

The Visible Church Was There All Along

By Cindy Beck

“I just can’t be Protestant anymore,” I blurted out one night as my husband and I were driving in the car.

“What?”

“This is just crazy. Every church teaches something different. Every pastor interprets the Bible according to his own personal beliefs. How is anybody supposed to know who’s teaching *the truth?*”

“Well, all we can do is choose the denomination that’s most faithful to the Bible.”

“So we decide what the Bible means? We decide what’s true? Then the Bible isn’t our final authority – we are.”

Kerry was silent for a moment.

“Well, if you’re not Protestant anymore, then what are you?” he asked.

I didn’t know.

“Lord,” I prayed later that night, “I’ll go wherever You want me to go. Please, just lead me to the truth.”

I never imagined that I would one day become Catholic, even when I knew I could no longer be Protestant. Catholicism simply wasn’t an option. When I left Protestantism, I had no idea where I was going. I only knew that there had to be something else. No matter where it led, I had to find the truth. I never dreamed it would be in the last place I ever wanted to look.

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Raised without a religious faith of any kind, I envisioned God as a stern Judge rather than a loving Father. Knowing my sinfulness, I didn’t think He would ever forgive someone like me. But in the mid-1980s, I discovered the Trinity Broadcasting Network on TV. The televangelists spoke of a merciful and forgiving God Who “so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). One night, in front

of the TV set, I prayed the “sinner’s prayer” and asked Jesus into my heart as my Lord and Savior.

I began attending a Charismatic church whose pastor frequently appeared on TBN. Amid rock and roll music, swaying bodies, and waving arms, I was baptized. Charismatic worship was an exciting new experience. I had never before seen people speaking in “heavenly languages” or being “slain in the Spirit.” Visiting evangelists told amazing stories of “signs and wonders and miracles.” I longed to receive the gifts of the Spirit myself and went forward for the “laying on of hands” each week, but nothing happened.

As time passed, I began to question some of the beliefs of my church. Our pastors promised that we would receive physical as well as spiritual healing if we only had enough faith. And yet each week I watched as the same people went forward time and time again. No one ever got up out of a wheelchair, and the blind did not see. I wondered if these dear people who loved the Lord felt as though they themselves were to blame because they didn’t have enough faith to be healed. But as I read the Bible, I saw that God has a purpose for suffering in the Christian life (cf. Rom. 5:3-4, 8:17; Phil. 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:6-7).

I was also deeply troubled by the emphasis on “speaking in tongues.” Hadn’t the Apostle Paul said, “But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Cor. 14:19)? Though our pastors appealed to the first letter to the Corinthians to support the practices in our church, I could see that Paul was admonishing them for their excesses. “Brothers, stop thinking like children” (1 Cor. 14:20), he told them.

As the Charismatic movement became more and more extreme, I began to distance myself, and I eventually left the church. For a time I continued to read the Bible, but it wasn’t long before I gave that up, too. As the cares of the world crept back into my life, I slowly abandoned the practice of my faith. For the next several years, I drifted further and further away from the Lord. Stubbornly resisting His grace, I tried to find happiness in the pleasures of the world.

It was during this time that I met my husband. Kerry had been raised in the Lutheran Church and had even been an altar boy in his youth, but fell away from his faith as a teenager. Together we went about living extremely self-centered, self-indulgent lives apart from the Lord.

Then one day, I got a letter from a woman I had known years earlier in the Charismatic church. She had become a Jehovah’s Witness. I knew that the Witnesses deny that Jesus is the eternal Son of God and teach that He is Michael the Archangel. While I didn’t remember much about my faith by then, there was one thing of which I was absolutely certain: Jesus Christ is not a created being; He is God in human flesh, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity.

I found my Bible and called her, determined to show her from Scripture the truth about Christ. But it had been so long since I had studied the Bible that I forgot the passages that proved Christ’s Divinity. So I began to study the Scriptures again in earnest and we continued to talk

until, on the advice of her elders, she cut off all contact. I never heard from her again. But like the prodigal son, I had come to my senses and longed to return to my Father's house. I begged the Lord to forgive me for my years of sin and rebellion and I re-surrendered my life to Christ.

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Scanning through the stations on the radio one day, I came across a discussion of the Jehovah's Witnesses. I discovered the *Bible Answer Man*, a call-in radio talk show hosted by Hank Hanegraaff, president of the Christian Research Institute. I contacted CRI for more information about the Witnesses and became an avid listener of the show.

I started going to church again, attending a Baptist church near my home. How different it was! I had thought all Christians clapped and danced and shouted in church. But worship in the Baptist church was orderly and dignified. I felt so much more comfortable there.

At first, Kerry resisted. But by the grace of God, it wasn't long before he had a conversion experience of his own. Kerry recommitted his life to Christ and we began following the Lord together.

Over the next few months, as he grew in his relationship with the Lord, Kerry became more and more uncomfortable in his job as the manager of a secular bookstore. Books on the occult, adult magazines, and the like were offensive to his new faith in Christ, so he prepared to look for some other kind of work.

I was listening to the *Bible Answer Man* on the radio one day when Hank announced that the Christian Research Institute was accepting resumes.

"Why don't you send your resume to CRI?" I suggested to Kerry later that night.

We had no idea what kind of position was available. As it turned out, a manager was needed for the on-site bookstore – and Kerry got the job.

Founded in 1960 by the late Dr. Walter Martin (*The Kingdom of the Cults*), the Christian Research Institute is the largest Protestant apologetics organization in the world. CRI publishes the award-winning magazine *The Christian Research Journal*, and the *Bible Answer Man* broadcast is heard on over one hundred radio stations in the U.S. and Canada. What an honor it was that Kerry was going to be a part of this ministry. We could hardly believe that the Lord had blessed us in this way.

Kerry began working for CRI in the summer of 1996, and we moved north from San Diego to Orange County. Kerry loved his new job and quickly became a valued and well-liked member of the CRI staff. Within a year, he was supervising the warehouse and shipping department in addition to the bookstore. I became a volunteer and eventually started working for him in the

warehouse on an as-needed basis. We made wonderful new friends and enjoyed working alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ.

After our move, we set about finding a new church. We wanted to try a different denomination, as we were troubled by the “secret rapture” teaching in our Baptist church for which we could find no Biblical support. We were surprised to learn that this teaching was less than two hundred years old and that it has never been accepted by the majority of Christian believers.

We eventually settled into a Reformed church. For the next two years, we studied the history of the Protestant Reformation, embracing Reformed theology wholeheartedly. I loved Calvinism – at last I could love the Lord not only with my heart but with my mind as well (cf. Matt. 22:37). Calvin’s doctrines on election, predestination, and the perseverance of the saints were particularly comforting. I loved the teaching that everything was in God’s Sovereign hands, determined before the foundation of the world.

We attended Bible studies and conferences, read numerous books, and listened to hundreds of theology tapes. We were learning from the best theologians the Reformed tradition had to offer.

One evening in a Bible study class, we were discussing *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) when the topic of conversation switched to the canon of Scripture itself. Our teacher quoted my favorite theologian, R. C. Sproul, as saying that the canon of Scripture is a “fallible collection of infallible books.”

What a strange thing to say, I thought. If the collection of books is fallible, how could anyone be certain that we have infallible books? It didn’t make sense. Still, I put the thought out of my mind.

But it wasn’t long before another crack in my Reformed fortress began to appear. During another Bible study, a question was asked about the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: How could we explain this passage in light of the doctrine of *Sola Fide* (Faith alone)? The answer that was given was less than satisfactory. How *did* this parable fit our theology, I wondered? The passage began to haunt me.

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His throne in Heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on His right and the goats on His left.

“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me.’

“Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and invite You in, or needing clothes and clothe You? When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit You?’

“The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me.’

“Then He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave Me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite Me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe Me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after Me.’

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help You?’

“He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for Me.’

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matt. 25:31-46).

Here was the clearest picture of the final judgment in all of Scripture, and the Lord was rewarding or condemning the people according to what they had *done*. As I searched the Scriptures, I found that this was not an isolated text (cf. Matt. 12:36-37, 13:49; John 5:28-29; Rom. 2:6-8; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:17; Rev. 2:23, 20:13).

How did all of this fit “Sola Fide”?

I knew that we are saved by the free gift of God’s grace; there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation (cf. Eph. 2:8-9). But the simple formula of “faith alone” did not do justice to the totality of Scripture. How could we reconcile Martin Luther’s doctrine of forensic justification and imputed righteousness with the clear teaching of the Bible?

“Do not let anyone lead you astray,” said the Apostle John. “He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous” (1 John 3:7).

Luther said, “No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times each day” (*Let Your Sins Be Strong*, 1521). But the Apostle Paul warned, “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God?” (1 Cor. 6:9).

Was the doctrine of *Sola Fide* misleading countless people into a false sense of security? I remembered the Lord’s stinging warning in Matthew 7:21. “Not everyone who says to Me,

‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father Who is in Heaven.”

I wondered. Had Martin Luther *really* “rediscovered” the gospel? Or had he invented something new?

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It began to bother me that there were so many theological differences among the CRI staff. The Lutherans disagreed with the Baptists, who disagreed with the Reformed, who disagreed with the Calvary Chapel people and so forth. Though we claimed to be united on essentials, in reality we had serious disagreements on central theological issues: Does God regenerate us in baptism or is it only a sign? Is Christ truly present in the Lord’s Supper or are the elements merely symbolic? Can we resist God’s grace and lose our salvation or are we eternally secure? It seemed absurd to me that we could hold so many contradicting views and yet all claim to be “within the pale of orthodoxy.” *Somebody* had to be wrong.

And what of those Christians who disagreed with CRI positions? We all looked to the Bible; what made our opinions more correct than those of anyone else? We were sending out “fact sheets” every day, but how could we really be certain that we were telling people the truth? I began to view CRI as a microcosm of Protestantism. At the end of the day, all we could do was “agree to disagree,” because each one had his Bible and was determined to decide for himself what was true.

One evening, Westminster Theological Seminary hosted a debate between the Lutherans and the Reformed on the topic of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Kerry and I couldn’t make it, but a Lutheran co-worker from CRI attended the debate and told us about it the following day. He said the discussion had quickly become heated, each side hurling Bible verses back and forth, saying things that were “almost blasphemous.”

Oh, this is just ridiculous, I thought to myself. *It’s been nearly five hundred years since the Reformation and they still can’t agree on what the Bible means!* And then I came to a startling realization: *Sola Scriptura* doesn’t work.

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I couldn’t stop thinking about the hopeless state of division and confusion within Protestantism. With the Bible alone as our guide, we had managed to split into nearly 30,000 bickering denominations with no end in sight. How could so many sincere men of God, all claiming the Bible as their sole authority, come up with so many different interpretations of Scripture? Whose interpretation were we supposed to trust? How could we look to the Bible alone if nobody could say authoritatively what it means?

The weakening of faith and the collapse of moral values were equally disheartening. Many mainline churches, once stalwart in defense of orthodox Christian doctrine, now watered down fundamental beliefs such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the Virgin Birth, the Bodily Resurrection, and even the Divinity of Christ. Rejecting Biblical morality, homosexual practice and lifestyle were becoming acceptable. Even traditionally conservative denominations were now permitting abortion. What would have been unthinkable fifty years ago was rapidly becoming commonplace today. And still, all looked to the Bible alone and continued to claim the perspicuity of Scripture.

I had to see for myself what “private interpretation” had really led to. I asked Kerry to take me to see the various denominations. We began going on what we called our “field trips,” visiting a new church every week.

One Sunday morning, we went to the fastest-growing church in southern California. One of the new “seeker-sensitive” mega-churches, it seemed more like a stadium event than a religious service. There were no Christian symbols on the walls, not even a Cross. Musical instruments covered the stage from end to end. The pastor’s sermon was motivational and we enjoyed the lively, contemporary Christian music, but there wasn’t a word about sin, repentance, or Christ’s death on the Cross. Was this *worship*? Or was it entertainment? Was this what five hundred years of Protestantism had produced?

Kerry was quickly becoming as disillusioned as I was. We began to think that perhaps the solution could be found in the Anglican-Catholic Church. We found St. Matthew’s, a parish about thirty miles from our home, and began attending services each week. For a time, we loved it there. The worship was reverent and the parish priest gave some of the best sermons we had ever heard.

But there was no Anglican-Catholic parish in San Diego, where we hoped to return someday. And I discovered that the Anglican-Catholic Church had only been established as recently as 1978, when it separated from the Episcopal Church. It was just one more denomination, split off from yet another denomination.

I was terribly frustrated. Paul had warned against divisions (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10) and said that we are to watch out for those who cause them (cf. Rom. 16:17). “For the time will come,” he wrote, “when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Tim. 4:3). I was weary of being “blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). Surely this disunity and confusion was not the work of the Holy Spirit.

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We were visiting a small, Episcopal church in our neighborhood one week, when the pastor announced that there was going to be a day of prayer for unity and a special ecumenical service

held at a nearby Greek Orthodox church. Knowing very little about the Eastern Orthodox, I was intrigued.

“Why don’t we go and see what it’s like?” I suggested to Kerry. “We’ve been everywhere else.”

Though we missed the ecumenical service, one Sunday morning a few weeks later, we decided to visit the Orthodox church.

The smell of incense filled the air as we entered St. Paul’s Greek Orthodox Church for the Divine Liturgy. It was the most majestic church that we had ever seen. The priest, clad in a lavish golden vestment, censed the altar as he prayed in the Sanctuary. Worshipers lit candles and kissed the icons, making the Sign of the Cross. Kerry and I sat down in silence. There was a sense of reverence here that we had never experienced before. But as the celebration of the Liturgy progressed, we felt terribly out of place as the people around us stood, knelt, prayed, sang, crossed themselves, and even kissed! As beautiful as it was, I didn’t know if we would ever go back again.

I began reading about the Eastern Orthodox and discovered that theirs was an ancient church with a living, historical connection to the Apostles and to Jesus Himself. As far as I had been concerned, Church history began in the sixteenth century. I knew nothing about the fifteen hundred years before the Protestant Reformation. I began to wonder about the early centuries of Christianity. What had the early Christians been like? How had they worshiped? Reading Church history, I discovered the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. The writings of the early Fathers opened up a whole new world to me that I never knew existed.

I discovered a Church that believed in Apostolic Succession, Sacred Tradition, baptismal regeneration, and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist – a visible, authoritative Church whose bishops had infallibly determined the canon of Scripture and had defined the great dogmas of the Christian Faith.

I learned that worship in the early Church was centered not on music and preaching but on the *Eucharist*. The early Church Fathers unanimously believed that the bread and the wine truly became the Body and Blood of Christ.

St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the Apostle John, called the Eucharist the “medicine of immortality” (A.D. 110, *Letter to the Ephesians* 20:2). Concerning “those who hold heretical opinions,” he wrote, “note how contrary they are to the mind of God. ... They abstain from the Eucharist and prayer, because they refuse to acknowledge that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins and which the Father by His goodness raised up” (A.D. 110, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 6:2-7:1).

St. Cyril of Jerusalem expressed the Eucharistic faith of the early Church in his catechetical lectures:

“Therefore, when He has spoken and says about the bread, ‘This is My Body,’ who will have the nerve to doubt any longer? And, when He affirms clearly, ‘This is My Blood,’ who will then doubt, saying that it is not His Blood? Once, by His own will, He changed water into wine at Cana in Galilee; is He not worthy of belief when He changes wine into blood? ... Do not judge the reality by taste but, having full assurance from faith, realize that you have been judged worthy of the Body and Blood of Christ. ... Having learned these things, you have complete certitude that the visible bread is not bread, even if it is such to the taste, but the Body of Christ; and the visible wine is not wine, even if taste thinks it such, but the Blood of Christ” (A.D. 350, *Mystagogic Catechesis* 4:1,2,6,9).

Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My Flesh is real food and My Blood is real drink. Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood remains in Me, and I in him” (John 6:53-56).

The early Christians knew that the Lord was not speaking of a mere symbol. I discovered that for the first thousand years of Christianity, no one denied the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. It was the universal belief of the entire Christian Church.

As if scales fell from my eyes, I began to see other passages in Scripture that, taken at face value, contradicted Protestant theology: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God” (John 3:5); “Stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15); “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24); “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23); “Take, eat; this is My Body ... this is My Blood” (Matt. 26:26-28).

I was shaken. We had refused to believe the plain meaning of Scripture. We had “nullified the Word of God for the sake of our tradition” (cf. Matt. 15:6).

As I continued to study Church history, I learned that “Scripture alone,” “Faith alone,” an “invisible” church, and symbolic baptism and Eucharist were all late innovations – teachings of men who came along centuries after Christ established His Church. Not a single Church Father taught *Sola Scriptura* or *Sola Fide*. The two great pillars of the Protestant Reformation were “traditions of men” (Mark 7:8).

I had to make a choice. I could listen to the men who sat at the feet of the Apostles themselves – men who sacrificed their very lives for the faith that had been passed down to them – or continue to follow those who had separated themselves from the ancient Church, men who taught radically new doctrines that had never been held in the entire history of Christianity.

Jesus promised to be with His Church until the end of time (cf. Matt. 28:20) and to send the Holy Spirit to guide her into all truth (cf. John 16:13). I was forced to admit that either Christ had

broken His promises and had allowed His Church to fall into error and remain in darkness for fifteen hundred years, or that Protestantism was not historical Christianity.

The testimony of the Fathers was irrefutable. I had been taught that the Reformers restored “pure Christianity” to a corrupt Church, but I now knew that Protestantism was the corruption. The Reformers refashioned Christianity according to their own beliefs and lost the Faith of the Fathers, departing further and further from the Apostolic Faith with each successive generation of Protestant believers.

At long last, I discovered the Church that was founded not by Luther or Calvin or any other man but by the Lord Jesus Himself. That one, Mystical Body where there was truly “one Spirit ... one hope ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4-5); where the many are made one Body, for “all partake of the one Bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). The Orthodox Church still possessed the faith that had been “once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). The Orthodox had kept the Traditions of the Fathers.

Or so I thought.

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We decided to go back to St. Paul’s for the Resurrection Service on Great and Holy Saturday, the eve of Pascha. (*Pascha* is the Greek word for Passover, what Eastern Christians call Easter.) The church was dark, symbolizing the darkness of the grave. At the altar, the priest lit the Paschal Candle representing the Resurrected Christ, the Light of the World. We lit our candles from the Paschal Candle, passing on the light to each other.

“*Christos Anesti,*” we sang. “Christ is Risen!”

After the Divine Liturgy, everyone went forward to receive a blessed Easter egg. Kerry and I went forward, too, and to our surprise the priest invited us to come back the following day as his personal guests for the annual Easter picnic. From that day forward, St. Paul’s became our church home.

Father Steve took us under his wing as we began to learn about Orthodoxy. He gave us books to read over the summer, and in September we began the Studies in Faith class, a twenty-four-week course covering the content, history, and practice of the Orthodox faith. We joined a weekly Bible study and OCF (Orthodox Christian Fellowship), another study group that also met for occasional social get-togethers, and we continued to read the writings of the Church Fathers.

The Orthodox Church seemed to be the answer to our prayers. We even began to accept the teachings about the *Theotokos*, the Blessed Virgin Mary. After all, we discovered, Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, the fathers of the Reformation, had all honored Mary and affirmed that she

is the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin. How far the contemporary denominations have departed from the beliefs of their founders!

As the months passed, we continued our studies and were warmly welcomed into the life of the parish, making wonderful new friends. The fact that we were going to an Orthodox church didn't even seem to bother anyone at CRI – Hank's personal assistant even came to a conference at our parish. We looked forward with eager anticipation to the day when we would formally enter the Church and receive the Body and Blood of the Lord in Holy Communion. It was the happiest time of our lives.

As we were nearing the end of our Studies in Faith class, we came to the topic of moral issues. One young couple in the class, converts from Catholicism, spoke candidly about their marriage. They had not been allowed to marry in the Catholic Church because the woman had been divorced, but they found that this was not a problem in the Orthodox Church.

I had never thought about this before; in Protestantism, remarriage after divorce is a non-issue. Although Kerry had never been married before, I had been previously married and divorced. For the first time, I began to think about divorce and remarriage and how this affected Kerry and me.

I made an appointment to speak with Father Steve about my concerns. After discussing all of the circumstances, he assured me there wasn't a problem; he would marry Kerry and me in the Church and that would be my first, true Sacramental marriage. He would bring us into the Church at Pascha and then marry us on the day of our next anniversary.

That night I couldn't sleep. I was terribly worried about receiving Holy Communion before we were married in the Church. How could we go forward in good conscience to receive the Body and Blood of Christ if we were not going to be married in the Church until the following November? It just didn't seem right. And then something else began to trouble me: Why did the Orthodox Church permit its members to marry *three times* and still receive Holy Communion?

Something was wrong.

I decided to talk to the instructor of our Studies in Faith class. He promised to send me some information that would help. But what he thought would bring me comfort actually brought me more distress.

I learned that at the time of the emperor Justinian, the Eastern Church was pressured into a "situation which she had to accept." Although "unwillingly and in seeming deviation from the main position of considering marriage indissoluble, yet for the purpose of helping her faithful who were at the same time citizens of the state, the Church decided to follow in the main the legal decision of the state in matters of divorce.

“Some of the reasons which the Church accepts as valid for ecclesiastically dissolving a marriage include imprisonment for life, incurable mental or physical illness, proven and irremedial incompatibility, and others” (*A Dictionary of Greek Orthodoxy*, pg. 120).

When I read those words, my heart sank. I turned to the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 19 – a passage I had read many times before and yet, until now, had never truly seen. Jesus said, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries a divorced woman, commits adultery” (Matt. 19:8-9).

I knew that there was only one Church that taught the indissolubility of marriage. Could the Catholic Church *really* be what she claimed to be? I didn’t want to believe it, so deep were my prejudices against Catholicism.

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I had one Catholic friend. Mary had a deep love for the Lord and a steadfast belief that the Catholic Church was His true Church. The Lord used our friendship to soften my heart, just enough that I was able to buy my first Catholic books: *Surprised by Truth*, a collection of conversion stories edited by Patrick Madrid, and *The Question and Answer Catholic Catechism* by Father John Hardon, S.J.

About this time, Kerry began listening to Catholic radio in his car. Protestant programming no longer interested him. We were so much closer to the Catholics now; Catholicism and Orthodoxy were virtually the same faith, sharing the same Sacraments but divided mainly over the issue of authority. Kerry told me about *Catholic Answers Live*, a call-in radio talk show similar to the *Bible Answer Man*, and I began to listen, too.

As I read about the Catholic faith and listened to *Catholic Answers Live*, I realized that I had serious misconceptions about Catholicism. The Catholic Church did *not* teach salvation by works, that Christ is “re-sacrificed” in the Mass, that Mary and the Saints are to be worshiped, or that purgatory is a second chance at Heaven. I realized that all of my perceptions of the Catholic faith had been gleaned from anti-Catholic Protestant sources that had misrepresented official Catholic teachings. I was ashamed to admit that I had never before read a single book written by a Catholic author in defense of the Catholic faith. I had to know more, but I didn’t want Kerry to know what I was thinking until I was absolutely certain for myself.

I had been studying the cults for years, collecting nearly every book that had been written about them. One day, I casually said to Kerry, “You know, there’s really nothing available by an Orthodox author on the cults or apologetics. Do you mind if I order something from the Catholics to get their perspective?”

“Go ahead,” he replied.

And so I began ordering books and tapes by Catholic authors Patrick Madrid, Jimmy Akin, Karl Keating, Scott Hahn, Marcus Grodi, and others. I was studying the Catholic faith intensely – and Kerry didn't suspect a thing.

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One day, I discovered something that absolutely shocked me. Up until 1930, *all* Christian churches taught that contraception was intrinsically evil and gravely sinful. It was the Anglican Church, at its Lambeth Conference, that first approved the use of birth control. Since that time, every single Protestant denomination – and sadly even the Orthodox Church – has followed suit, departing from nineteen hundred years of universal Christian belief.

But there was something more. I learned that some contraceptives – the IUD, Norplant, Depo-Provera, and the Pill – were also potential *abortifacients*. The Pill, I discovered, does not always prevent conception, but sometimes causes an early chemical abortion after a new life has already been conceived. Although its primary function is to inhibit ovulation, the birth control pill sometimes allows breakthrough ovulation and conception to occur, meaning a woman can still become pregnant, even when she's on the Pill. When this happens, the Pill works in another way: by causing changes in the lining of the uterus that prevent the *implantation* of the new human life.

I believed that human life is sacred and that we must respect *all* life – from the very moment of conception until natural death. It is as sinful to take the life of a tiny, seven-day-old human being by a chemical abortion as it is to take the life of a seven-week-old human being by a surgical abortion. I thought of all the sincere, pro-life Christians who use birth control because their pastors have told them that it is morally permissible. In allowing the use of contraception, Christian churches had unwittingly caused the deaths of innocent human beings created in the image of God.

With tremendous sorrow, I realized that I could not become Orthodox. There was only one Church that stood firm on all moral issues, only one Church that could be the one Scripture calls the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

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St. John Chrysostom, the great fourth-century patriarch of the Eastern Church, wrote, “Why did He shed His blood? It was to purchase the sheep which He entrusted to Peter and his successors” (*The Priesthood* 2:1). Christ had given the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to Peter (cf. Matt. 16:19) and charged him to feed His sheep (cf. John 21:15-17) and to strengthen his brethren (cf. Luke 22:32). I now knew that the Lord was calling me into the Catholic Church. I had to be obedient to Christ. I had to “become like a little child” (cf. Matt. 18:3) and humbly submit to the authority of His One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

I wasn't sure what to do next, and there was still the matter of my marital situation. I decided to call Catholic Answers. I spoke with a staff apologist who suggested that I contact Edward Peters, a canon lawyer and frequent guest on *Catholic Answers Live*.

Dr. Peters explained that an annulment is not a "Catholic divorce" as some people think. The Catholic Church teaches that a valid marriage is indissoluble. An annulment is granted only when the Church determines that a valid marriage never existed from the beginning. The Church takes great care to protect her faithful because, in her wisdom, she knows that to attempt a second marriage when the first marriage is valid causes one to be in a state of adultery. He encouraged me to speak with a parish priest who could then help me to begin the annulment process.

It was nearing the day when Father Steve would pray for the Catechumens who would be coming into the Orthodox Church at Pascha. I couldn't put it off any longer. I told Kerry that I could not become Orthodox – I had discovered the truth of the Catholic faith.

Kerry stared at me in disbelief. He was devastated. After all of the months of prayer and study, all of our plans now lay in ruins. Our life at St. Paul's, our future at CRI, everything we had looked forward to – it was all over.

"I hate the Roman Catholic Church," he said, and turned and walked away.

There was now a tension between us that had never existed before. But while Kerry couldn't accept that the Catholic Church could be Christ's Church, he could not deny that there were serious problems with the Orthodox position on moral issues. We now realized that if I had been validly married in the past, Kerry and I were living in a state of adultery. Rather than risk offending God and eternally endangering each other's soul, we agreed to live as brother and sister until we could determine our true marital state.

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There was one Catholic whom Kerry respected very much: Jimmy Akin, the senior apologist at Catholic Answers. Jimmy had been a guest on the *Bible Answer Man* years earlier and, though I didn't know it at the time, Kerry had listened to the tapes over and over again, astonished that there were good, solid Catholic answers to Protestant questions. If I could convince Kerry to meet with him, I knew that Jimmy could help. But when I raised the idea, he refused.

"I can't take a day off to go down there," he said. "You know how busy I am at work." Kerry was adamant that there was nothing I could say to change his mind.

"Please Lord," I prayed that night, "find a way to get Kerry down to Catholic Answers."

The Lord answers prayers in unexpected ways.

A few days later, we found out that Kerry needed to have minor surgery. On doctor's orders, he would be off from work for two weeks.

"You know, we could go to see Jimmy before you have to go back to work again," I said with a sly grin one night, as the day of surgery approached. "You know how bored you'll be after you've been sitting at home for two weeks."

"Oh, all right," he reluctantly agreed. "Make the arrangements."

Kerry recovered from surgery quickly and was feeling fine when the day arrived for our trip to Catholic Answers. The tension that had been between us for weeks seemed to lift as we drove down the coast to the San Diego-based apostolate.

Jimmy welcomed us and gave us a tour, introducing Kerry and me to everyone on staff. We then settled into a conference room where he spent the next two hours answering all of our questions about the Catholic faith. Karl Keating, the founder and president of Catholic Answers, spent some time with us, too, and gave us all of the back issues of *This Rock* magazine featuring articles on Eastern Orthodoxy. We met Johnny Hochgraefe, the host of *Catholic Answers Live* at the time, and stayed to watch a taping of the show.

On the way home, Kerry broke the silence. "I suppose it's inevitable that I'm going to be Catholic, but I'm just not ready yet; I need more time. But if you're ready now, I don't want to stand in your way. I think you should enter the Church."

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St. Michael's Abbey of the Norbertine Fathers was near our home, and we began going there for Sunday Mass. One of the priests at the Abbey, Father John Caronan, was on the Orange County Marriage Tribunal. I made an appointment to meet with him to discuss the annulment and the possibility of my coming into the Church.

The annulment process is lengthy, lasting at least a year. But because Kerry and I had been living as brother and sister, Father John said that it was possible that I could enter the Church in full Communion at Easter if we agreed to go on living continently. With the Easter Vigil just a few weeks away, I was hopeful that I would soon be received into the Church.

Father John sent us to Father Daniel Johnson at St. Mary's by the Sea. Although Father Johnson's RCIA class was almost over, he allowed us to come into the class. Because of our background, the instruction we had received at St. Paul's, and our own study of the Catholic faith, he agreed that I was ready.

There remained one, final question to be answered: What would we do if my annulment was denied and we could never have our marriage blessed in the Church? It would mean that we could never live as husband and wife again.

Kerry and I were of the same mind. We knew that to reject the Church would be to reject Christ. We would accept the final decision of the Church as that of a mother who protects and cares for her children. We would trust God and rely on His grace to help us live accordingly. We had to follow Christ no matter what the cost. Knowing that our Lord was truly present in the Holy Eucharist – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity – how could we ever turn away?

With that decision made, there was nothing left to stand in my way. At the Easter Vigil of 2000 – with Kerry’s blessing and my friend Mary as my sponsor – I was welcomed into the arms of Holy Mother Church, and I received the Body and Blood of the Lord in Holy Communion.

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Two weeks later, Kerry began Father Johnson’s new RCIA class. With Kerry’s entrance into the Church imminent, we knew that it was time for us to leave CRI. Though we had respect and admiration for the work that CRI does on the cults and aberrant Christian movements, we no longer shared the Protestant beliefs of our Evangelical brothers and sisters. We had found the fullness of the faith in the Catholic Church.

We had to decide quickly what to do next. We wanted very much to return to San Diego, but Kerry didn’t want to go back to his old job at the secular bookstore.

“Lord,” I prayed, “You’ve led us this far and we trust in You. Please, open a door for us somewhere.”

I was working in the warehouse at CRI one day, listening to *Catholic Answers Live* on the radio, when I heard an announcement: Catholic Answers was accepting resumes.

“Thank you, Lord,” I whispered as I turned and looked at Kerry. I just knew we were going home.

Kerry met with the vice president of Catholic Answers and the following week gratefully accepted a position as the manager of purchasing and inventory control. There wasn’t time for him to complete the RCIA class before we moved back to San Diego, so Father Johnson graciously allowed him to listen to tapes of a previous class.

That June, in a private Mass at St. Mary’s by the Sea, Kerry was received into the Church, and we shared the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion together for the first time.

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“Where Peter is, there is the Church,” wrote St. Ambrose in the fourth century. The visible Church that Kerry and I had once refused to see was there all along. Despite persecutions, scandals, and the sins of her members, the Catholic Church lives on. She has stood invincible throughout two thousand years of history and will last until the end of time, for Christ Himself promised that she would.

“And I tell you, you are Peter,” said the Lord. “And on this rock I will build My Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

Postscript

In March 2002, as we were preparing for Holy Week, we received word that the Marriage Tribunal had reached a favorable decision in my case. Kerry and I would soon be free to have our marriage blessed in the Church.

The Lord has blessed us in so many ways we scarcely have words to thank Him. To God alone be all glory and honor, forever and ever. Amen!