

Conversion Story: Mark McNeil

Introduction

“I would rather have received a letter from you saying you had cancer or were divorcing your wife than that you were becoming a Catholic.” With these words my friend in Christian apologetic and evangelistic work for a number of years concluded his reply to my letter explaining that my wife and I had chosen to join the Catholic Church. These words deeply saddened me but they did not surprise me. For years I worked with people that viewed the Catholic Church as an enemy of the truth rather than its home. What caused my conversion? In what follows I will try and offer an answer to that question.

Beginnings

Our church building was a large, cavernous one that seated well over a thousand people. There was a third-story room behind the main sanctuary we used as a library. My pastor had a large personal library of perhaps as many as 10,000 books. Being a teenager with little to do during the summer and an insatiable lover of books, I, along with several friends, was recruited by the pastor to transport thousands of his personal books to the third story library. After a long day of this labor, I sat on the floor of the library and picked up an old book, the title of which suggested it was a theology text of some sort. I quickly discovered that the book was a high school theology textbook. Flipping around its pages, I found various topics that my church considered among the great “heresies” and errors of the Roman Catholic Church. To my surprise, I found this textbook gave Scripture references for the Trinity, the Marian teachings, confession, the papacy, and a host of other doctrines we viewed as erroneous and even Satanic.

I recently recalled this boyhood experience when one of my current students asked me how it is possible for people who are raised in a particular faith to question it. It is certainly true that many simply accept the beliefs and customs of their upbringing. We seem to implicitly trust the “traditions” handed to us. Unfortunately, however, we sometimes are given beliefs that are unjust, harmful, and untrue. Prejudices are only one example of beliefs about people that are potentially harmful. Still other beliefs and traditions may be partially true but, when seriously considered, show they are incomplete, impractical or inconsistent.

I grew up in religious movements in which many believed that Catholics worship idols, deify a “pope,” reject the Bible, magnify human traditions, substitute Mary for Christ, crucify Jesus every Sunday, and a host of other distortions. Although it only took a few minutes, the experience of my finding a book on Catholic theology and reading Scriptures and explanations supporting a Catholic reading of the Bible softened my position on these subjects. Instead of merely repeating the accusations I had learned, my brief exposure to Catholic theology, along with many other related experiences, challenged me to allow my perceived “enemies” to speak for themselves. It was this openness to understanding a belief before judging it that would eventually lead me from Pentecostalism to Catholicism.

This story is related here because it represents the fact that many “small” experiences (many others I’m sure have faded from my conscious memory) help to direct our lives. Any attempt to tell a life’s story, then, is necessarily selective. The events highlighted here are those I think are most important to understanding the direction of my life towards the Roman Catholic Church.

My Earliest Religious Feelings

In front of our South Houston home were several bushes that provided shade from the summer heat. My older sister and I, and occasionally some neighbor kids, would often make tracks in the dirt between the bushes and the house.

One afternoon, while playing by these bushes, I recall a middle-aged couple walking up the driveway to the house and talking with my parents for a brief while. We were later informed that a bus from the Baptist church down the road would pick us up for church on Sunday mornings from now on. Prior to this time I do not recall ever attending a church service and so I don’t recall any particular feelings about the new activity planned by my parents for our weekends.

The Good News

I have two primary memories of these early days of attending church, one negative and one positive. Negatively, I recall sitting in a small room with various young people, most of them older, perhaps teenagers. We would sing some songs and then there would be some dialog, presumably about something pertaining to the Bible. I felt uncomfortable in this setting, possibly because I was around older people and also because I was occasionally called upon to interact with the

issues they were discussing. I was a fairly shy child, especially when in places and around people I didn't know.

Positively, I recall on several occasions the younger children (I was about seven), were taken to a larger room or auditorium to watch a puppet show. My memory is that there were large numbers of children and that the show itself was quite good. The goal of the show was to explain that we had done things that made God unhappy and that God loves us so much He sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to show us His love and also to die in order to forgive our sins. We were then invited, or coerced, I don't remember which, to walk to the steps before the show's procs and pray with a counselor about "receiving Jesus."

I do recall praying with a counselor. The real impact of the experience, though, was felt later. There was something about this message of God's love, my sinfulness, and Jesus' death that so impressed my mind that I continued to think about it. I can remember lying in bed at night wondering about its meaning. How is it that Jesus, someone living a long time ago, can be the basis of God's forgiving love today? Although I could not understand the full meaning of the message, I embraced it by faith. I prayed over and over that Jesus would come into my heart and forgive me of my sins. I embraced this message because its parts seemed to correspond to my needs. I knew I had sinned. Even at this very early stage I was conscious of the fact that I did things that displeased my parents or others and therefore, by extension, God. I was sorry for them but was nonetheless aware of the fact. I also had a strong sense of the reality of God. The tension between a holy God and my sins made the message of Jesus as sacrifice for my sins quite meaningful and persuasive.

God

My awareness of the reality of God is somewhat difficult to explain. Every time I try to reach back to my earliest awareness of God I return to an experience that is so vivid yet difficult to put in words. I'll try to do so here.

My grandparents' home was old and large. The kitchen area was just beyond a small sitting room and had wooden walls. Just around the corner from the kitchen were several doors: one opening to a stairway, one to a bathroom and the other to a "powder" room. I could not have been any more than seven years of age, perhaps around the same time that we began attending church. On one particular occasion, I stopped in the small area beyond the kitchen with the three doors and stared at the wall. The wall seemed to speak to me (not literally, of course). My eyes

focused on the wall and my mind asked, “How is it the case that this wall exists?” It was as if the wall showed itself to be *dependent* on something else. The best illustration I can muster for the experience is the relationship between my mind and its thoughts. Whenever I cease thinking about something, the thought ceases to exist. The world about me seemed to cry out that it depended on something beyond itself every bit as much as my thoughts depend on me. That great “mind” I intuitively recognized as God. Although only a moment in duration I cannot remember ever doubting the existence of God afterwards.

In the earliest and most formative years of my life, then, I came to embrace the message of Jesus Christ and the reality of God. These truths and my discovery of them are essential to my story since they will serve as the bedrock foundation of the rest of my life. Every twist and turn of my story will be motivated by the desire to be faithful to the God that is known and revealed through Jesus Christ. There are no greater truths that I know than that God is real and evident to us in the world and that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world.

Youthful Development

My family moved across town from my childhood church and school. There was a Methodist church close by that we attended for some time. My family was not committed to a particular theology at this time. We attended church, I suppose, because my parents thought it was good for us but not because they had concluded that a particular understanding of the Bible was a correct one. We did choose to leave that church, however, after my parents became concerned about their Sunday school teacher that taught them much of the Bible was pure mythology and could not be trusted. They chose a Baptist church that we attended for more than a year.

By now I was a teenager. My acceptance of the Christian message and my belief in God were now bearing fruit in a quest for deeper understanding. Since we believed the Bible was divinely inspired, my mind became consumed with understanding its message. Our youth minister encouraged us to memorize scriptures, a challenge I took seriously. I spent my spare moments reading the Bible and locating texts I wanted to memorize. More and more I felt a “burden” to preach and evangelize. My pastor would take me to the homes of visitors to our church and we would both explain the good news of Jesus to them and seek to persuade them to “receive” Jesus as their personal savior. My love of scripture was expressed in my relationships to friends and peers at school. Along with my textbooks was always present, purposely

visible to all, a Bible. This Bible would often spark conversations. One of these would change the rest of my life.

The United Pentecostal Church

“Speaking in Tongues”

My mother was on one side, my sister on the other and my brother, eleven years younger than I, was crawling somewhere below the pews. “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place...” The words of this song were sung over and over. Tears streamed down my face while my whole body trembled. We were surrounded by church members, including my mother’s coworker who invited our family to this “revival” service. “Just let the Holy Spirit take over!” “Be filled with the Spirit!” The shouts of those who held my hands in the air and encouraged me to “speak in tongues” by the power of the Holy Spirit filled my ears. I did allow my tongue to begin making sounds without my consciously controlling them. The sounds flowed effortlessly for a considerable length of time. Though I had been baptized in the Baptist church, the pastor of this church insisted we all be baptized “in the name of Jesus.” I was open to virtually anything at this point and so I, along with my mother and sister, was baptized.

This experience, in September of 1983, was a critical turning point in my life. I had studied some about the Charismatic movement. My mother had become interested in that movement through a hairdresser friend that invited her to a large, nationally known church in Houston. I avidly read the pamphlets and books that were purchased at the meetings and also attended them. I was impressed by the emotional worship and the enthusiasm of the preachers. The accounts of miracles, visions, prophecies, and the like, were captivating to my young mind. When I had an experience with “speaking in tongues,” then, I was already drawn to the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.

After this experience, our family returned to our Baptist church. I don’t think there was any immediate thought that we would not. My father was not interested in Pentecostalism at the time and we therefore made no changes of church attendance. My experience of Pentecostalism, however, was certainly alive in my mind.

“Oneness”

Ricky was a funny, somewhat mischievous young man. As I recall, we shared the same science class as high school freshmen. I liked

Ricky. He had a tendency to find trouble but he also had a humorous innocence, or at least it seemed that way to me.

“Where do you attend church?” he asked.

“I go to a Baptist church,” I replied.

“You ought to come to my church. The people there act really wild. They quote a lot of Scriptures, though, and I think you’d like it, especially since you carry around that Bible.”

“Maybe I’ll come some time. Where is your church?”

“It’s a United Pentecostal Church,” he said. “In fact, we have a youth service on Friday nights. Maybe you can meet me there sometime.”

I did go to one of these youth services. The problem was that I found no youth. Instead, I found a minister who was recently hired as the director of evangelism at this church.

Most importantly, it turned out that this was the very place at which I had several months earlier experienced “speaking in tongues” and was baptized “in Jesus’ name.” The minister I met up with, “Brother” Smith, was quite a colorful character. I was captivated by his interest in speaking with me. I was a fourteen-year-old boy deeply interested in the Bible and had even memorized fifty or sixty verses. I had a simple knowledge of some areas of theology. Certainly I lacked a solid, mature knowledge of basic doctrines like the Trinity, the meaning of baptism, and other important matters but I tried my best to explain and defend the beliefs of my Baptist church. My “opponent” in this case, however, was far too great a match for me. Over the next several years he would be the “standard” by which I would gauge my own progress in knowledge and preaching. He could quote seemingly endless texts from all over the Bible. To that task I would devote my energies as well.

Point by point Bro. Smith “proved” to me that I had been misled. He showed me that the Bible emphasizes there is only one God. Trinitarians, he claimed, deny there is one God by claiming God is “three persons.” He showed me that people in the book of Acts were baptized in the name of “Jesus only” (e.g., Acts 2:38). This must mean, he claimed, that *Jesus* is the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, Jesus is the only person who is God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “roles” that God plays for human salvation much like I am a father, son, and husband but only one person.

“Did you know that the word Trinity is not even in the Bible?” he asked.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean the doctrine isn’t there,” I replied. “In fact, the Bible says ‘there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit.’”

“Yes, but that text, all agree, was not in the original manuscript of I John (5:8). The Bible says there is only one God. Jesus claimed He and the Father were one (Jn. 10:30). He also said, ‘He that has seen me has seen the Father’ (14:9). The Bible says people were baptized in the name of Jesus, not using the words of Matthew 28:19 (Acts 2:38). This must mean that Jesus is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The problem is that pagan philosophy and Christianity were merged together at the Council of Nicea in AD 325. Prior to that, Christians believed in one God and that Jesus name baptism was essential to salvation.”

Before I had time to digest these new “revelations,” he threw another at me. “In the Bible people always spoke with tongues when they received the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Also, if one is not baptized with the Holy Spirit he is not a part of the church,” citing Acts 2:4 and 1 Corinthians 12:13 as his proof-texts.

The implication here, of course, was that if one had not spoken with tongues, he was not “fully” a Christian. Further, baptism with the oral formula, “in Jesus’ name,” was equally essential for salvation. In these few theological “strokes,” virtually all of Christianity through the centuries was defined as sub-Christian. The Catholic Church, Bro. Smith informed me, was the main culprit in the great “deception” on these essential teachings. The 20th century Pentecostal Movement, and especially the Oneness Movement that began within that movement in its early years, was most important since it “restored” the truth about God, baptism, and salvation in general. This latter day movement was considered a divine act restoring the “full truth.”

After several hours of talking, I left that church shaken to the roots of my faith. Bro. Smith had a Bible study he had developed that used hundreds of texts from the Bible to “prove” the truths of the United Pentecostal Church (or the “UPC,” the largest “Oneness” Pentecostal organization, so-called because of its emphasis on God’s *oneness* and rejection of the Trinity). I talked my mom into allowing me to go to the church and sit with Bro. Smith for the Bible study. Eventually I would talk my parents into taking the same study and, after considerable friction and controversy, both my parents would accept these teachings.

For the next seven years I would devote my energies to studying, promoting, preaching, and teaching the Oneness Pentecostal faith. My high school years were filled with church-going, Bible study, prayer meetings, revival services, and the like. I wanted nothing more than to spend my life as a preacher in this movement. I sincerely believed it was true and that most of the Christian world had missed the truth. I wanted to use all my skills of persuasion and memorization to convince the world that this faith was “*the truth*,” as we liked to call it.

When I graduated from high school, I entered into one of the Bible colleges associated with the UPC. I spent three years there studying theology and the Bible. I did well at the school. In fact, I graduated in 1990 as Valedictorian of my class. During my stay I regularly preached both at the school and surrounding churches. I continued working hard on memorizing as much of the Bible as I could and also engaging in discussions with people that disagreed with our faith. Since few were familiar with what we believed, I found it rather easy to argue my position while they struggled to understand and answer it.

My life seemed “on track” for a career of ministry in the United Pentecostal Church. When I entered the college, however, all was not well in my confidence in Oneness Pentecostal theology. Several events happened both before and after my entrance into the college that challenged my well-insulated and protected world. What I discovered would also develop over the coming years until I found myself at the doors of the Roman Catholic Church.

Problems

My pastor asked me to preach a Sunday morning service shortly after graduating from high school. I suppose this was part of my “gift” for graduating. It was also around the same time that I had determined to go to Bible college and prepare for ministry. I had long known that my life would be spent in ministry, the only question was whether or not I would take the time to go to school. You see, in the UPC there was generally some fear of education. This was not always true but there were many that especially feared the effects of higher education on our minds. This fear was not without good reason. I came to discover that various ministers with some education in non-Pentecostal institutions had left the UPC. In fact, I would have contact with some of them over the next several years.

I preached a message that morning focusing on the death of Christ as the only true grounds of divine forgiveness. In a sense I was emphasizing the powerful message I embraced as a young boy. That morning when I stood preaching, there was not one single doubt in my mind about Oneness Pentecostal theology. In the course of my preaching, however, I expressed the fact that I “wished” it were true that more people than those who believed our faith would be saved. I also criticized the “legalism” and hypocrisy that were too often present in our midst. I called on our church to discover anew the message of God’s love found in the sufferings of Christ.

My motivation in preaching this message was partly because I rarely heard it since becoming involved in the UPC. We focused so much on speaking in tongues, baptism in Jesus' name, and various other peculiarities of our movement, that it seemed to me that the simple message of "Christ-crucified" was lost. Whether this sense was real or apparent, others may question. For me, this perceived "lack" was significant.

After the sermon was over, I was shocked that several older members of the church pulled me aside and expressed their concerns that I no longer believed the message of our church. My mother also informed me that one person had called our home expressing the same concerns. I still remember sitting down at my desk in my room wondering what it was about the message I preached that provoked such concerns. Was it because I preached Christ? Could it be that our great emphasis on baptism in Jesus' name had ironically diverted our attention from Jesus Himself? I picked up a piece of paper and began to jot down various ideas. The thought then occurred to me, "Could it be that the Oneness Movement is not the truth we thought it was?"

I did not entertain these thoughts for long. I shortly returned to the "norm" as a committed member of our church and now a Bible college student. I continued my preaching but never softened my emphasis on Christ. It seemed to me that the very heart of Christianity was the message of Christ and I would not allow the fears of some to dissuade me from a strong emphasis on its truth and centrality.

I read every book I could find on the Trinity. This was not, at least initially, because I wanted to believe it. Instead, I wanted to know every "good" argument for it so that I could be sure and always have an answer for those potential opponents I might meet. I also read every book I could obtain that defended our understanding of Scripture. I can remember one Christmas morning opening a box from my parents that was filled with books from the publisher associated with the UPC. I quickly became a "bookaholic." I loved books. I bought every book I could afford on theology, Scripture, history, archaeology, biblical languages, and apologetics. I was convinced that "truth" would prevail and that I need not fear the best and brightest defenders of different perspectives.

At the college, I spent every spare moment in the library. Although the library was not all that large, it did have a fair collection of theology works as well as some primary historical sources. On one particular day, lunch break as I recall, I was looking around at some of the reference works and stumbled upon a set of books on the bottom shelf in the far corner of the library. The writing on the spine of the

books was too faded to read. Opening them, I found they were the Ante-Nicene Fathers. The word “Nicene” caught my eye since the “version” of history we were usually taught was that the Council of Nicea was the historical turning point with respect to the “truth.” These volumes before me consisted of the primary works remaining from the period *before* the Nicene Council. I quickly looked to the index of each volume and searched for references to the Trinity, baptism, and speaking in tongues. To my surprise, I not only found texts that clearly suggested the Fathers of the church in the second and third centuries believed something that sounded much more like the Trinity than Oneness Pentecostalism, but I also found that the other beliefs of our movement were not present as we believed them. Additionally, I found works written specifically to defend the Trinity as the faith of the church against a “novel” interpretation that was strangely similar to what we believed! To my surprise, our version of history was simply untrue.

When I shared my findings with my classmates and instructors, it was typical for them to question the reliability of the sources. They claimed that the later “Trinitarians” had purposely distorted the texts to support their case. This never made much sense to me since the same argument could apply to the Scriptures themselves. Since we depend on the same people who taught the Trinity through the centuries to transmit the Bible to us, it seemed reasonable that if we accept their trustworthiness in one case we ought to accept it in the other.

This whole matter showed me with growing clarity that our movement was almost entirely without historical consciousness. There was little or no sense of history. We treated the Bible almost as if it had dropped from heaven in the King James Version and that was good enough. Numerous times I heard preachers scoff at “scholars” who “wasted” their time studying the biblical languages or theologians who consulted the history of theology in the formation of their own. This sense was not unanimous but was almost so.

My discovery of the Fathers of the Church uprooted my theological world. More and more I recognized my dependence on those who came before me. I found myself in a movement that not only lacked a real sense of how much we depend on the Church through the centuries for the Scriptures themselves but also rejected without serious investigation the conclusion of the Church through the centuries. Increasingly I began to believe that this approach was theologically and historically shortsighted. I was struck with a profound sense of historical loneliness. The writings of the Church Fathers as well as great thinkers in subsequent centuries had a depth and significance that none of our writings or sermons, including my own, exhibited.

Entering my senior year at the college, I now determined to devote my full energies to the subject of the Trinity. My senior research project was a lengthy paper entitled, "An Examination of Trinitarian Proof-Texts." My purpose in writing was to identify the strongest biblical texts used to support the belief in the Trinity and find the best answers from our "Oneness" perspective. I tried my hardest. I truly did everything I could to explain the texts that most troubled me. One such text was John 17:5. Here Jesus speaks of the "glory" He enjoyed "with" the Father before the creation of the world. I examined each text in the New Testament where the same Greek word appeared for "with" that appears here. There was not one example where the use of this term did not mean a distinction between persons (when personal subjects were at issue). Once I asked my Greek professor about this text that indicates personal distinction between the Father and Son before the creation, something we would not grant. He turned to John 1:1 and offered the typical Oneness explanation. When I noted that the preposition translated "with" in each text was different and therefore his answer for John 1:1 did not apply to 17:5, he raised his eyebrow and moved on to something else. Never again did I hear about the matter.

Another text that troubled me was John 16:13. Here the coming of the Holy Spirit is promised by Jesus who, concerning the Spirit, says, "He shall not speak of Himself, but whatsoever he shall hear that shall he speak." I asked my professors how the Holy Spirit could "hear from" the Father and not speak "of Himself" if He was in no way personally distinct from the Father. It seemed to me that the language of the Bible was quite misleading if our interpretation was correct. The New Testament contained too much language that implied personal distinctions between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Since there were no texts in which Jesus said anything like "I am the Father," or, "I am the Holy Spirit," our conclusion on this matter was at least debatable.

This conclusion was not easy for me to reach. Many a night I prayed with an open Bible asking God to help me understand texts that troubled me. I still have the Bible I used during these years. Most of it is underlined. In certain key places, like the texts mentioned above and many others, there are lines drawn here and there along with my frantic notations in which I tried to "tear apart" (an expression we used for "deep" study) biblical texts. I posed my concerns and questions to ministers at my local church and they were equally unfruitful.

Much space could be spent describing experiences with deeply devoted and sincere members of the UPC who simply could not "see" the points I was making. It was as if their minds were so deeply indoctrinated with their theory of God and salvation that the Scriptures

themselves could not be seen in their true sense. I discovered the same was true with respect to baptism “in Jesus’ name.” Examining the book of Acts more carefully, I found there were variations in the Greek text that suggested the text was not interested in a precise formula. Instead, baptism in Jesus’ name in Acts revealed various facets of baptism in relationship to Christ and His saving work. In essence, they refer back to the authority of Christ that is expressed in His words of institution (Mt. 28:18-20).

With respect to speaking in tongues, as much as we tried to show otherwise, it became impossible for me to believe that this experience was essential to salvation and yet there is not one text that states such. It is a doctrine entirely built on historical narrative portions of Acts. Increasingly I found that our argument was equal to claiming that because God parted the Red Sea for Moses He must do so for us today. Our claim was that because God enabled people to speak languages they had never learned in the earliest days of Christianity, everyone must have the same experience. The experiences in Acts, however, were spontaneous, without prior instruction and always included the presence of an Apostle (Acts 2, 8, 10, 19). None of these are typically present today. The structure of Acts itself, I discovered, suggests it is a period of historical transition and the miracle of Pentecost is reproduced primarily to show the gradual inclusion of all people groups in the reality of the Church (Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles).

When I graduated from the college in 1990, I had no choice but to leave the Oneness Pentecostal Movement. I had tried my best to remain within its context but found that I could no longer ignore my dependence on the historical Church. I also found that the Trinity was a biblically based doctrine and that our understanding of salvation, the baptismal formula, and speaking in tongues was not the best reading of the biblical material. My perplexing question, however, was, “Where shall I go?”

The Assemblies of God

After a short period of reflection and confusion, I chose to join with the Assemblies of God. This was because the Assemblies affirmed the Trinity and also seemed somewhat more “traditional” theologically. It was also a major part of the Pentecostal Movement, a movement in which I had spent the prior seven years. My father’s side of the family also had deep roots in the Assemblies, my great grandfather being one of the early “converts” and ministers in the Assemblies from Methodism.

Ministry and Education

Not long after joining with the Assemblies of God, I began to pursue work in ministry. My pastor was helpful and shared my name with influential people in our district. I was called by our district presbyter and asked to “fill in” at an Assemblies church that had recently lost its pastor. As it turned out, the church was in disarray due to a terrible tragedy and scandal in the former pastor’s family. After taking care of the teaching and preaching in the church for a few Sundays, I was asked if I was interested in pastoring the church permanently.

My interests at the time were mixed. My strongest desire was to teach. I wanted to continue my education. I had completed a fourth year of studies and received a Bachelor’s degree in biblical studies in ’92 and was now working on a master’s degree in systematic theology. Over the next several years I would complete a master’s program in scripture and one in theology. I was still working on a consistent approach to scripture and theology that would take seriously the history of the church’s reflection on such matters. At the same time, I did have a great love of working with people in churches, especially those churches that were having significant troubles.

Rather than agree to serve as pastor without qualification, I agreed to serve as “interim” pastor until the leaders of the congregation were able to locate a permanent one. For the next six months or so, I would serve this church in regular ministry. After they found a permanent pastor, I turned my attention again to my studies. That did not last long, though, since I would be called again to serve in another church in a similar capacity for a similar length of time. A few more opportunities would arise to pastor churches as well, all of which I would decline primarily because I did not feel I was prepared to fully commit myself long-term to pastoral work. My reason for this decision was because I was still heavily involved in graduate studies and felt these would detract from my ability to serve. There were other growing problems, however, that also exercised a powerful influence.

Authority

For one, there were movements within the Assemblies and the larger Pentecostal world that deeply concerned me. At this time, there were growing reports of “strange” happenings in two or three cities that were being reported with regularity in the churches I was connected with. “Holy laughter,” an experience in which people uncontrollably laughed under the influence, they claimed, of the Holy Spirit was a dominant one.

Others, too bizarre for me to mention here, were reported as well. I began investigating these things and found that some leaders in these movements were defending these various, as I viewed them, “unbiblical” happenings, with a fairly sophisticated theological defense. I saw the happenings as compromising the doctrine of *sola scriptura*: the Bible alone is the basis of our faith and practice as Christians. Those I read after, however, seemed to deny this principle and argued that contemporary “prophets” were able to communicate truths that reached beyond what could be shown from Scripture. This seemed to me a recipe for incredible confusion. How was I to judge between these so-called modern-day “prophets”? Why aren’t these people consistent and adding “books” to the Bible? I concluded that there was a growing crisis in our view of the authority of Scripture itself.

Also, I was growing increasingly uncomfortable with the “hierarchy of truths” in the Assemblies. My ongoing study of theology had moved me away from a strong Dispensationalist interpretation of Scripture. Not only was this approach relatively new and novel historically, I increasingly saw it as a theory that damaged the unity and progressive unfolding of the divine plan in history. Dispensationalism, most famous for its insistence on a pre-tribulation “rapture” of the church, was very much a part of the Pentecostal movement. It was the rapture, along with a few other doctrines, that received special focus on our ministerial licensing exam. Although I was not strongly opposed to these teachings, I was saddened by the fact that they seemed more important on the exam and in the everyday life of our church than the teachings that, in my view, were more to the heart of the Christian faith (e.g., Trinity, Christ, etc.).

As I was encountering these difficulties, I chose to study theology at the University of St. Thomas School of Theology at St. Mary’s Seminary in Houston. This was for several reasons. First, I was not attracted to the other schools in town. They did not seem to focus on the subjects that most attracted me. Second, my study of theology and the history of the church had created in me a growing curiosity about the Catholic Church. I was not interested in the sense that I wanted to *be* a Catholic. No, I was interested primarily because I thought the long history of the Church had resulted in insights that would enhance my own religious faith as I currently practiced it. I simply wanted to learn more theology and studying at a Catholic school seemed promising.

I did not make this decision without some criticism and questioning. Through a series of events, I had begun working with an apologetics organization in Austin, Texas. Through some friends in Pasadena, Texas, my hometown, organizations in Austin learned of my

“conversion” from Oneness Pentecostalism to a belief in the Trinity. They provided an opportunity for me to tell my story on video and this in turn opened into a long relationship of involvement with my new friends in that city. I was invited to be a guest on a radio program that fielded questions about the Christian faith from a live audience. This became a bimonthly and sometimes even weekly activity. I also was involved in street ministry there, especially on the campus of the University of Texas where we would do live “shows” answering challenges and attacks against Christianity from students.

My friends in Austin were truly wonderful people. I have fond memories of the many exciting things we did together. Our friendships were built on our common love of Christianity as we understood it and our delight in defending our faith from misunderstandings and challenges. Their enthusiasm, however, was also channeled against the Catholic Church. They were all deeply anti-Catholic. They viewed the Catholic Church as the enemy of truth and its greatest opponent. They would host some of the most well-known and most outspoken critics of the Catholic Church in local debates and video productions. They often wondered aloud why I would study theology at a Catholic school.

In the meantime, I was becoming more and more aware of the rich literature on Catholicism, mainly by digging around in the library at the seminary. It was there that I discovered authors like Karl Adams, John Henry Newman, Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Louis Bouyer. These authors presented the riches of Catholicism in a way that I had never seen. These works were not primarily argumentative or controversial. They largely presented the beauty of the Catholic vision and it was that beauty that captivated me. Slowly but surely I began to see that Protestant Christianity, of which I was a part by adopting the foundational principle of *sola scriptura*, was *incomplete*.

“Sola Scriptura”

How do we know that the books contained in our Bible are the correct ones? This question was first posed to me by a man who stood holding a copy of the “Old Testament Pseudepigrapha.” This collection of writings, largely from the few hundred years before the birth of Christ, is quite an assortment of writings that provide rich insight into that period of time. We might naturally ask, however, what is it that distinguishes these works from the books that did end up in the Bible? The same may be said about writings that overlap the New Testament period, some of which were seriously considered inspired by God by some Christians in the early centuries.

Whenever this man posed his question, the implication was that we should accept more than what we have in our Bibles. I denied that conclusion but found it difficult to refute him. For one, I had not personally evaluated the books he claimed were inspired. In essence, I realized that I trust others from the past about what should and should not be in the Bible. I knew enough about the history of the biblical canon to know that the process was a long and “messy” one. I also knew there was no clear set of criteria for including a book in the Bible. The ones offered in the standard books on the subject are largely criteria determined after the fact. There is no evidence that a certain list of standards were imposed at a given time in history and that all the biblical books and no more were demonstrably shown to satisfy them. Such a “picture” of history, although I’ve heard it many times, is simply a fiction.

Not only was the canon of Scripture a serious problem, but also the text of Scripture constitutes a serious difficulty. Within forms of fundamentalist Christianity, very much the general tendency of my associates, we were quite familiar with debates about which “translation” of the Bible was the most accurate. The tendency was to accept the King James Version as the best one. This was largely due to its long “traditional” use among us (although we would never use the word “tradition” positively) but its use was supported by the frequent comparison of texts in the KJV with other modern translations, like the New International Version or the New American Standard. The problem was not just translational. Words, phrases, and even whole verses were “omitted” in more recent translations. This, it turned out, reflected different theories about the “true” Greek text that stood behind the translations. The various remaining Greek texts do not fully agree with each other. There are also several major “families” of texts that reflect longer and shorter readings of given New Testament texts. The problem is considerably aggravated when the Old Testament is brought into the picture.

Although it is true that the majority of the texts are identical or virtually so, it was still troubling that the infallible word of God, to us the *only* guide and authority for the Christian faith and life, should come to us in such a fragile way. If the text could vary in so many ways, who can say that the text has not been damaged in a more serious way? The only way out of the problem, it seemed to me, was to affirm some kind of divine guidance for those who transmitted the text. The same is true for the canon itself. The only justification for full confidence that the books found in our current Bible are the only ones that should be included is if I appeal to divine guidance and protection.

Even if we are able to satisfy questions about the canon and the text, another great problem yet remains. What about the proper *interpretation* of the biblical books? This problem became increasingly apparent to me during my days of studying at the seminary. I began to understand the role of presuppositions and tradition in our understanding of biblical documents. I had known for some time that the Bible could be variously interpreted depending on what texts one chose to begin with. During these days I was forced to the conclusion, a conclusion I fought quite hard through the years, that the Bible could be honestly interpreted in different ways on important matters. Oneness Pentecostals honestly believed their understanding of Scripture. Jehovah's Witnesses do the same. Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Orthodox, and numerous others, read the same Bible and interpret it in different ways.

I had to face a critical series of questions. Did God really intend for each individual person to determine the canon, text, and proper interpretation of the Bible? Those who are scholars of these subjects are often unsure of their conclusions let alone people who spend their lives raising children, working forty hours a week, and all the rest. Is there another solution?

My study of Catholicism showed me there was not only another way to approach the problem but that this approach was present in the very earliest days of Christianity. Already in second century documents we find that the Church was viewed as the "home" of Scripture. The proper interpretation of the Bible was found in the Church that flowed with unbroken succession from the Apostles themselves. This Church is found where the visible succession of bishops from the Apostles is found. Its unity is maintained by the continuance of the unifying ministry of St. Peter in the bishop of Rome, Peter's successor. I saw that, looking back through the centuries, Jesus' promises to Peter could in fact be read in this way (e.g., Mt. 16:17-19). This, I knew, was the same faith of the Catholic Church today.

The whole matter began to make sense to me. The canon, text, and interpretation of Scripture were "problems" precisely because I was missing a vital element in my understanding of the "authority" of God in this world. As a Catholic, one "hears" God's voice in the Scriptures as understood and lived within the Church having succession from the Apostles. The authority of the Bible is complemented and made certain by the authority of the Church. The Bible provides the "material" of our faith and the Church "forms" that data into a living whole. I became convinced that the question is not whether one will have the Bible or the Church but rather what "church" or leader will provide the formative context in which the Bible will be read. *Everyone* has a context or

tradition that will guide his reading of the Bible. The Catholic tradition, however, has an objective continuity with the Apostolic faith itself and thereby provides a powerful set of reasons for believing Christ has truly been present in it and will be so, “until the end of the world” (Mt. 28:20).

Along with the above considerations, I began to seriously study the various “problems” that Protestants typically have with Catholic theology. The pope, Mary, saints, the Mass, and all the rest were considered. One by one I not only found there were reasonable explanations for Catholic beliefs and practices but that there were compelling reasons to believe they were right. I found that many of our differences were based on some very basic starting-points that resulted in dramatically different conclusions.

Sacramentality

Perhaps the most basic difference on a foundational level was the Catholic emphasis on the *sacramentality* of human persons. *We know divine and invisible things in and through the visible.* We are bodily creatures and we discover the spiritual world in “signs” of God in the world about us. When this observation is appreciated, the sacraments of the Church along with artwork, holy water, architecture, priestly robes, and a host of other “signs” take on new meaning. They become compelling as expressions of Christian faith since they are not only consistent with our needs as bodily and sensory creatures but also because they continue to express the reality of the Incarnation. God saves the human family not by a purely spiritual act but by becoming visible to us in the humanity of Jesus. Thus the Catholic faith is incarnational and sacramental at its core. Protestantism, especially the forms I associated with, tended towards a more “gnostic” spirituality that, at its worst, despised the visible and physical.

Additionally, the Catholic emphasis on sacramentality, I found, is most perfectly expressed in the Mass. I discovered that the Mass, or the Lord’s Supper, is the heart of Catholic worship and life. It is there that Christ is believed to be present sacramentally under the appearances of bread and wine. Every time a Catholic goes to Mass, he is directed to Christ as the center of everything. He is directed to the great events of salvation history as the Lord’s Supper is reenacted. I was overwhelmed at this emphasis since my entire Christian journey began with the message of Christ as the way of salvation. In the Catholic Mass we celebrate and relive that reality every time we go to worship.

The Social Dimension

Also, Catholicism emphasizes the *social dimension* of human persons. We are not little “islands” to ourselves. We are social creatures who depend on one another. We begin our existence in this world in a community, the family, and we find our meaning and self-identity in relation to others. I learned from Catholics that this dimension of human persons is reflective of the Triune God eternally existing in a perfect communion of self-giving love. Our acts are not merely our own but affect those around us. Ultimately we are all interconnected and we journey to God *together*. The Catholic doctrine of the “communion of saints,” that the saints of all ages have become one in Christ, brought not only understanding but also attraction to many practices that were once seen as deplorable and sub-Christian (e.g., rosary, prayer to saints, indulgences, etc.).

I found that Catholicism completed my already-existing Christian faith. I did not have to repudiate anything I truly loved and believed. I only had to embrace a more complete vision of what Christianity means whenever we did in fact become full members of the Catholic Church.

Joining the Church

It was on Pentecost Sunday, 1999, I stood in the sanctuary of Annunciation Catholic Church (Houston). As those entering the Church recited the creed and received the oil of confirmation in the sign of the cross on our foreheads, I could not resist the tears that welled up in my eyes. What I had chosen to do was *right*. I had listened to the guiding voice of the Christ I had chosen to follow as a boy. I sensed the reality and presence of God and the hosts of heaven all about us as we were beckoned by the beautiful architecture and art that surrounded us. I stood in continuity with the countless numbers of Catholics through the centuries who lived and affirmed our faith. I was intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally satisfied that we had made a decision that was truly in accord with the will of God.

That blissful morning I did not give much thought to the future. I was absorbed in the present. The truth, however, was that I did not know what the future would hold. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to describe the last ten years. Suffice it to say, the above story is by no means the end of my journey. The opportunities and experiences of my life since Pentecost Sunday, 1999 have been literally overwhelming.

Educationally, I continued graduate studies in the area of philosophy, especially focusing on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas,

eventually finishing a master's degree in philosophy. My life has been profoundly enriched by these years of study. Occupationally, I have been teaching theology and philosophy to high school and college students. I could fill many papers this length with exciting stories of young people discovering the power of the Catholic message in our many dialogues. The future appears bright with opportunities to spread the Catholic message.

It is with great excitement and anticipation that I look to the future. Although I have lost many friends and opportunities by my becoming a Catholic, I can say in all honesty that God has abundantly blessed me with many more of both. May God bless you in your own journey.