

## James Story

I grew up in the Assembly of God denomination. When I was seven years old, my family moved from a small town in Pennsylvania to San Diego, California. The new church we had settled into was only a few blocks from our home, and had a small, friendly congregation which my parents fell in love with. For those reasons, we became more active than we had previously been.

In addition to morning worship and Sunday School, we also began attending Sunday evening and Wednesday evening services as well. My father had joined the choir, and my mother was hired as the Church Secretary. My brother and I were involved in Royal Rangers (the denomination's own version of Boy Scouts). In addition, we attended a lot of church socials and other activities.

In time, it seemed that our whole life revolved around the church. In spite of our heavy involvement, I was not fulfilled. It felt as though I was missing out on something, particularly during my early teen years. Had I given my life to Christ? I thought that I had. I might have liked to try another church, but my parents would balk at the idea. As a teen, one thing I thought was essential was a romantic relationship with a Christian girl. The youth leaders were always saying, "Be not unequally yoked with non-believers," and always encouraging members of the youth group to date one another.

I was attracted to one girl in the youth group, but she spurned me after I had made a giant effort to get her to notice me more, and that really hurt. After that experience, I concluded that I was not going to find whatever was lacking in my spiritual life within the walls of the church I had been attending since age 7. One thing I had yet to do was get baptized, but that would happen at another church when I was 16 years old. A Baptist friend of mine invited me to his church and youth group, where I made a commitment to Christ (really meaning it this time) and was subsequently baptized. I realized that I could have been baptized at my own church, but I had too much pride to admit, in front of Christians I had known for years, that I was still a sinner in need of salvation. It was much easier to do that among new acquaintances and strangers.

After I was baptized, I had a different outlook. I felt cleansed of my sins, unlike the many times I had recited the "Sinner's Prayer" with little or no effect. And I had come to believe, contrary to what some church leaders taught otherwise, that baptism was essential to salvation. This reasoning also seemed to explain why some Christian churches baptize infants. And those that subscribe to "believer's baptism" also seem to think it important, even if they think it is superfluous to salvation. Other than the question of baptism, there did not seem to be a lot of differences in the core beliefs of Protestant Christians. Having grown up in the era of ecumenism, I was quite tolerant of the variations.

Choosing a church was becoming more of a matter of personal preferences than subscribing to a certain set of beliefs, and I held that loyalty to Christ mattered more than loyalty to a certain denomination. I had tried out a nondenominational church and two Baptist churches before I settled in the United Methodist Church, where I had become quite content, actually joining the church membership and being active in lay ministries. That seemed to be a good fit, because I considered myself an evangelical, but not a fundamentalist. I remained active in the same Methodist church for a number of years, until I moved to another city.

Upon moving to Phoenix, the task of finding a local church was not as simple as I imagined. I thought that it would only be a matter of scoping out a handful of select churches, attending a few services at each, and then choosing the one where I was most comfortable.

It did not quite turn out that way. This was taking longer than I expected, and I had visited more churches than I planned to, across the spectrum of Protestant denominations, including "nondenominational." But I had overlooked, or perhaps I purposely avoided, the Catholic church from consideration. That may have been because I couldn't imagine becoming Catholic. But eventually, I felt compelled to at least visit, and wouldn't be able to rest until I had done so. I was not a complete stranger to the Mass.

When I still lived in San Diego I had once dated a Catholic woman, and we attended mass together a couple of times, and since that time I had learned that Protestant critiques of Catholic beliefs are often distorted. One thing I had reservations about is the Catholic's claim to be the "one true church." No other church that I knew of would declare such a lofty claim. Then, one time I had a disturbing thought that couldn't escape me: What if the Catholic church could SUBSTANTIATE that claim? I wouldn't be able to put that thought to rest until I at least visited mass a few times. I attended mass at the parish in my neighborhood.

It was awesome, to be sure. More so than previous visits to mass (when I wasn't open to consideration). This was in early September 1996, and the RCIA course for potential converts had just started. I enrolled in the RCIA, if for no other reason than to learn what the Catholic church really believes. Prior to this time, practically everything I had ever learned about the Catholic church has been from Protestant or secular sources, and therefore, distorted. I had nothing to lose by studying Catholic doctrine from a Catholic point of view. And I was prepared to walk away if the teachings didn't line up with my understanding of the Bible. I was no biblical scholar, but I knew enough to sniff out erroneous teaching, and years earlier had once bolted from a Mormon study. But that never happened at any time during the RCIA, and I found that the Catholic church is more compliant with the Bible than any of the Protestant churches. I was received into the Catholic Church on the Easter Vigil in 1997.