

Our Mission to Convert Catholics Made Us Catholic

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The jet made a careful descent between the three volcanoes that ring the sprawl of Guatemala City. It was April 19, 1992. My husband, Marty, and I had reached the end of eight years of preparation to be Evangelical Protestant missionaries.

We were finally here, excited and eager to settle in Guatemala. We knew our faith would be challenged, but we were more than ready for it, because above all else, we desired to serve God with everything we could offer. Our new life as missionaries had begun.

I didn't feel even a twinge of regret over what we had left behind in the States: family, friends, a familiar language and culture, and amenities such as clean water and good roads we Americans so often take for granted. In spite of the unknowns ahead, I knew we were being obedient, regardless of the cost. We were living smack in the middle of God's will, and it gave us a great feeling of security. We had given ourselves fully to bringing Christ's light to the darkness of this impoverished Catholic country.

As the jet touched down onto the bumpy runway, tears welled up in my eyes. "Thank you, Jesus," I whispered as I reached over to squeeze my husband's hand. Marty and I had

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come to the end of a long journey, but we were also beginning a new one. “Someday, Lord,” I prayed silently, “I hope we’ll find our home in this foreign place.”

I was elated as we walked down the exit ramp from the plane to begin the long-awaited adventure of being Protestant missionaries — missionaries sent to “rescue” Catholics from the darkness of their religion’s superstition and man-made traditions and bring them into the light of Protestantism.

There’s no way I could have known that three years later, almost to the day, my husband, my two children, and I would stand holding hands again, elated again, waiting to be received into the Catholic Church. My prayer had been answered: in this foreign place, we had found our home — our spiritual home — in the Catholic Church. Let me tell you how.

Born again (and again and again)

I was raised in a devout Fundamentalist home. When I was five years old, I asked Jesus to be my Savior. I was watching cartoons, and it was time for a commercial. I figured that was as good a time as any to “get saved”; I had been told many times by my folks that all I had to do was “open up a little door in my heart and let Jesus come in, and I would be a true Christian.”

That was it. Once Jesus was in, He would never go away. And when I died, I would go to Heaven. It was a sure thing, the best deal in life, the free gift of eternal life. I couldn’t earn it; I could only ask for it; and as soon as I asked (if I really meant it), then it was a done deal! One minute I was a little sinner on the way to Hell; the next minute I was a Christian.

When I told my mom I had become a Christian, she wept for joy. I didn’t feel any different, but I knew that now my

black heart was white as snow. No matter how bad I was, no matter what naughty things I did, when God looked at my heart from now on, all He would see was white, because Jesus was my personal Savior. As I grew up and found myself involved in sins of one kind or another, I doubted the sincerity of my conversion at age five, and I got “born again” on at least two other occasions (just to be sure).

This is the Catch-22 of the born-again theology taught by many Evangelical and Fundamentalist denominations: they teach that faith alone saves a person, but the assumption is that right away the convert will change his life and will continue to grow in holiness out of sheer gratefulness to God for the gift of salvation. In this system, the whole conversion event is subjective and valid only with the right measure of sincerity and true repentance — what Evangelicals call “saving faith.”

If a person known to be born again falls away from Christ, it’s said that he had never *really* been born again. In other words, the possibility always remains that you might not actually be a Christian, even if you are completely convinced that you are. (Evangelical and Fundamentalist Protestants would never say it this way, nor do they even like to think about it, but they do recognize that this is so.)

Catholics: worse than pagans

Just as I knew for certain I was a Christian at five years old, I knew with equal certainty that there were others who were not Christians. I had been taught that some of these non-Christian people lived in places such as Africa and Asia. Missionaries were frequent visitors to our little church, and we listened with awe to their stories. One time some missionaries

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came back from Mexico, where, they said, the people thought they were Christians, even though they weren't. The Mexicans, we were reminded, were a lot worse off than heathens in Africa. At least the heathens knew they worshiped demons and false gods, but the poor Mexicans were Catholics. They had been deceived into thinking they were real Christians, and this made them a lot harder to convert.

But it wasn't just the Mexicans we worried about and prayed for. Most of our neighbors weren't Christian either: they were Roman Catholics. Their kids went to Sacred Heart School, where nuns and priests taught them to worship statues and pray to Mary, who — we were told — Catholics thought was more powerful than God Himself. I was taught to feel sorry for Catholics, because they were members of a cult, and they didn't know it. Like Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, they had been deceived into thinking that their good works would get them to Heaven.

All of my father's relatives were Catholic. I remember that when one of them died, my mother cried bitterly because he was in Hell — not because he was a great sinner, but because he was Catholic. And there was no way a Catholic could be a born-again Christian. In fact, as far as we were concerned, being Catholic was far worse than being simply unchurched. Being Catholic was to live a lie, a lie that would be exposed only at death, when the unsuspecting person would end up in Hell for believing he could work himself into Heaven by good deeds. This was the way Catholics and their theology were explained to me.

I was not allowed to go to the funerals of any of my Catholic relatives. It was too sad, my mom told me. Funerals were supposed to be happy, because the person who had died (if he

had been born again) was with Jesus, free from suffering and pain. Catholic funerals weren't happy at all. People cried because they didn't know for sure whether their loved one was in Heaven. But we would know, Mom assured us. That was the great thing about being *real* Christians.

Can Catholics be Christians?

These prejudices and misconceptions about Catholicism were reinforced continually throughout my childhood. In fact, I heard strong criticisms not only of Catholicism, but also of most Protestants in other denominations.

We were taught that only in our Church, or in a Church that shared our dispensational interpretive system,⁶ could a person find the complete truth about the Bible. The big denominations, the “mainline Churches,” were all apostate, we were warned. It was best to avoid those Churches, for in them, a person would hear error taught and might be deceived into believing it. Errors included things such as infant Baptism, amillennialism,⁷ speaking in tongues, faith healing, and, worst

⁶ The term *dispensational* refers to a brand of biblical interpretation, common to Baptist and other similar Protestant denominations, in which Scripture is divided generally into five or more epochs or “dispensations.” According to this theory, God deals differently with people depending upon which dispensation they're in. This interpretive theory was invented by Protestant minister J. N. Darby (founder of the Plymouth Brethren) in the nineteenth century. It was popularized in America by the Schofield and Ryrie Bibles, widely used among Evangelicals. Dispensationalists place heavy emphasis on the “End Times,” especially the “rapture” and the “tribulation.”

⁷ The denial that Christ's Second Coming will be preceded or followed by a thousand-year earthly period of universal righteousness and peace.

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of all, the belief that a Christian could lose his salvation through serious sin.

We had the Truth at our Church, period. Anyone who wanted the whole story about God would have to come to our Church and study the Bible the way we did. When meeting someone from another denomination for the first time, we were taught to view with suspicion that person's claim to being a Christian. If he didn't believe pretty much what we did, there was a good chance he wasn't really born again. We were constantly reminded by our pastor that we were obligated to share the real truth with such people, especially if they were Catholics. We had Jesus; they didn't. It was that simple.

Over the years, I came to know many "true Christians" from these other "erroneous" Churches. This had an effect on me. I gradually drifted away from my Fundamentalist views on truth and adopted the typical, somewhat vague belief of contemporary Evangelicalism that as long as a person has a personal relationship with Christ, that's all that matters. To my shock, I even met a few Catholics whom I judged to be "born again" (although I wondered how they could possibly grow spiritually within the Catholic Church, and I had no idea why they remained in it). As their friend, I saw it as my duty to urge those "Christian" Catholics to find a better Church, a Bible-believing Church. Some of them took my advice and left the Catholic Church. Some however, stuck with Catholicism, which made me question the validity of their commitment to Christ.

Preaching the gospel of America

From the time I was a kid, I was taught that in the hierarchy of careers, foreign missionary service was right at the top

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of the list of vocations that please God. After we were married, Marty and I discussed the possibility of his teaching in a school for the children of missionaries. Since he already spoke Spanish, we knew it was likely we'd end up in Latin America or Spain. We prayed that God would use us as missionaries to bring Catholics to Christ. We wanted to bring them true Christianity. From the time we made that decision until our arrival in Guatemala, a little over eight years passed.

Shortly after we arrived in Guatemala, my tidy paradigm of "true Christianity" began to disintegrate. For more than two years, I had experienced a persistent nagging at the back of my consciousness regarding several theological issues. Getting to the mission field brought those problems to the fore.

Perhaps the most troublesome of the nagging issues was the cultural hegemony inherent in Evangelicalism's mission strategy. Evangelicals were (and are) exporting wholesale a specifically American brand of piety, imposing the forms and symbols and jargon of American Christianity on the people in other countries. This religious colonialism bothered me a lot.

There was also the problem of illiteracy in Latin America. Since childhood I had been steeped in the mindset that the Bible is the literal touchstone of all things Christian. Consequently, I had a hard time integrating the Evangelical "read it for yourself" approach with a culture in which many people couldn't read.

Finally, the Protestant notion of *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") fell apart each time I tried to test it. I began to see that Evangelicalism's insistence on going by the Bible alone led continually into division and problems. Worse yet, I didn't see how claiming to go by the Bible alone could provide certitude of belief for believers.

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Because of my upbringing and theological training, I didn't realize that as soon as I allowed myself to entertain questions in these three areas, I was pointing myself toward Rome. I thought I was just settling some troubling issues, but it was really here that my journey into the Catholic Church began.

Marty and I spent our first few months in Guatemala looking for a church. What we expected to find was authentic, Latin American Christianity. What we found was simply transplanted American Evangelicalism, the only difference being the language. It was like watching *The Dukes of Hazzard* dubbed into Spanish. Guatemalan Evangelicalism was a clone of its stateside counterpart. The Sunday-school curriculum was American; the music was American. Church government was copied from whatever denomination had founded that particular Church. Evangelism there was geared, like advertising, to reach the most people with the most attractive gospel.

I had originally believed, as most Evangelicals do, that my own brand of Christianity was the most authentic, i.e., the closest to the New Testament beliefs and practices — the most biblical. In Guatemala I was confronted with something I had never considered before: that my Christianity was, in fact, largely an American phenomenon. Indeed, in most Guatemalan churches, American missionaries wielded a powerful influence, despite the fact that Evangelicalism has been present in Guatemala for over one hundred years. I realized pretty quickly that Americans are boss there. Sure, there are native Evangelical pastors, but real influence and authority remains in the hands of the Americans.

There were other unfortunate parallels with Evangelicalism in America. Poor people went to poor churches; middle class and wealthy attended upscale churches that attracted

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people from their particular level of society. Only in one large, downtown Evangelical church did we ever see rich and poor in fairly equal numbers, although most of the poor people sat in the balcony, not in front, where the affluent folks sat. I had never noticed how Protestant churches are almost always separated by class. I was unsettled to realize that I had never attended a church with poor people. I had always looked for a church with people like me. Where was the One Church of Jesus Christ which embraced rich and poor alike? I had expected to find it in Guatemala.

I didn't.

I began to reflect upon something I had heard from a visiting missionary years before. He had said their mission had begun to target only the wealthy and middle classes in large urban areas. Why? "Poor people would want to be like the rich," so, according to his logic, starting Churches among the rich made it easier to reach the poor. Starting a Church among the poor, however, would not reap a harvest with the rich later on. After all, the rich don't want to be associated with a "poor people's religion."

I remember reading an article on church growth in which the Evangelical author stated that "multiplication occurs in homogeneous churches." Translation: If you want lots of people to come to your church, don't mix the poor and the rich, and don't mix races. Many Evangelicals would balk at such a blunt way of characterizing this attitude toward Latin Americans, but it's a fact, and the proof is in the way Evangelical missions are run in Latin America.

In Guatemala, the Ladinos, predominately European people of Spanish descent, make up the ruling class. For the most part, the underclass are pure Mayan Indian. There are Ladino

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churches and Indian churches. If you see a woman in a Ladino church dressed in native clothing, it's a good bet she's someone's maid. This stratification of Evangelical churches had never bothered me before. In fact, I had never really considered it. My conscience was pricking me. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Evangelicalism was not promoting harmony between the races and classes but, rather, was structured to reinforce these social and cultural separations between believers. What bothered me most was that this attitude was very American.

Protestants rebuild the Tower of Babel

Segregation was only one of the problems I observed with the Evangelicalism exported to Guatemala. A bigger problem is the disease of dissension, which is endemic to Protestantism. When the Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, and other well-meaning missionaries went to Guatemala, they carried with them the doctrinal spats that had split American Churches. Guatemalan Churches, like their American counterparts, are constantly in a state of strife and doctrinal turmoil, splitting into new Churches. Protestantism arose out of the Reformers' dissent from Catholic teachings. And even within Protestantism itself, dissent from doctrines that one denomination teaches inevitably leads to a break, followed by a new denomination's being formed. New denominations spring up in Guatemala at a breathtaking rate. Pastors (often self-proclaimed, with little or no education) simply establish new Churches, taking large portions of their former congregations with them.

In one small Evangelical church, the leaders decided to get hymnals (at great expense to the members) and tone down the

music on Sundays, so the neighbors wouldn't think they were Pentecostals. Some members left because they didn't want to give up swaying and hand-clapping during worship.

Another Church split over the election of a female elder. Splinter groups split from splinter groups that had split from other splinter groups. In Guatemala, the Church was "multiplying," all right.

American Evangelical missionaries pour into the country to do what they call "Church planting." This means that the newly arrived American pastor knocks on doors until he finds a handful of converts; then they meet and call it "church." (This is typical of nondenominational evangelism the world over.) Although several mission groups, including the one that had sent us to Guatemala, work to unite Protestant denominations and help them work together, I realized that there is no reason to assume they can achieve the unity that has eluded Protestants since Luther's day.

I asked myself, "Where is the 'one body, one faith, and one baptism'⁸ that St. Paul spoke about so passionately?" I began to fear that the answer could not be what American missionaries were peddling; at least it couldn't be the whole answer. Before the arrival of Protestantism, this town was united in its Catholicism. In Guatemala, the Catholic parish used to be the center of the community. Now there were multitudes of competing Protestant Churches, each promoting its particular brand of Evangelicalism: nondenominational Churches, Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Mennonite Brethren, and Baptists of every conceivable stripe were all there, scratching around for converts and reminding their

⁸ Cf. Eph. 4:5.

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flocks that all the other groups were wrong (especially, of course, the Catholics). One day we drove through a small village in which I counted three Pentecostal churches on one block.

I thought constantly about this choose-your-own-church syndrome. Although all of us missionaries from these various denominations proclaimed the purity of our gospel, the truth was, there was no way for any of us to know for sure which of us had it right.

I had no doubt that people who previously had no relationship with Jesus Christ were being saved and brought into God's family through the efforts and sacrifices of Evangelical missionaries. Still, along with the message that you must be born again came the difficulties of disunity and division that plague American Evangelicalism.

Protestantism abandons the illiterate

The problem of the poor and illiterate forced me to rethink several issues. For one thing, I had been taught that to know God, you must know the Bible. In fact, I had been taught a very detailed, specific interpretive system and had a great deal of experience in using it to understand Scripture. I had been reading and memorizing Scripture since childhood, and I thought I understood it. I knew that, most of the time, the Bible was meant to be taken literally, especially regarding creation and the End Times. I also knew the spots where taking it literally caused problems — such as the Bread of Life discourse in John 6 and the teaching on justification in James 2:24. Regardless of what other denominations taught, I knew the truth, because I knew how to study Scripture for myself.

At least that's what I thought.

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Most educated Evangelicals are confident in their theology, and I was no exception. For example, if I met a pastor who taught that infant Baptism was acceptable, I knew he was wrong; and I could prove it from Scripture. I could read the Bible and understand it and apply it to my life. I could use the study tools necessary to understand what it meant. I had well-used lexicons and concordances and had studied the Bible for years.

But when I went to Guatemala — a country of high illiteracy — I was forced to ask the following question for the first time in my life: “If a person’s knowledge of truth and his growth in Christ depend to a great measure upon his ability to read, understand, and use Scripture, what hope is there for the illiterate?”

Guatemala has an illiteracy rate of about fifty percent. How could those illiterate believers grow in Christ? How could they fulfill the mandate of prayer and daily personal Bible study? Translating the Bible into a person’s native language wouldn’t suffice to help him understand Scripture’s meaning in context. That’s why, for knowledge of the Truth and for spiritual growth, illiterate people have never depended on the Bible — which they can’t read — but on the Church and her teaching and preaching.

This realization was earth-shaking.

I saw that Evangelicalism had become, by its “Bible alone” principle, a religion of the literate elite. Moreover, as a missionary taking the gospel to illiterate people, I realized I had to be absolutely sure, before God, that what I was telling them was, in fact, the Christian Faith, free from error. It had to be one hundred percent Truth. The problem was, using my “Bible alone” principle, I had no way to be absolutely sure.

Where was Christ in all those Churches?

I heard among Guatemalan Evangelicals a cacophony of conflicting teachings. Pentecostal television preachers railed against the Devil and cast out demons right and left. Fundamentalist non-Pentecostal preachers were just as busy railing against Pentecostals for speaking in tongues, which was, they warned, a sign they were in cahoots with the Devil.

Although Guatemala is one of the Western Hemisphere's poorest nations, some preachers taught a "health and wealth gospel." Many preached American-style democracy as the "biblical" government that God wanted to see in Guatemala. While Lutheran missionaries were busy baptizing babies, Baptists preached that infant Baptism doesn't count and that those who practice it aren't Christians. Quakers told people they didn't need any outward symbols of Christianity.

Every Evangelical preacher waved his Bible, claiming it as his authority. "The Bible says . . ." may be the most common phrase heard on the radio in Guatemala these days.

With all the competing voices, how was a person to know who was right? What mere mortal could stand up with a clear conscience before a group of illiterate people and say, "This is what the Bible means"? After a while, the arrogance of it all made it difficult for me to listen to sermons. All of them were "preaching the gospel," but whose gospel?

Then a more fundamental question loomed: What is the gospel?

I had plenty of theological training. I knew the answers I had learned in my Bible classes at college. I knew what I had been told was true, but I also knew many good Christians who didn't hold to some of those teachings. Even I held opinions that differed from what I was taught as a child.

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Still, I wanted to be able to tell a new Christian where he or she could go to church and really learn the truth about God. I began to ask myself, “What exactly is my personal theology?” I felt that if only I could firm up my own beliefs, I’d be able to find the answer. The more I thought about this, the scarier my conclusions became, because the bottom line for me and for every other individual Protestant Christian was this: Theology for the modern Evangelical is a matter of his own opinion about what Scripture means.

For years my husband and I had chosen where to attend church based on the following criteria: first, the teachings and doctrinal statement had to agree with our own conclusions; second, there had to be a group of people of our own socioeconomic level with whom we could share good fellowship; and third, we had to be comfortable with the style of worship.

The question “Do they teach the whole truth?” never entered into the equation, because in the Protestant system of individual interpretation of Scripture, there is no way to know who has the whole truth. Protestantism offers a sort of functional agnosticism with regard to the meaning of Scripture. One simply can’t know for sure. But I knew that Christ established a Church, and He meant it to contain all Truth. And I was beginning to see that in the Protestant scheme of things, this was completely unattainable.

We observed many of our nondenominational missionary friends urging people to find a “Bible-believing Church” where Scripture was taught accurately. This was especially the case after a large crusade in which hundreds came forward to “get saved.” The interesting thing was that if the missionaries were Pentecostals or Charismatics, what they meant by a “Bible-believing” Church was a “Spirit-filled” Church with lively

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music and overt expressions of the sign gifts.⁹ If the missionaries were Baptists or Fundamentalists of another kind, what they meant by “Bible-believing” was a non-Pentecostal Church with heavy emphasis on exegetical preaching and personal Bible study (assuming, of course, that the people in question could read). In our own dealings with people, we told them to choose a Church in which they were comfortable. It was the best we could honestly suggest, because every single Church claimed to teach God’s truth, straight out of the Bible. Who were we to say that one was better or truer or more Bible-believing than another?

I finally meet the early Christians

At this point I read two important books that rattled me even more. The first was Randall Balmer’s fascinating *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Evangelical Sub-culture in America*.¹⁰ Balmer, a Columbia University history professor, explored the roots and traditions of my childhood religion with great respect but, nonetheless, with the impartial eye of an outside observer. For the first time, I climbed out of the fish bowl and looked in. What I saw astounded me. Contrary to what I had been taught, my version of Christianity didn’t go all the way back to the New Testament. Not even close: my theological roots were at most only 150 years deep.

From then on, I had a strong desire to understand historical Christianity. I borrowed from a missionary friend Paul Johnson’s book *The History of Christianity*.¹¹ Over the next year I

⁹ Cf. 1 Cor. 12.

¹⁰ Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹¹ Touchstone Books, 1995.

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read several other books on Church history and also the works of men I had never heard of before: Anthony of the Desert, Cyril of Jerusalem, Clement of Alexandria, Basil, Ambrose, Eusebius, Ignatius of Antioch.¹²

It was like discovering new friends — Christians who had known my Lord intimately; but their words profoundly shook my Evangelical theology. The fact that these men were Catholic embarrassed me and made me indignant. In all my years as a Christian, why hadn't I ever heard of these people? Why hadn't I studied their writings?

I didn't know much about the early Christian Church. In seminary (Biola, in Southern California) we had been taught to believe that after the death of the Apostles, the Church slid immediately into error and stayed that way until Luther nailed his Theses to the door,¹³ and then the "real" Christians came out of hiding.

But what I found as I read was that in those formative first thousand years of Christian history, the great doctrines, the fundamentals of my Christian Faith, had been hammered out

¹² St. Anthony of the Desert (d. c. 356), father of Christian monasticism; St. Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386), Bishop of Jerusalem; Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215), Greek theologian; St. Basil (c. 329-379), Bishop of Caesarea and Doctor of the Church; St. Ambrose (c. 340-397), Bishop of Milan, Father and Doctor of the Church; Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340), Bishop of Caesarea; Ignatius of Antioch (c. 50-c. 115), Bishop of Antioch and martyr.

¹³ In 1517, German Reformation founder Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, on which were posted disputations and announcements of academic functions, his Ninety-Five Theses, attacking not only the abuse of indulgences, but also the Church's penitential system and ecclesiastical authority.

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by the Catholics in councils and synods and by the Church Fathers who wrote and taught and preached! I discovered that although the Protestant Reformers were hailed as our heroes, the Evangelical Protestantism I had been raised in was quite a long way from the theology promoted by the Reformers. My denomination was a splinter group — a teeny, unhistorical, brand-new splinter of a splinter of a splinter.

I didn't want the splinter anymore. Part of the Church that Christ established just wasn't enough. I wanted the whole Church, if it still existed.

Here I began to have serious doubts about the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. I noticed that the early Church did not follow the Protestant concept of relying on the Bible alone. That was a shock! Scripture and Sacred Tradition, interpreted by the Church's teaching Magisterium, was the model of authority for the early Christians.

In the first centuries after Christ, there had been one Faith, and Christianity had swept the world like wildfire. Although Protestantism had never converted even one entire pagan nation to Christ, Catholicism had converted whole races: the Slavs, the Irish, the Gauls, the Saxons, the Nordic races, the Japanese, Indians of South America, Africans — the list was endless. And here we were in Guatemala as “missionaries,” making Catholics into Protestants! These people had been Catholic for five hundred years, and now we were converting them to our way of understanding the Bible. Not a very impressive thing when you compare it with the two thousand years of Catholic evangelization!

My most astonishing discovery came when it dawned on me, after long hours of reading and studying Scripture and conservative Evangelical commentaries on biblical sufficiency,

that Scripture doesn't teach that it alone is sufficient for knowing all Truth about the Faith. Protestants presuppose *sola scriptura*, without giving the slightest thought to the possibility that "the Bible alone" is an inadequate foundation for faith. If that presupposition is erroneous, I reasoned, then everything built upon it is dubious as well.

We find the true Body of Christ

I knew I couldn't remain the Evangelical I had been. I had been sharing my struggles with Marty, who had been doing similar study and soul searching. We decided to resign from our mission and return to the United States, where Marty took a job teaching in a public high school. When we arrived in the States, we didn't know where we were headed theologically, but we did know that Evangelicalism was behind us forever. From the time we made this difficult decision to the time we entered the Catholic Church, only six months went by.

At first we attended a small Episcopal church, which met to a certain extent our need for solemn worship, liturgy, and a meaningful eucharistic experience. At this time the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* had just been published in English. Marty and I began to read it. It didn't take long for us to realize, with a mixture of anxiety, relief, and joy, that we had finally found the answers to those doctrinal and moral questions Protestantism could never hope to answer.

I soon read many more Catholic books and spent wrenching sessions in prayer, as the truth became clear and the cost of discipleship became obvious.

Years of prejudice and ignorance do not disappear overnight. We had to lay aside our Protestant glasses, as it were, and see things with Catholic eyes. Having lived in more than

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one culture, we'd had some practice at this. Still, it was difficult, because we were on the verge of giving up our autonomy as arbiters of Truth. We had always been in charge of what we believed. We had always said, "I believe Scripture teaches . . .," and now, in exploring Catholicism, we realized we were heading toward a Faith that would require us to state and believe, "The Church teaches . . ." In some ways, leaving Protestantism was like death. But new life was just around the corner.

In February 1995, Marty called the priest at nearby Blessed Sacrament Church and made an appointment. Although I had led the way toward Rome by my incessant reading and discussion and questions, when it came down to it, Marty said it was time we acted upon what we now knew was the truth, and Marty made the call. We were on the brink of a life-changing decision. Everything up to that point had been an intense theological investigation without real commitment. Were we ready to take the next step? Were we willing to go where Christ led us?

We had been willing to give up home and friends in America and live as missionaries in a foreign land. But now we asked ourselves if we were willing to give up everything for the sake of the gospel — not just material possessions or a job, but our reputations and the respect of our family and friends as well. We had done the reading and studying and praying. Now the time had come to speak with a Catholic priest.

I was never more nervous than on the afternoon Marty and I walked up the steps of the rectory at Blessed Sacrament parish and rang the bell. Marty briefly told Fr. O'Donnell our story and then said, "We're pretty sure we want to be Catholics."

Father smiled warmly and said, "Only the Holy Spirit could have done this in your lives. Welcome home." I fought

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back the tears that welled up in my eyes. The relief was overwhelming. Home? I had begun to think finding our true Christian home was impossible. Now I knew it had been there all along — Holy Mother Church, waiting for her children to find their way into her arms.

I knew our entrance into the Catholic Church would be devastating and shameful to my family. They had had high hopes for us and not a little pride over our decision to become missionaries, and now we were about to do the unthinkable.

Indeed, the news didn't go over well. Friends and family were shocked; many were angry with us. We heard the questions and challenges: "How could Kris and Marty Franklin fall for the deceptions of the Roman Catholic Church?"

"What went wrong?" they asked us and each other in dismay. "Nothing went wrong," we assured them. "In fact, everything is finally right." But they couldn't hear us.

There was a lot of speculation about why we were becoming Catholics, much of it unpleasant, all of it inaccurate. Some thought we had simply grown weary of fighting the good fight.¹⁴ Others thought we couldn't handle the pressures of missionary life and had popped our spiritual corks. Some thought we must have been lured by the strange attractiveness of the Catholic Liturgy or by some wily, fast-talking, Scripture-twisting priest.

A week before our reception into the Church I composed a letter for friends and relatives to explain why we had become Catholic. I received no response for over six months. No one called; no one wrote. When we finally connected again, they just didn't mention our becoming Catholic.

¹⁴ Cf. 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7.

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Here are some excerpts from my letter:

I know only that what we've found is nothing like what I was told it would be. Ninety-nine percent of what we thought we knew about Catholicism was based on ignorance and prejudice. Once we laid aside our prejudice and preconceptions — as one must do in order to cross into another culture — we were able to overcome our ignorance.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, there have been more than 28,000 distinct denominations at one time or another since the Reformation. There are estimates that five new Protestant denominations are created each week around the world. This, in my mind, makes a mockery of the concept of Truth. . . . If the doctrines of the Reformation were sound, we would expect to see one Protestant Church, one Protestant doctrine based on Scripture alone, but that is absolutely impossible, as five hundred years of history proves. . . . Using the same Scripture and having the same Holy Spirit, what we've ended up with is a theological Tower of Babel.¹⁵

Yes, there has been scandal in the Catholic Church. There is some pretty rotten history. There were some popes who were dopes. But these are not Catholic problems; they are *human* problems.

There are things in the Catholic Church that seem weird, but I have found that many of the “weird” things make very good sense from the Catholic world view,

¹⁵ Cf. Gen. 11:1-9.

Our Mission to Convert Catholics

which is actually much more spiritual, Jewish, and first century than anything else.

For Marty and me, it's a great relief to have made this decision. We're so full of joy that sometimes we can hardly stand it! There's much work to be done in the Catholic Church; there are problems to be overcome; and we're excited to roll up our sleeves and help. We've found a niche, a Church we are fully comfortable in, and a place where we have much to give. We've met some wonderful, godly people and are continually surprised by their love, their joy, and their dedication to Jesus Christ. We are convinced that the Church was meant to be one (1 Corinthians) and are willing to take this difficult and possibly misunderstood step to do our part. We're tired of protesting. It's time to go home.

I found out later that, after reading our letter, one of my family members thought we had lost our faith completely and had walked straight into the jaws of Satan. The truth was the opposite. We had found Jesus Christ in the last place we or anyone could have imagined, and His arms were open wide to welcome us.

Blessed Sacrament Church was packed for the Easter Vigil Mass. At Communion, the priest leaned close and whispered, "Kris, you've waited all your life for this." Then he held up Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, smiled, and said, "The Body of Christ."

"Amen," I said. "I believe it."

As I received Jesus sacramentally in Holy Communion for the first time, I thanked Him with all my heart for the miracle of grace He had worked in my life to unite me to Himself in

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this way, in this wonderful, mysterious way I could never have imagined possible.

The day we landed in Guatemala City, I had prayed that we would find our home there. We did; we found our spiritual home: the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

In the Catholic Church we have the fullness of the Christian Faith — not seventy-five percent of the Truth, not ninety percent, but all of it, one hundred percent. We have real worship, shaped by Jesus Christ and focused on Him, not on this minister's or that minister's opinion about this or that passage of Scripture. We have the Faith of our Fathers, the teachings that Christ intended us to follow.

During our long, circuitous journey home to the Catholic Church, we found that there is indeed only one gospel, the Catholic gospel. There is only one place where we can find the fullness of truth and the most personal of relationships with Jesus Christ — and that place isn't Protestantism.

The last place we looked for truth was where the Truth had been all along: the Catholic Church. We are home to stay.