

An Open Letter To My Friends, Colleagues and Fellow Christians

My Christian Journey from Jerusalem To Rome

by

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I am writing this brief summary of my life sharing my experience and to serve as a testimony of my Christian journey from Jerusalem to Rome. At the outset, let me confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord of my life and it is my lifetime goal when standing before the throne of Judgment, that I hear the words, well done, good and faithful servant.

During my Christian walk, I have been asked to serve the Lord in many capacities, including: trustee, elder, deacon, advisory council, land acquisition negotiator, building committee member, loan signer for church debt, long range planning committee member, 10-year budget forecaster, capital campaign committee member, youth leader, children's church leader, Sunday school teacher and prison ministry leader. I have also been a men's fellowship leader, home group leader, outreach and evangelism leader, have led many prayer groups, provided counseling and worked as a nursery worker. I am sure there are some assignments or special projects that were overlooked in this listing. In over 28 years of Christian service, one gets called upon for many things. This many years of service opens the door for wonderful opportunities to study the scriptures, dig into word studies using a concordance, bible dictionaries, commentaries and the like. Over time I have been blessed to receive some of finest Bible teaching available to Christians. After years of study and devotion, one could anticipate having a fairly secure handle on the "truth concerning the things of God," yet, I must be perfectly frank, after recently studying our Christian history, it is very easy for me to deduce, without feeling the least bit insecure, that my learning curve in light of the past few years has only just begun. I really do not know a fraction of what I thought I knew. Herein begins my story.

My wife Deborah and I have awakened daily since 1976, which was the third year of our marriage, in a diligent effort to serve the Lord. We have found our Christian walk taking some very unusual, yet Holy Spirit calculated turns over the past 28 years. This year we both turn fifty, which in biblical terms is the "Year of Jubilee." Leviticus 25:10 says, "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan." This then is our year to return to our Christian roots.

My closest time to the Lord as a child was under the care of Dr. John Ed Matheson, at Capitol Heights Methodist Church during a Blue Lake Methodist youth camp trip. I was born again at an early age as a protestant and water baptized (immersed) by Dr. Jerry Gunnells at Eastern Hills Baptist Church at age 13, along with other members of my family.

As a youth, using a definition from the Scriptures, I backslid and adopted almost every sin I could in high school. But right out of high school, at the age of 18, I married Deborah Woodley; we have been married over 31 years. We were equally yoked because both of us were not serving Christ in the early days of our marriage. Our first child came in late March in the 3rd year of marriage (1976) and before the summer was concluded, Deborah had met and accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savoir (believe it or not, while reading a Living Bible version of the New Testament.) 28 years ago on our 4th wedding anniversary, I reunited with Christ and was filled with the Holy Spirit; the date was September 29, 1976, which was 30 days after Deborah's conversion. This conversion and reuniting with Christ confirmed to me that we needed to raise our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This all happened under the ministry of Fran Harrison who reminded me so much of my mother. We concluded that in our new walk with Christ we wanted to be a part of a church that was alive, that treated Jesus as a living, real Lord and invoked HIS presence, power and gifts. We were enjoying the Charismatic movement and attending Evangel Temple Assembly of God church in Montgomery, then pastored by Dr. Frank Martin. We wanted to fully engage in church-life activity and living on Lake Jordan, a 30-mile commute to Montgomery made it very difficult. We then immersed into New Life Church; an inter-denominational church in Elmore County where God's Spirit was saving lives and His spiritual gifts seemed to weekly flow. The manifestations of emotional and physical healings were commonplace under John Varner, a former Baptist minister who served as pastor. In 1985, we sold our house on the lake and moved back to Montgomery and joined another inter-denominational church, Christian Life Church led by Pastor Stephen Vickers. This church had a racial mix of 50% white and 50% black. We gladly embraced this idea because it was spiritually the right thing to do here in the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement, Montgomery, Alabama. Martin Luther King used to say the most segregated hour in America was during church. This church was living proof it could work.

We then felt the need to get involved in the inner city and reach out to the poor in West Montgomery. A new church, named River of life was birthed with this as a primary mission under the pastorate of a former Presbyterian USA minister, Dr. Dick Druary. It was in this setting that communion became very special to my family as we approached the altar regularly together, broke bread and prayed. It would always reduce me to tears embracing my wife and three children as we took communion all clutched up close together. I joyfully, yet tearfully, prayed over my little flock as their patriarch: what a memory.

Our second child was born in 1979, the 3rd child we miscarried and our 4th child was born in 1984. In the spring of 1999, when our second child was 19, he was killed in a car accident. He was missing for 3 days under a bridge on I-65 South just 4 minutes from our home. The unanswered questions about his death still remains a mystery that lingers with us; was his wreck accidental or was he intentionally run off the road? As a side note, the

Lord graciously spared my family from the deep throws of grief and anguish after losing a child.

Although our spiritual journey allowed us the distinct honor in our Christian walk to serve under different pastors, we only had positive and non-controversial experiences in each transition. In fact, every minister that had been our pastor or influenced our son Micah's life (who was killed) participated in his funeral. His funeral service, with all of these ministers involved, seemed in that glimpse of time a coming together of the body of Christ from all walks of faith.

In 1999 we were acquainted with a small tour group going to Israel. This trip triggered a new search for our Christian roots. The homeland of Jesus, Israel, felt so alive after reading about this miraculous land in the New Testament. In Israel, we saw three churches at every major Christian historical site; Catholic, Orthodox and Coptic. In addition, we saw Muslim mosques and the long-standing Jewish synagogues nearby. We walked where Jesus walked and quickly learned that this land, which was the birthplace and crucifixion of Jesus, was only the beginning of Christianity.

At the beginning of Christ's ministry there was a transition from Judaism to Christianity, which made its way to Rome. In 2002, Deborah and I went to Rome on our 30th wedding anniversary. We realized first hand that the launching pad of the Gospel to the Gentiles took place here in this historic, yet romantic ancient city. In Rome, we saw where Christian martyrs were executed for their faith, including Peter, Paul and many others who gave their life for the Gospel. As a side note, isn't it interesting that when the church was under persecution, it grew, and as we are under persecution as individual Christians, we grow spiritually as well. We saw a pattern of apostolic succession with the lineage back to St. Peter the apostle, the first pastor in Rome, and the disciples of Jesus, which all began at their commissioning during the Last Supper.

On this trip we began to ask new questions about the Reformation and the brave and unusual Catholic priest named Martin Luther. He submitted his 95 Thesis of unscriptural infractions to the fathers of the Catholic Church. The time was 1517 A.D. and the Catholic Church hierarchy was at that time corrupted, unsightly at best, and in many ways un-godly. It became clear to me that all Protestants, including myself, were in a way formerly Catholic and when we "left" the Catholic Church about 400 years ago, we abandoned almost anything that remotely looked Catholic. In fact, if the truth were known, we had nothing but criticisms of the Catholic faith. Because of the experiences leading to and following the Reformation, we did not understand, or even want to understand, this ancient faith.

As evangelical Protestants, we found it hard to believe that Catholics and Episcopalians were ever born again, but I later discovered this was not true. In fact, many of the things we learned as Protestants about the Catholic Church I have since found to be untrue, inaccurate or exaggerated. History teaches us that in 313 A.D. the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity in the entire Roman Empire. As a result, the Gospel and Christianity rapidly spread. It was Constantine who assembled the Nicene Council to settle

once and for all the question of the Deity of Jesus Christ. Constantine called the Nicene Council to settle the disputes over the person of Jesus Christ; and in the process defined the Holy Trinity. Although we as Protestants fled from the Catholic Church, many of us still say and/or believe the Nicene Creed, which is our confession of faith. Still, many Christians, wince at the words, “we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” Somehow we skip over that term or explain it away by saying “universal.” Yet, St. Ignatius of Antioch used the use the word Catholic in reference to the church in 110 A.D. The Nicene Creed, which is the profession of our Christian faith, goes back to 325 A.D.

As we all grow in our Christian life, we quickly realize that no church is perfect and all churches (denominations and non-denominations) have experienced internal sin, disappointment in man and scandals, which is indeed not a good testimony for the Lord. Protestants have experienced this heartache as well as Catholics.

In addition, there have been doctrinal changes across Protestantism. Under Martin Luther certain books were removed from the Old Testament, even though they were in the Bible used by Jesus and the Apostles. Martin Luther even wanted to remove the book of James because he thought it conflicted with the doctrine of being saved by grace alone. James 2:20 states, “But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead.”

Two things followed Martin Luther’s departure from the Catholic Church; one is that men will scatter quickly outside of authority. The divisions in the Protestant ranks vary over a wide range of disputes and differences, which led us today to having over 33,000 denominations. Each year new church splits occur over the most insignificant issues, which continue to multiply. Yet, Martin Luther’s departure forced the Catholic Church to reform and vigorously deal with the valid and undisputable accusations levied against the Church. History teaches the doctrines of the Catholic Church have been consistent and scriptural; man did fail, but God never fails and the teachings and traditions of Christ are tried, true and tested over time, even until today. Man did fail, but the doctrinal scriptural teachings did not fail.

All of this warm up and background is preparing you the reader for the fact that my wife Deborah and I this year, 2004, in our 50th year of life (Year of Jubilee) will be received into the Catholic Church. Interestingly, there is no lineage in either of our families that navigates back to the Catholic Church, neither has anyone in the Catholic Church been recruiting us, the Holy Spirit has been drawing us for years in the face of great resistance from me, the old faithful Protestant. I must admit though, a dear friend, Virginia Gagliano, a faithful Sidewalk Counselor volunteer in Deborah’s pro-life work was always faithful to send Deborah home with material, which she read.

There are many of our friends, including my colleagues reading this testimony who will be asking the big question – why are you doing this? Many emotions may stir over this decision that has taken years to materialize. I trust you will hear me out from the content of this short white paper, which is designed to answer some of those questions. Some insiders on the news of our planned entrance into Communion with the Church this Easter have

asked why, and hearing our reply, began to embrace an understanding of our decision. This testimony will hopefully shed some light to many who we call friends, brothers and sisters in Christ and my fellow Protestants as to how we came to our conclusions. The purpose of this paper is to serve as an explanation; it is not designed as a sales piece, so please relax and walk with me for a few minutes as a fellow Christian. I cannot and will not renounce my protestant background, nor does this move negate my Christian upbringing, it enriches my faith and walk. My wife Deborah and I find ourselves very comfortable in any Christian environment and participating in any Christian worship service. All of the body of Christ has much to offer and we enjoy witnessing God's Holy Spirit at work everywhere.

Please permit me to share a few of the spirit filled parcels about my new walk in the Catholic Church that generates great personal excitement. In an early admission up front, it appears that every where I turn, there is a sign, symbol or tradition that seems to have some value or meaning that is a reminder of Christ, it is absolutely life giving. Everything, including certain gestures and moves, has some deep spiritual symbol that point to Christ. I was satisfied with apostolic succession, the sacraments and the history that all Protestants, including me, clearly originated from the Catholic Church, and we were drawn in. I began to see other signs and symbols that enrich my faith in Jesus Christ and my spiritual walk with him. I guess it goes back to our work on the pro-life front and being around Catholic priests. Although I was not a Catholic admirer, I was drawn by the servant-hood and humility I witnessed in these men. I seemed to have an "unwritten holy respect" for them. There was no envy, strife, struggle or ego present in them, which I found most Christ-like and very appealing. This temperament in a minister draws me to Christ. As I took a closer look at these priests, I realized they have given up all. They had pledged their lives and their own needs through a commitment to celibacy. It does not get any more unselfish and selfless than this. I found myself rather than being critical (as most of us Protestants were) of priests, having a deep regard and respect for their willingness to serve the flock of God. I did not know this, but they hold church daily and most have multiple services daily, this is true dedication and a true gift to the body of Christ. Needless to say, I am indeed impressed with this deep level of commitment and sacrifice. They have given up their entire life to be a servant to the Lord and HIS flock, which is all they do 24-7. What more can one give than one's whole life? I have always had the highest regard and respect for pastors since there is no higher calling in life, but I have a new respect and admiration for Roman Catholic priests who literally give everything up. Roman Catholic priests like Father Francis Butler, Father James Dean, Father Frank Pavone and Father Charles Troncale were visible signs and witnesses to Deborah and me in our pro-life work. A recent priest in my life who loves to research and teach church history and has greatly contributed to our walk and understanding is Father Stephen Martin of St. Peter's Catholic Church here in Montgomery. I love this guy. I would be remiss if I did not expound for a moment about a spiritual patriarch and friend, Jim Pinto. Jim Pinto is a former Charismatic Episcopal priest who served as a pastoral covering to my family as we were searching for a church home. Jim was a former Catholic, strayed from the Lord and after coming back to Christ was ordained as an Episcopal priest. Recently, he came home to the Catholic Church, gave up his ordination and pastoral ministry in this decision. This man's gifts and pastoral calling have richly touched my family. The Catholic Church has one of the finest ambassadors in modern time

in Jim Pinto. He now works in the vineyard with Priests for Life under the direction of Father Frank Pavone. To me and to thousands he has ministered to over the years, he is still Father Jim Pinto. We are proud that Jim Pinto is sponsoring us coming into the church. Ed Clark with the Montgomery Respect Life Committee and a founder of COPE Crisis Pregnancy Center is another person who touched our lives. In the Gospel of John chapter 17 is an example of touching all of those in Christ; because we are one. Ed never had but one agenda and that was to serve others. Around our house he is referred to as Saint Ed. His humility and gentleness was a living testimony of God's love.

Once we began to visit the Catholic Church, it seemed as though I had come in contact with some significant symbols and traditions that greatly enriched my Christian walk. Catholic churches in their architectural design create a sense of permanence. Their typical grandeur and construction is built to be a holy place, which in their stature alone loudly communicates that the Lord is the same yesterday today and forever more. I love to hear the bell ringing before church, which is a call to the people for a time of worship. In Rome, you hear the bells echoing through the ancient streets with a crispness of joy and thanksgiving. The bells somehow ring in our hearts that HE is alive and we are HIS people, come forth in the name of the Lord. The holy water font in the rear of the church is such a reverent opportunity to dip our fingers in the water which reminds us of our baptism and form a cross, being cleansed from sin and setting us apart as a servant of God Almighty. This sign was present when the Christians were being martyred at sporting events for the Romans; before Constantine legalized Christianity as the religion in the Roman Empire. It was a sign and witness to the audience from the martyrs as their life drew to a close, that they were marked as Christ's own. How many of us would risk our life, as they did, for their faith? What a testimony to not be ashamed of the Gospel and losing their life for their faith. When you see the people enter into the peaceful, holy and reverent sanctuary and kneel in respect to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, it outwardly reminds us all HE is seated on the throne, Hallelujah. Watching Christians quietly slip to their knees, making their pew an altar and praying before the service begins, allows us a moment to reflect and prepare our hearts for worship and adoration for all HE has done for us. The procession coming down the aisle with the cross leading reminds me of when HE came into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey Palm Sunday revered and recognized by HIS own as King of the Jews. The burning of incense is a symbol that has great depth and meaning. This can be seen, for example, in Revelation 5:8, where John depicts the saints in heaven offering our prayers to God under the form of "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints." The censer of frankincense burning reminds us of the gifts given by the wise men to baby Jesus. History teaches us the significance of those three gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gifts of gold were always reserved for a King. Frankincense was a gift customarily reserved for the physicians used for healing and worship on the altar of incense in the temple. Myrrh was a sign of death and suffering and was used to perfume bodies for burial. As the frankincense is burning, I am reminded of the prayers of the people, but also that Jesus is the Great Physician. As a Christian, I see the cloud of smoke as God's healing power and glory hovering over the people and the altar where the sacrifices are offered and communion is taken. I love to see and smell the incense as they are offered up to HIM who is worthy of all praise and thanksgiving. Exodus 30 describes the altar of incense in the

temple. Verse 34 states, "Then the LORD said to Moses, Take fragrant spices—gum resin, onycha and galbanum—and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD."

The art in the church enveloped in paintings, stained glass windows, sculptures and the like cause me to meditate and bring to life and remembrance the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I find myself observing others prayerfully taking in these images, which so vividly remind me of Jesus. The liturgical calendar is exciting to me as we always have something to look forward to in our walk during the year with HIM. To me it is not even close to becoming boring or a ritual, but breeds life. HE promised that HE is the same yesterday today and forever more --- HE is far from boring. The order of service which dates back to 155 A.D. begins the service with repentance before God of how we have fallen short of the Glory of God which prepares our hearts to enter into HIS worship service clean before God and man.

The scripture readings which are daily read in church services, not only walk us through the Bible essentially every two years, but HIS word is being read worldwide daily by Christians on the same page, which I find absolutely amazing. This in my view brings unity and direction to all of HIS flock around the world. Repeating the Nicene Creed, which is the confession of our faith as Christians, dates back to 325 A.D., which as we know, emerged from the Apostles Creed. I am in awe that we repeat everyday the very confession of faith that our brothers and sisters have faithfully through tradition recited since the beginning of the church.

As I stated earlier, communion became a very intimate time for my family several years ago at that make shift altar in that inner city church. I have come to realize that when Jesus was on the road to Emmaus, his disciples did not recognize HIM until HE broke the bread and revealed himself. There is a great revelation of Jesus in the taking of the bread and the cup. Partaking of the bread and cup is an honor and privilege for Christians and should not be taken lightly. Protestants want to reach the lost and reveal Christ to them. Christ does reveal himself in many ways to believers and unbelievers. Traditionally, most of our Protestant upbringing overlooks the power and revelation of Jesus in communion, so it sometimes becomes a square we color in, and yet, we miss an opportunity for Christ to have another venue to reveal Himself. Early Christianity was under fire because rumors were flying about communion (the body and blood of Christ) being viewed as cannibalism. Jesus in HIS words said, "this is my body, take eat; and this is my blood, take drink." In defense of the Christian church, St. Justin Martyr wrote to Antonius Pius, the Roman Emperor to fully disclose and describe the order of a typical Christian worship service, which always included communion. Christ reveals Himself though many manifestations and in many venues. I now realize what it is about communion that reduces me to tears every time. Like on the road to Emmaus, HE revealed himself gently in communion, yet HIS power is overwhelmingly miraculous and great revelation is present in and through it. He told us

“this is my body, take eat, this is my blood take and drink.” The benefits to all Christians of the sacrifice of Christ’s body and blood are too great to enumerate, the awesomeness of all of this can be witnessed in communion. I think another thing that grips my heart is the altar. It is where you come to take communion. The altar is a place of dying to self, sacrifice and place where we as sheep are fed and touched by the Shepard, it does not get any more powerful than that.

I always thought the word Mass was weird, why didn’t they just say church or worship service like we Protestants called it. Later, I found out the word Mass came from the Latin word missa, which means, “go forth.” Actually, we get the word mission from the Latin word “missio.” We are to go forth into the world carrying the Gospel to love others and serve the Lord. We always talked about, as found in Ephesians, equipping the saints for the work of the ministry, but this term, “mass” means that I am being sent out into the world; isn’t that neat.

In summary, it appears as though that the Lord uses all five of our senses to minister to us in these ancient Christian services. Seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting all seem to be ways the Lord ministers to us; I find it quite fascinating. With our eyes we see marvelous architecture, icons, sculptures and art that gives us visuals that draw us into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Certainly with our ears we hear the scripture readings, prayers of the people offered up, the liturgy being read and the sermons. The sweet smell of the incense burning takes us back to the altar of incense used in the temple and reminds us of the prayers of the people being offered up. We touch one another as we exchange the peace of the Lord; hold hands during the Lord’s Prayer and the representative of the Lord, the priest touches us as little lambs of the flock during communion. We use our sense of taste as we ingest communion as the body and blood of our Savior. It is simply amazing how God uses even our senses to reach us during these times of worship; HE does not overlook one detail.

For my wife Deborah and me, we have been at sea now for a long time seeking the harbor that we can call our own. We have standing invitations all across Montgomery to join many churches all the time. All of these churches have great pastors and wonderful congregations. It seems as though one of my personal struggles was the issue of biblically based church government. In addition, what do we as Protestants do with the 1500-year block in our history; we have ignored it totally. I could never renounce my Christian experience over the past 28 years as a Protestant, for the Lord does deliver, heal and restore by the power of HIS Spirit wherever there is a willing heart, but neither can I ignore the history of the church.

Again, this letter was written to share an explanation of our journey to our friends and colleagues and try to answer the question: “why are you doing this?” Some have said to Deborah and me, “you do not even look Catholic.” Deborah and I are absolutely thrilled and we cannot wait until Easter 2004 to be received into the Roman Catholic Church and take Communion. I even get excited saying the words Roman Catholic, because until now it seemed we were hopelessly separated from one another, but now we have been invited to

bring all the blessings we have received throughout our Christian lives, in the whole Body of Christ, into the Catholic Church. You know we are all in one body together. Deborah and I have seen one of our gifts and calling is to bring people of all walks of life together. I hope our experience and future walk could serve as a small contribution in building a bridge that brings two remote islands together. As President of the Christian Coalition of Alabama, it will give me a continued opportunity to build bridges in the faith-based community. You know, together we stand, divided we fall. I want to dedicate myself to be in the business of unity. Thank you so much for allowing me to bare my soul.

With warm and kindest personal regards, I remain

Respectfully your friend and fellow bondservant,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John W. Giles". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

John W. Giles