

CHAPTER 2



A RESPONSE TO EASTERN ORTHODOXY

Craig Blaising

At the outset, let me express my appreciation to the editor and publisher for an opportunity to respond to Wilbur Ellsworth's essay promoting the Orthodox Church. I accepted this invitation without knowing either who the author would be or what approach he would take. Imagine my surprise to find the author was Wilbur Ellsworth, the former pastor of First Baptist Church, Wheaton, Illinois. I think this surprise may be shared by many readers of this book as well. I was intrigued by Ellsworth's narrative of his spiritual journey from Baptist pastor to Orthodox priest but pleased that he chose to share his story and appreciative of the gracious, humble, and engaging manner in which he presents it. I was also pleased to see that Ellsworth is truly appreciative of his Baptist and Evangelical heritage while candid about the concerns that led him to search for "something more." His testimony leads naturally to the question of how to evaluate the move theologically, and so, toward the end of his narrative, Ellsworth provides a brief, gentle apology for some obvious differences between Orthodox and Evangelical belief and practice. I do hope that my reply will carry the same spirit of sincerity and grace in which Ellsworth has shared his journey. Truly, that should be the case for all of us who seek to serve Christ, since the authority to which we appeal is not in ourselves but in Christ. As servants of Christ, we humbly defer this matter to him and to his Word, which is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" so that we might be "competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17 ESV).

Let me begin at the point of Ellsworth's appreciation for his Baptist background, in which he heard the gospel and was first nurtured in Christ. It is very important to note that Ellsworth acknowledges that the gospel is preached by Baptists, that he himself heard it, received it, was saved thereby, and as a Baptist pastor, preached that gospel to others. Furthermore, he acknowledges that there are many in Baptist churches who are sincere and godly believers. It is very important to understand what is being said here. Ellsworth is not simply saying that there are nice, sincere, pious, or even religious people in the Baptist and Evangelical churches with which he was associated. Rather he is saying that the gospel is preached and believed there. Faith in the gospel is foundational to Christian identity, and Ellsworth, as a former Baptist and Evangelical, knows that. There is only one gospel (Gal 1:6–9), and it is the power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16). Traditionally, Evangelicals are very jealous for the gospel and distinguish between those churches that clearly preach it and those that do not. Ellsworth's estimation of his early Christian and ministerial background is typically Evangelical, and it is noteworthy that he still speaks of the churches he was formerly affiliated with as truly churches.

Furthermore, the freedom with which Ellsworth sought out “something more” and then went on to embrace, profess, and practice it is itself a Baptist principle—the principle of religious freedom. Ellsworth is certainly free to be or not to be Baptist or Orthodox, and I, as a Baptist, completely uphold his right in this matter. However, not all of the Orthodox see it this way.

This may be surprising to the American Evangelical who is looking at the Orthodox Church as a “possible alternative” among a variety of Evangelical communions. That perspective, and the alternative it seems to offer, is particularly Western, and even in the West, it may be more apparent outside an Orthodox church than inside it. Moving beyond Western democracies, in traditional Orthodox countries, the freedom of Baptist and Evangelical ministries is often significantly restricted and many times politically harassed by the Orthodox Church working through the state.¹ If this is simply a matter of misunderstanding, then it is incumbent upon Orthodox priests like Ellsworth and others in Orthodox churches in the United States who

know that Baptists and Evangelicals are preaching the true gospel to set the record straight and bring the harassment to an end. For, as every Evangelical and in fact as every true Christian knows, the first priority is the proclamation of the gospel. The apostolic position on this matter is one of indifference as to who is preaching it or even what their motive is as long as the true gospel is preached (Phil. 1:15–18). The eternal destinies of many are at stake here. The Orthodox harassment of ministries preaching the gospel, however, raises the question of how widely the perspective held by Ellsworth on Baptists, Evangelicals, and even the gospel itself is actually shared in Orthodox circles.

As appreciative as he is of his Baptist heritage, Ellsworth highlights a problem which caused him to look for “something more” — a deeper, richer, more reverential form of worship. For Ellsworth, the problem of a seemingly shallow worship was exacerbated by the impact of the seeker sensitive movement on the church with which he was affiliated. The seeker movement, drawing upon market-driven methodologies, recast the church service so as to be suitable to an assembly of seekers rather than a congregation of believers. This is one aspect of the “worship wars” troubling Evangelical churches, and Ellsworth is right to complain about it. On the one hand, given the Evangelical concern for the gospel and the cruciality of personal faith, it is understandable that churches would and should do everything they can to make the gospel clear within their gatherings. On the other hand, this practice of turning the primary gathering of the church into a seeker service constitutes a challenge to the traditional Baptist doctrine of a believers’ church.² A believers’ church, at the very least, is a gathering of believers to worship God and grow together in grace and the knowledge of God’s Word. Even Willow Creek has admitted failure in their church’s ministry responsibility to believers.³ Ellsworth is a pastor who has struggled with this issue, and it constitutes an overarching theme in his essay from beginning to end. While many have sought and are seeking to correct the problem, Ellsworth’s own quest for a solution led him to Orthodoxy, which by the very meaning of the word is a literal claim to “right worship.”

In response, I wish to neither understate nor overstate the problem, nor is it possible in the scope of this reply even to begin to deal with the many aspects of true and proper worship (something on which many books and articles have been written). I do think that there are

Baptist and Evangelical church services that deeply reverence God, and there are those that seem like shallow performances. Any one person's experience is anecdotal and context specific. However, I think it would be a mistake to assume that a scripted liturgy in itself solves the problem. Has there never been an Orthodox service in which the liturgy seemed a rote performance or from which congregants left having repeated familiar, even memorized, lines without the truth touching their hearts in a deep way? I have seen this happen on occasion with the singing of profoundly theological and biblically rich hymns in an Evangelical service. If it can happen there, I rather think it could and probably does happen sometimes with the performance of liturgy in an Orthodox service. The issue here is not simply a matter of finding the right "worship program." Ellsworth is certainly right that worship requires a deep reverence for God. Worship also expresses a deep gratitude and joy for the grace of God in Christ and manifests itself in faith, hope, and love. Pastors have a responsibility to instruct and lead their churches in true worship and guard against the mere rote performance of a program, whether that be new or old.

Ellsworth's quest for a deeper, truer form of worship, however, did not lead merely to an adjustment in the form of the service but led him to convert to the Orthodox Church, and that inevitably raises the issue of theological differences between Baptists and Orthodox. In concluding the account of his journey, Ellsworth admits "a significantly different theological vision and practice" between his beginning and end points, and he addresses some of the key issues, albeit rather lightly, at the end of his essay.

The first issue has to do with the authority of Scripture in relation to the Tradition of the Church and is addressed by Ellsworth in his sections "The Church and the Bible" and "The Church and Her History." The concern that Baptists and other Evangelicals have here is that the Orthodox extend the locus of divine inspiration and authority beyond the Scripture to the Church itself, specifically to the decisions of the ecumenical councils, but more generally and on a practical level to the entirety of Orthodox tradition.⁴ For all practical purposes, this means that church tradition is not correctible by Scripture. Rather Scripture is ruled by Tradition, which defines its message and application.⁵

The Orthodox usually defend their view by arguing the primacy of the Church over the Scripture: the Church existed prior to the New Testament Scripture and was itself the source of Scripture. As it was the source of Scripture, so it was the source of the Tradition that integrates and applies Scripture.⁶ This typical Orthodox argument is, I think, what Ellsworth is alluding to when he says, “I believe that the historical development of the text and canon of the Scripture must inform how we are to understand the divine authority of the Bible today . . .” The Orthodox believe that the actual history of the canon and the beliefs and practices of the early church support this view. However, I do not believe that this reading of early church history is correct.

The problem is that the Orthodox blur the New Testament and early patristic distinction between apostolic and episcopal authority. Ephesians 2:20 says that the Church is founded on “the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (ESV). This is said in a letter in which an apostle directs the church to his writings in order to understand the mystery of Christ, a matter revealed to apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:3–4). This same apostle stipulated that bishops must hold to the faith as he taught it, and warned that the time was coming when some would depart from that faith. In fact, both Paul and Peter warned that heresy would arise *within the church* and directed the bishops and teachers to Scripture (Acts 20:28–32; 2 Tim. 3:1–4:8; 2 Peter 1:12–2:3; 3:1–18)—which those apostles saw as inclusive of their own writings (1 Cor. 2:6–13; Eph. 3:1–4; 2 Peter 1:12–21; 3:1–2, 14–16)—in fulfilling their charge of guarding and proclaiming the faith. The early Christian episcopal writings express this same sense of dependency and obligatory faithfulness in their regard for and use of Scripture, and this was especially evident in the Church’s early response to heresy.⁷

The Orthodox are particularly concerned about the problem of heretics misusing Scripture, and so they appeal to Tradition as a guard against such distortion. The problem is, however, that Scripture-twisting heresies normally arise not outside but rather inside the Church. The New Testament warns of *the problem of discovering heresy present within* the episcopal and teaching structures of the Church, a problem that would have to be dealt with not by appealing to one

set of episcopal authorities over against another but by appealing to Scripture.⁸ This is a problem of which Evangelicalism, by virtue of its Reformation heritage, is well aware.⁹

The Arian controversy, which is viewed as pivotal by present-day Orthodox and Evangelicals alike (as well as Roman Catholics), is a case in point. Arius claimed to be doing nothing more than passing along the Tradition that he had been taught.¹⁰ The Arian heresy was discovered *existing within* the teaching structure of the fourth-century Alexandrian church and was then found to be favored by bishops and teachers in other churches as well. The controversy was formally settled (though Arianism continued an historical presence) on the basis of biblical authority through an intensive debate over the meaning of Scripture. All the documents bear witness to this.¹¹ The Nicene Creed was drafted as a concise statement of what Scripture taught on this issue. As Athanasius makes clear in his *Defense of the Nicene Creed* and his *Letter to the African Bishops*, it was the objective of the council *to use the acknowledged language of Scripture*.¹² This carried over into the actual construction of the statement, which is a remarkable composition of biblical words, phrases, and allusions collated into the structure of 1 Corinthians 8:6.¹³ Athanasius also makes clear that the council's regard for the authority of Scripture led it to address the matter in this way. When they did use the nonbiblical word *homoousios* and the phrase *ek tes ousias tou patros*, the referential meaning of those words was explicitly tied to a collection of biblical texts, so that the meaning of the phrases, and thus of the creed as a whole, would be, in a derivative sense, exactly the meaning of the Scripture.¹⁴ The creed functioned in the same way as expressions of the rule of faith in earlier patristic writings. The rule of faith was not the *imposition* of a doctrinal rule upon Scripture but the *exposition* of a rule inherent within Scripture.¹⁵

Between the fourth and eighth centuries, however, a not-so-subtle shift of authority took place within the Church, a shift that is starkly evident when one compares the language of the First Council of Nicaea (325) with that of the second (787).¹⁶ The Second Council of Nicaea addressed the doctrinal issue of venerating icons in Orthodox life and liturgy, a practice that had developed within the Church to the point that it was regarded as a problem, was challenged, and was

even proscribed by some on the basis of biblical prohibitions against idolatry.¹⁷ Whereas the First Council of Nicaea dealt with its controversy solely upon biblical authority, the second council spoke solely on the basis of episcopal and popular tradition, a tradition that is found neither in the New Testament nor in the earliest days of the Church.¹⁸ It was *a practice that developed within* the Church. Not only did the council authorize this practice solely upon its own tradition, but it went on to declare Tradition itself as a Holy Spirit–given, sufficient basis for any doctrine and practice and anathematized “anyone who rejects any written or unwritten tradition of the church.”¹⁹ By that act and with that express teaching, the Second Council of Nicaea formalized a departure from the tradition of sole biblical authority in doctrinal matters that was evidenced by its earlier namesake. Contrary to apostolic teaching and early episcopal practice, it legislated for the Church a new conception of Tradition, one that is, in principle, immune from biblical correction.

The issue is not the existence of Tradition per se. We all have traditions. Not only are they unavoidable; they are quite necessary. At their best, they offer familiar and accepted ways of expressing faith and obedience to Christ. In fact, we expect that in the Church’s life and worship, there will be traditional ways of speaking and acting that reflect the constancy and continuity of the unchanging gospel and the abiding canon of Scripture. Scripture gives instruction on the unchanging faith and unchanging character of life in Christ Jesus, who is the same, yesterday, today, and always. So we should be able to see in and through our traditional practices continuity with the New Testament church.

Developments do take place in traditional practices.²⁰ This is true even in Orthodox liturgy. Certainly the liturgy is old, but Orthodox liturgy in its current form was not performed by the earliest church. Nor has it been practiced in exactly the same way among various Orthodox churches past or present. Differences have developed in time and in different regional contexts, not to mention certain doctrinal differences, as seen for example between Eastern and Oriental Orthodox.²¹ New Testament uses of *leitourgeo* and *leitourgia* do not refer to a performance of liturgy like that of the Orthodox today. The New Testament usage is quite interesting and clarified by Paul in his

epistles. The apostolic work of proclaiming the gospel, conversion, and then the growth of the Church into maturity in Christ was seen as a *leitourgia* or “priestly service” in which the Church is offered up to Christ as a holy, living sacrifice. It was not the offering up of a sacrifice on behalf of the Church (as in the Catholic performance of the Mass) or the performance of a scripted service (as in Orthodoxy) but evangelism, conversion, and edification in godliness through apostolic teaching directed toward the formation of a holy communion that presents itself to Christ now and at his coming.²²

Developing Tradition is not a problem in itself unless it is found to act as a hindrance to a fully formed biblical faith and wholehearted obedience to God’s Word. This is something Jesus found in the Judaism of his day. The only way to guard against this is to focus first and foremost on Scripture, submitting our traditions to the Word of God either for reaffirmation, renewal, or reformation.

This is not to say that Orthodox tradition generally and the liturgy specifically are lacking in biblical content. On the contrary, the liturgy is richly endowed with biblical citations and allusions. It manifests a biblical depth that is richly rewarding to the participant who carefully considers its content in itself and intertextually with the canon of Scripture.²³ The liturgy is a carefully constructed framework by which one can not only learn and be reminded of basic theological truth but also contemplate deeper matters of the faith. Consequently, it is not surprising that Ellsworth and many others who have longed for deeper biblical and theological worship have been greatly blessed by participation in Orthodox liturgy. In spite of various developments, the high value the Orthodox have placed on Tradition has for the most part preserved this collection of Scripture texts and biblically informed prayers and admonitions for the guidance and instruction of generations of worshipers. However, Evangelicals in continuity with the Reformation sincerely believe that side by side with these are some practices and theological expressions that are in tension with if not actually contrary to the intent and teaching of Scripture. Along with the matter of the unique authority of the Word of God, these are other features of what Ellsworth calls a significantly different theological vision.

Take the matter of the use of icons in worship. We need to note that Scripture clearly teaches that the focus of worship is on God

alone. It is not focused upon ourselves, either as individuals or as a church, but upon God. Candidly, one of the issues we as Evangelicals sometimes struggle with is the danger of a worship service becoming focused on ourselves or on a performer rather than on Christ. We know that this is a temptation in the Church, and we need to be continually reminded of Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 1–4: we preach not ourselves but Christ. But just as surely as we are not to focus on ourselves as the living Church today, neither are we to focus our worship on dead saints. The dead in Christ are with Christ. Their examples and testimonies may be cited in the service (particularly in preaching, as illustrations of faith and obedience) along with the examples and testimonies of living believers today. But they should not become the point of focus in the worship service.

The problem for the Orthodox, however, seems greater than a shift in focus. Orthodox liturgy requires the *veneration* of icons. Scripture gives absolutely no basis for lighting candles or incense for dead saints and clearly forbids the use of images in worship, avoiding even the temptation to idolatry.

It is true that the Orthodox offer a distinction between the honor given to icons on the one hand and idolatrous worship on the other. The Second Council of Nicaea argues such a distinction.²⁴ However, the concern here is the same as that articulated by the Reformers against the Church of Rome: the supposed distinction may sometimes be too subtle for actual practice.²⁵ I grant that a well-trained and well-educated clergy and laity may comprehend and maintain the distinction. I think that Ellsworth maintains it, as do many Orthodox that I know personally. But is this always the case? In the New Testament, Paul taught that he would rather go without meat than by eating meat offered to idols cause a weak brother to stumble back into idolatry—the weaker brother not being able to comprehend or maintain the distinction that prevents idolatry-like behavior from being actual idolatry. Why then would the Church authorize a practice in Christian worship *that might in any way* cause someone to stumble into idolatry?

The problem of iconology extends to Mariology in Orthodox practice. The fact that Mary said that all generations would call her blessed does not authorize forms of veneration that are practically

indistinguishable from worship. Evangelicals consider Mary blessed and expect to see her with all the saints when we are together with the Lord. But we expect that she would be just as appalled as were Paul and Barnabas at Lystra, or as was the angel in John's vision in Revelation, when actions directed toward her even look like worship.²⁶ Her words in Scripture were, "Do whatever *he* tells you" (John 2:5, italics added). She is honored when multitudes do as she advised by listening to and submitting themselves to her Son.

Of course, one might attempt to excuse practices of veneration by arguing that these are forms of honor and respect that belong to ancient culture, and while they may seem strange to modern sensibilities, they were acceptable then. The problem with this is that it ignores the fact that this veneration did provoke a strong reaction in the eighth century by many in the Church concerned about the sin of idolatry. Icon veneration was actually proscribed for a while precisely because of this fear. Consequently, even in ancient times there was concern that a line might be or was being crossed. A practical solution to the problem now would be simply to dispense with these practices which are no longer culturally relevant and were even then religiously suspect and replace them with activities that are better understood and not problematic. However, this is where we run into the problem of Tradition once again. Tradition has fixed the practice on its own presumed divine authority so that it is alterable neither by practical considerations nor out of regard for biblical instruction.

Another significantly different theological perspective mentioned by Ellsworth has to do with the Eucharist and baptism. The Eucharist especially plays a prominent role in Orthodox liturgy, and the liturgy clearly advocates (by invocation and proclamation) a real change of the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ.²⁷ Ellsworth candidly admits that this doctrine was not easily accepted by him or by those from Christ Church who joined him, but came to be accepted through extended study. It is not necessary for me to rehearse here the arguments of Baptists and other Evangelicals who dissent from the real presence interpretation of the Lord's Supper. These are well known and can be easily accessed. But it may be helpful to recall what the issue is in the different views. The issue, once again, is faithfulness to the Lord's command and to apostolic instruction. Historically,

Baptists have reacted to sacramental views of grace which they argue are not biblical. Baptists believe that Zwingli was basically correct in seeing a metaphorical intent in the Lord's remarks at the Last Supper. However, the deeper issue has to do with how grace is transmitted and received. Baptists see no justification in Scripture for connecting grace to anything other than the direct gift of God to personal faith directed to his Word of promise. There is no doubt that a sacramental view of the Eucharist did develop through the early centuries of the Church so that a real presence view *came to be found within* church teaching. But Baptists do not believe this was in fact the view of the New Testament churches. In fact, Baptists have even criticized Zwingli for inconsistency in not recognizing that this deeper theological issue extends also to the understanding of baptism. Accordingly, Baptists affirm believer's baptism, which is taught consistently in the New Testament. Baptism is a proclamation and testimony by a believer of a grace received from God through faith promised to the believer by God in his Word.

Having said all this, I think it is fair for Ellsworth to raise the question to Baptists whether there is something legitimately more than mere memory in a communion service and whether baptism is more than the mere obedience to the Lord's explicit command. In fact, Baptists have theological resources that are deeper and richer than those conveyed in some contemporary practices. It is, after all, not mere memory but a living remembrance of faith, hope, and love that is called for, the content of which is informed by the theologically rich divine Word of promise. However, many Baptists have reacted so strongly against sacramentalism that they have neglected to develop and expand the rich depth of the theology they profess. This is a responsibility that rests squarely on the shoulders of pastors and teachers who are tasked with faithfully preaching and teaching the Word of God for the edification of the Church. They must not be deterred in that task by traditions of neglect, whether those be formal or informal traditions.

Pastors and teachers must be careful not to neglect declaring to the Church "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27 ESV). The doctrine of the atonement is central to that counsel and is presented in Scripture through several images, metaphors, and direct instruction. Unfortunately, much of the current debate on the atonement tends

to be reductionist, highlighting one or another of the images to the neglect of the whole. While I agree with Ellsworth that the notions of victory, release, and redemption should powerfully inform our understanding of the work of Christ, I don't see any reason to neglect the equally powerful and rich New Testament teaching on the penal and judicial meaning of the cross. We may differ on which may be better suited as a unifying image theologically, but as long as we include the whole counsel, we will not differ much on this issue in the long run.

There are other things that could be highlighted among the theological differences between Baptists and Evangelicals on the one hand and the Orthodox on the other. However, I would like to close this response with a word of appreciation and a challenge that I think both of us can appreciate. Talk about differences must be balanced by noting what we share in common, chief among which is a Trinitarian theology revealed in Scripture and faithfully expounded by pastor-theologians in the early centuries of the Church. This is a theological heritage that is bequeathed to both Eastern and Western Churches. Theologians on both sides have reflected on this common orthodoxy, but interaction among them has been limited because of the historic separation of the churches. The immigration of Orthodox Christians to the West at the beginning of the last century brought renewed contact between Eastern and Western theologians and has made the work of Eastern theologians more accessible to the West. Important contributions have been made, and we would be remiss not to acknowledge that fact. The contact between East and West has also sparked a renewed interest in and recovery of patristic sources. New critical editions and modern-language translations of a number of patristic texts have been published in the last century, bringing a renewed interest in and more developed knowledge of the theology of the early church among Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant theologians. In the last quarter of the century, Evangelical theology began to benefit from this greater engagement with patristic thought as well.

Many benefits can be cited, but a particularly relevant aspect of this *ressourcement* is the focus that has been brought to bear on patristic biblical interpretation with critical editions and translations of numerous homiletical and expositional works, many of which received little attention in the past.²⁸ This has brought into view more clearly

than ever before both the great value the Fathers placed on Scripture and the wealth of insight and wisdom they drew from it for the edification of the Church. The challenge for us today, as I see it, is to recover that biblically enriched mindset in Christian ministry—a ministerial mind that is immersed in Scripture. For surely, the one who knows the Scripture deeply is the one who is able to draw out its riches—not for mere curiosity’s sake but for the nurture and edification of the Church. In the early church, the focal point of the service in which this took place was the sermon. But this was no short homily tacked onto the liturgy, or some friendly religious talk addressed to “felt needs.” Perhaps it is just my opinion, but maybe both sides can yet learn something from those who went before us. Maybe if the churches recover a deep love for, a deep knowledge of, and a deep obedience to God’s Word, then we’ll have a better perspective from which to address those debates about worship that are troubling the Church today. For the issue ultimately is a matter not of a program per se but of a deep abiding of the whole Word of God—living and written (which are bound together)—in the heart, mind, and soul of the Church so that what is done and what is said is a pleasing and fragrant offering to God.