

FINDING THE REAL PRESENCE UPON THE ROCK

An Orthodox Presbyterian Clergyman's Road to Rome

Rich Sowder

With all the momentum of a love awakened in eternity, the Lord's Presence passes before a lone man kneeling in the cleft of a rock. The Lord pauses, communes with the man, then His great love urges Him onward. The Lord is en route to His own Rock upon which He shall humble Himself. To this Rock the Lord comes to manifest His loving Presence to the whole world, while Moses now bears witness from above.

We, too, should be en route to this Rock until we find it. The same great love urges us onward until we find what the Lord has founded. The Lord's Real Presence is not suspended in the thin air of religious ideas or pious thought. When the Lord re-names Simon "the Rock", He names him after Himself. Jesus, the Rock of our Salvation, comes to manifest His loving Presence through the Church built upon Peter, the Rock.

The Church built upon Peter is that cleft in the rock where all humanity is to kneel before the Real Presence of the Lord. There it is where the Lord humbles Himself under the appearance of bread and of wine. Nourished upon Him, the momentum of our love urges us onward into the unending day of eternity.

But in order to find the Real Presence upon the Rock one must travel the road that leads to Rome. Orthodox Presbyterians are not frequently found traveling this road. Perhaps a fallen and broken clergyman is about the only kind of Orthodox Presbyterian you would expect to find along this way.

Here is the story of such a man's journey – the account of my finding the Real Presence upon the Rock:

Born in 1953, I was raised by parents who had left farms in Kentucky to find industrial work in the North. My 3 sisters, 1 brother and I grew up doing chores and playing in the countryside of Montgomery County near Dayton, Ohio. Our mother, Elva, never met a stranger and could make the best butterscotch pies on earth. Our father used to be a master machinist of the metal lathe and has always been especially devoted to the Lord. We attended the Church of God in Farmland, Indiana, where perfectionism and faith healing were made to dominate our lives.

Consequently, in 1980, tragedy struck our family. At the age of 67, due to a deliberate avoidance of medical care, our mother died a premature death. Then, in 1994, our father -- needing medical attention for his eyes but clinging to the same false promises of faith healing -- went totally blind. While youth in general tend to rebel against their parents' religion, I believe false teachings and their consequences have made it particularly difficult for the members of our family to find our way back to a healthy expression of the Faith.

At 23 years of age, back in 1976, I had a conversion experience; and it was not to be my only one. My studies at Wright State University in Dayton, leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree in Anthropology, had enticed me to sample a variety of belief systems. But when a dear friend faced me with the fact that this was idolatry and that the one true and living God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, I instantly recognized Him as mine and gave my heart back to the Triune God in whose Name I had been baptized when I was 10 years old. This marks the wonderful beginning of my adult experience as a Christian. If only I had been allowed to mature before being thrust into a leadership position!

Within a year I was teaching the adult Sunday school class at a Grace Brethren Church. Distressed by their easy-believism, I found my way to a Plymouth Brethren Assembly. After learning more about ecclesiology and becoming convinced of infant baptism, I next joined the Orthodox Presbyterian Church where, within another year or so I was taken under care of the Presbytery of Ohio, and began seminary in 1980.

I found a companion on my journey when Kathy and I were married in 1983. She is a wonderful friend and a precious help in the spiritual life we share together. Kathy is the daughter of the Rev. and Mrs. George W. Hall of Dayspring Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Manassas, Virginia. She is the second oldest of 9 sisters and brothers. She is a graduate of Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education, with Music and Reading as specializations.

After graduating from the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where I earned a Master of Divinity degree, I was ordained in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. The seven years I spent as a Protestant minister of the Word was marked by tireless study, love of preaching, and joy in instructing youth and adults. My ministry was very well received, but pride was setting me up for a fall.

My first pastorate (1984-1988) at Grace OPC in Lansing, Michigan, ended when the Presbytery dissolved my pastoral relation with the congregation due to a conflict between the local leadership and myself. My second pastorate (1988-1990) in the Orthodox Christian Reformed Church of Bowmanville, Ontario, ended when the Consistory deposed me for another conflict between the local leadership and myself. My third pastorate (1990-1991) at Nashua OPC near New Castle, Pennsylvania, came to an

end when I resigned, full of disillusionment with the ministry and with myself – but not nearly disillusioned enough with myself. Sufficient disillusionment with myself was not to come for ten long years--not until 2001.

The years between 1991 and 2001 were very dark years. I completely stopped going to church and entered into an incognito status with everyone I worked with or met. First as a truck driver, then as a carpenter's helper, as a cabinetmaker apprentice, and finally as a property supervisor, no one was aware of my clerical past. This was but the manifestation on the outside of the denial I was experiencing on the inside. I was living in flagrant violation of my ordination vows. I had deserted my last flock; and I refused to take the blame for the conflicts at my first and second charges. Just as St. Paul warned in *I Timothy 3:6*, having been elevated as an immature Christian to the pastorate, I fell, because of my pride, into the devil's punishment.

With my fall came years of inward torment traumatizing my conscience. In desperation my intellect attempted to find a way of damning the source of my condemnation. I gladly fell prey to the writings of Gene Edwards (www.geneedwards.com) who had similarly flunked out of the "institutional church". In 1999, we sold our home near Dayton, Ohio, and moved to Jacksonville, Florida, to become a part of "church life" -- a house church assault upon the "institutional church".

Finally, at last, in 2001, I relented to the Holy Spirit's striving within me. In another conversion experience, my eyes were opened to the error of my ways and the stony heart I had hardened against my Christian brothers in the so-called institutional church melted with love. I joyfully submitted to the love of God and made a 19-day, 3400-mile pilgrimage of repentance to the 3 churches I had served between 1984 and 1991. I wrote letters ahead of time confessing my sins and asking if I could visit. I was received with open arms, shed many tears, and experienced a deep and powerful healing in my life. How wonderful it has been to be restored to the friendship of these beautiful people of God.

But the error of my ways produced more than broken relationships. It also entailed a departure from the Truth. Love and Truth do not vie for primacy. They are essentially one in God Himself and necessarily interdependent if we are to be godly. Therefore, the grace of God enabled me not only to repudiate the false practices of the house church movement, but also to renounce the heterodox teachings of Gene Edwards, a particularly radical leader in that movement.

Before leaving on my pilgrimage of repentance in 2001, I wrote *Too Divine a Romance: Gene Edwards' Passion Beyond Union with Christ*, a book critiquing the doctrinal views of Gene Edwards. It remains unpublished because I do not want to become an independent one-man ministry fighting another independent one-man ministry. Our home is located in the neighborhood where Gene and the members of the

house church live and meet. My love for my neighbors is deep and my rapport with them is great, but how sad I am that I do not help my neighbors as much as I wish I could. Nevertheless, with the Lord's love now reigning in my heart, I am able to think and to write in accordance with the Truth.

Ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1984, resigning in 1991, and then returning as a layman in 2001, I came to discover that I was actually no longer a Presbyterian in heart. I began to wonder whether I ever was. This struggle produced another unpublished book in 2002: *Beloved Congregation: The Suspense of First Love*. I was facing a new challenge that exceeded all my previous training: What exactly was the spiritual error I had fallen into in the house church movement, and how could I be rehabilitated?

In order to fully diagnose and begin to correct this spiritual error, I found that I had to go beyond the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and the Reformed Belgic Confession of Faith (1561). I was unable to re-connect with where I became disconnected not only on *objective* dogmatic issues, but also in the *subjective* experience of spirituality. My repentance from the Gnostic deification taught by Gene Edwards cried out for something more than the Protestant understanding of sanctification as its cure. *Only after recovering the Catholic spirituality rejected by the Reformation did my spiritual rehabilitation find the hope it needed.*

Meanwhile, Kathy and I continued on our journey together. It took an Episcopalian interlude, and a serious glance at Orthodoxy, for us to embrace what the Lord was teaching us in our hearts from Holy Scripture and from Sacred Tradition: the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the centrality of the Eucharist. After that year of study – and listening to **WQOP**, the local **EWTN** radio station -- we made our first visit to our local Parish, Blessed Trinity Catholic Church, in May 2003. Their RCIA program gained 5 new members (all of my household) for Catholic formation.

Becoming Catholic is such an intellectually sanitizing and existentially exhilarating experience. We used to be so prejudiced against the Roman Catholic Church. But now it all makes perfect sense: The Rock of Peter and the Real Presence of Jesus constitute, respectively, that *authority* which Christ gives to His Church and that *intimacy* which Christ desires with His Church. Neither of the two can exist in its fullness if it is separated from the other. They are complementary to one unity. Subtract intimacy from authority or authority from intimacy and what remains is qualitatively altered from what it was before.

That *authority* which Christ gives to His Church and that *intimacy* which Christ desires with His Church can only be experienced in their fullness upon the Rock of Peter in the Real Presence of Jesus. The bond joining Petrine primacy with Dominical sacramentalism only lives in its fullness in Communion with the See of Rome. And nothing can ever break that unbreakable bond between Peter and Jesus.

For the pretense of authority from Christ in a Protestant context, ministry after ministry is created and destroyed – lacking the complement of Christ’s humbling intimacy. For the pretense of intimacy with Christ in a house church context, so many souls are led astray – lacking the complement of Christ’s creedal authority. How defeated I became pursuing *either* authority *or* intimacy but never experiencing them *both* together! How thankful I am now to finally discover them united together – the only way either can exist in its fullness! ***This is what finding the Real Presence upon the Rock has meant to me.*** How truly wonderful is the Lord’s Church!

Three friends have helped so much in bringing the Church’s saving love into my family’s and my life. The first is my former boss, Bernard Vargas Vila. After witnessing his godly, Catholic life for several years, I asked him about the Faith. Though we were already friends, my inquiry began a wonderful fellowship. He soon confidently told me, while I listened in unbelief, that I was on my way Home. Not long afterwards, I asked Bernard to become my Sponsor.

The second friend is Father Denis O’Regan. Since I used to be the property supervisor of the condominium complex where he lives, he spoke with me almost every day. We became friends long before I realized that he is the retired Priest who pastored my local Parish for 30 years. I thank Father O’Regan not only for hearing my Dad’s first Confession and administering to him the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but also for directing to my family the man who was to become the third of my three friends.

And that man is Hollis A. Fowler III. This brother, a layman, faithfully visits my Dad to explain the Faith and spends many hours with me sorting out issues and reinforcing faithfulness to the Magisterium of Rome and our holy Father John Paul II.

In addition to these three friends, my own family has been a source of great encouragement on my journey. Kathy’s growth into the Catholic Faith has been in tandem with my own. Over the years Kathy has taught in a Christian school, substituted in public school, tutored in a learning center, continues to give piano lessons, and now also home schools our 2 daughters through the Seton Home Study School. Carolyn, born in 1989, and Debbie, born in 1994, are very happy about becoming Catholic. Our multi-cultural Parish and the Catholic friends they have in the neighborhood feed their interests in languages and other cultures.

Dad joined us on our journey in 1996 when his second wife, Naomi – our children’s beloved “Grandma Noni” -- passed away. Some have found it very hard to accept the fact that Dad – now well past 90 years of age -- has followed us into the Church. But if I were accused of having cajoled him into becoming a Catholic, I might have to plead guilty were it not for the fact that Dad’s devotion to the Blessed Virgin deepened ahead of my own. It has been so thrilling to fall in love with the Church

together with him. Our children are also finding their “Papaw” to be a much warmer and more cheerful man since his conversion.

Presently (2004), I am sharing this account of my journey with others as a way of discerning with their help where I may serve the Church with my gifts, and when. The grace flowing into my life from daily Mass, weekly Confession and Adoration is bringing much needed healing, and preparing me to give myself more fully to the Church. As I wait upon the Lord, I intend to pursue additional formation and, if the Lord should call, I would be willing to relocate to serve His Church. Kathy and I, together with our two daughters and my Dad, are so thankful for the privilege of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church -- ***having found the Real Presence upon the Rock***. May the Lord Jesus Christ be forever praised!

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