

A Russian Reformation

By J. Mark Hord

For some reason I have always been drawn to two particular branches of history, military history with an emphasis on unconventional warfare, and the history of the Russian revolution. My passion for the first came when I was still in my early teens during the Vietnam war. I was a young man in a family that valued military service and the difficulties of guerrilla warfare captured my interest. My passion for the second came about the same time as I became interested in the writings of Karl Marx as well as revolutionary guerrilla leaders like Che Guevera and Mao Tse Tung. It was a time when communist philosophy was in vogue and I was drawn to the high-sounding ideals myself.

At the time I had a cousin, Denny, with whom I was very close. He was a 'Jesus freak' but it never seemed to come between us that we had divergent philosophical views. We had similar family backgrounds and related on a much closer bond than surface politics. He had something that made me keep coming back to him. I think it was his honest concern for my well being. I was not aware that he had shared with his Pastor how often he had prayed for his family, including me. He asked his Christian friends often to pray for us as well.

In 1975, Denny was killed in an accident and at his funeral I remember staring at his coffin there in front listening to his pastor challenge us all with those prayers for us. I felt an overwhelming sense of a love I could not resist. I came back for more in the weeks to come and became close to some of Denny's old friends in the church youth group. That stirring of love led me at last to 'accept Jesus as my personal Lord and savior.' With time, I became convinced that God would have me be a missionary in communist countries as a tent-maker. A tent-maker is a term coined for a self-supporting missionary taken from the apostle Paul's profession of making tents to support his missionary endeavors.

I knew that, to fulfill that call as a tent-maker, I would need to learn a trade that was wanted and learn theology well enough to teach. But I have always been too undisciplined for formal classroom learning. So instead I joined the Navy and studied electronics and computer programming. As an avid reader, I continued studies in theology and military history.

After my initial Navy training I joined the crew of a fleet ballistic missile submarine home ported in Connecticut. It was there, near the end of my 6 year enlistment that I met my wife. I had been convinced that I was to remain single in order to have the flexibility to travel in eastern Europe, specifically, Albania. But very quickly Maggie had stolen my heart. We were inseparable almost overnight.

The melodrama is almost comical but I was literally deadly serious. At the time, Albania called itself the world's only officially atheistic country and was considered the most hostile country to the gospel. I told Maggie of my plans to go to Albania and probably die for the gospel. The way I proposed was to ask her if she was willing to die with me for the sake of the gospel. To my shock and joy, she agreed. I am reminded often how the Lord makes a similar proposal; "Follow Me and die," is His call

to each of us. It is only in that total sacrifice of self that we find real life everlasting.

Life and death on a foreign mission field was not in our future however. Within a year of being married, we learned that Maggie was expecting our first child and we became responsible for more than just ourselves. We were a family now and had a new calling for the time being. My obsessive nature caused a great deal of friction as I was torn between the calling I thought God had for me and the calling He was putting in our path instead. I knew my first calling to be a father and husband but the allure of the missionary life stayed with me for many years leading to misunderstandings between Maggie and I.

We moved several times to various jobs in those early years and had 4 children along the way. We had been attending various non-denominational and Assembly of God churches much of that time but did not feel we really fit into any of those churches in our theological understanding. In the early 1980's, we moved to a new job in New Jersey and looked up an old Navy friend of mine who lived in the area. He had been attending a conservative Presbyterian church in the area for some time and had become a convinced Calvinist. Soon we realized that we too were being led in the same understanding of scripture. And, as is often the case when discovering a new paradigm in which to study scripture, our scripture study blossomed and we spent hours talking about the things we were learning. Maggie is a great blessing in her love for theology so our long discussions were a mutual boost to our faith sharing and honing each others' understanding.

After a time, I was ordained a deacon in the Presbyterian church and was considering a calling as an elder. I thought that perhaps my desire for the ministry was a calling to be a full-time pastor. And it was during that time of study and contemplation that I became interested in the writings of the Calvinist philosopher/theologian, Dr. Cornelius Van Til. Dr. Van Til is noted primarily for presuppositional apologetics. In one of his works on epistemology (the study of how we obtain knowledge), he classified two types of thinking – theistic, and anti-theistic. Theistic thinking presupposes that there is a God that gives order to the universe. Anti-theistic thinking is any thinking that assumes that it must presuppose there is no God in order to be 'un-biased' or 'scientific.' From the standpoint of apologetics, the secret is to challenge the presuppositions of the other person. Put simply, in order to use logic, one is presupposing that there is an order to the universe and to presuppose there is an order presupposes there is a God who creates and maintains that order. There is much more to presuppositionalism, of course. But, the point of it all in my life was that it was the philosophical seed that grew into my eventual conversion from Calvinist to Catholic.

In the early 1990's I was looking for a new job once again. The cost of living in New Jersey and the desire to return home and work on healing some family relationships I had abandoned when I left for the Navy, led us to look for work in my home state of Missouri. I found a job in the Kansas City area and we packed up all we had on the moving truck. Then we piled 4 kids and a golden retriever along with some essentials in a little Chevy Lumina for the long 24-hour drive to our new home. It was heartbreaking to leave friends in New Jersey but exciting to be on a new adventure. The lower cost of living afforded us a higher living standard and the new job had plenty of opportunity for career growth.

In Missouri we moved from one church to another looking for that right fit where we felt we could

share our understanding of the faith openly. But finding no where to call home we were becoming more and more disillusioned. It seemed there were no churches that were truly Calvinist by our definition of Calvinism. At last we landed in a small Calvinist mission church in a new spinoff of the Presbyterian denomination. We thought we had found a home. The irony of the Protestant tendency toward splitting did not seem to hit us at the time. Each person, led by their own understanding of scripture alone, comes to his own theology and looks for a church that fits that understanding. This is especially ironic in Presbyterian circles where the authority of the church over the individual is so often discussed. In a short time I was ordained in the new denomination as a teaching elder and became the assistant pastor of the little church. Almost as quickly the pastor and I had a disagreement on a minor difference in the way we interpreted certain texts of scripture with regard to distributing communion. And so, we left that church disillusioned more than ever and wondering if it was even possible to find the truth at all.

This disillusionment with finding a church home and a failure to resolve some of the weaknesses in our marriage led to a great fall. For many reasons Maggie and I began to drift apart and before long we no longer had a marriage in the true sense but had become two individuals who happened to live under the same roof. Each of us had our own interests and our own lives apart from one another. Love seemed to have grown cold and we were indifferent to one another. And our faith was too uncertain to provide the stabilizing affect it once did. Maggie confided later that she felt she was lonely all the time and she could stand it no longer. Though it had been building for some time, I was still surprised when she told me one day she was leaving me. I was devastated and humiliated. I think that I am very hard headed and it takes a great crisis for God to gain my attention most times. This was one of those times. I had thought that despite everything else we had a good marriage; it was a source of pride to me. But now I had to examine those assumptions about what makes a good marriage and I felt I had failed at the one task I thought most important. It was a dark night of the soul for both of us and a long battle to restore what seemed to be lost forever. It was a very brief separation but it seemed an eternity before Maggie came back home and we set about rededicating ourselves to one another.

This time of healing in our marriage was made more difficult in the fact that we did not have close friends in a home church from which to gain strength. We were alone, it seemed. It was as if it were our family against the world. Our marriage strengthened despite the growing disillusionment in our faith. In that disillusion we had to return to the roots of our faith – away from the debates about great theological points and back to the simple 'Jesus loves me, this I know' where we had both began our faith journey. We spent long times together reading and sharing the Pslams with each other.

Looking for ways to become closer as a family and to slow the physical affects of aging, we began training in martial arts together as a family. Since I never had much athletic ability I was never any good but the time together was the goal and it served that better end. But, having the tendency to never half-do things, I began studying the background of various martial arts and discovered a group of former Russian special forces instructors teaching a relatively unknown art. My passions for unconventional warfare and eastern Europe made it all the more intriguing and I was soon studying this new art exclusively. I thought too that perhaps this was the doorway for me to share the gospel in the cultural context I had felt so drawn to before. I know now, God was setting me up.

Many of those involved in the Russian martial arts, including the majority of the instructors, were

devout Russian Orthodox Christians. The martial art itself has deep roots in the Eastern Orthodox hesychasm. I knew very little about the Russian Orthodox tradition so I began to read about it in order to find ways to share my faith with them. Instead, I realized I was learning more from them and that they had a spiritual life I longed for. They taught me the value of liturgical prayer. They led me to read more of the church fathers and find the deep roots of faith there. I had studied church history from 'trusted' Protestant sources but never read extensively in the primary sources myself. It was a challenging experience to find that the assumptions I had made about a primitive early church were far different than what I found there. It led to further studies in Orthodox theology and church history. Calvin himself had said the ultimate goal was to return to the early church but I was not finding anything that looked remotely like the Calvinist church I had envisioned. Instead, I found a church that rested on word and sacrifice and was liturgical in their worship.

At the same time, I began to wonder about my presuppositions concerning that pillar of reformed Protestantism, scripture alone. If indeed we were to base our faith on scripture alone then why was it that the early church did not argue for the faith from scripture alone? Why was it that they kept insisting that the orthodox faith was marked by a tradition handed down from the apostles and that only those who could trace their authority back to the apostles were the authentic faith? And, most of all, how could one argue for scripture alone when scripture itself did not support such a concept? And even if we argue that scripture does support the concept, is that not just scripture asserting itself (i.e., circular reasoning)? With time I began to consider converting to the Orthodox tradition. Indeed, I began to think of myself as more Orthodox than anything else. There were no Orthodox churches near where I live so my conversion was challenged logistically. But it was a conversion all the same.

A favorite verse of mine in times where my faith wavered has always been Peter's question, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You [alone] have the words of eternal life?" Whatever the uncertainties of my understanding or the trials of life, there was always that Rock to which I had to cling. And then, one day, the context of Peter's question hit me – it came in response to Jesus' teaching about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. And Peter was responding to Jesus' question if the apostles too would leave him for this difficult teaching. Jesus had said that unless we eat His flesh and drink His blood, we have no life within us. Could it really be that I could be a Christian for 30 years risking not having life within me? And if I had been wrong about such an important teaching of the faith, I was ready to consider where else I was wrong. I knew I had to go through my conversion somehow officially so that I could share in His body and blood and have that eternal life to which Peter was referring. But how when the nearest Orthodox church was more than an hour from my home?

God led a Catholic friend to help me over one last hurdle. As a Calvinist with a strong sense of the reformation, I still held a distrust for the Catholic church. Orthodox was one thing, but Catholic was not even a remote possibility in my mind. My Catholic friend was glad that I was opening my mind to the sacraments and he was excited to see the changes as we talked. He shared Dr. Scott Hahn's lectures on "The Bible Alone" with me as well as other tapes and books. One day he asked what I saw in the Orthodox tradition that I did not find in the Catholic tradition. I spoke of the mysticism, the spirituality, and especially the mysteries (the Orthodox word for sacraments). After a while he said, "I think I get it. You like the sacraments but just not the authority." His candor set me back for a bit and at first I was a little angry. But the more I thought about what he said, the more it made sense. He helped me identify the Pope as my last stumbling block to the Catholic tradition and he encouraged me to return prayerfully to the church fathers. I know he was praying for me because it seemed all I read

was confirmation of the primacy of Peter and his successors. Slowly my anti-Catholic bias began to melt and I became convinced in the Catholic tradition.

I remember my first mass, weeping as I joined in the liturgy and heard those familiar words from scripture in a new light. I would not be satisfied until I could be in full communion and join my brothers and sisters in the Eucharist. I am sure I tried our local priest's patience with my incessant questions and sharing with him the things I was learning; things that he probably thought quite obvious but which I was just realizing. That long dark night of the soul, of thinking I had to find a church that conformed to my subjective understanding, was over. I was free to submit my opinions to the objective and wise counsel of the Church and not have to lean on my own understanding.

I could go on concerning the miracle of praying the rosary for my wife. It was that miracle of the rosary that got me past the Marian devotion that is a stumbling block for so many former Protestants. I could also talk about the miracle of our four children coming to the faith at the same time through their own journeys unknown to me. It was an exciting time again with the Lord completing and fulfilling that journey I had begun so many years ago as a teenager. I love telling the story to whoever will listen. I hope one day to complete a book to share all those stories if God will give me the ability to write it like it needs to be told.

As we approached Confirmation in 2007, I took Cyril and Methodious as my Confirmation saints. Their prayers had led me on that round about trip through a Russian reformation into the Church. I pray one day for the true unity of east and west – the two lungs of the Church as Pope John Paul the great called them. I retain those friendships with my eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters and pray that we find the common ground to be one in truth again. And I pray for my Protestant friends who still have difficulty understanding our conversion. Jesus prayed that we be one, we pray the same and hope one day we can truly worship together in spirit and in true fullness of faith.