

How (NOT) to Become Catholic

In 9 Easy Steps

Introduction

A little over a year ago my status changed. Having been a Presbyterian minister for over twenty years, I became a Catholic layman. How that happened is a long story.

In a nutshell, though, reading a Catholic author here, meeting with a priest or two there, befriending groups of faithful Catholics, and attending lectures, meetings, and (occasionally) Mass all added up. At the same time, my questions about the viability of Protestantism in a post-modern environment became more pointed and my answers more frightening. The Protestant mainline, oldline, sideline is in theological, moral, and cultural freefall as it approaches becoming little more than a sideshow. And the evangelicals, I fear, are not all that far behind.

This, of course, didn't occur to me overnight. My journey to the Catholic Church happened over the course of about twelve years—eight asking increasingly uncomfortable questions and four praying very hard and asking more uncomfortable questions.

Again, it's a long story. On the other hand, how to keep the same thing from happening to you is a shorter story.

After all, for Protestants and for ministers in particular, becoming a Catholic is a hassle. A now-Catholic friend told me that his evangelical missionary in-laws would have been happier had he and his wife become hyper-liberal Episcopalians than faithful, orthodox Catholics. Friends with worried faces either ask difficult questions or—even worse—ask and say nothing at all.

Had I left my Presbyterian denomination to join the Free Will Baptists or a dispensational Bible church or to an Anglo-Catholic parish (smells and bells, but not Roman smells and bells), things would have been simple. There would have been a sentence or two in the Presbytery minutes to the effect that I had “peaceably withdrawn” to thus and such church because my theological convictions were no longer in keeping with the Westminster Confession.

No one, however, is permitted to peaceably withdraw to the Catholic Church. Old anti-Catholic habits die hard and so rigmarole, kerfuffle, and consternation were the order of the day. On the other hand, I guess I did demote the denomination from “church” to “ecclesial community,” the ministers from “fathers and brothers” to “separated brethren,” and Protestantism in general from “many expressions of the Body of Christ” to “a bunch of sects in imperfect communion with the Body of Christ.”

Once all was said and done though, my friends are still my friends, something for which I'm genuinely and profoundly grateful.

Not that I'm complaining, mind you. The Catholic Church is all it's cracked up to be in those Scott Hahn books, Opus Dei discussion groups, and descriptions by friends who converted before I did. It is, as I told my wife one day, “the real deal” and I am amazed at God's kindness to me that I get to be a Catholic.

On the other hand, if you're a Protestant and especially if you're a Protestant minister listing Romeward, there are rules you can follow that may help keep you from following in my soggy footsteps across the Tiber.

Let me make clear that they're not hard and fast rules. Breaking them all with impunity will not guarantee a switch to Rome. I know many people such as the Protestant half of Evangelicals and Catholics Together who know more about the Church than I do and yet are firmly rooted in the faith of the Reformation.

After studying enough Catholicism to coauthor the book *Is the Reformation Over?*, historian Mark Noll in an issue of *First Things* called himself “someone whose respect for Catholicism has grown steadily over the last four decades, and yet whose intention to live out his days as a Protestant also has grown stronger over those same decades.” Fair enough.

You could break all the rules and have the same experience Dr. Noll has had or you could break the rules to your own peril and could begin to view the Christian faith, your life, time, space, and the whole physical world in a new, but oddly familiar light. Perhaps I can steer you around all that.

For Catholics, let me strongly encourage you to break all the rules early and often. After all, why should the “converts” have all the fun?

Rule #1: Assume that all Catholics are idiots.

When I say assume all Catholics are idiots, I mean you need to assume *all* Catholics are idiots. You can't begin making exceptions because that's where the trouble starts. It's a slippery slope from "All Catholics except John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis I are idiots," to "All Catholics except JP2, B16, F1, Richard John Neuhaus, Francis Cardinal George, and G.K. Chesterton are idiots," to "There are many Catholics who are not idiots," to "The majority of Catholics, I must admit, are not idiots," to "Bless me, Father for I have sinned." Nip this slippery slope in the bud. All means all.

"All" has to include all clergy, theologians, and intellectuals. In Blessed John Henry Newman's mid-nineteenth century novel about conversion, *Loss and Gain*, the main character, Charles Reding, receives a final warning from Carlton, a friend at Oxford University, before he takes the plunge across the Tiber. About Roman Catholics, Carlton cautions, "You will find them under-educated men, I suspect." When Charles presses his friend as to how he knows this, Carlton replies, "I suspect it. ... I judge from their letters and speeches which one reads in the papers," that is, in the English, Protestant, and, at the time, thoroughly anti-Catholic papers.

Carlton, a theology scholar, had managed to avoid all contact with actual Roman Catholic theologians and thinkers thereby providing himself with the safety of claiming that all Catholics are under-educated and not worth his attention except perhaps for ridicule.

Today that's what the *New York Times* seems to think. Catholics are prejudiced, "under-educated" (at least), cultural troglodytes and that should be good enough for you. (Actually the *Times* believes what most liberal elites believe, that, as Richard John Neuhaus put it, "The only good Catholic is a bad Catholic." They heartily approve of Catholics who reject Church teachings particularly teachings to do with sexuality.)

Anyway, more than a century and a half after Newman wrote, Fr. James Schall, former Professor of Government at Georgetown University noted at the website, [The Catholic Thing](#):

Few want to know what truth is found in Catholicism. The main reason Catholicism is hated in the modern world, and it is hated, is the suspicion that Catholicism might well be true. To mock or misrepresent Catholicism seems permissible if, as it is supposed, it is composed of dunderheads who cannot argue coherently about anything, not even what they believe and the grounds for it.

On a popular and practical level, this can be done by simply repeating the words, "How could anyone believe that?" with a pained facial expression whenever confronted with Purgatory, indulgences, the Immaculate Conception, papal authority, transubstantiation, or any number of other Catholic doctrines.

Wondering even for a moment how bright, well-educated, and theologically astute people defend these doctrines will only lead you to investigate. And investigation would put you in dialogue with Catholic thinkers in person or through their writings. And dialogue, if it is honest, carries with it an openness to change. And an openness to change is the very thing you don't want.

Better simply to assume we are all misguided dolts who desperately need either the *New York Times* or some *Ryrie Study Bibles* to set us straight.

Rule #2: Get all your information about the Catholic faith second hand.

How the conversation got started is a mystery, but the topic was death and something I said caused my companion, an elderly gentleman, to remark, “Of course I’m Catholic and the Catholic Church teaches that when you die you become an angel.”

“Actually,” I responded helpfully, “the Catholic Church doesn’t teach that.”

“Oh, yes it does,” he insisted. “The Church teaches that when you die you become an angel.”

“No, really,” I replied, “Trust me on this. I know that the Church does not teach that when you die you become an angel.”

“Look,” he said become mildly annoyed at the obviously uninformed Protestant minister at his side, “I’ve been a Catholic all my life and I *know* the Church teaches that when you die you become an angel.”

Soooo... how 'bout them Red Sox?

Bugs Bunny cartoons and *New Yorker* cartoons teach that when you die you become an angel. Country songwriter Hoyt Axton teaches that you need to be good lest, when you die, you become an angel with “a rusty old halo, skinny white cloud, second-hand wings full of patches.” And the 1967 movie “Casino Royal” with Peter Sellers and David Niven teaches that when you die you become an angel—unless you’re very, very bad.

But no matter how long you’ve been a Catholic, the Catholic Church has not, does not, and never will teach that when you die you become an angel. And, for the record, neither does any other Christian church.

I often wonder what other exotic ideas were growing in this gentleman’s garden of misinformation. But I’m certain that finding someone like him is an ideal way to explore the Catholic Church—or something vaguely like the Catholic Church—in complete safety. Since poorly catechized Catholics are a dime a dozen, you won’t have far to look. Some are still in the Church, some are as far from the Church as they can get, and some are next to you in the pew, having found in evangelical Protestantism what they don’t realize has been in Catholicism since the beginning.

If you have a choice, go with the now-evangelical ex-Catholic particularly the variety who will tell you, “I used to be a Catholic, but now I’m a Christian.” Their misunderstandings of Catholic doctrine will probably be mixed with a severe distaste and the desire to prove the Church wrong and their current theological ideas correct.

Odd as it may seem, another good source for second-hand misinformation is older priests. Pick one who still appears to have hung on to his hippy tendencies and who you estimate went to seminary in the 1970s. If you prefer, you can substitute a habit-free nun of the same vintage. That’s the era Catholic scholar George Weigel refers to as the “post-Vatican II silly season.” Priests and nuns who imbibed the silly sauce have never quite recovered.

Father Starchild or Sister Sunbeam will feel very comfortable making light of the Church’s authority to define any doctrine whatsoever. They happily disagree with many, that is, assuming they remember the correct doctrine at all. If you’re a conservative evangelical, these two will be your worst nightmare holding, as they do, to all the trendy ideas that liberal Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Methodists love beginning with sexual “freedom” and do-it-yourself dogma.

When choosing a priest or nun, be careful not to get involved with a young “John Paul II” priest or a young nun in full habit. Too many of them are scary smart, extremely well educated, meticulously orthodox, and better preachers than you’ve heard in years. They’ll only cause you trouble so stick with Father Starchild or Sister Sunbeam. Their ideas are outdated, their ilk is literally dying out, but they’re safe.

As Father Starchild or Sister Sunbeam will tell you, you’ll also want to avoid the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Commissioned by Pope John Paul II and written under the watchful eye of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (a.k.a. Pope Benedict XVI), the Catechism is the first-hand primary source of information on what Catholics believe. Avoid it.

First of all, it’s very long, detailed, and replete with Bible references and quotations from the Church Fathers (see Rule #3). Second, if evangelicals Mark Noll and Carolyn Nystrom in their book *Is the Reformation Over?* are correct, you will find yourself agreeing with at least two-thirds right off the bat. Then, to make matters worse, whatever you don’t agree with, you will find yourself understanding and pondering. “Hmm,” you’ll say to yourself, “Perhaps I should study and think a bit more about the place of the Virgin Mary in the economy of salvation.” And what will come of that?

As Noll and Nystrom write:

Evangelicals or confessional Protestants who pick up the Catechism will find themselves in for a treat. Sentences, paragraphs, whole pages sound as if they could come from evangelical pulpits, including passages on topics such as the nature of Scripture or the meaning of grace and faith. These readers will also notice the depth of scholarship, worn quite lightly, with hundreds of references to Scripture but also citations from early theologians.... Readers familiar with standard statements of faith from the Reformation era... will quickly notice a different tone in this Catholic writing. While covering much of the same territory..., the Catholic Catechism is much more comprehensive. Moreover, it looks beyond the statement of doctrine to the care of souls. The Catholic Catechism is strikingly pastoral in tone. It is in part a book of worship—focusing again and again on the majesty of God, inviting readers to reflect on God’s character, to respond to his love, to live as he commands, and to devote themselves to his service. ...Readers... may come to the Catechism looking for information. Finding information, they may also find themselves (as we did) stopping to pray. (page 116)

Far better and safer to get your information second-hand.

Rule #3: Avoid Being “Deep in History”

For many evangelicals, Church history is simple. Jesus, the Apostles, and the golden age of the New Testament Church were followed by the people who wrote the creeds before a slow descent into heathenism until Martin Luther swooped in to save the day. Then there were people like John Calvin, John Wesley, the Pilgrims, and some other guys. Eventually Billy Graham was born. After that, I was born and then I was born again. Why be bothered with more than that?

Let's be honest, if you're part of a congregation that was planted in 2004 in a denomination that was founded in 1973, no one can blame you for not being much of a Church history buff. Studying Church history has more to do with curiosity than connection.

In the Catholic Church, by contrast, history is a living reality, something with which Catholics connect daily. So, in order to avoid the temptation of becoming a Catholic, you'll need to avoid the temptation of history.

Blessed John Henry Newman, an Anglican priest and scholar who entered the Church in 1845 and was eventually made a Cardinal, quipped, “To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant.” And while it's not a hard and fast rule, if you want to avoid the Catholic Church, do your best to avoid being “deep in history.”

Some history, of course, will do you no harm. Protestant history written by Protestant historians and the shenanigans of Borgia popes are good reading. But always assume that from the death of the last apostle until Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-Five Theses to the door at the Castle Church in Wittenberg there is nothing important to learn. After all, if the Church centered in Rome was utterly corrupt, there is no reason to study it except insofar as its corruption led to the Reformation.

This will allow you to think about the Reformation in purely spiritual terms. It was a great spiritual revival that struck a dead, corrupt, and calcified Church, met resistance and finally broke free. That the renewal movement freed from its roots promptly hit the floor and shattered (and continues to shatter) into tens of thousands of smaller and sharper shards can be chalked up to there being “different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:2).

By keeping the focus on the spiritual, you can avoid questions about greed and the politics of Europe. Princes who were caught up in the fervor of revival also managed to enrich their treasuries and their friends by shamelessly despoiling churches and monasteries. Rodney Stark in *The Triumph of Christianity* notes that during Henry VIII's Reformation-like looting of the Church, “from the shrine dedicated to St. Thomas à Becket alone, Henry's agents confiscated 4,994 ounces of gold, 4,425 ounces of silver gilt, 5,286 ounces of silver, and twenty-six cartloads of other treasure—and this was regarded as a trivial portion of the wealth confiscated from the church.”

It's legitimate to ask what the Church was doing with such wealth, but regardless of the answer to that question, the fact remains that the state engaged in er... “wealth redistribution” or “repurposing” or... let's be honest, they stole it.

Which brings up another inconvenient truth. The Reformation allowed the rulers of Europe to achieve what generations of kings yearned for: the total subjugation of the Church to the state. As long as the Church was one and centered in Rome, it served as a counterweight to the domineering aspirations of European princes. Controlling the Catholic Church proved exceedingly difficult. But once the Church was “reformed” and shattered into bite-sized bits, controlling the bits was child's play.

Cuius regio, eius religio (“Whose realm, his religion”) meant that the princes of Europe could and did make their churches into departments of government and their clergy into government bureaucrats. Membership in the national church became a mark, if not the defining mark, of patriotism. Kings appointed bishops and other church leaders who became his ecclesiastical lap dogs. And dissenters, be they Catholics or free church Protestants, were persecuted and/or treated as second-class citizens in some cases well into the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile the abuses that shocked and enraged Luther also shocked and enraged many good and godly clerics who remained in the Church. And while it's true to say that the Reformation forced the issues, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) corrected most of the abuses and launched the Catholic Church into a new era of spiritual, intellectual, and missionary vigor. Meanwhile the shattered chunks of Protestantism did as they were told.

Rail against my wrong-headed reading of the history if you wish, but keep it to *ad hominem* attacks and leave it there. If you start reading more broadly from Catholic as well as Protestant sources it will only cause you to get “deep in history.” When that happens, don't say that Blessed John Henry and I didn't warn you.

Rule #4: Do Not Read the Church Fathers

Our small group began meeting just before Advent. “Why don’t we read St. Athanasius’s book *On the Incarnation*?” I suggested.

“Athanasius?” said one of the group members, “Wasn’t he Catholic?”

How exactly do you answer that question about someone who lived in the third century? Yes, of course, Athanasius is a Catholic. But what my friend meant was Catholic as opposed to Protestant. That distinction 1,300 years before the Reformation is more than anachronistic; it’s absurd. Athanasius belongs to all Christians. He was, after all, in the front lines of the battle defending the deity of Christ from the Arians. The Arian belief that Jesus was not God, but a sort of super-duper angel was taking over the Church one city at a time and if it had prevailed, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Athanasius is one of Christianity’s greatest heroes. He belongs to us all.

Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, Clement of Rome, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Anthony, Augustine of Hippo, and the rest of the Church Fathers stretching from the early second century into about the seventh century belong to us all as well. They laid the foundation for all genuinely Christian theology and many were involved in writing the creeds that we still recite—or at least, that some of us still recite.

That makes reading the Fathers sound mighty attractive, but consider: most of them were bishops and some, Clement of Rome for example, were popes. Resist the temptation since they will demand that you think seriously about many things including Church government and why yours is probably not biblical.

There are three church polity options: government by bishops or episcopal (from the Greek word *episcopos* meaning overseer or bishop), government by elders or presbyterian (from the Greek word *presbyteros* meaning elder), and congregational (who don’t get a Greek word).

Like many, I left seminary believing that church government didn’t even make it to the level of a tertiary concern. The New Testament talks about bishops and elders in ways that I saw as interchangeable. It seemed clear to me that the New Testament congregations were run locally with elders/bishops or whatever they wanted to call themselves aided by deacons. Apostles, being the authoritative conduits for Christian truth, could and did have special input, but then they died. Did I mention that I was a licensed Congregational minister at the time?

Reading the early Church Fathers makes clear that a matter of a few decades after the apostles died all across the Church there was a hierarchy of bishops, priests (presbyters), and deacons.

There are only two ways to explain this.

Explanation #1: The apostles had no strong opinions about church polity and the New Testament is intentionally ambiguous so that congregations could pick what worked best for them. (Alternative Explanation #1 reflecting my Presbyterian years: The apostles writing the New Testament intended presbyterian polity, Acts 15 being the minutes of the first General Assembly.) Then as soon as the last apostle went to his reward, the Church from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Ephesus to Corinth, across North Africa to Rome underwent a massive reorg that instituted episcopal polity everywhere complete with the doctrine of apostolic succession. And, unlike every other reorg in history and unlike every other change in the early Church, no one complained or even bothered to mention it.

Sure, it could happen.

Explanation #2: The apostles set up a hierarchical system of bishops, priests, and deacons complete with the doctrine of apostolic succession and we need to read the relevant New Testament texts in light of that and adopt the same system today.

Which of the two sounds more likely?

Writing in the late second century bishop and theologian St. Irenaeus said, “[I]t is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church—those who, as I have shown, possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the infallible charism of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.”

The Church Fathers are full of disturbing stuff like that. If you must read them, read them as quoted in Calvin and Luther. Taken on their own and straight up, you’ll find them strong and disturbing.

Rule #5: Affirm “The Great Tradition,” but Don’t Ask What’s Included in the Great Tradition

Connected to the Church Fathers is the Great Tradition, something that has made a comeback recently in the thinking of evangelicals. For example, the Urban Ministry Institute, a division of the evangelical ministry World Impact, wants to revive the Great Tradition. [They write:](#)

As the roots of our orthodox faith, the Great Tradition is grounded in the Apostolic Tradition set in the bounds of the historic orthodox faith as defined and asserted in the ecumenical creeds of the ancient and undivided Church, with special focus on the Nicene Creed. It confesses the Ancient Rule of Faith, the core Christian confession expressed in that adage of [the fifth century monk] Vincent of Lerins: “that which has always been believed, everywhere, and by all.”

Some evangelical leaders have begun espousing theology somewhere between wobbly and downright heretical. Somehow it has escaped these “post-conservative evangelicals” (sounds like an oxymoron to me) that they’re repeating the errors the Protestant Mainline churches made over a century ago, errors that caused them to slip from mainline to oldline to sideline to what they are today: sideshow. Nonetheless, since no one gets published by agreeing with everybody else, evangelical theology is being kicked down the slippery slope into the same subjectivity, private judgment, and irrelevance that mark its mainline cousins.

Traditional evangelicals trying to do damage control feel a need to put a hedge around the Scripture and around orthodox theology. The chosen hedge for some is the Great Tradition. As one evangelical thinker [writes](#), “Scripture is primary, but the Great Tradition is the authoritative guide to its interpretation.” Unless evangelicals accept this, he goes on, “[evangelicalism] will risk disintegrating into ever more subjectivist and individualistic sects, many of them neither evangelical nor orthodox.”

Now an evangelical appealing to the authority of the Church is already more than just a little strange. But beyond that, when he affirms the Great Tradition, what he really wants is orthodox Trinitarian theology and Christology as expressed in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. And while I’m all for that, it’s a very Protestant pick-and-choose approach to something larger than the Creeds.

If we are to follow Vincent of Lerins’ rule of “that which has always been believed, everywhere, and by all,” we can’t stop with the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. We need to take the whole package.

As pointed out in Rule #4, above, the Great Tradition includes bishops and apostolic succession. Hence, the Church is “one, holy, and apostolic.” Reinterpreting apostolic as “based on the writings of the apostles,” that is, “biblical” really isn’t an option particularly if you’re going to rely on the Great Tradition to keep others from doing the same sort of reinterpreting.

The Great Tradition includes the real *real* presence of Christ in the Eucharist, not some sort of spiritual real presence. In his book *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, Robert Louis Wilken quotes Justin Martyr (AD 103-165): “So also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by being renewed, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.” If you want the Great Tradition, “symbolic presence” and “spiritual presence” were not options and neither is the notion that the Lord’s Supper is an “ordinance” rather than a “sacrament.”

The Great Tradition includes “the communion of the saints” of which prayer to the saints for their intercession is a necessary part. For example, St. Basil the Great (AD 329-379) wrote, “I acknowledge also the holy apostles, prophets, and martyrs; and I invoke them to supplication to God, that through them, that is, through their mediation, the merciful God may be propitious to me, and that a ransom may be made and given me for my sins.” And, when you think about it, invoking the saints—St. Basil in particular—isn’t a bad idea for evangelicals in theological crisis.

Finally, the package deal includes what most evangelicals affirming the Great Tradition would probably consider the most disturbing: Mary. The Church “everywhere, and by all” believed that Mary is the new Eve, remained a virgin after Jesus’ birth, was bodily assumed into Heaven, is rightly called Mother of God (Theotokos), and intercedes for us. Christians as early as AD 300 prayed: “We fly to your patronage, O holy Theotokos; despise not our petition in our necessities, but deliver us always from all dangers, O ever-glorious and blessed Virgin.”

I could go on, but you get the idea.

Traditional evangelicals have a desperate need to set a hedge around *sola scriptura* in these post-modern days. And I believe the Great Tradition is precisely what they need. But, then again, I’m a Catholic.

Rule #6—If You're an Evangelical, Ignore the Sin of Schism Altogether

One thing many people can't quite get their heads around is the Catholic Church's claim that there is one Church founded by Jesus and that one this Church, according to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), "constituted and organized as a society in this present, world, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him." Or as the late Richard John Neuhaus liked to put it, "The Catholic Church is the Church of Jesus Christ most fully and rightly ordered through time."

A surefire strategy for keeping that claim at bay is to defend the legitimacy of the multitude of Protestant churches and denominations as perfectly normal, part of God's will, and having nothing whatsoever to do with the terrible sin of schism.

A castaway had been marooned alone on a tropical island for more than ten years. Now finally a boat had landed on the island's shore to rescue him. "How have you managed all these years," asked the officer in charge.

"Let me show you," the castaway replied and he gave the officer a tour of what had been his home all those years.

In a clearing near the beach were three structures. "This is my house," he said pointing to one. "And this is my church," he said pointing to another.

"What's this third building?" asked the officer.

"Oh," said the castaway dismissively and with distain in his voice, "that's the church I used to go to."

"Schism" is a word I never heard in evangelical circles. And in your struggle to avoid the Catholic Church, it's a word you should completely forget. Evangelicals, it seems to me, have Protestantism figured out. It's consumer-driven, free market, entrepreneurial Christianity. If you don't like your church, find one that suits you better. Not only is there nothing wrong with that, but you probably owe it to yourself and your spiritual wellbeing—or at least to your kids' spiritual wellbeing. Heaven forbid that they should attend a youth group with an inferior worship band.

If there are no congregations to your liking, feel free to start your own. The folks in your old church may be disappointed or angry. They may call you a "sheep stealer," but it's very unlikely they'll accuse you of the sin of schism or call you a schismatic.

Those pesky Church Fathers (see Rule #4) had a very different take on divisions in the Church. St. John Chrysostom (347-407) wrote, "I say in private and in public that to tear the Church apart is no less an evil than to fall into heresy." Not to be outdone, St. Augustine put it this way: "There is nothing more serious than the sacrilege of schism because there can never be any just need for severing unity." Methodism founder John Wesley (whose heirs we'll get to in a moment) [preached](#):

[Schism] is evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians, with whom we were before united, is a grievous breach of the law of love.... And as such a separation is evil in itself, being a breach of brotherly love, so it brings forth evil fruit; it is naturally productive of the most mischievous consequences.... It gives occasion to offense, to anger and resentment, perhaps in ourselves as well as in our brethren; which, if not presently stopped, may issue in bitterness, malice, and settled hatred; creating a present hell wherever they are found, as a prelude to hell eternal.

But free-for-all schism has been the order of the day since the Reformation opened the free-market more than five hundred years ago. Think 25,000+ Protestant denominations and countless independent churches not to mention assorted cults claiming the Bible. Jesus prayed in John 17 that his people be one even as he and the Father are one. Somehow I can't imagine that he meant what we experience today. In fact, in light of that prayer, the current state of affairs seems monumentally sinful.

But unless you keep "schism" out of your vocabulary and "sin of schism" out of your thinking, you could end up thinking about Church unity. That could then lead you to affirm that it makes biblical sense that there should be "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." And I don't need to tell you which Church best fits the bill.

Rule #7—If You're in the Protestant Mainline, Assume that Schism is Somebody Else's Sin

If you're a Mainline Protestant you're nodding your head about those fractious evangelicals. Churches and the covenants that bind members are sacrosanct. You would never, never, ever commit the sin of schism. That's what other people do.

So, for example, when I was president of the Institute on Religion & Democracy, a group reporting on the political shenanigans of the Protestant Mainline churches, I was regularly denigrated as a "schismatic Presbyterian" by the organization's many critics because I was ordained by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a denomination that broke away from the mainline Presbyterian church in 1973.

And while it's true that the PCA has a schismatic relationship to the mainline/oldline denomination, "schismatic Presbyterian" remains the dumbest thing I've ever been called.

Twentieth century philosopher George Santayana famously said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Allow me add a corollary, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to talk nonsense."

Somehow my detractors managed to forget that all Presbyterian churches got their start with the English Puritans who were dissenters (that is, people in schism) from the Church of England. And the Church of England was itself born of schism from the Catholic Church; a schism brought about not by lofty theological conviction or vital spiritual renewal, but by Henry VIII's empty coffers and bursting libido.

The idea of any Protestant fussing and fuming about schism is laughable since Protestantism is by definition (note the name) schismatic—and typically darned proud of it. The Episcopalian bishops who occasionally attempt to guilt disaffected clergy and laity to stay in the denomination by proclaiming, "Schism is a greater sin than heresy," are either disingenuous or delusional—unless they're making plans to return to Rome, which they're not.

Having said that, let me make it clear that I have great affection and admiration for friends in the Mainline renewal movements. They are courageous folks who stay in their decaying denominations often at great personal expense and attempt to turn them back to God and to the Gospel. While I sympathize, their arguments against schism and for unity are, it seem to me, either an appeal to sentiment or based on an unreasonable claim about their denomination.

An elderly woman I know made the sentimental appeal this way. She detested the pastor of her Mainline Presbyterian congregation for his revisionist theology and what she viewed as shady dealings. "Why not leave?" I asked.

"I was baptized in this church," she told me, "I raised my children in this church. I've never gone to any other church and I will die in this church. This is my church and that son of a b**** isn't going to take it away from me." Well, alrighty then.

Less piquant versions of the same argument come from pastors and theologians. This church baptized me, married me, and ordained me. I won't leave it to those who will destroy it. Besides, as one renewal leader noted recently, "Churches are not reformed by people who have left them."

Fair enough, but it's hoping against hope. Decades of renewal activities in the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church (USA) costing millions of dollars and untold man-hours have delayed, but have not prevented the current theological and moral freefall. Many orthodox lay people and clergy have already gone elsewhere. The average age in the Mainline denominations is now well over seventy with young people and dynamic, orthodox young clergy staying away in droves. And to top it off, [research shows](#) that Protestants are more loyal to their brands of toothpaste and toilet paper than they are to their church denomination. Encouraging warm feelings and dogged commitment has no future.

The alternative is to claim that the existing denomination is, in a sense, Holy Mother Church. And so John Wesley vehemently argued that it was a sin to leave the Church of England to form a Methodist church. Today his heirs are arguing that it's a sin to leave the United Methodist Church to form something new. Why? Because schism is such a grievous and grave sin and the existing denomination must be preserved at all costs. I agree that divisions in the Body of Christ shouldn't be multiplied, but why not go back and heal the original wound? Rather than multiplying divisions, let's get rid of them all.

The United Methodist Church (or the Episcopal Church, or the Presbyterian Church (USA), or the United Church of Christ) is not Holy Mother Church, but bodies in schism from Holy Mother Church. If future schisms are unacceptable, then past schisms are equally unacceptable. Why not quit the exhausted Protestant project and come home?

Westminster Seminary Church historian and Reformed thinker [Carl Trueman has written](#):

Every year I tell my Reformation history class that Roman Catholicism is, at least in the West, the default position. Rome has a better claim to historical continuity and institutional unity than any Protestant denomination, let alone the strange hybrid that is evangelicalism; in the light of these facts, therefore, we need good, solid reasons for not being Catholic; not being a Catholic should, in others words, be a positive act of will and commitment, something we need to get out of bed determined to do each and every day.

Why, I wonder, would anyone get out of bed determined to continue in schism? Better to either remove schism from the list of sins or convince yourself that it's someone else's sin. The only other alternative will leave you with no good reason for being Protestant at all.

Rule #8—Believe that the Catholic Church and the Bible Don't Mix.

When stating their objections to the Catholic Church, most Protestant Christians have two impressions. First, the Catholic Church is thought to be somewhere on a scale from hating the Bible to ignoring the Bible. Second, the Church is said to be devoid of grace and preaching works righteousness. Neither of these impressions is true, but to avoid becoming a Catholic, it's important to turn them into solid rules for thought and life.

Ask almost anyone over the age of sixty who was raised Catholic and you will hear how priests discouraged reading the Bible. "It's too complicated. You will only get things wrong," seems to have been the common priestly warning. It seems that many if not most Catholic families didn't even have a copy of the Scriptures in their homes.

To be safely not-Catholic, conclude from this that the Church has never wanted, does not want, and will never want people to read the Bible lest they think independently and become Baptists.

The alternative is to realize that this was nothing short of a scandal—a scandal not from a Bible-reading Protestant point of view, but a scandal from a thoroughly Catholic point of view.

1920 was way back in the "bad old days" when legend has it that priests everywhere were telling the Catholic faithful not to read the Bible. It was also the 1,500th anniversary of the death of St. Jerome one of the greatest Bible scholars who ever lived. Jerome famously said, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."

To celebrate St. Jerome's life and work, Pope Benedict XV wrote the encyclical [Spiritus Paraclitus](#). In it, he took Jerome's famous words very seriously. In fact, Benedict wrote that a central purpose of his encyclical was: "to promote among the children of the Church, and especially among the clergy, assiduous and reverent study of the Bible." Bible study—"assiduous and reverent study" at that—was for everyone.

He went on to praise the Society of St. Jerome whose objective was "to put into the hands of as many people as possible the Gospels and Acts, so that every Christian family may have them and become accustomed to reading them." Benedict had, in fact, helped found this Catholic version of the Gideons.

"Don't read the Bible," was apparently said by many a priest and nun. But they spoke contrary to the Church's clear teaching that "assiduous and reverent" Bible study is for everyone.

Jumping forward to 1965, [Dei Verbum](#), Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, minces no words. The Church "earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful... to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the 'excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ' (Philippians 3:8)."

That folks were hurt and damaged by erring ministers is hardly a problem limited to the Catholic Church. And it is sad when the Bible is kept from any person, Christian or not.

On the other hand, to keep yourself safe from becoming a Catholic, it is, as always, best to follow Rule #2 and get your information second hand. Listen to disgruntled Catholics who grew up without Bibles and are still fuming rather than popes who can actually tell you what the Church teaches.

It's also helpful when avoiding Catholicism to keep in mind that, "Catholics added books to the Bible," presumably in spite of the warning at the end of the Revelation that applies to all of Scripture:

I warn everyone who hears the prophetic words in this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book.... (Revelation 22:18)

But, of course, the Catholics (and the Eastern Orthodox) did not add Maccabees, Tobit, Wisdom, Judith, Sirach, and Baruch to the Bible. They were already there from the beginning as part of the Christian Old Testament. It was only later that the Protestant reformers scuttled them. Why? One Protestant theologian told a now-Catholic friend of mine (who, let me add, has a Ph.D. in theology) that it was because these books teach things that are "unbiblical." That is, the "unbiblical" parts of the Bible had to be excised so that the entire Bible could be "biblical."

Hmmm. Can you say, "Circular reasoning"?

His point was that the books teach Catholic doctrines that Protestants wanted to reject—things like Purgatory (2 Maccabees 12:46). And arguments about the first-century Jewish canon aside, remember that Martin Luther also wanted Hebrews, James, Jude, and the Revelation voted off the island as well since they too were "unbiblical," or at least unbiblical à la Martin Luther.

If you make the mistake of getting deep into history (see Rule #3) you will find that the Church's canon of Scripture was intact from the fourth century until the Protestants tampered with it in the sixteenth. And if you keep reading in the Revelation, the thought in 22:18 continues in verse 19: "...and if anyone takes away from the words in this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city described in this book."

But let's move on. (Quickly! Quickly!)

Rule #9—Keep Insisting that Catholicism is a Grace-Free, Works Religion

A Presbyterian friend is appalled that I've become a Catholic. "My wife was raised Catholic," he says, "and Catholicism has no grace in it at all. It's all about works."

I am genuinely sorry for his dear wife's bad experience growing up Catholic. I am also genuinely sorry for the experience other friends of mine have had in the Presbyterian congregation where my friend serves as an elder. They left. Why? Because, they said, "Presbyterianism has no grace in it at all. It's all about works."

Could it be that the grace in any given church is in the eyes of the beholder? Or could it be that grace and graciousness are less a function of settled doctrine than of the spiritual lives of the people and ministers in any particular church—Protestant, Orthodox, or Catholic?

My friend's Presbyterian doctrine is in [The Westminster Confession of Faith](#) which clearly states, "The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts..." (XIV.1).

If you read the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) (which you shouldn't—see Rule #2), you'll find that it sounds eerily similar. In a section titled "[Faith is a grace](#)" we find: "*Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him*" (153. Italics in the original). A few paragraphs later it says, "Faith is an entirely free gift that God makes to man" (162).

"Our justification," the Catechism says later (1996), "comes from the grace of God. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life."

Try not to notice that this seems a pretty clear statement about the centrality of grace in Catholic doctrine and spirituality. Or at least it's as clear as the one in the Westminster Confession. Living in light of that grace without becoming impressed with our goodness is, on the other hand, one of the great struggles of the spiritual life on both banks of the Tiber.

"Then what is all this Catholic stuff about 'merit'? Isn't that works righteousness?"

Good question, but I'll warn you, it's another concept you will want continue to misconstrue if you want to avoid becoming Catholic (see Rule #1). But, since you asked...

When my son was about four, we gave him three empty 35mm film canisters (Do you remember 35mm film canisters?). They were labeled: "Spend," "Save," and "Jesus." Every week, we explained, he would receive three dimes as an allowance and he was to put one dime in each canister. He could bring the "Spend" dimes to the store to buy gum and candy that same day. His "Save" dimes, by contrast, would accumulate over time for bigger purchases. As to the "Jesus" dimes, he'd bring them to church as his offering to God.

When he placed his "Jesus" dimes in the offering basket, we praised him up and down for his generous giving. They were, of course, our dimes and we dictated the terms under which he would receive them every week, but in faithfulness and obedience, he did the right thing and was honored. If you will permit me to use the word, he "merited" our praise for his use of "his" money.

God treats his sons and daughters the same way.

Catholic teaching on merit is clear:

With regard to God, there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man.... The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness. 'Grace has gone before us; now we are given what is due.... Our merits are God's gifts' ([Catechism, 2007, 2008](#)).

God by grace gives us the dimes, tells us how to use them, and honors us for our good works when we obey. Wasn't it Jesus who told a story like that and gave us the hope to someday hear, "Well done good and faithful servant," (Matthew 25:14-30)? But then Jesus' parable couldn't possibly have been about merit, could it?

Concluding Remarks

I can come up with additional rules and can expand on the nine I've written (book publishers please take note). But you get the idea. As long as I followed the rules, the Catholic Church remained strange, problematic, and suspicious. Once I broke the rules, stopped listening to hearsay, and began studying, the Catholic Church became irresistible.

Are there difficulties? Of course, but as Blessed John Henry Newman, a convert to the Church in the 1840s, wrote, "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as I understand the subject; difficulties and doubts are incommensurate." Difficulties are part of seeing through a glass darkly and, as such, are scattered throughout the Bible, inherent in every theological system, and buried in every church's history and every human soul.

Are there doubts? I began with piles, but over twelve years of reading, thinking, and discussing, they have all been sorted out. I moved steadily from, "The Catholic Church is not the solution, but..." to "The Catholic Church is probably not the solution, but..." to "The Catholic Church may be the solution, but..." to "The Catholic Church is probably the solution, but..." to "The Catholic Church is the solution, but..." to surrender. The Catholic Church is and always has been the solution.

As the late Father Richard John Neuhaus, another convert, noted, "Rest comes with surrender, with being shaken out of the state of *incurvatus est* [being turned in upon oneself], with submission to an other, and finally to the Other. The Other is embodied, as in the body of Christ, the Church."

And it's good to be at rest. So let me invite you to break all these rules and find rest as well.

About the CHNetwork



WHAT IS THE CHNETWORK?

The Coming Home Network International was established in 1993 to help inquiring clergy as well as laity of non-Catholic Christian traditions to discern whether God is calling them to come home and then be at home to the Catholic Church.

The purpose of the CHNetwork is to assist the Catholic Church in fulfilling its mission of evangelization and its call for Christian unity, as proclaimed by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical, "That They May Be One" (*Ut Unum Sint*).

WE PROVIDE

Contacts, assistance, and fellowship for those who are exploring the teaching and history of the Catholic Church, and are considering coming into full-communion with the Church;

Continued fellowship and encouragement for those who have entered the Church and want to live fully Catholic lives;

Resources that give clear expressions of the Catholic Faith.

www.CHNetwork.org





About the Author: Jim Tonkowich

At a “Skis & Skeptics” retreat during my junior year at prep school, I committed my life to Christ and began a serious Christian walk. Soon after, friends confronted me with a pile of books. “Now that you’re a Christian,” they said, “you’ll want to read these.”

The pile included works by C. S. Lewis, Francis Shaeffer, John Stott, J.I. Packer, and Os Guinness as well as Scripture Union’s daily Bible reading guide, *Encounter with God*.

“Is this what Christians do?” I asked.

“Yes,” they answered, “this is what Christians do.” And not knowing anything better, I began reading, thinking, and writing.

As it turned out, their answer was more wishful thinking than fact. Nonetheless their encouragement was the genesis of what has become my passion: developing a Christian Heart (spirituality) and a Christian Mind (worldview) in myself and in others.

At Bates College in Maine, I majored in philosophy—Martin Heidegger in one hand, Francis Shaeffer in the other. Then I received my Master of Divinity and later my Doctor of Ministry in Christian Spirituality at [Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary](#).

Over the years I’ve worked in business, done youth ministry with [FOCUS](#) (Fellowship of Christians in Universities & Schools), and pastored a church in California’s Silicon Valley. Then for nearly five years I worked with Chuck Colson, managing his daily [BreakPoint](#) radio commentary, founding a magazine, writing, speaking, and developing curriculum including the Centurions Program, an adult distance-learning program in Christian worldview.

Since then I have been associated with the [Institute on Religion & Democracy](#)—first as president and now as a scholar. My focus is the intersection between faith and the public square, space where worldview makes all the difference in the world.

Currently I serve as Eastern Regional Director for Major Gifts at [Wyoming Catholic College](#). In addition, I write a weekly column at [ReligionToday.com](#) on the intersection of faith and public life and am working on a book about the threats to our religious liberty for publication in April 2014.

My speaking experience includes Bible exposition, congressional testimony, lectures, small groups, and retreats. I have spoken and written extensively on prayer, work and vocation, Christian worldview, faith and politics, environmentalism, bioethics, human life, and religious liberty.

I am available to speak at churches, retreats, conferences, banquets, campuses, and to other groups. Requests can be made using the [Contact](#) page of my website.

My wife, Dottie, and have been married over 33 years. We have one son, Jon who is married to Emily and they have one son (so far). I love alpine skiing, hiking, golf, fly fishing, jazz guitar, cooking (and eating), literature, laughing, and Maine.

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