

From Ignorance To Bliss

The Story of my Journey (Still in the Making) to the Catholic Church

I guess it began in high school when i began to ask some of the questions that had less to do with my choice of Friday night entertainment and post-church lunch preferences and dealt more with matters that might actually cause me to sit down and think for a minute or two. Everyone comes across that time in life, sooner or later, to some degree, when they began to question the things they've just accepted in order to get a grasp on the metaphysical platforms and foundational reasons for their convictions. It can be a scary time as these inquiries often have the potential to travel through our thoughts in areas that may not lend themselves to our own personal comfort, but it can also be an exciting and reassuring time when some of these regresses eventually find themselves resting on a solid bedrock of a sure-foundation, firmly planted and strongly supporting the structure of our beliefs. There was one particular question that once ran across my mind, which, at the time, i thought to be a quite simple query, but it would later prove to be a quandary which would point me in a direction that i had never even considered to be a remote possibility.

Part I

In 1979, after 9 months of preparation and getting myself ready to take a stab at things, i became the firstborn into a family i wouldn't trade for the world. Almost two years later, my younger brother, Zachary, was born, and almost three years after that, my youngest brother, Micah, made his way onto the scene. Our parents raised the three of us to live orderly and moral lives, to respect others and each other, and to do what was right. They helped us to grow in our lives by guiding us, giving us advice, disciplining us when needed, and working to maintain the balance between these things while still supporting and encouraging us in the decisions we made for ourselves. And even though we may not have said it much within our family, there was never any question of our love and care for each other—even though sometimes i had to mask this love and concern for my younger brothers by an occasional bullying. Now, however, that both of my younger brothers are bigger and stronger than me, i'm glad that we've matured enough to put those ways of physical persuasiveness behind us and are able to work things out like adults! Within our family, we, unfortunately, never discussed our spiritual lives much, although we had no shortage of theological discussion. Our mom made sure to extend the long arm of the household law in order to see that we regularly attended and were highly involved with our church. My dad quit attending the church with us while i was young, which i simply attributed to a busy work schedule that often kept him on-call during weekends, but he continued to remain faithful in tithing, reading the Bible, and leading us in the pre-dinner prayers. We had our little problems and spats here and there, but i couldn't and wouldn't ask for a better family. While my brothers got on my nerves all-too-often during those younger days, they are now two of my best friends whom i always enjoy hanging out with even though our lives frequently keep us in different places. And, concerning my parents, i'm sure that i was the least favorite out of my brothers and deservedly so, as i was often times a bit difficult to deal with, but even so, they were more loving, caring, supportive, and understanding than any child deserves.

From the times of my earliest childhood memories, i cannot recall a time when the church did not play a significant role in my life. The early years of my life found me regularly attending church, at least 3 times a week, due to the powerful persuasion of my parents. We were there every Sunday morning almost without exception, hardly missed a single Sunday evening service or Wednesday evening activity, and almost every special event, service, fund-raiser, or fellowship found us in attendance. We knew everyone in the church, everyone knew us, and, save a few neighbors and relatives, i can't think of anyone i knew other than those in the church. It wasn't before too long that the church became a staple in my life. We attended a 'non-denominational' Bible church that my maternal grandfather pastored, located only a couple of blocks from the house in which i spent the first decade of my life. The church also housed a private Christian school as one of its ministries to the community where i attended school for kindergarten and the next five subsequent grades. I say all this to portray that for the first 10 years of my life, if i wasn't at home, chances are, i was at the church. Through this church-saturated childhood, the church became ingrained within me as a part of me—it was part of my identity. While i can't say that i always paid attention during the sermons or didn't wish to have rather been riding my bike down the street or throwing a baseball at the park, i did enjoy the time i spent in God's house. I loved the stories and songs in Sunday School, and i loved the games we played and fellowship we had on Wednesday nights. I especially loved the people i would see there every week—some of the best friends i have today were friends that i made during this time in my life. And in addition and most importantly, i came to love God in all three persons for who He is and what He did for us. It was during these early years of my life that i asked Jesus to be my Lord and Savior, and, a few years later, i was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I grew up with what i believe to be a very healthy childhood, influenced heavily by both my own family and my church family, with God and family holding very dear places in my heart.

As the years of my life went by, i became increasingly more aware, among other things, of my status as a child of God and the accompanying implications of that status. Both church and the study of Scripture became correspondingly more important to me as a result. Even while i was still relatively young and therefore not afforded as many opportunities, i always relished and took advantage of any chance for any teaching position or leadership role within the church, as informal as they may have been at the time. I also made the most of every opportunity for growth in my faith and beliefs through various activities such as mission trips, discipleship groups, Bible studies or anything else i could manage to get my knowledge and ministry-hungry hands on. During these times, while striving to know the Lord better through study of the Scripture, there would inevitably arise questions, due to the overwhelming nature of theology, that would prove to be a bit more difficult to answer than i knew that i could handle on my own. At these times, i would turn to my trusty resource for advice in doctrinal matters and life in general. This was the man known to many of us in the youth group as 'Uncle Pastor Granddad'—anyone in the youth group could apply at least one of these titles to their relationship with this man, and so that's what we called him. He had been pastoring the church since the early 60s, had been my granddad since the late 70s, and had a load of

experience and respect under his belt from years of faithful ministry and service. He was a jack-of-all-trades, and i would daresay a master at most. He taught me a bit about almost everything, from what to do with money when i had any to how to build or fix just about anything and everything, and everything else in between. (While much of that knowledge has escaped me now—i have still retained enough to get myself into trouble—i have always sought to hold fast to whatever he taught me about matters of the faith.) Nary a question went his way from the youth (who he allowed to meet at his house for Sunday evening Bible studies) to which he couldn't effectively reply. With the authority of the Scriptures and the guidance of Uncle Pastor Granddad and other youth ministers and leaders explaining the deeper things in life, questions would come, resolutions would follow, and growth would be accomplished.

I was confident that any question i had could be satisfactorily answered to back up the beliefs i had been given as a trusting student of the Scriptures at my Bible church to the point that, while remaining critical and questioning, i never worried that a problem could come up that would not be soon resolved with the proper understanding. So even when a somewhat different sort of curiosities made themselves known to me leading up to a particular question one day, i didn't think much of it, other than that it was another drop in the bucket of mysteries with which i would soon be settled with a solution. This particular chain of thoughts, which i can still remember quite vividly, went something like this as i recall looking at my old, beat up, brown, leather-bound, Ryrie Study Bible my mom had given me: 'You know, if i'm to put my beliefs about my eternal destiny and salvation on the words of this book, and if i'm to trust every word and idea within these pages in order to learn how to conduct myself as a child of God, which is my ultimate calling in life, then it wouldn't hurt me to have a little background in knowing where it came from. I'm fairly confident i haven't read anything in my Bible that tells me that Jesus gave his disciples a copy of the Bible with his stamp of approval and told them to go proclaim its truth. I believe that it is inerrant and inspired by God, but i don't have any basis for that other than that's what my church has taught me. I think it might do me some good to learn a bit about the history of the Bible. Where did we get the Bible?' When i first thought about it, i was sure that it would be a simple question with a correspondingly simple answer. In fact, i was even convinced that the reason i had never been taught about the origins of the Bible was that it would be so simple and straightforward that it wasn't even worth taking the time in Sunday School to talk about it. And so i set out to learn about the authors of many of the books, their purposes for writing them, when they wrote them, and how the themes of the books related to the bigger picture of the message of the Bible. Very soon into this endeavor, i realized that learning the answers to these questions did not answer the underlying fundamental question which i soon found to be developing: 'Why are these particular books included in the current list of our canon, and other writings not included? How are we to know which books were inspired writings suitable for canonization and which were not?' I soon realized that this was a problem for good ol' Uncle Pastor Granddad.

One afternoon, many moons ago, as we sat down to share a meal and some conversation together, i sent the question his direction, sure to receive a convincing sure-fire response. 'How did the books of the Bible come to be the books that compose our

Bible?’ And with that infamous inquiry, the following conversation began, which i will attempt to relate as accurately as i can, focusing on the key points of the discourse.¹

Uncle Granddad Pastor: Well, God had inspired their writings at the time they were composed, and since they are inspired, we include them in our canon of Scripture.

Me: But how do we know which of the early writings were inspired and which were not? I’m sure there were other, non-inspired writings going on at that time.

UPG: There was certain evidence that told us whether they were inspired or not, as well as a group of men that convened during the early years of the church and considered that criteria within the writings in order to determine their status of inspiration.

Me: How do we know these men’s judgments were accurate? Did they have any special authority in making these decisions?

UPG: No, they didn’t have any sort of special authority other than being guided by the Holy Spirit. They just happened to be the ones who established the canon.

Me: Wouldn’t that guidance of the Holy Spirit give them some sort of special authority?

UPG: Nothing more than we have when the Holy Spirit guides us.

Me: So could they have been wrong? I know i’ve been wrong many times when i thought the Holy Spirit has been guiding me, just like i know many other people have. How do we know they were completely correct or that they weren’t just claiming that the Holy Spirit guided them through their discernments, since, without any other claim to any official authority, they were just ordinary men like us? It seems like there is some room for error, which could mean they could have been wrong, but it is certainly not our place to question any of these decisions they made.

UPG: They could have been wrong, but they weren’t.

Me: How do we know they weren’t?

UPG: We have evidence today to tell us that these books are inspired, and, bottom line, we just have to trust God. The Scriptures have proven themselves in our lives to be true, so we know that they truly are inspired.

Me: Well, how do we know they didn’t have some special authority to make the decision as to which books would be in our canon?

UPG: Because they are just men.

Me: But God gave men like Paul authority to be used to write much of the Scriptures. He had authority in his writings based on the authority of the Holy Spirit. How do we know that the men of this council weren’t granted a similar inspiration based on the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to authoritatively establish the canon of Scripture? It seems that the way we so trustingly accept this canon that we already seem to almost hold their decision as one made with authority. How do we know that they didn’t have some sort of authority, like Paul was given?

UPG: Because that type of authority ended with the apostles.

Me: How do we know that?

UPG: Because Jesus never gave anyone else that kind of authority.

Me: Then, if they didn’t have any kind of authority, how can we be sure that all of the books that are in our Bible are supposed to be there, and that some of the writings that were left out are not supposed to be in there?

UPG: Sometimes you just have to have faith in matters. You have to trust God.

¹ The conversation is not verbatim, but still remains accurate to the ideas discussed.

That didn't settle well with me. Having faith and trusting God settled well with me just fine—it always has—but the whole conversation didn't settle well with me. This was the first time i could remember not being settled on an issue after having discussed it with Uncle Pastor Granddad. I still had no reason for why the components of Scripture were considered as Scripture and why they were included in the canon. I still fully believed that the Scriptures were inspired and inerrant, but i would have had absolutely no water-holding defense or account for what i believed in this matter had someone come to me off the street and asked me why i held *3rd John* to be inspired Scripture but didn't hold *The Shepherd of Hermas* to be inspired. The only answer i could have given would have been along the lines that, long ago, in a land far away, some men recognized what would be Scripture and what wouldn't, and i believed that decision. I don't really know why i believed it as blindly as i did if they had no authority to make that decision and could have been wrong about it, but i believed it anyway. That didn't seem to make sense. I knew there had to be a better reason out there—i just didn't know where.² It didn't affect what i believed at the time, but it did create an epistemological obstacle for me to hurdle in order to know why i believed it, so i didn't concern myself with it too much at the time. I would later find that this question had laid a foundation for future difficulties and uncertainties i would soon come across.

A few years later, i found myself 'studying' at Texas A&M University. In order to fast forward through the first couple of years of my time at Texas A&M, i will simply say that i experienced my first real taste of unsupervised freedom, and that combined with a lack of Christian fellowship resulted in the first three semesters of my higher education proving to be the lower times in my life. However, through the amazing work of God, i stumbled into some amazing Christian fellowship during the latter part of my sophomore year (which is quite a testimony in itself of the faithfulness of God but will have to be postponed for another story) that quickly snowballed into a saturation of Christian friendships, relationships, and fellowships. For this, among countless other blessings, i again owe God an unrepayable debt of gratitude for pulling me from where i was headed and placing me where i needed to be. I began to get involved in the church again which filled a substantial hole within me, but it also led to a whole new interesting situation for me. It was the first time in my life that i had looked for a new church to attend as i had remained in the same church for my whole life up to this point. During this time, i also became involved in a rather large men's ministry at Texas A&M—a non-denominational Christian group focusing on creating fellowship and accountability for college men. Right away, during these times of meeting others from so many different Christian backgrounds and searching for a new church at which to worship, i immediately began to recognize that i was quite naïve to the immense diversity that was present within the beliefs and doctrines of the Christian church. I had always known there were quite a few different denominations and that different churches held different beliefs, but i was shocked and surprised, although not too much affected in any other way, to learn about

² Keep in mind that at this time in my life, i knew absolutely nothing about Catholicism other than once, when i was young, i saw a strange shrine in someone's backyard, and, asking my mom what it was, she told me that sometimes Catholics imagine they see Mary in strange places and they'll do strange things to let other Catholics know about it.

the magnitude and range of even a small sample of the varying theologies. This new ‘discovery,’ however, did not have any significant impact on my theology or on my views toward Christianity or other Christians. I simply felt that we were all in this thing to serve God and that we believed in Jesus, and that was enough for me. I continued to seek after ways to serve in the ministries that were going on around and through the university. This included taking a few positions of leadership as well, including with the leadership council of the aforementioned men’s ministry where i focused a very large part of my ministry while in college. Through these involvements and positions, i continued to feel the Lord growing me in many areas, especially in allowing me to fully trust and have faith in Him for everything, as i felt strong inadequacies to fulfill the roles and responsibilities i had been given.

During this time, i continued my search and study of the Scriptures in order to continue increasing in knowledge and faith which i felt was one of my duties as a Christian in order to learn how to practically carry out my faith on a daily basis. During these few years, while being exposed to so many new backgrounds and beliefs, i began to study Scripture in a way that, regrettably, was a bit foreign to me. I approached the Scriptures with a much more open view as to the truths which might be present, seeking more for the truth found within, rather than searching for how to support the doctrines i had already been taught. I attempted to allow the Scriptures to develop my doctrines, rather than attempting to conform the Scriptures to my preconceived beliefs. During this time, especially during the last couple of years in college, i began to take on the concept of *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone, to an extreme degree, which was the only way i believed it could appropriately be carried out, and inherently began to arrive at certain inconsistencies and problematic conclusions.³

I realized that if the Scriptures are all that we need, as is what the Protestant view of *sola scriptura* implies, that i could begin searching out the Scriptures in order to arrive at the truths on matters which i had discovered opinions to run the spectrum of beliefs. I thought to myself that i would simply search the Scriptures on any given matter, and i would pay no attention to what my pastor or other leaders would tell me, simply because they are mere men with their own conclusions and agendas to support their own beliefs with no authority⁴. It would be much wiser to go straight to the fountainhead of truth, the Bible, in order to arrive at true conclusions untainted by men’s opinions and philosophies. As i began to dive into this endeavor, i quickly realized that the opinions i drew from the Scripture would be labeled as heretical and un-Christian if i were to share them with others. The primary issues i remember arriving at which i would be fearful to announce to others included things such as an uncertainty as to the concept of the Trinity (i would have had difficulty coming up with the concept of the Trinity had i not previously been acquainted with this idea), no concept of Satan having formerly been an angel (i looked into this in response to a discussion concerning demon-possession which arose in a Bible study i was co-leading), the concepts of ‘once-saved-always-saved’ and

³ Again, at this time, i had no concept of what the Catholic Church taught. I only knew that the Bible was our sole authority because that is what i had been branded with while growing up.

⁴ Even though the very legitimate claim could be made that it is dangerous to ignore the council of pastors and others who have been put over us to guide and teach us, i had recognized the futility and arbitrariness of this, knowing that one pastor’s interpretation was as varied as that of the next, and to begin with their guidance would many times simply mean beginning with their bias.

‘perseverance of the saints’ was heavily overshadowed by evidence that we could fall away from grace, and i could not make heads or tails of the apocalyptic writings to determine anything about the rapture. The biggest problem i had, however, was to find support for *sola scriptura*. Simply to clarify, this does not mean that i necessarily believed all of these things, but the conclusion i did come to was that i was not smart enough to understand and interpret the Scriptures on my own. My personal conclusions were not in line with the Christian community as a whole. I began to wonder if i was beginning to see II Peter 1:20-21 and 3:14-17⁵ being demonstrated in my life.

I also remember sitting spectator through, and even being involved in discourses, discussions, and ensuing debates on several theological issues. I could remember several particular debates concerning predestination theologies based on Arminianism and Calvinism that were saturated with Scripture and presented with well-grounded biblical support on each side, yet each accusing the other of being a false doctrine. My thoughts, as i would listen to these debates and search the issues again and again in Scriptures, would lead me to the confusion of how these people, who i believed were all truly seeking after Christ and his truth in Scriptures, could come to completely different views and conclusions based on the same source of truth, the Bible. Both sides were biblically argued, so who’s to decide which position might be truth and which is not. At least one of them has to be wrong, and even worse, neither of them necessarily has to be right. Who’s to tell? They should both be correct since they are both derived from Scripture, but quite honestly, at least one has to be incorrect and even both could very easily be wrong. And through these sometimes heated and seemingly pride-filled debates, which i cannot be considered innocent, i felt there was a distinct disobedience to the lesson we should learn from Paul’s exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche to ‘live in harmony in the Lord’.⁶ Again, i thought to myself, ‘There has to be an authority to guide us in our understanding of the teachings of the Scriptures. We, as untrained laypersons in the church, should not be trying to figure out the deeper things of Scripture—we will be in much danger of simply creating our own interpretation whether we claim that we were guided by the Holy Spirit or not. While i still held to a complete authority of Scripture at this point, i was beginning to feel like we needed someone to guide us through Scripture as well in order to be able to fully grasp what it had to offer. We needed Scripture, definitely, but we also need someone else to guide us through that Scripture.’⁷ This, i felt,

⁵ *II Peter 1:20-21* ‘But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.’

II Peter 3:14-17 ‘But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness...’

⁶ *Philippians 4:2* ‘I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.’

⁷ An example could be that just as we have the constitution and the corpus of laws that govern our country, we need the judicial branch to interpret and uphold the laws made by the legislative branch. It would be disaster to try to have one without the other.

was reminiscent of Jesus telling Peter to tend his lambs and shepherd his sheep⁸. We need others to guide us or we'll get ourselves into trouble.

To sum things up as to what was going on in my head at this point, i was beginning to worry that things weren't exactly as hunky-dory as i had always thought them to be. By no means was i anywhere near dismissing Christianity or the God who i had adored all my life. I had seen too many things throughout my life to claim that there wasn't overwhelming substance to these things and evidence to know that God was still the creator, sustainer, and ultimate reason of life, and that Christ was the true Messiah, Savior and Son of God. These fundamental truths stayed strong. However, i began to sense that there was a missing piece of the puzzle with which i was not acquainted. There had to be something out there that would make sense of everything, but i had no idea where to look. God wasn't going to leave me dazed and confused, however. I was confident of that.

Then came another problem. This will need a slight bit of background in order to preface. Within the organization that i was involved, we held weekly corporate meetings among other activities in order to worship and pray as a group, discuss various issues, be exhorted through a few words from our chaplain, and occasionally hear testimonies from others before breaking up into our small groups for accountability. It was in no way limited to these times, but during many of these meetings, i would hear various people claim that the Lord led them to say certain things. While i had no problem with people claiming this, as i do believe that the Holy Spirit is constantly guiding us and helping us along, i began to sense that many of these statements were being made in an all too flippant manner, and many times even being used as a sort of trump card to lend credibility to what may have been our own thoughts and opinions. Because of this, i soon became a bit critical when people prefaced their words by stating that 'the Lord led me to say this'. It may have been a bit too critical, but i also believe that we should not use the Lord's name in vain or to incorrectly attribute our own desires to his promptings, lest we be ready to answer to some serious charges. Personally, i even began to feel that it sometimes even got to the point where, within our Christian community, if a statement did not begin by claiming that it was Holy Spirit led, that we would be seen as unspiritual and our opinions would not be held as worthwhile, and this was a dangerous road to walk. It got to the point where, maybe even out of some sense of disgust or bitterness toward the seemingly flippant remarks, i would think to myself, admittedly sarcastically, when someone stated that the Lord led them to make a statement, 'That's great...if the Lord led you to say that, it must be inspired, therefore inerrant, so let's write another book of the Bible with whatever He's guided you to say.'⁹

⁸ *John 21:15-17* 'So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me more than these?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My lambs." He said to him again a second time, "Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Shepherd My sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?" Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, "Do you love Me?" And he said to Him, "Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You." Jesus said to him, "Tend My sheep."

⁹ I want to emphatically stress that i certainly do believe that the Holy Spirit is constantly guiding, leading and helping us. We wouldn't be able to survive otherwise. I even believe he moves us to say certain things in the manner which i had previously described. My qualms were that it was apparent that many were essentially making claims and statements on their own accord and attributing it to the Holy Spirit. 'The

Here's where the real problem came in. These thoughts actually began to make me think again, which led to more internal problems with my beliefs. I thought to myself, 'If statements truly are inspired by the Holy Spirit, then there actually should be no reason not to hold them in the same esteem as Scripture is held. If someone is to have actual inspiration in their words from God, and they better have that inspiration there if they are going to claim they do, then it would seem to hold as well that these claims should be inerrant, and, therefore, as good as Scripture.' That may seem to be a bold statement, but it also seemed to me to be what would logically follow by making this claim. I certainly agreed that the Lord did lead us to say and do certain things all the time, but I wondered if people would claim inspiration from the Holy Spirit, especially when making statements of doctrine, if this conclusion were actually the case. This thought bothered me. My next thought was that if the Lord did lead someone to make a doctrinal claim, why could the thoughts not be added to Scripture since they were inspired and inerrant, as a God-inspired thought would be. Criteria for canonization, such as apostolic authority and the closed-canon, were certainly man-made criteria of which I could find no credible biblical support. What would keep that criteria from being wrong since it was man-made and only supported through extra-biblical arguments? The only thing keeping the doctrine of the canon closed was a man-made doctrine¹⁰, again refuting the doctrine of *sola scriptura* and leaving me utterly confused. Why can we not include inspired words today as additional Scripture?

Lord led me to say...' was a phrase I was hearing tossed around in an all too careless manner, not out of intentional malice or deception, but more out of a sense of habit or whatever other reasons. I do not want to make it sound as though I do not believe the Spirit does lead us.

¹⁰ At this point, I had no foundation for a closed canon of Scripture because I could find no Scriptural support for it. As far as I could tell, it was a man-made doctrine that was completely prone to error. I have heard it argued, even from the pulpit, that Revelation 22:18-19 is a Scriptural support for a closed canon which states, 'I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of prophecy, God will take his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.' There are many fallacies to this reasoning, which I can not go into in detail, but will give highlighted points for a few of them. First of all, we must remember that the Bible was not written as a whole at one time, but it is a collection of sacred and inspired writings that were compiled at a later date. Therefore, Revelation was written as a single unit, a book in and of itself, and it is much more likely to believe that the book of prophecy which we should not add to or take away from is the book of Revelation itself, and not the current form of our Bible in its entirety which John nor his contemporaries could have been familiar with as it did not exist. This reference to the 'book of prophecy' is supported as a reference to itself when it is compared with Revelation 1:1-3, in which it tells us that it is a book of prophecy. It is much more plausible and believable to accept that these verses are referring to the individual book of Revelation and not the Bible as a whole. Even if we did assume that it was referring to the entirety of our modern Bible today for argument's sake, this would lead to other problematic issues including, but not limited to the deuterocanonical New Testament passages. To hold that this statement refers to more than the book of Revelations would also mean that either this verse did not take effect until the 16th century, or else Christians have been violating this up until that time. Books of the Old Testament, although accepted in the traditional vein, were still being discussed up until the 16th century until the Catholic Old Testament was set in the Council of Trent, while the Protestant canon is still held on tradition (which I think is somewhat ironic in itself). It is implausible to hold these verses as referring to more than the book of Revelation.

This began to make me wonder about the canon of the Scripture once again.¹¹ I began to question the canon of the Scripture again, this time, with more skepticism, although knowing that the books in the Bible had had great impact in my life and that there was definitely something more to this amazing book than it merely being an anthology of writings about Israel, Christ, and the teachings of the church. I still knew they were books that God had His hand in, but i feared in many aspects on the beliefs i had been given about Scripture. What if, as some reputable Protestant scholars believe, that we had a fallible canon of infallible Scripture? This seemed to be the only logical conclusion to hold if we denied the authority of the church that set these decisions, but it produced many problems itself, which i was hard-pressed to believe. Why did i believe in a closed-canon if God could still inspire us today in the same way? Why do many Christians (Catholics) hold additional books that much of the early church believed to be inspired Scripture as Scripture, and i didn't? Where did my doctrine of inerrancy come from? Why were things so difficult? (It would be best to read this last question with an anguished yell through a PA system with reverb and echo effects on the voice, and then add a yell of frustration to top it off.) It was not an easy point in my life, especially as i knew that there weren't many with whom i could discuss these issues. Even the very few people who i chose to share these issues with did not lend much support in helping me or encouraging me to find the answers for which i was looking—it was obvious that most of these people did not approve of me even considering these things.

It was at this point that i knew things were truly breaking down within the doctrines i had held. I tried to convince myself that these were non-issues with which i was dealing, and to continue on as i had by simply accepting the things that had been handed down to me, but the uneasiness and unrest would not allow me to do so in good conscience. What's a guy to do when he knows that there are structural truths that have been made evident to him, but the foundations begin to crumble?¹² (I realize that the

¹¹ By this time, i had learned more about the books of the Apocrypha/deuterocanonical books through a means that i will discuss later.

¹² **Foundations** This statement may sound somewhat illogical, to claim that truths can remain stable while the foundations for these truths began to crumble, but i would like to explain what i mean when i say this. First of all, the distinction has to be made that there are foundations which allow truths to be true, while, on another level, truths can be evident without knowing what the true foundations are that caused them to become true. There are two questions i like to ask myself or others when discussing these issues in order to grasp the truth, the foundation, and the distinction between the two. (1) How did it become true, or, why is it true? and (2) How do you know that it is true, or, how has it proven itself to be true. Allow me to give two examples to demonstrate what i mean and to show the importance of having a good grasp on both the foundation and the truth.

Let's say that there is a red house with a blue interior, that one man painted both the outside and the inside of the house, but that i have only seen the outside of the house and have never seen the inside. At this point, i am confident in the truth that the outside of the house is red, because it is evident since i have seen it and have experienced its redness. But now my curiosities lead me to wonder why the house was painted red, and so, when asking a friend, he replies that the man who painted the house red loved the color red, so whenever he paints something, he paints it red. He loves red, he painted the house, and, therefore, the house is red. I have the evident truth and a foundation i believe can support the evident truth, and so i could be happy with that. However, if i were to simply know that this same man painted the inside of the house, and that he paints things red because he loves the color red, i would then deduce that the inside of the house is red as well. This presents a problem since the inside of the house is blue. Even though i have a foundation for my truths, i would find out, once seeing the inside of the house, that my foundation as to the reason the house was red was a faulty foundation. While it could be used to give some support to

preceding footnote is a bit lengthy, but it does include some key thoughts, so please don't skip it just because of its length. I considered making it a part of the text, but i decided that it was more footnote material than part of the continuity of the text.) Where was the stable foundation, and what implications would that foundation bring?

I resorted to the only thing i could think of at the time in this search, which may or may not have been the wisest, but i was at a point of desperation. I resigned many of my beliefs internally (but still practiced the same things externally) and simply believed that i could be sure that there was a good God, the God of the Bible, who had made Himself real to me in countless ways¹³ and completely trusted that He would lead me to peace in these issues in His good timing, as difficult as it was to wait for it. And that was the only thing that i told myself that i could be sure that i believed, through a sort of Cartesian style resignation of all that could be dubious. I was an intellectual toddler at this point, holding on to no belief other than knowing that i had a good Father who i could trust to take care of me as my helplessness was being demonstrated. I began to pray even more fervently the prayer that had become such a staple in my life based on

evident truths, it could mislead me when deducing other truths which were not so evident, such as the color of the interior. At this point, i would find out that my foundation had crumbled, that it was not necessarily just because this man loves the color red that the house is red, but the evident truth still remains. I could then find out later that the plans from the owner called for a red exterior and a blue interior, and that the painter was simply following the plans, and that that was the reason for why the outside of the house was painted red. Now, i would have a true foundation that supports the evident truth and does not lead to other faulty conclusions based on faulty foundations. I could even then deduce the color of the inside of the house correctly, although it is not as evident as the red exterior. It is necessary to have both a true foundation in order to refrain from drawing faulty conclusions, but a faulty foundation does not deny evident truths. It just does not validly support them or allow them to be logically deduced.

To give another brief example with more importance on the line, we can take creation. Without going into any metaphysical windings, we can say that it is evident that this world exists. With a faulty foundation that tells me that this world exists simply by chance with no intelligent creator, i can draw another conclusion that tells me that i am perfectly fine living for myself or for whatever reason i wish. With a proper, true foundation that tells me that an intelligent creator created this world for His glory, i could no longer draw this faulty conclusion, but would rather have to draw the conclusion that i must live for his glory. The existence of the world is evident, but the foundations of why the world exists are crucial for drawing other truths such as how we should live within creation.

Many of my conversations have resulted in others telling me that they can accept the Scriptures as evidently inspired, inerrant, and authoritatively compiled as Scripture, and that they believe they are through their own evidence. I also believe that the foundations for those truths must be properly understood. At the very least, they have the possibility of further implications for other truths that i want to be certain do not lead to faulty conclusions. (It is also sometimes necessary to be able to explain the foundations in order to explain the truths of Scriptures for those who have not been convinced of their evident truths.)

¹³ Describing the countless ways God has made himself known to me could warrant a whole new paper all in itself, and to do so comprehensively would prove to be somewhat of a Sisyphean labor. I will not even attempt to go into any detail or to list any specifics, and i could certainly not give an exhaustive summation of every way in which i am confident that God exists, but i will just list some of the top few reasons. I do hold that there is strong intellectual evidence through the philosophical arguments concerning the existence of God, such as the ontological, teleological, and cosmological arguments, as well as arguments stemming from natural law and the universal moral law. However, more importantly, God has made himself evident to me through his workings in my life. I regret that i do not have the time or even ability to recollect and relate all of the countless times God has made Himself known to me in personal ways. Without being able to go into details, i can only say that i have seen exceptional intellectual evidence and undeniable experiential evidence for God's existence.

James 1:5 that God would grant wisdom to those who asked for it in faith.¹⁴ I knew that God would come through as He always had, but i didn't know when or how. It was both a time of desperation in my life in not knowing what would come upon me next, but also a time of joy in knowing that i was absolutely unable to do any good for myself, and that i would have to resort to a 100%, complete, unadulterated and undivided dependence upon God. That's always a good place to be, as hard as it may be.

This was all going on during my last year of college, when, during the final semester, many things started happening all at once in a way so 'coincidental' that it can only be attributed to the amazing and sovereign hand of God, as He proved Himself faithful once again in a way for which i can only rejoice and praise Him. However, due to these simultaneous occurrences and my lack of literary skills, effectively disclosing what went on at this time may prove to be a difficult challenge, but i'm gonna do my durndest to make it somewhat comprehensible.

To begin with, i must tell you of one of the few people i talked to about these issues, as it will later tie back into the story. She was a friend who i had never really talked to about any related issues and did not even hang out with much, but certain circumstances led me to talk to her about these things running around in my head. I saw my friend Christi at a coffee shop that i had spent a large part of my time hanging out at during my last years of college, and we decided to go chat for a bit about what we were up to since we would both soon be leaving college and wouldn't see each other much, if at all, anymore. We grabbed a couple of cups of chai and went outside, asking how each other had been and what we had been up to. The conversation soon turned to a topic which led her to simply inform me that she had been struggling with a few beliefs here and there, and after informing her i had done the same, i think we both felt a bit more comfortable sharing some of the particulars of those beliefs since we were both in a somewhat similar situation, earnestly seeking after the truth and struggling with issues in front of us. She told me some of her thoughts on things, and i disclosed a few of the aforementioned issues that had recently been keeping my thoughts occupied. We were able to share some of the same sentiments on a few issues, and decided we would have to meet up at a later time as well to finish our conversation.

Regarding problematic issues for me, there was yet another situation i began to witness within Christianity around me. While still knowing that the Scriptures were of a paramount importance in issues of authority, i severely struggled with the concept of *sola scriptura* simply because of its impracticality in both supporting itself, which would be necessary for it to do, as well as in governing the doctrines and truths of the church. There had to be some sort of extra-biblical guide in helping us to discern the truth of the Scriptures and back up the doctrines therein, especially as I Timothy 3:15 tells us that the

¹⁴ James 1:5-6 'But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind.'

church is the pillar and support of the truth.¹⁵ It also seemed somewhat necessary that this guide, this pillar and support of the truth, should hold somewhat of an authority, or else it would not be an effective guide at all if its teachings did not need to be heeded as authoritative. If it were to teach one thing on an issue from the Scripture which did not settle well with an individual, and they chose not to heed the teachings, we would be back to square one with a belief in *sola scriptura* which i had already found to be impractical. To deny the teachings of this ‘guide’ would have to be because of conclusions i would have drawn based on my own interpretation of Scripture, and i had already established that i was not capable to understand or interpret Scripture correctly myself. I also felt that to deny this ‘guide’ by seeking my own interpretations would be contradictory to the teachings of the Scripture itself in I Timothy 3:15, II Peter 1:20-21, and II Peter 3:14-17. I also realized that to hold to a teaching of *sola scriptura* it would be necessary for every individual to be responsible to give an account for all their beliefs Scripturally and to have a somewhat comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the Bible in its entirety. I knew that i was not able to do this, nor were most of the Christians with which i had known in my life. Many Christians took the interpretations which they had been taught by their church, and found Scriptural support to back those beliefs. While i do not believe this is a bad thing in itself, it is contrary to *sola scriptura*, which was the premise that allows these churches to be separated from the Catholic Church in the first place¹⁶. This was impractical, in addition, because different churches were able to find different interpretations of almost every single doctrine—even soteriological matters which i held to be foundational points of Christianity—and preach it as truth. I was sure that the Bible only gave one message, and that the fact that the church preached different and often contradicting beliefs as truth was a disgrace to the unity of Scriptures and an embarrassment to Christianity. Why would the Holy Spirit lead different seekers to different conclusions on the same matters? It didn’t make sense to me. I determined that *sola scriptura* could not be true. It was first of all not supported by Scripture, it was not able to be carried out practically, and i did not believe that any individual church truly conducted itself in a manner that the Bible was the only source of authority, yet it was still given lip-service in every church that i experienced¹⁷. I needed to find the complementing authority that would allow me to correctly understand God’s message to us.¹⁸ I was now on a mission to try to find which church could live up to this expectation, but, admittedly, i somewhat doubted that i would be able to.

And then i realized the futility of trying to determine which church to believe. With literally tens of thousands of denominations from which to choose¹⁹, i could not

¹⁵ I Timothy 3:14-15 ‘I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of the living God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of truth.’

¹⁶ While there were many reasons for the fathers of the Reformation desiring to break away from the Catholic Church, it was the concept of *sola Scriptura*, Scripture as the sole authority, which actually allowed them to break away from the Catholic Church by denying the authority of the Church to which they must submit.

¹⁷ note to self -- *sola Scripture vs suprema Scripture (Scripture as AN authority or even primary authority) – elaborate this footnote*

¹⁸ The thing that left me most frustrated with this conclusion is that even after coming to the realization that *sola scriptura* could not be correct, there is nothing i could do with that knowledge without having a knowledge of the history of the Catholic church.

¹⁹ note to self -- *get the numbers on how many denominations there are*

possibly be able to sort out the individual church that i could trust to guide me through the Scriptures. Should i go with the Baptist church that i had been attending or did the truth lie in the Methodist church down the street. I had never even seriously looked into the Episcopal or Presbyterian churches, but the Church of Christ was another alternative that i knew sought to understand the Bible in a pure and unadulterated way. The ironic thing is, however, is that all of these churches held to a doctrine of *sola scriptura* and doctrinally denied any true authority of the church, yet they all preached their doctrines with authority. Where should a new believer go in order to attain solid foundations and teachings before he is able to truly grasp and understand the deeper meanings of Scripture? Should his doctrinal beliefs simply lie in where he chose to attend church or by which denomination got to him first, because they will support their teachings with Scripture and show him how to interpret its teachings just like almost any church in the city would, albeit with a different conclusion from the other churches' interpretations? And through all the madness of realizing just how many Protestant denominations were out there, i became increasingly agitated at the lack of unity within Christianity as a whole that i thought was so stressed within the New Testament. It was a time when i would have thrown my hands up in the air and despaired, had other developments not been simultaneously taking place in other areas of my life.

Allow me to regress approximately years earlier, when my dad took a trip down to Mexico and became fascinated with the Spanish language. I didn't think much of it at the time, but he took it on as a hobby to learn the language in the same way as he had made projects for himself of countless other things. He soon became fluent in the language and began to become interested in other areas of Mexican culture, including Catholicism. He soon began collecting various pictures and trinkets relating to saints and other paraphernalia relating to the Catholic Church. I didn't think much of it at the time, other than that it was another one of his eccentric hobbies, and that it made his office where he kept these things look a bit tacky. A few years later, near the Easter of 2001 (during the last semester of my first senior year in college), he announced to the family that he would soon be confirmed into the Catholic Church. I really had no idea what to think since i knew very little of the teachings of the Catholic Church, but i was excited to see that he would soon be going to church again and for him to become passionate about God and theology, which he jumped into with both feet and immersed himself in a collection of literature on the subject that would put many libraries to shame. My mom, on the other hand, was irate at the announcement of his joining the Catholic Church. I found it odd that my dad didn't share many of the details with us at the time, but later found out that with so much dissension that the decision caused between he and my mom, that if he had tried to begin 'corrupting' us boys, that things wouldn't have been pretty. It was a somewhat difficult time as well, in seeing my parents argue much more frequently than i had ever seen before. The discussions usually began with simple questions turned discussions (at which time i would leave the room if i was around, although most of the time i was away at school) before they would sometimes turn into a bit louder discussions and debates. (Even though i never saw any times when the discussions had any hint of disrespect shown between them, it was still more than i was used to seeing from my parents, and i wasn't sure what to make of it. However, my mom assured me in a somewhat humorous way that while they were having their differences in these areas, that

it would all be okay because now he was absolutely not allowed to leave her because it would be a mortal sin within the Catholic Church and that she had no intentions of doing the same.) My mom and my brothers and myself went to his confirmation in order to still show our love and support, although my brothers and i didn't exactly understand it all and my mom was certainly not approving of the decision. 'The Discussions' (as i will refer to them) soon became a staple of conversation around the house, and my mom's collection of anti-Catholic books grew at an alarming rate as i found her studying them constantly when she was not at work or taking care of the chores around the house. (Our house became quite the resource for anything Catholic or anti-Catholic. It even got to the point where, when browsing through bookstores for books and seeing a book that looked interesting on these topics, i would refrain from purchasing it, simply because i was quite confident that i could find a copy of it somewhere at the house. I can only recall one time when either my mom or dad was not able to scrounge up that book on their bookshelves or closets.) She studied them frequently—up early every morning, reading away in order to find holes and inconsistencies in my dad's arguments. I never really hung around for 'The Discussions' so i never really knew how they all turned out, but i will admit that it somewhat surprised me when, after about a year of this going on quite frequently, my mom announced to my brothers and me that she was going to join the Catholic Church on the Easter of 2003. This was during my last semester at Texas A&M. I was a bit taken back, knowing that my mom had been so staunch in her anti-Catholicism and that this would mean leaving the church she had attended for almost her whole life in which she was heavily involved. She taught the women's Sunday School class, led the Wednesday night AWANA program for the kids, and was involved in just about every special event that was held at the church among other things. I knew that this was not an easy decision for her to make, and that it would not be without consequences. It was during this time that i began to think that it was time to seriously look into the Catholic Church, as i still knew very little about it.

After my mom's confirmation, the whole family went out to eat and just chat about things. I remember one of the distinctive points of that conversation was when i learned that the Catholic Church held to three pillars of authority, all which complemented and supplemented one another and supposedly never contradicted each other. These were the authorities of Sacred Scriptures, the Magisterium (the Church), and Apostolic Tradition. Honestly, i was initially excited to hear about a church that claimed authority in its teachings, although my joys had not yet culminated at this point. Subsequently, the issue came up on various doctrines the Catholic Church held in relation to Scripture. My parents explained to me that a church council, given authority through the Holy Spirit, just like the council of Jerusalem described in Acts 15, declared the canon of the New Testament inspired in the 4th century²⁰, and that it was held to be the end of its type of revelation at that time. This supported the doctrine of a closed canon while still allowing God to inspire us through personal revelation even today. My first reaction when i heard this was to be in a somewhat state of astonishment, realizing that this may have been the exact solution to the turmoil going on within me. God just may have been beginning to reveal His answer to my prayers in these matters. It was if i had

²⁰ I later learned that the canon of the Old Testament had its stamp of approval through tradition until the Council of Trent officially declared its status shortly after the Reformation in the 16th century.

just seen a light that had the potential to put me at peace concerning the doctrines of complete inspiration, inerrancy, and the closed canon, as well as to find a complementing authority in interpreting these Scriptures all in one fell swoop, but i was still leery in getting too excited just yet. It was still very early in the game and the verifications had not yet been made. After a bit more discussion, my astonishment began to slowly give way to joy. I remember going into the bathroom at the restaurant, looking into the mirror and telling myself, 'Brandon, i think you just may be Catholic before it's all said and done.' And i smiled from an inner joy that was beginning to relieve so many of the issues that i had struggled with for so long, and i thanked God for His faithfulness in beginning to give me a hint of peace again.

But i knew that this was hardly the end of the journey. There was still much i didn't know about the Catholic Church, and after all this time of searching for a conduit out of the theological turmoil i had gone through, i wasn't going to run full-force into what may have looked like an escape, only to find myself entering and trapped in another dungeon with a whole new pit of more terrible dangers to face. There was much i needed to learn, especially why the Catholic Church believed that they had that authority with which to teach and to interpret the Scriptures. The journey that lay ahead of me, i would soon find, would be full of joy in finding treasures, gems, pearls, and nuggets of truth and understanding, but would not be without much rocky terrain to travail in struggling to separate the fact from the fiction, as well as facing so many friends and mentors who did not at all approve of the direction i was headed. The journey was far from over. In fact, it was just beginning.

End Part I

Part II

I was quite ignorant to the teachings of the Catholic Church at this point, but i knew that i had to be faithful in searching and praying out every issue i could before making any progress toward heading into the Catholic Church. I was not about to take such a big jump out of the frying pan and into the fire. I did not really know where to begin looking, other than to begin reading books on the issue and talk with those who may have been able to provide insights into these matters.

To begin my literary travels, an impacting book was given to me to read by my friend Christi, who i had mentioned earlier. We met one evening at a coffee house in Dallas just to chat about the finer points of life, to catch up on what we were up to and all that good stuff, and i informed her of my quest to begin looking into the Catholic Church as a possible place for me to continue worshiping. It was a good conversation, although that was only one of the topics of the evening. There was not much more discussion on that topic other than just a few basic questions and answers. However, the next time i saw her, she had two books for me to look through. One was David Currie's *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic*, which a friend had given to her after his sister had converted to Catholicism. The other was a book on the Episcopal Church called *Our Anglican Heritage* by Bishop John W. Howe. She had been raised Episcopal and her father was the pastor of an Episcopal Church, and, being that the Episcopal Church was probably the closest relative to the Catholic Church in the Protestant tradition, i was more

than eager to take a gander at it as an option to determine if it may provide an alternative and allow me to remain with my Protestant upbringing. I quickly realized, however, that the Episcopal Church, while very intriguing and attractive to me in many areas, did not have the answers to the questions that had brought me to where i was in the first place.

I then began to read David Currie's book, and, again, the joys began building up inside of me like i hadn't felt in quite some time. It was the story of a fundamentalist who, through a theological search to which i strongly related, had discovered and fell in love with the Catholic Church. He discussed his journey as a whole and the doctrinal issues that had taken him from the Protestant side of Christianity to the Catholic. It was while reading this book that i began to feel that i wasn't alone in my searchings, but it also began to open my eyes to more of the vast differences in Catholic and Protestant theology to which i had been ignorant. However, when i began reading many of his discussions on these issues, i immediately began to feel that there was so much more evidence to these doctrines and unity within the teachings of the Catholic Church than i had ever found within any of my experience with any Protestant systems. While i cannot begin to claim that i was at all a scholar of Protestant theology, i had grown up seeking after the truths of Christianity with a strong Protestant upbringing. I knew the answers for many of the questions and i was very familiar with the teachings of our church, but i had never really been completely comfortable with the reasons for the answers or the reasons for the teachings. In contrast, i immediately saw vast biblical, historical, philosophical and pragmatic evidence for the teachings of the Catholic Church, and i began to wonder why i was never exposed to any of these things previously. Even for many doctrines that i had been taught as truth within the Protestant church that were held as truth in the Catholic Church, i began to find stronger support and evidence for the foundations of these truths.

I began by reading elementary and introductory books on Catholic teachings to begin to give myself an idea of what i was looking at, including the *Surprised by Truth* series edited by Patrick Madrid, which related a number of conversions of Protestants, New Agers, atheists, and others who had discovered the truth of the Catholic Church. With every story i felt as though i was able to relate to at least some aspect of their story. I gained countless more insights on the doctrines and reasons that had led them to see the Catholic Church as the continuation of the church Christ had instituted during his time on earth, and everything seemed to make sense in a very real way. And again, i rejoiced at each story to learn of the ways God was working in so many lives to guide and assist them all in their times of wandering, despair, and helplessness, and to see them brought back into the fold²¹. I was amazed at how many of these converts were former Protestant ministers and trained theologians. I began to become a bit more assured, again, as i realized that many others had walked this very same road, including others who had been well-trained in theology and matters of the faith. I began to feel more excited about the prospect of heading toward a church where i could potentially worship while laying to rest the doubts and uneasiness that had previously unsettled me.

²¹ I would like to clarify that i do not necessarily mean 'the fold' as in the Catholic Church, but i am rather using this term generically to refer to Christianity. I rejoiced at the way that God was faithful in comforting and guiding His sheep in the manner which they needed at the times when they were distraught, searching, and/or roaming away from Him.

I soon began delving into more books that dealt with the theological issues on deeper levels, weighing the arguments of the various Protestant views with that of the Catholic view, and learning that there were many similarities, but the differences were substantial enough to require serious time and dedication in order to be able to understand what i might be getting myself into²². It wasn't too much longer after these things that i began to discover the wealth of writings by the early church fathers, many of whom had fought and died to defend the faith in the first centuries of the church, and i was amazed to discover the consensus of beliefs on issues that only the Catholic Church holds to today. Men such as St. Clement, St. Irenaeus, St. Justin the Martyr, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, and, one of my favorites, although he came along a bit later, St. Thomas Aquinas, provided countless insights into the teachings of the early church. The biblical evidence with philosophical support had been criteria that i had always placed strong emphasis on when seeking after the truth of doctrine, but i was now finding that these could all be completely cohesive with an impressive string of historical continuity from men who were much closer to the original teachings of the apostles than we could obviously ever be. Even though severely limited in my scope on the depth of these doctrines, but amazed at how deep the waters ran within the pool of Catholic teaching, i was beginning to see an intricacy, consistency, coherence, and Christ-centeredness that i had personally never been able to see before in a system of theology. I am not saying that i immediately had a grasp on everything or that i was instantly enlightened, but i am saying that every time i learned more of the teachings, it consistently and, many times, effortlessly fell into the bigger picture in a way i had never experienced before.

During this time, i was just finishing up my last semester at Texas A&M University, and having majored in philosophy, i had no marketable skills confirmed by my degree. Therefore, i had no job waiting for me. I had actually wanted to take a bit of time just to get away for a bit, spend some time pursuing some independent studies and projects (including this exploration of Catholicism), and to begin casually looking for a Masters program in which to enroll, so the lack of a job was also due to the fact that i had no intentions of jumping into a 'real' job at this time. I had a friend, Jeff, who had graduated the semester before and had moved up to Boston, Massachusetts to accept a job offer that had been extended to him, and when he extended an offer to anyone who wanted to head that direction and room with him while he was up there, i jumped at the offer with reckless abandon. I told him that i would be up there as soon as i finished up my schooling and tied up all the loose ends. I still to this day don't know if he was completely serious about the offer, but i accepted it anyway, not giving him the chance to take it back or tell me he was only joking.

And so, when my time at Texas A&M was finished, i packed a couple of bags and hopped on a plane to Boston, found myself a job as a bookseller at Harvard Book Store, and had a great time living in the northeast. I continued my study of theology and

²² While i do intend to briefly discuss in a later section a few of the major doctrinal issues i encountered, i fully realize that these issues have been covered by so many more competent scholars than i, and i will leave the finer points and nuances up to their discussions. However, i do hope to begin to discuss in Part IV the issues that were some of the more difficult or interesting for me to deal with, and to relate the peace i found with them within the doctrines of the Catholic Church.

philosophy throughout this time, but it was not all concentrated on Catholic-related issues. I had wanted to brush up on much of my existential and Greek philosophy during this time, and my theological studies were sidetracked by friendships made with members of the International Church of Christ (ICOC). Jeff and i had met some guys who were part of a relatively new branch of the Church of Christ, the ICOC, but we heard and found that they were not recognized by any credible Christian groups, and that they were even considered a cult of Christianity by many. We spent much time researching their beliefs and building defenses and counter questions for the areas in which we were in disagreement. It was a beneficial time for our own apologetic skills, but it also caused me to slow down a bit in my research of Catholicism, although many issues did overlap. My study and searching into Catholic theology by no means ceased, however. I continued to try to read as much as i could get my hands on whenever i could and would usually discuss these issues with Jeff, although i think he tired of me constantly bringing up these issues in light of so many other pressing matters that were concerning him. I didn't want him to feel that, after all of his hospitality, that i was simply being another enemy for him to defend his beliefs against in the same way that we were with the ICOC, so i tried to limit my discussions. (I don't think i was too successful in limiting my discussions, however.)

Near the end of that summer, i received a call from the director of the national organization of the men's ministry that i had been involved with at Texas A&M. He asked me if i would like to come work for them as an intern. I originally told him that i didn't think i was too interested, especially in light of the direction my doctrines were headed, but that i appreciated the thought. However, we continued to talk within the next few weeks, and, after discussing some issues such as my sentiments toward Catholicism and other logistics, i told him that i would think about it. Accepting this position, however, would mean needing to move back to Texas where the operations were based. Eventually, i ended up accepting the offer, said goodbye to my friends in Boston, flew back to Texas, and sadly ended a very enjoyable chapter in my life while looking forward to the next.

I began working for the ministry that i had returned to Texas to be a part of. This ministry, while holding to a non-denominational doctrinal statement, was overwhelmingly Protestant in teachings and practice. During this time, i had many discussions with the director, a staunch Calvinist who was very knowledgeable in the Scriptures and in theology, over some selected issues in both Catholicism as well as Calvinist teachings. During this time, i made the decision to begin attending Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in order to try to gain a stronger grasp on Protestant theology to try to determine if there were any key points that i was missing. I had always been impressed by the manner in which St. Thomas Aquinas wrote his *Summa Theologica* and, in general, approached his apologetics. It was said that he could argue his opponents position better than they could even argue their own view, allowing him to be more competent to present his views against their objections. I realized that i needed to gain as much understanding into the Protestant teachings as i could so that i could not only make a better informed decision, but also so that i could be able to effectively discuss my decision with the many Protestant friends i would have to explain myself to.

During this time of being formally surrounded by Protestant teaching and environments, i continued to fail to make sense of the foundations and specifics of the doctrines. Too many questions were left unsettled for me. I truly attempted to make sense of the whole systems, as i knew that in almost every aspect of my life it would be so much easier for me to remain a Protestant. To become Catholic, i was well aware, would effectively put an end or at least dramatically alter many dreams, possibilities, opportunities and even relationships that had been such a strong part of me. Therefore, i tried to become comfortable with Protestant doctrine in whatever way i could. Nevertheless, i continued to feel as though there were too many loose ends and unanswered questions that were left hanging, and i couldn't make sense or agree with much of what i was learning which often left me frustrated. I want to emphasize that i did not, nor do i, hold any animosity toward the Protestant Church.²³

I also began engaging in conversation after conversation with friends, all of who were from a Protestant background, concerning issues of Catholicism. To make a blanket statement concerning my sentiments of many of these conversations as a whole, they were certainly not convincing. If anything, i found that many of the discourses further affirmed the confusion i had felt was characteristic of Protestant theology. Knowing that the direction i was heading would cause quite a stir among many, i only selectively disclosed my thoughts on the topic to those who were either close confidants, those who i felt could give me decent advice on how to practically look at and pursue things, or who were knowledgeable in theology and could possibly 'set me straight' with insights into these issues. More often than not, i realized that many of those who fit one of these criteria met all of them. I again realized that God had blessed me with many amazing relationships within the community of believers. I have always enjoyed a good discussion, and, as my closest friends can attest, i relish the opportunity for a decent debate, and this provided the perfect forum for both. This time, however, the topics were hardly chosen for recreational purposes, and i knew, as well as my friends did, that these chats would have tremendous influence on the most significant aspect of my life.

The specifics of the countless conversations i have had varied with every person, and other than with my parents, there was always a decided disagreement within the chats to at least some degree. While many fundamental issues remained the same, the particular topics discussed were as different as the people with whom they were discussed. These were very beneficial as well as challenging times, in that they forced me to at least have a fundamental and basic understanding of most every issue that would arise as a concern within Catholic teaching. Often times, the discussions were largely question and answer times with inquiries on how various beliefs were taught within the Catholic Church and where the biblical foundation could be found. Other conversations dealt with apparent contradictions or anti-biblical teachings that had to be hashed out. Many had misconceptions of certain doctrines which were easily worked out simply by appealing to the facts, while others brought up very good points that forced me to return

²³ I still love all of my Protestant friends, ministers, ministries, and churches, and the passion i see in so many of them, but i could never find consistency within the teachings of the Protestant Church in the way that i could in the Catholic Church. By no means is my goal to undermine or to try to discount anything that is Protestant, but i just never felt comfortable and could not be at peace with the foundations of the Protestant Church.

to the books and seek after answers for the things that i did not have the answers. Some conversations resorted to joking with statements such as, ‘I wonder if when we get to heaven, God’s gonna just shake His head and tell us that we all got it wrong, and He’s gonna make us all go back and do it all over again,’ while other conversations got a bit riled and at the end we had to both look at each other, smile, say that we loved each other and that we were not going to let this affect our friendship, but that we were going to take it seriously and not act like it’s not a big deal. I truly thank God for the friends that He gave me who were willing to take time to argue with me because they loved me, as well as to prove their point. I thank each one of them for showing me their love to me through these times. There were many difficult conversations, however, with many telling me that they were confident that i was wrong, that i was not seeking after the truth, or that they just did not understand what was going on within me or why i would want to do this. However, there were also times, albeit much fewer and further between, that someone would say that they see my point on an issue or two, or the very rare comment that they may have to look into the Catholic Church more seriously. I know that many friendships and relationships have been altered through these talks, but i also know that i am surrounded by people who care about me, and i was truly able to experience sheep looking out and caring for another sheep.

While many of the conversations were filled with good content and substance, i found that there were a few general trends that many often took that i almost found humorous in how often they appeared. I don’t know if this flows into the point of this section, but i would like to relate some of these tendencies that appeared so regularly. I have taken the liberty to title these trends, obviously by my own subjectively biased perspective. There is the (1) *An Enemy of Catholicism is a Friend of Mine* tendency, the (2) *Well, That’s Not What I Believe* tendency, and the (3) *You Just Have To Trust God (That I’m Right and You’re Mistaken)* tendency. These names may be unfair and judgmental, but, being that this is my testimony and that i have afforded myself the right to make up the names, this is what i have decided to name them. Allow me to briefly explain the characteristics of these trends.

The *An Enemy of Catholicism is a Friend of Mine* tendency is characterized by a run of questions to poke holes in Catholic doctrine where the opponent²⁴ will throw objections to Catholicism based on premises that they may or may not hold to themselves, but will use as long as it defeats their antithesis. It doesn’t matter whether they necessarily believe it or whether it is their position, but they will use it if it damages the Catholic teaching. For example, if discussing the unity of the Catholic Church, the opponent may begin by claiming that this unity is in essence a hindrance to the good of the church in that it does not allow people to worship in the way that they feel comfortable or allow for the Holy Spirit to lead individuals to their own beliefs and that there is no real need for this kind of unity in the first place. If it were then demonstrated through Scripture and testimony from the early church fathers that there is need for unity within the church in order to protect from heresy and for countless other practical reasons, and the opponent happens to agree, it may be very likely for the opponent, if following this trend, to begin arguing that the Catholic Church does not hold this kind of

²⁴ I have used the term ‘opponent’ in the following paragraphs to describe my discussion partners, not out of a sense of an enemy, but rather for simplicity in simply showing that we did not often agree.

unity that is called for. This demonstrates that the opponent does not really care what they have to claim as long as it pokes a hole in the Catholic argument. They will claim that there is unity but that it is detrimental and damaging if that will best work for them, or they will claim that there is no real unity within the Catholic Church and that it is not what it claims to be. They don't care whether they need to claim to unity or disunity, as long as it pokes a hole in the Catholic argument. Therefore, 'Any Enemy of Catholicism is a Friend of Mine' whether i believe it or not.²⁵

Within this category, i also place those who do not necessarily have a problem or are completely fine and settled on an issue or even that they know is an incorrect assessment of an issue, but they will still argue it in hopes that, out of ignorance, a response will not be able to be made. For example, let's say that the opponent knows good and well that Catholic doctrine does not teach us to worship Mary, nor does it put her on the same level as God, but they will still ask why Catholic teaching puts her on the same level with God just to make sure that you can answer that, and if you do not have a decent answer for it, they will claim that is an objection against Catholicism, knowing good and well that it is not the truth. They are not afraid to present a known misconception as a truth and argue against Catholic teaching in hopes that it will hinder your case. I am not claiming that everyone who presents misconceptions as arguments against the Catholic Church are doing it intentionally—i certainly believe that the majorities simply do hold them as misconceptions—but i have had times when opponents present misconceptions knowingly in order to try to poke holes in the case.²⁶

Then there is the *Well, That's Not What I Believe* tendency that only works due to the nature of Protestant doctrine. Because Protestant doctrine does not really have any sort of system of required beliefs or a rigidly defined orthodoxy, but rather allows the individuals to arrive at their own conclusions from the Bible through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is almost impossible to know what beliefs your Protestant opponent holds as an individual. If any point is brought up to try to demonstrate an inconsistency in Protestant doctrine, the opponent can simply reply with an all-encompassing, 'Well, that's not what i believe,' and there you go. The question is swiftly and painlessly averted, even though it may be a common teaching of Protestants. It's a classic move, one that works almost without fail, in order to escape the tough interrogations. The Catholics don't really have this luxury, being that their cards are out on the table with the Catechism and other documents and you don't really get to pick and choose what you want to believe on most issues. A common example i can give which i have experienced of this example is that of *sola scriptura*. *Sola scriptura* in its pure unadulterated form is very difficult to hold to practically, and even the concept itself takes on various meanings for different Protestants. When discussing the impracticalities, difficulties, and lack of scriptural, historical and philosophical support of *sola scriptura*, i have found many Protestants to claim that they do not hold to *sola scriptura*, but rather to what they refer to *suprema scriptura*, which has plenty of its own problems as well. Protestantism was

²⁵ Arguing against this type of opponent did tend to prove to be very beneficial. It not only forces a defense to be made for every issue, but it requires a defense for every side of every issue.

²⁶ I would like to point out that most experience i have with this is from those who are not necessarily the closer friends and confidants who i openly shared with, but, rather, those who would hear anything associated with Catholicism and would begin attacking with a viciousness that i found to be quite entertaining.

birthed through the claim of *sola scriptura* and Protestants will often rally around this concept, but that does not keep one from simply denying that that is what they hold to when they find themselves backed into a corner. I have learned that before discussing an issue with Protestants, even if it is an issue commonly accepted by most Protestants, it is necessary for me to have them describe exactly what they believe as an individual so that it doesn't come to the end of an argument and having them simply tell me that that is not what they believe.

The final tendency is one that i have experienced on a surprisingly frequent basis. It is the *Well, You Just Have To Trust God (That I'm Right and You're Mistaken)*. The name is very pointed, but many conversations i have encountered have fallen directly into this line of reasoning. It is somewhat of another spiritual trump card for times when the opponent does not have an answer or simply does not wish to become involved in or continue a discussion over an issue. Often it is preceded by attempts to reason out a position, but if the opponent ever happens to fail to have an explanation, a simple, 'Well, you just have to trust God,' or 'Well, you just have to have faith,' is all that is needed to demonstrate that you are lacking in your faith in God and that that is why you have arrived at such faulty conclusions, even, or i should say, especially, if you may have a stronger case than they. I don't know how many times i have ended a specific point of a conversation with someone, after extended discussions back and forth on an issue, with the question that asks, 'I just don't understand how this fits into the bigger picture,' and the opponent quickly covers their lack of an answer by claiming that you are putting too much hope in your own reason and that you are not trusting God enough. However, i would venture to say that if you were to arrive at the same conclusion through reason that they had arrived at, they would be the first to congratulate you on your keen insight into effective study of the Scriptures. Trying to reason things out is a lack of faith in God if you arrive at questioning or dissenting conclusions, but it is keen insight into the logical message of Scripture if you arrive at an agreeable conclusion.

I am not saying at all that there have not been legitimate concerns brought up through many conversations, or that everyone i have talked to could be categorized into any of these trends, but i have encountered them on such a frequent basis that i could not avoid to at least make mention of them. I may have somewhat caricatured them in an unfair manner, but i think they portray at least the general idea of the trends²⁷. In order to be fair, however, many conversations i have had have been very enjoyable, insightful, have brought up true concerns that i have taken to heart, and i have pursued my study and prayer in these issues.

The point i am belaboring through these ramblings is to simply say that i have taken my search into Catholicism seriously from the time that i originally became acquainted with the possibility. I have tried to be faithful in examining both sides of the issue and the whole spectrum of the issues as diligently as my capacities would allow. I received some very good advice from a friend to obviously not just look at one side of the issue, but also not to just take into account the extremes or moderates on either side, but rather, the whole spectrum of every side of every issue. I have tried to heed that advice

²⁷ I hope i have not offended anyone with the rather polemical style of my rhetoric in these discussions of the tendencies i have noticed, but these trends did occur with such a frustratingly humorous frequency that i guess i had to briefly vent about them.

and take into account everything, and in all that i have found, in my admittedly own personal judgment, all the evidence has overwhelmingly pointed me to the Catholic Church.

During the summer of 2003, i attended a Catholic conference with my family to hear Catholic apologists and speakers discuss various issues of the Catholic Church. It was during this time that i realized that the only way to remain in good conscience and faithful to the direction that i felt i was being led was to practically begin taking steps toward entering the Catholic Church. I had already known that i was Catholic in my theology and that i held the teachings of the Catholic Church as authoritative, and at this point, it was time for me to begin preparing for confirmation into the Church. This, and the desire to be able to receive the sacraments, lit the fire for me to begin attending the Rite of Catholic Initiation for Adults classes, which i have just begun at St. Andrew's Catholic Church in Fort Worth, Texas and am certainly enjoying. I am excited to know that i am on the last leg of the travel home. Home should be a place of peace and joy, and i am already beginning to experience these in a way that i had had difficulty experiencing for a while. When i go to Mass, i can enjoy the experience of worship and reverence for my God and Savior, and i rest in knowing that i do not have to worry about determining if the theology of the priest matches my own theology. I am at peace in submitting myself as a sheep to the guidance of the Church which i believe is guided with authority by the Holy Spirit in the same way in which the Scriptures were written with authority by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the same way that i believe that God uses the Bible, written by fallible men with an infallible inspiration, to communicate to us, i believe that He uses His Church, consisting of fallible men guided by the infallibility of the Holy Spirit, to direct us and lead us in matters of doctrines and morals. I love being able to ask the angels and saints for their prayers, and knowing that they are in constant intercession for us who are battling to glorify God among the lusts and spiritual warfare of this world. I love the Christ-centeredness of the Mass and the emphasis on worshiping Him with our whole selves—body, mind, and soul. I thank God constantly for His faithfulness in answering my prayers and bringing me to a place of peace and joy in my Catholic home in order to prepare and strengthen me and to give me rest for the turmoil and fights of the world...and i'm not even Catholic yet! This is all simply from the anticipation of soon being Catholic!

But it has certainly not all been fun and games. This decision has had its share of consequences and has come with a price. For starters, working within an organization with a purpose of Christian ministry, although it is a nominally non-denominational Christian organization, i was asked to leave my job for reasons of 'doctrinal differences' as a result of this decision. I have also lost a great deal of respect from many of those of whom i had been involved with in ministry. I have been told many hurtful things from people who i truly respect who have told me outright that i have fallen away from the truth, that i have given up in my quest for truth, that i am no longer in the fight, and that i am out of God's will. I am told quite often that i am deceiving myself with my philosophies and, as one man said, 'making the simple complex,' that i am not truly trusting God, and that i do not have faith that He will guide me through my battles. As i have said earlier, this has been one of the few things that has been difficult for me to reconcile, that so many who i respect, who i know love the Lord and seek after truth and

have taught me to do the same, are so adamantly opposed to this decision²⁸. And because of this, i do wonder sometimes if i am heading the right direction. I often ask myself why i should be granted the grace to find the fullness of truth, being completely undeserving and a terrible sinner, and that i know that there are countless others who seek after God and His truth so much better than i do. At these times, i remember the joy, comfort and peace that this journey has ultimately brought me, and i also remember that that is the story of Christianity, that none of us are deserving of the grace God chooses to give, but that we can only rejoice when we receive it and pray for ourselves and others in love, which, again, is only through grace.²⁹ There have been and are many things that hurt, and i know that many relationships will never be the same, but none of this compares at all with the joy i have felt from following after God wherever i feel Him leading me.

Before i begin to wrap this up, i want to disclose my thoughts on the Protestant Church as i see it now. I love the body of Christ, in whatever shape and form that it takes. There are countless aspects of the Protestant Church which i admire and immensely enjoy, and i love the passion that i see in my Protestant friends who are so adamant about knowing Christ and making his name known in all the earth for his glory. I believe that the Holy Spirit works in tremendous ways through the Protestant Church, and i believe that Protestants are well within the plan of salvation. By no means do i believe that God is only working through the Catholic Church or that those outside of the Catholic Church are condemned or the reprobate or whatever you want to call it, just as i believe that being within the Catholic Church does not, by any stretch of the imagination, guarantee one's salvation. I still feel excited to worship within Protestant services, even though i admittedly take the teaching with a grain of salt. There is unbelievable evidence that God is strong at work within all those who call upon His name—Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox—and by no means do i wish to discredit the good that comes from any who God chooses to use. There are certainly major differences between the Catholic and Protestant schools of thought, and i am all for the discussion and attempts at resolving these differences, both formally as in the Joint Declaration on Justification, and informally with friends of varying views, provided that we all keep in mind that it is ultimately God's truth that we are after, that we are members of the body of Christ who are called to love one another, and that we do not attempt to maliciously offend or condemn each other. I love all of my Protestant friends and ministers, and i love the hearts they have for God and his kingdom. I love the role that the Protestant Church has played in my life and will continue to play. I know that we have our differences, but we have the same God and we are members of the same body, and i will rejoice in the grace that God has extended to my Protestant brothers in the same way that i rejoice in the grace he has extended to me.

It has been a difficult journey at times, but it has been well worth it in the same way that it is worth the pain of the surgery in order to experience full health, and it is

²⁸ I did receive some very comforting words from Stephen K. Ray, a Catholic speaker, author, and apologist, in which he told me that he has discovered that while so many have met and love Jesus, they have not met his full family. He said it much better with much more explanation, as well.

²⁹ Hopefully this statement, which i fully affirm, will buy me some credibility with my Calvinist readers. Contrary to some popular beliefs, Catholic teaching fully affirms that it is first, foremost, and only through God's grace that we may be saved and experience eternal life in glory.

sometimes difficult to appreciate full health when you haven't had the pain and experience of sickness to help you realize how blessed you are to be healthy. I have already begun to experience blessings from this journey that i thank God for constantly. I have begun to find people within the Catholic Church who have been nothing but a blessing in their support and assistance in this journey through their prayers and words of encouragement, and i thank Him for them daily with a smile on my heart. And i also thank Him for His children and my friends in the Protestant Church who serve Him with such a passion and glorify His name through their lives, action, and faith. There are many fights left to be fought, and now i feel as though i am one fight closer to my true home outside of this world, and through it all, God hasn't once left me to do battle by myself. Protestant or Catholic, what an awesome God we serve—and i do mean 'we' completely collectively.

End Part II

Brief Follow-Up—I just want to say that i have just received my confirmation and first communion this past Easter, and couldn't be more excited about the new beginning of my life as a Catholic.