

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

By Jonathan Massey

Historically, my family was Anglican. They emigrated to Virginia in 1690 and helped build the church where, eventually, George and Martha Washington were married. After losing their plantation and finding their fortunes in decline, they moved to the frontier in the early 1800s and, finding no Protestant Episcopal Church available, joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, thus beginning my family's 200-year Methodist heritage.

After some years of youthful rebellion, and dalliance with the New Age Movement, I returned to Christ and the church of my baptism. I felt called to pastoral ministry and, as a sophomore, transferred to Asbury University, a Methodist-adjacent Christian college in Wilmore, Kentucky. At that time, every single United Methodist missionary slot in the world could have been filled by an Asbury graduate. I became a member of the local United Methodist Church—one of America's great churches which, at that time, would have around 1,000 people in attendance on Sunday *evenings*. The first time I entered that church, I noticed the prominent memorial display of its martyrs—members who had died for Christ in missionary service.

I studied Koine Greek at Asbury and became proficient in reading the New Testament in its original language. At some point, one of my professors mentioned that, if we wanted to hear the spoken language with modern pronunciation, we would need to visit a Greek Orthodox Church. I didn't know what the "Orthodox Church" was at that point, but I looked in the Yellow Pages and found one in Lexington, Kentucky. When I went, I had no idea what to expect, and, based on my then-current experience, the service was shockingly unusual. But, even on that first visit, there seemed to be something very, very *right* about it. At that time, most of the Liturgy was spoken in Greek, and although it moved too fast for me, I was able to follow along with most of it in the text. I was surprised at how familiar the theology seemed to me, and not long after that I discovered that John Wesley was steeped in the Greek Fathers, and their influence led to his brand of Anglicanism that became *Methodism*. I was warmly welcomed by the members of this church, including the priest and the chanter (who also attended a UM Church in Lexington with his wife, but regularly helped out in the church of his birth).

Somewhere around this time, I read a fascinating book called *Agenda for Theology* by Thomas C. Oden, one of the great United Methodist theologians of the twentieth century. He had been an extreme Protestant liberal for his entire life, but, in the early 1970s, experienced a dramatic course correction. In the first chapter of the book, he said, "I once had a curious dream that rekindled my deepest theological

hopes. The only scene I can remember was in the New Haven cemetery, where I accidentally stumbled over my own tombstone only to be confronted by this astonishing epitaph: ‘He made no new contribution to theology.’ I was marvelously pleased by the idea and deeply reassured. Why? Because I have of late been trying in my own way to follow the mandate of Irenaeus ‘not to invent new doctrine.’”

The years passed. I went on to graduate from Asbury Theological Seminary and minister in the United Methodist Church. I read many writings from the Church Fathers. At some point, I stumbled upon *The Way of a Pilgrim* and incorporated the Jesus Prayer into my spiritual life. I continued to read Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox theology. At one point, I took correspondence courses from St. Vladimir’s Seminary and was introduced to the writings of Alexander Schmemmann (along with others, such as Vladimir Lossky), who was destined to become the most profound modern theological influence in my life. I became friends with a couple Orthodox priests in Arizona who, looking back, sowed seeds that are bearing fruit today. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to them.

More years passed. My life changed. The United Methodist Church changed—tremendously. Heritage is very important to me, and, for many reasons, I tried to stay on the path I set out on in the late 1970s. Occasionally, I would visit St. Katherine. On one visit, in 2019, I picked up a brochure advertising a Modern Greek class. I signed up. Although I became what I like to call THE WORST MODERN GREEK STUDENT IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE due to my work circumstances at the time (along with my own laziness), I did become familiar with Greek again (after neglecting my daily Greek New Testament readings for about 25 years), and my teachers had more of an effect on me than they could probably imagine. I started visiting St. Katherine more often, attended Father Timothy’s Catechism/Inquirer classes, did more study, and started working with the prayer book. In January 2023, I showed up on a Sunday morning—to stay! I began practicing our fasting disciplines and generally trying to live an Orthodox life.

I am very grateful for my heritage in the United Methodist Church which—ultimately, finally—led me to the Orthodox Church. I told Father Timothy that Protestantism had provided me with a Reader’s Digest version of Christianity, and now I was ready to fully embrace the Original Work. I was chrismated on the Sunday of Orthodoxy this year. This church has changed my life. I am growing spiritually, and I plan to spend the rest of my life here. I am very grateful for the founders of St. Katherine, who sacrificed so much to build this church. And, coming full circle, I want to say that it makes me extremely happy to be in an Orthodox Church where I can not only worship in my native tongue (English), but worship using the language of the New Testament (Greek) every Sunday, too.

“I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go into the house of the Lord’”—Psalm 121 (122):1.