

There and Back Again: A Preacher's Tale (The Testimony of Michael Matthews)

We are often told that the Christian life is a journey; and mine has been a very bumpy ride! When I was born, I was baptized into the Catholic faith; but I never received the Eucharist and was never confirmed, and by the age of eight I never darkened the door of a church except for weddings and funerals.

My early Christian experience did leave me with two lasting effects: a basic knowledge of some Catholic doctrines (the nature of God, Jesus as Savior, etc.), and an insatiable curiosity about things spiritual, or more properly, supernatural. I had three great loves in school: science, history (especially ancient and medieval history), and literature, especially fiction. These interests came together in my reading habits, which gravitated toward science fiction on one hand, and historical fiction or fantasy on the other. I collected comic books from the age of four; delved into Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Norse mythology; and followed most of the science fiction movies and TV shows. Unfortunately, some of this sort of fiction includes elements of the occult, which drew me like a moth to a very dangerous flame.

As a teenager, I read a great deal of occult material, and even fantasized about being a sorcerer of sorts; but I never became actively involved in things magical until I was 14. At that time, I began playing a role-playing game called Dungeons and Dragons. D&D is infamous for incorporating many elements of actual occult practice, including spells, symbols, magic circles and conjuring demons. In fact, so close is D&D to the real thing that books have been written to guide a player into actual magick and witchcraft. It did not take such to get me interested, and I began to dabble. Such activity eventually brought me in contact with the spirit world, and I found myself confronted with the reality of the forces of darkness. Voices in the night, faces in the shadows, and dreams of death and dying plagued me for several years.

Ironically, while my love of science fiction got me into trouble, it also led to my conversion. One day while searching for a book for a school project, I came across the book [The Late Great Planet Earth](#) by Hal Lindsay. Far from being about science fiction, it concerned Bible prophecy; and while there is much about the book with which I no longer agree, it was just what I needed. It literally scared the devil out of me! Through reading that work, I came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, and came to know Him in a very personal way. When I graduated from high school, I began attending a small Baptist church in the area. While I did begin to know the Word of God much better, there was poison in the grape juice. The church was an Independent, Fundamental Baptist church that held to a view of church history called the "Trail of Blood". According to this view, during the Middle Ages the Catholic Church went off into apostasy and idolatry, while all the "Bible-believers" went underground. These "real Christians" formed all the groups that were so viciously persecuted by the "Papists". Today's Baptists are all descended from those groups, and so were never part of the "Harlot of Babylon". I also started to study the writings of Jack Chick, and came to the conclusion that I had been badly deceived. In my mind, Catholicism was at best a cult, and no Catholic could be saved without leaving the Church.

When I was 21, I felt a call to the ministry, and went to study at Pensacola Christian College. PCC is best known for the A Beka textbooks and curriculum, which is used by even some Catholic schools. What is not widely known is that PCC is a center of anti-Catholic teaching, on a par with Bob Jones University. Much of what I was taught was standard anti-Catholic Fundamentalism; but the college did have intellectual integrity when it came to its Church history classes. I was greatly surprised to learn that, in fact,

there were people who loved the Lord during the Middle Ages; that all the "ancestors" of modern Baptists (according to the "Trail of Blood") were heretics that denied the core teachings of the Bible; that Christianity was not put on hold until the Reformation; and that many of the "fundamentals" of the Faith were in fact hammered-out and defined by the Roman Catholic Church! Nevertheless, I continued my studies in fundamentalism, graduated from PCC, and at 24 was ordained a Baptist minister. A month later I was married, and my new wife, Trudie (who was a lifelong Independent, Fundamental Baptist) and I looked forward to a life together in ministry.

Almost immediately we began to notice an interesting facet of fundamentalism: the process of multiplication through division. Fundamental Baptists tend to be even more divided than most Protestants; and we were faced with the fact that many of our "brothers" refused to fellowship with us simply because we did not attend the right Bible college. When our son, Jonathan, was born, I became involved with pro-life work, eventually serving as director of the Charlotte, NC branch of Operation Rescue. In that work, I discovered that there were, in fact, Catholics who truly, deeply loved the Lord. I also learned that the Catholic Church was the only "denomination" that has steadfastly stood for life.

About this time, I became acquainted with the testimony of Scott Hahn, a former evangelical Presbyterian minister. Scott presented such a straightforward, Biblical account of his reasons for conversion, I could not help but be intrigued. I soon came to understand the true Biblical basis for many of the doctrines that I had once thought were superstitions and traditions of man. After much study and even more prayer, I came to a firm conviction that the Roman Catholic Church is the Church founded by Jesus; that Mary was indeed immaculately conceived; that Peter was the first Pope; and that the Eucharist is the very Body and Blood of Christ. As I made these incredible, life-changing discoveries, Trudie came to share my enthusiasm, and my conviction as well.

In 1997, a year after moving to southern Virginia, my family and I were received into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church; and our Easter Vigil was glorious! Today, Trudie plays her flute during the Mass; Jonathan is an altar server and violinist; and I have served as a lector, Communion minister and adult formation teacher. The Lord has led me back into ministry as a Catholic evangelist and apologist, and I have been honored to speak in parishes across the country. Granted, life has not always been easy: some family and friends have expressed great opposition to our conversion. But our lives are filled with a sense of awe, joy, peace and sanctity that we have never known before. We are home.

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