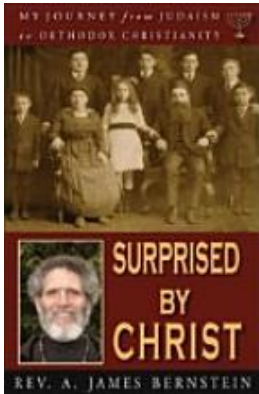


Surprised by Christ

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



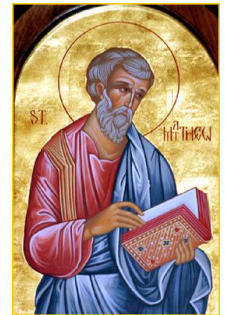
On November 16th we remember the Apostle and Evangelist Matthew. The primary audience for Matthew's Gospel was his fellow Jews, and one of his main goals was to show that Christ fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies that the Jews revered.

It seems an appropriate time to review a book written by an Orthodox priest who is a convert from Judaism, Father James Bernstein. He grew up as a devout Jew, very knowledgeable about his faith, and with an inquiring mind that wanted to find the reasons for things. His book *Surprised by Christ* tells us about his journey to Orthodox Christianity. The journey itself makes for an appealing story. Father James writes of the initial attraction between himself and his wife Bonnie: "She told me that though she had read about Jews in the Bible, she had never knowingly met one. I was the first, and a New Yorker besides. I told her that I had never knowingly met someone of Okie and Swedish descent as beautiful and mellow as she."

A special value of the book is that Father James shows, through his own study and experience, how Orthodoxy completes the faith of the Old Testament. Though raised to view the New Testament as "the enemy's book," he was curious enough as a teenager to borrow a copy and to read it at night under the covers with a flashlight. He found himself "mesmerized" by its description of Jesus Christ.

Wanting to find out whether this Jesus could be the one described in the Old Testament prophecies he already knew well, he studied them even more closely. His account of that study is rewarding reading for anyone who wants to learn more about how the Church interprets the Old Testament, and why it is the basis of so much of our prayer and teaching. He gives wonderful insights into Jesus' life and work as the fulfillment of the prophets' words.

Father James also was looking for a church that maintained the kind of worship he knew: "As a Jew, I desired worship that contained a sense of mystery, was rooted in ancient Jewish practice, and centered on God and our Communion meal with Him." He did not find these elements fully in Protestantism or in Roman Catholicism, but discovered them in wholeness in the Orthodox Church. He is never smug, or disrespectful toward the Protestant Church and the Roman Church, but reading his analysis of their deficiencies when compared to Orthodoxy is a valuable means for Orthodox Christians (also without smugness or disrespect toward others) to know their own faith better.



Father James writes candidly that he did not always find Orthodox people to be as attractive as the Orthodox Faith itself is. He urges parishes to be welcoming to newcomers, having experienced indifference and even coldness in some of his early visits to churches. But for those who want, as he does, to know Orthodoxy and invite others to share it, *Surprised by Christ* is an excellent companion and teacher.