

WHERE THIS ALL STARTED

I remember sitting at my desk at work with my head in my hands looking at the screen. I couldn't believe what I had just read. There was no possible way that what I was reading was the truth. How could it be? I always thought that I was right and they were wrong. If this statement was true it would mean so much change. But, how could they be right? I mean, everyone knows their wrong. Heck, even they know their wrong. Surely there has got to be a way to explain this. I'm sure somebody has already disproven what they believe. Surely...

This conversation I had, in my head, back in early 2008 was the start of what would ultimately change my life forever. A change that would be inward and outward; a change no one else could or wanted to believe in.

At the time I had a very successful career as a youth/ associate pastor at a Non-Denominational/ Southern Baptist church in Poteau, Oklahoma. I had been there three years and was excited about what the future held for me. I was only twenty-two but saw so many possibilities before me. I loved being a youth pastor and watching teens grow in their faith, but my big dream was to be a senior pastor one day. I wanted to be the guy that God would use in a mighty way to reach those with broken and shattered lives. I wanted to open the Bible to people in new ways they had never seen before. I didn't want to be mega-church pastor. I just wanted to be a pastor. However, there was a time the thought of even being a Christian was repulsive.

I didn't grow up in what you would call a "Christian home". Don't get me wrong; my parents raised me with the utmost respect, love, and care any child could ever hope to receive. Still, we didn't go to church, and there was never any mention of God except when someone was mad. I went to church as a young child, but because of a move when I was eight years old I was unable to keep attending. It would be another five years before I would cross the doors of a church. A girl I was madly in love with invited me to come to her church for a special "youth night" involving a guest speaker, free pizza and basketball. All I knew was Brianna wanted me there, and that was a good enough reason to go.

I went and enjoyed all the activities, and called later thanking her for the opportunity to go. After building up the courage I asked her out to a movie and she kindly agreed. As a thirteen year old I felt like I had the world in my hands. After our movie we continued to talk and I was convinced she liked me. What I never knew was that a friend of mine convinced her to invite me to the youth night at her church. She went to the movies with me out of kindness and friendship. I knew none the better.

Weeks later, in total teenage awkwardness, I asked her out over a letter during science class. She passed the note back to me, and I kept it in my backpack until I could read it when I got home. I opened the neatly folded letter and read what seemed like a preverbal dagger through my heart, "I just want to be friends." From then on I grew to hate her and everything about her; including her faith.

It was over the following year that I began to ditch my preppy clothing for dark shirts. Country music was tossed aside for Rock and Metal. I even found myself trying to conjure demons. I wanted to be the antithesis of everything Brianna's faith was. Because of my total anarchy against Christianity my soul paid dividends. During my freshman year in high school I grew increasingly depressed and even contemplated suicide. At one point I wrote, on the wall next to

my bed, "I wish I could just die right now." Death seemed like a very viable option; reaching but viable.

Because of my depression I turned to pornography to feed the ever increasing void in my life. What started out with lusting after the girls I went to school with, became looking at photos of nude women, which eventually became watching porn. What I thought was fixing my heartache was only making the emptiness inside of me deeper.

During the middle of my sophomore year my best friend Derek invited me to attend church with him. Derek was part of the cool crowd. He always fit in. Maybe if I went to church I too could fit in. I started attending church with him that following weekend and started forming friendships immediately. I attended Fort Osage Church of the Nazarene for six or seven months, yet inwardly I was still the same porn addicted depressed teenager I was before I started attending church. Where was that change that was supposed to happen? Wasn't I supposed to become a goody-goody? I just assumed it wasn't for me, but to give up seeing the cheerleaders in cute skirts and tight shirts was asking too much.

During March of 2001 my friend Bethany invited me to her church for a special "youth night" involving you guessed it, a speaker and pizza. My sole intention of going was to ask out Bethany; however, God had bigger plans for that evening. I listened to the speaker give an impassioned speech about how God had saved him from a life of drugs to one devoted to Christ. It impacted me, but I felt no need to make a change in my life. At the end of the evening he gave an altar call. I had never seen an altar call before. Seeing people go up to "ask Jesus into their hearts" was something new and dramatic. He asked if anyone wanted to become a Christian, and if they did to come down to the altar to pray the "sinner's prayer". I stood there in my self righteousness and thought, "Wow look at all those sinners." After more people went up he asked the question that pierced my soul, "Those of you still standing, if you were to die tonight, do you know with full confidence that you would go to Heaven? If you don't come on down here." I reasoned with myself that I hadn't killed anyone so surely God would let me into Heaven, yet that answer didn't seem good enough. What if God didn't let me into Heaven? I had to know for sure I was going to go to Heaven.

I ran to the front with tears streaming from my face, and a man led me in the sinner's prayer. I had no idea what I had just prayed, but he told me that I was a Christian. I went to school the next day and sought out my Christian friends and told them what happened the night before. During lunch they helped me sort out my new faith. Who would have ever thought my first discipleship would have come from some ninth grade girls?

Over the next months I began to embrace my new faith and fought hand in hand with my pornography addiction. After six months I was porn free, and was truly living a life sold out to God. The years went on, and my pursuit of God increased. I loved reading the Bible, and sharing what I had learned with others. After struggling with months about my future I accepted the call into the ministry. I felt so blessed that God had given me the gift to share with others what I loved so much.

Later that year in the winter of 2004 I received a phone call from a Southern Baptist Church in southeast Oklahoma. I was only nineteen and in my first semester at Bible College, but the pastor was laying the opportunity for me to accept a salary paying position as their youth pastor/associate pastor. It seemed like so much so soon, but it was an opportunity to start doing what I

wanted to do all along. Teach and preach the Word of God. My first day was January 2nd, 2005; however, it would only be four years later in January of 2009 I was at Immaculate Conception Parish in Poteau. What was I, an evangelical pastor, doing at a Catholic Church on a Sunday morning? Before I explain why I was there let me explain why I wasn't there. When word got around, as it so easily does in a small town, that I was attending a Catholic church many rumors and theories started popping up like impatient buds after a summer rain.

Most assume I did it in order to marry Jordan Reeves, my fiancée, who happened to be Catholic. Her Catholicity had a role in my conversion; however, it wasn't out of love for her that I converted (My original intent on studying Catholic doctrine was to argue back with her Catholic parents. I had no idea it would lead to this). Before my decision we had made plans to wed in the summer of 2009, and she would serve alongside me in my ministry. We had already received pre-marital counseling a year before, when I had asked for her hand, from my pastor. We had the reception hall picked out. I was calling area churches to see how many people their auditoriums could hold. Her parents hadn't placed a pre-nuptial agreement on the table that demanded I convert if I planned on marrying their daughter. Jordan didn't ask me to become a Catholic for her; in fact she was looking forward to being a pastor's wife. Thus, don't assume my journey into the Catholic Church was in an attempt to get married; the wedding was going to happen, with or without my conversion.

Others might believe it was in an attempt to leave my old church, Grace Fellowship, over some issues such as leadership or direction. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the deacons and elders I had older men to look up to who raised their families in the fear of God, and loved their wives as Christ loved the church. Men I could quite honestly pattern my life after. In my pastor I had a man who wasn't afraid to work in order to provide for his own family. A man who wasn't afraid to take a chance on something new, ministry wise, even if it went against the status quo.

Direction wise, we were in the midst of building a church that, when lit at night, could be seen from the surrounding towns. Who wouldn't want to belong to the church that is going to get great, and might I add free, publicity like that. People can't help but see a city on a hill shining like that.

Some may argue I was looking for a way out of ministry and just wanted to live a normal parishioner's life. Perhaps, after four years of being a youth pastor I was tired of church work and wanted a break. Still, that couldn't be any further from the truth as well. Before I left Grace Fellowship I had felt God calling me into a new ministry of writing and speaking events. This was the announcement I made to the church when I told them my intentions of leaving. Doing speaking engagements wasn't a clever attempt to hide my desire to leave so I could just go to church like most Americans. Don't believe me? Ask the seventy or so churches around Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas that I contacted about my direction and my willingness to speak to their congregations, on whatever issue, for absolutely no cost what so ever. Besides years of sermons, outlines, messages, games, events, and ministry tools I made available for free via my ministry's website. I wasn't trying to escape ministry; I was entering a new realm of it.

A few others might think that I was tired of being a Christian and wanted a way out. Maybe, after living as a Christian for the majority of my teen and early adult years I was ready to go "have some fun" and "live a little". Besides, aren't all Catholics just flaming hypocrites anyways? Understand, as a Catholic I am called to a higher ethical and moral code than I was as an

evangelical. It amazes me how I never heard any evangelical pastor have any definitive answer why they believed abortion was a sin, yet using a contraceptive and preventing/killing a human life was somehow ethically higher? We can trust that a man we have never seen before, whom we also believe is God's son, 2,000 years ago died on a cross for our salvation, but we can't have the same faith to trust God with our sexuality and reproductive cycles. We can trust God with the direction of our lives, but we can't on how many kids we'll have?

Thus, this leaves me at the context of why I am a Catholic. Not because of any of the excuses I listed above, but because I believe that the Catholic Church is the living, breathing Church that Christ established 2,000 years ago on Pentecost.

I believe it's very important you see why I reached such a conclusion as this. In sequential order is the issues that brought me to the realization that evangelical is not enough. I had to become Catholic.

(a) THE REAL PRESENCE IN THE EUCHARIST

As I previously stated, in an office in February 2008, I stared a hole in the computer at work wondering where in the world this scripture had come from. This scripture was John 6, verses 35-59, especially verses 48-56. I had learned in Bible College that Roman Catholics believed that Jesus was truly present in the wine and bread of the Eucharist. However, I had always dismissed it as superstition and a horrible over emphasis on Jesus words at the last supper, "This is my body; this is my blood." Yet, for the first time I was seeing Jesus say more than that the bread was his body and the wine was his blood, he tells the Jews that his flesh is really food and his blood is really drink. **In fact he tells them seven times this truth.** No talk about it symbolizing body and blood; no apologizing to the Jews, who leave because they can't understand this teaching, saying he was only kidding. He makes the point, with no bones about it, he really means his flesh is eatable and his blood is really drinkable.

The first thought that crushed my mind was the dang mackerel snappers were right, however, I assumed that someone had a great argument about what Jesus really meant here and that I was safe. The only plausible argument, brought up by a former Catholic (eternal-productions.com), was that in verse 63 Jesus says the flesh profits nothing. However, Dr. Scott Hahn notes Jesus says THE flesh and not HIS flesh profits nothing. Their minute attempt at trying to grasp this concept will lead them no where. The real presence is truly a mystery that defies any attempt to define it. Just like the doctrine of the trinity.

Next I thought, ok just because these Catholics can make a good argument for the real presence, it doesn't mean it's the truth. Someone has to have some proof of the first Christians believing in a figurative Eucharist and then the Catholics screwed it up and it was that way until Martin Luther saved the day. I needed some proof that the first Christians were symbolic rather than literalists. Various websites proclaimed that the doctrine of transubstantiation was invented in the 5th – 6th centuries. However, that isn't the truth. Transubstantiation was formally defined during that time period not invented. In my pursuit of the beliefs of the early Christians I stumbled upon Ignatius, the second bishop of Antioch. As bishop he was entrusted with the care

and admonishment of several churches. This leadership is shown in numerous epistles he wrote to the churches under his guidance. While reading his epistles I found what I had been looking for. A formally written belief on whether the first Christians believed the Eucharist was symbolic or literal. His answer scared me.

“Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God. . . . They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes” (*Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 6:2-7:1 [A.D. 110]).

A first century Christian leader in the Church defining that the heretics believed that the Eucharist was symbolic, and that real Christians believed the Eucharist was the actual body and blood of Jesus. I was scared. Seriously scared. I thought perhaps this was just an anomaly and that he was a heretic himself; thus, I searched out other writings by the early Christians. I found a man named Irenaeus who wrote an apologetical work entitled, Against Heresies. It was a second century discourse to the Roman governor about what was really going on when the Christians met on Sundays. He writes...

“He has declared the cup, a part of creation, to be his own blood from which he causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, he has established as his own body, from which he gives increase unto our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup [wine and water] and the baked bread receive the Word of God and become the Eucharist, the body of Christ, and from these the substance of our flesh is increased and supported) how can they say that the flesh is not capable of receiving the gift of God, which is eternal life — flesh which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord and is in fact a member of him?” (*Against Heresies* 5:2 [A.D. 189]).

The Romans had heard rumors of cannibalism within the Church, but Irenaeus argues against the charge and describes what is truly taking place. The Christians weren't feasting on one another, but upon the body and blood of Christ. Beyond this great apologetical work I still had an issue; another Christian leader who clearly describes the Eucharist as the true body and blood of Christ. I had to dig deeper. My digging led to Cyril of Jerusalem. I already had quotations from the supposed “Golden Age” of Christianity; Cyril would supply me with writings after Christianity had apparently apostatized. Cyril's belief backed up what Christians had apparently believed for 300 years. He states...

“Do not, therefore, regard the bread and wine as simply that, for they are, according to the Master's declaration, the body and blood of Christ. Even though the senses suggest to you the other, let faith make you firm. Do not judge in this matter by taste, but be fully assured by faith, not doubting that you have been deemed worthy of the body and blood of Christ. . . [Since you are] fully convinced that the apparent bread is not bread, even though it is sensible to the taste, but the body of Christ, and that the apparent wine is not wine, even though the taste would have it so. . . partake of that bread as something spiritual, and put a cheerful face on your soul” (ibid., 22:6,9).

I had before me the evidence that Christians, even the Christians during the supposed Golden Age of Christianity, believed in a Eucharist with the real presence of Christ (I will tell you right now; if you think for one second there was a group of separate Christians who believed in a symbolic Eucharist good luck finding them. In fact you won't find any Christian literature that consistently points to a figurative Eucharist that is older then 400 years). For 2,000 years the Catholic Church has firmly held and believed in the real presence. After discovering my symbolism of the Eucharist was wrong, and in fact one of the first heresies the church fought, I

knew I had to investigate other areas. Yeah, the Catholics got this area right, but they couldn't be right about something else. Could they?

(b) THE ROLE OF TRADITION AND SOLA SCRIPTURA

I had been taught since day one of my Christian life that tradition was a bad thing that people needed to get around it in order to live better, fuller Christian lives. It was because of these traditions, people had grown up with, they were unable to enjoy being Christians. They had an invisible list of dos and don'ts and these were holding them back. When I looked at Catholics I saw a laundry list of traditions that could be no where found in scripture that were causing them to live in fear and fallacy. I knew Catholics didn't read their Bible, but how much more clearly did Jesus have to make it in Matthew 15 when he condemned the traditions of man? The question I now ask myself is how much more clearly did Jesus have to make it for me?

2nd Thessalonians 2:15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.

2nd Thessalonians 3:6 Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you have received from us.

Twice, in one epistle, Paul clearly tells the Thessalonians to follow the traditions that Paul and others handed down to them (Besides, Jesus condemned the traditions of MAN not those handed down in inspiration by God.) In fact, Paul places both the written teaching and oral teachings in the same boat of tradition. Our New Testament is written tradition. The teachings on Mary's Immaculate Conception, her assumption into Heaven, Zacharias' death, etc. are the oral traditions which were passed on until formally written down but not included in the New Testament canon.

The common argument against the use of tradition in Church is that the Bible is solely authoritative and this point is demonstrated in 2nd Timothy 3:16 when Paul states that Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training so that a Christian should be complete. In fact this was the verse I quoted most often to Jordan when the debate over tradition arose. However, what I never saw in my Bible only glasses was this scripture in no way makes the claim that is the sole authority for Christians. It states scripture is profitable for the following things, but in no way the only thing you need. What one should also take into account is when Paul wrote this epistle. This wasn't written in the 400's or beyond when the New Testament canon had been agreed upon; this was 60-70 A.D. when parts of the New Testament hadn't even been written yet, much less put together in anything resembling a canon. Thus, the only Scripture Paul could have been talking about was the Old Testament.

What I find extremely funny and ironic now is looking at the multitudes of "Bible only" churches that have numerous traditions in use that are not specifically listed in the pages of the Bible. Don't believe me, look in your Old or New Testament and find me the sinner's prayer, youth or worship pastors, musical instruments used in New Testament worship, or accepting Jesus into your heart.

This isn't an either or issue, it's a both and. You can't just have Scripture by its self; it must be accompanied by the oral teachings passed on throughout the generations. Both were considered tradition in Paul's eyes. Both are considered tradition in the Catholic Church's eyes.

(c) SALVATION, BY FAITH ALONE

I can remember my high school Sunday school classes like they happened last week. Some of the best memories of my Christian life occurred doing those two years. I forged friendships and learned concepts my youth pastor didn't delve into. One discussion that sticks in my head was a study we did on grace. Our teacher asked us simply what we were saved by, and most of us responded back "grace" or "faith". He then asked us to prove it from the Bible. We each flipped to the back, in the concordance, and diligently searched for every mention of the word grace. I found Ephesians 2 and flipped immediately there scanning for every mention of grace. I raised my hand and read off Ephesians 2:8 and ever since that Sunday morning that verse has been grilled on my mind.

Over the years any mention of works in accordance with salvation has thrown up a red flag in my psyche and I would immediately begin quoting, "You are saved by grace through faith...". Thus, when radio show hosts and preachers would say that Catholics believe you have to work for your salvation it made perfect sense to me that most Catholics weren't actually saved. They could work all they want, but in the end their good deeds are nothing but filthy rags to God.

I hope you can see that when I looked at salvation from a Catholic viewpoint during this time I was very scandalized. I knew I was saved by grace through faith, but Catholics believe that works play a good part in salvation. How was I to reconcile these issues? Also, what about the Catholic belief that you have to be baptized in order to be saved?

In Church history I remember learning that Martin Luther broke away from the Catholic Church for two very important reasons; his beliefs in sola scriptura (Bible alone) and sola fide (saved by faith alone). In order to validate his belief that we are saved by faith alone he wanted to remove the epistle of James from the New Testament canon. He often referred to it as an "Epistle of straw." I never quite caught on to that until I reread James and figured out why Luther disliked the epistle of James. Because, the whole latter part of the second chapter James completely defeats his belief in salvation by faith alone!

James 2:19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"--and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25 And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26 For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Once again, in my previous eight years of being a Christian I had read the book of James countless times. I had preached numerous messages involving the fact that faith without works is dead, but how did I skip over verse 24 for so many years? As an evangelical I had always

believed and been told that my justification came by my placing of faith in Christ's work on the cross and accepting him as my Lord and Savior. Yet now, I have before my eyes, a verse that undeniably states my justification before God is a result of the works I produce because of my faith, and not just by my faith alone.

Clearing this hurdle opened up so many verses that I had been unable to grasp. (Understand every protestant / evangelical/ Christ follower has a list of verses that they don't know what to do with. These verses don't fit their doctrinal beliefs so they get placed in the back of their mind until some one can push a square peg through a round hole with those verses) Believing for so long that my salvation was a product of my faith I was unable to understand why Jesus told the people in Matthew 5 that if unless their righteousness exceeded that of the Pharisees they wouldn't enter into the Kingdom of God, and why he told the young ruler that if he wanted eternal life he needed to follow the commandments. Good works are a product of, and work in cooperation with, our faith in God.

Moving beyond this either or thinking to a both and mindset towards salvation helped me wrestle my next issue, baptism. As a youth pastor, over a four year period, I baptized some thirty teenagers. Before these baptisms I stressed the fact that the water was a symbolic action where they were publically recognizing their faith in Christ and their determination to live for him. The water was just water. It had no special magical powers to save them. Yet, in a verse I had commonly used to argue against the saving power of baptism I found a reason to believe that baptism does accompany salvation.

John 3:5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Believing that salvation was by faith alone, through grace, I pushed a square peg through a round hole and interpreted the water as the water involved in the birth of a newborn child. I knew it sounded weird, and it made Jesus sound way too much like a doctor, but it allowed my doctrine to match. Furthermore, this is the way I was taught to interpret this scripture at Bible College. Jesus said water, but what he really meant was this kinda water.

This interpretation had always bothered me, but I stuck with it. However, as the other pillars of my evangelical faith were falling apart, and the way I personally interpreted scripture, I began coming back to John 3:5 and asking is the water involved in pregnancy really what Jesus meant? As I put myself in Nicodemus shoes I realized if I would have heard Jesus say to me that unless one is born of the water from a pregnancy and the spirit he cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven I would have immediately asked, "So Jesus you mean to tell me that I first have to be born in order to go to Heaven? Well, everyone alive meets that requirement." When you put it into perspective how redundant and foolish does it sound for Jesus to tell Nicodemus, and those who would read this text, that we have to be born first before we can enter the Kingdom of God? When Jesus said you have to be born of water what he really meant was water!

While that verse will be debated upon until there is no water left, author and speaker, Steve Ray pointed out a verse that is so forthcoming that no one can render a second meaning. What this verse says it means.

1 Peter 3:21 baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

No matter how you try to sugar coat or dance around this verse the Apostle Peter couldn't be any clearer. He undoubtedly defines the truth that baptism is an essential part of our salvation. It isn't just a public announcement of your commitment to Jesus; it's the very act where we are raised from death to life in our new life hidden in Christ.

(d) THE CANON OF THE BIBLE

As a teenager I made a pact with several of my friends to attempt to read the Bible in a year. At this point in my Christian life I had only been a believer for six months, thus, the Bible was still fairly new to me. With this pact I was scared I would get bored and stop reading or that I would lose concentration easily and allow my mind to wander. So I did what any teenager would do. I got out grandpa's gigantic book of Bible facts and did some research. I wanted to lay out a plan so I would know how many chapters a night I would have to read in order to complete the Bible within a year. My research found out there were 1,189 chapters in all. That would mean roughly three chapters a night. I knew at that blistering pace as soon as I got bored my reading schedule would be over.

What I didn't expect was that I would fall in love with the Bible. Within the first day I read twenty-two chapters, and surprisingly I remembered every event that occurred. I went on the next day to read sixteen chapters, and ten regularly from then on. By early May I had read the entire Bible, cover to cover, and was poised to start again.

Since then I have read the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, four times completely. Sixty six books back and forth. I was often saddened with the fact that there weren't any more letters or epistles to read. Besides, why were there only sixty-six and not two-hundred books? When I learned about Luther in Bible College I found out why. When Luther and his followers had eventually succeeded from the Catholic Church Luther formed his own canon of scripture. New Testament wise he moved James to the table of contents, and wished to remove Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, and Revelation. Old Testament wise he removed seven books that would ultimately cause his Old Testament to resemble the Jewish canon of scriptures.

Why did Luther remove these books? What were these books in the first place? The books being called into question are 1 & 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch. Most of my professors called these books "Apocrypha" so I assumed they were like the Gnostic books of the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Phillip, and Gospel of Judas; heretical but possibly interesting.

Years later, at Carl Albert State College, my philosophy professor spoke of something I had remotely heard of, the Septuagint. It was a work commissioned in Alexandria, Egypt to translate the Tenakh (Old Testament) into Greek. Seventy Jewish scholars tediously worked and translated the entire Hebrew Bible into Greek.

This affected me none what so ever until I realized the Septuagint had more books then the Hebrew Scriptures. Seven more books in fact. During the time of Jesus two different Old Testament canons were in use; the Palestinian canon containing the thirty-nine books in most

Bibles now. Yet, the Alexandrian canon contained those same thirty-nine books plus the seven books of 1 & 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch! Why should this alarm you? Of the some 1,500 Old Testament quotations used throughout the New Testament over 1,000 of them come directly from the Alexandrian canon; while only some 250 or so are only directly linked to the Palestinian canon. Overwhelmingly it is seen that the canon used by Jesus, the Apostles, and first Christians was the canon containing forty-six books.

For some 350 years no formal New Testament canon was in use, but the church consistently used an Old Testament containing 1 & 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch. At the councils of Carthage and Hippo the Church agreed to the twenty-seven book canon we know as the New Testament alongside an Old Testament containing forty-six books. This seventy-three book canon of New and Old Testament was consistently used until the time of Martin Luther, thus, for 1200 years the church stood in agreement that God had given the church seventy-three books and not just sixty-six.

Some have argued that we as Christians should use the same Old Testament that the Jews use; thirty-nine books. It was at the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D. that a single canon was set in place; a canon with thirty-nine books. However, herein lays a big problem. If a Christian wants to use the Council of Jamnia as authoritative on the issue of Old Testament canon they also have to hold to the authoritative decision of the council that the New Testament was condemned as well as Christianity.

(e) THE INTERCESSION OF THE SAINTS

The last time I had visited a Catholic Church I thought would be the last. I had gone with Jordan during Lent of 2007, a forty day period of preparation before Easter, to celebrate the Stations of the Cross. This was a tradition I had partaken in the Nazarene Church. Thus, nothing was scandalous about doing this activity. However, on this evening before the Stations began I couldn't help but notice all the statues. All these statues seemed so blasphemous and in direct contradiction to the second commandment. I left that evening with such a bitter taste in my mouth towards Catholicism.

During this time Jordan had a growing affection towards the angels Michael and Gabriel, and she would often talk about her prayers to them for guidance and safety. All I could do in these times was bite my tongue. After a few moments I would ask her why she didn't pray directly to Jesus. After all he is our one mediator. After one of these discussions, late last summer, she simply asked me why I asked for her prayer. After all why did I need her prayers if I could pray directly to Jesus? I quickly retorted that it was different, but in her grace she smiled and said "ok". It left me wondering was it really different? Was her asking the angels to pray for her any different then my asking of her to pray for me? My only answer was that she was alive, the angels couldn't hear her, and the saints she prayed to were dead. Therefore, what she was doing was necromancy.

While sitting at my desk and doing work, later that month, I listened to a radio preacher referencing Matthew 22 talking about the Sadducees and the resurrection. I heard him quote a

scripture that I had read countless times, but had never once considered this in the issue of praying to the saints.

Matthew 22:31-32 And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not God of the dead, but God of the living.

I experienced the same emotion as the crowd who heard these words. It astonished me. Even though these three Godly men had died millennia ago Jesus states that they are fully alive. This answered one question for me; whether or not those who once lived were still conscious after death. They weren't in some sort of soul sleep or post-life unconsciousness waiting to be woke up. These people are alive as you and me. None the less, this left me with one lingering question; was it ok to pray to these people?

As the phrase "intercession of the saints" (as the doctrine is formally defined as) kept rolling around in my head I remembered a creed I had often recited at the church I attended as a high schooler. This creed is called The Apostle's Creed, and Tradition holds that this document is as old as 30 – 150 A.D. This creed is a basic description of what those first Christians believed (creeds were generally written in response to heresy) and practiced. One of the last statements in The Apostle's Creed is: I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints... Once again, the early Christians showing up and presenting what has always been believed. To the first Christians it was essential enough that they formally define that they held to the Holy Spirit, the Church was Catholic, and that we could commune with the Saints.

Yet, I needed more than creeds. I wanted some strong Biblical proof that these men and women who died on the earth, and who are now alive in Heaven, can offer prayers for us. I scanned the New Testament and even the Old Testament endlessly looking for even the smallest crumb trying to make sense of it all. That was until I stopped trying to read Revelation like I read the news coming out of the Middle East. I looked at it from the point of view of a first century Christian, and what it would have meant to them at that time. No chapter breaks. No subtitles; just a long letter written to Christians suffering severe persecution, from the Roman government, offering them future hope.

What I arrived at was John describing Heavenly worship that unmistakably resembled their own liturgical worship, with the saints offering golden bowls full of incense to God. Revelation 5:8 states that those bowls of incense are the prayers of the saints! Prayers, in Heaven out or out of Heaven, are being made as an offering to God not through the hands of Christ but through the twenty-four elders. Yes, Christ is our one mediator between God and man, but he has left us a great cloud of witnesses to pray for us in our journey in and towards salvation.

(f) CONFESSION

After I had struggled and wrestled with these five issues I thought my journey was over and I was only left with what to do with what I had found. However, one Sunday morning, I realized I hadn't reached the crest of the hill yet. In November of that past year my pastor just remotely brought up the issue of confessing your sins to a priest. He had watched it in a movie, and simply asked if he had missed something in the Bible about confession. At that moment I'm sure

I heard nothing else my pastor had to say. I thought I had found my way out of leaving evangelicalism.

During this point I was contemplating my new ministry and the churches I would be speaking at, and knew it would most likely mean leaving the church I had been serving at for four years. Yet, if I was to become a Catholic not only would I be leaving my church because of my new ministry; I would be leaving everything I had ever known as a Christian. And I was dreading it. I thought perhaps I had found my loophole. After all my intensive studying I had never seen a verse that says to confess to a man in a black suit or talk to a guy in a box about the regretful things you did last week. I was holding firm to 1 John 1:9 that if I confess my sins, God is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse me from all unrighteousness. Yeah, my beliefs about those other core doctrines had changed because of what I discovered, but this issue of confession changed everything. My big dream of being the senior pastor of a church one day was still alive. Thank God for confession! Or so I thought.

After a Friday evening dinner at IHOP Jordan and I stopped by Books a Million in Fort Smith to waste some time before our movie started. While browsing the "Christian" section I found a book entitled Born Fundamentalist Born Again Catholic by David Currie. A year ago the mere title of this book would have seemed like an apparent oxymoron. It detailed his journey from being an evangelical to a Catholic. In the chapter dealing with authority Currie discusses how authority rests in the Church not just in the Bible (1 Tim 3:15, Matthew 18:15-20). While making his position he points out the authority given by Christ to the Church to forgive and retain sins; this authority given to the apostles after the resurrection.

John 20: 22-23 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any they are retained."

I loved the Gospel of John, yet once again, how many times did I skip over this verse? How could I skip over this verse without wondering what the heck Jesus meant by it? As I read this verse I can't help but note there are some serious implications for me. Above all else it means that God gave men the power to forgive and not forgive by the power of His authority.

Naturally, I started raising objections, and wondered if Jesus meant forgiving our brothers when they wrong us. Yet, that would contradict his words about forgiving a brother up to 490 times! Jesus meant unconditional forgiveness for our neighbors who wrong us; Jesus said nothing about not forgiving them if we didn't feel like extending grace. So this authority to forgive and retain sins must mean something else.

My next move was to turn back to the writings of the early Christians, as I had done with the issue of the real presence in the Eucharist, and see if they believed you should confess to a priest or alone to God. The earliest recorded writing on confession I could find wasn't a person's quotation but taken from a booklet on how to conduct Church affairs. This booklet is known as the Didache and historians and Tradition trace it back to as early as 75 A.D. Regarding confession it states...

"Confess your sins in church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . , On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure" (*Didache* 4:14,14:1 [A.D.70]).

According to this Church manual confession was a daily part of Church life. However, my skeptical mind thought that it was too vague on what it considered confession. I turned to a man named Tertullian. His spin on people and their lack of confession is almost comical.

"[Regarding confession, some] flee from this work as being an exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day. I presume they are more mindful of modesty than of salvation, like those who contract a disease in the more shameful parts of the body and shun making themselves known to the physicians; and thus they perish along with their own bashfulness" (*Repentance* 10:1 [A.D. 203]). Beyond the witty humor of Tertullian's writing is the fact that he equates confession to salvation. Remember these are Christians he is speaking to and about. In a 21st century Christianized way of saying it; these people had already been saved. They had accepted Jesus into their hearts. The matter of the fact is that Tertullian says if these Christians don't get beyond their pride and confess their sins then they won't be saved! Shocking. The final man I turned to was Cyprian of the North African town of Carthage. In discussing the Eucharist and confession he states...

"The Apostle [Paul] likewise bears witness and says: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord "[I Cor. 11:27]. But [the impenitent] spurn and despise all these warnings; before their sins are expiated, before they have made a confession of their crime, before their conscience has been purged in the ceremony and at: the hand of the priest . . . they do violence to his body and blood, and with their hands and mouth they sin against the Lord more than when they denied him" (*The Lapsed* 15:1-3 (A.D. 251)).

Beneath the surface this is another great quotation affirming the early Christians belief that Jesus was truly present in the wine and bread. However, the bigger issue is that Cyprian clearly states what takes place with confession. Sins are expiated or forgiven. The person being forgiven makes a confession of their sin. Their conscience is cleansed. This is all before a priest! Once again, something I had condemned for so many years being confirmed by the earliest Christians and the Bible.

Perhaps the major issue with confession is the matter of pride. "I'm not going to confess my sins before some man" is what most would say. However, is this response out of fear or vulnerability? The fact you might have to move beyond your pride and admit to someone else that you fail. You might have to admit that you aren't the perfect Christian everyone supposes you are. Maybe, it's the fear of your spiritual leader knowing where and that you mess up. Understand, there is no super pastor. Even priests have their own person they confess to. Besides, do we really think that priests get some kind of weird pleasure out of hearing where we sin. Fr. Valentine Ndebele asked me recently, "Do you really think I enjoy hearing how everyone failed God or one another last week? No, in fact I do my best to forget immediately what people tell me. We were taught to do that in seminary."

As I have discovered no priest or bishop claims that he has power to forgive sins, only Christ can do that. But what he does is stand in for Christ pronouncing His forgiveness over us.

Just one last thought on confession. In the New Testament there is only one verse that tells us who we are to confess our sins to. James told us to confess to *one another*.

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE

It was early December and I had so many decisions. I knew God was calling me into this new ministry of writing and doing speaking engagements. I had been praying about it for two months and thinking about it for five. I knew this was the direction he was calling me into. This direction would mean that I would have to retire all positions at Grace Fellowship. I wouldn't have time to be a youth pastor and or an associate pastor. The first thing I wanted to do was visit as many different denominational churches as I could, and write about my experience there as a first time worshipper. However, that brought me to my next decision.

Where do I go with what I have found about the Catholic Church? I had found so much rich truth from the Bible, Tradition, and the early Christians about the Catholic Church, but I was still so unsure. Do I announce to my Church that I'm leaving to start this new ministry as well as become a Catholic? What if half way into becoming a Catholic I finally find that one doctrine or that one teaching that totally defies what I know is 100% true? What if I decide that the Orthodox got it right, and the Catholics messed up? What about playing it safe and just becoming an Anglican? What if in the end I look like a complete fool? So much uncertainty; so much left unknown.

Weeks later, I announced to the board of deacons and then to my church that I was leaving Grace Fellowship to start my new ministry The Berean Life. This I at least knew for sure was going to happen. The part about becoming Catholic I was unsure about.

The last time I saw my pastor he asked me if I was leaving over some doctrinal issue, and I simply told him no. I felt so sure in my heart about it that I wanted to scream YES! But my mind left me saying no. At the time I didn't know where my doctrine was headed. I was either headed to Catholicism, another brand of Protestantism, or agnosticism.

On January 5th, 2009 my first Sunday in 4 years that I wasn't some sort of pastor I decided to start the first leg of my ministry and visit a church and write about my experience there. As it was a cold day, and the NFL playoffs kicked off that afternoon, I decided to stay close to home and visit Immaculate Conception Parish in Poteau, Oklahoma. I knew that my visit there was either going to make or break me in my journey home. Everything that I had read and studied on Catholicism was going to come alive in brilliance or die a foot in front of my face.

The morning began thirty minutes prior to Mass with a middle-aged man reciting the Rosary. Surely praying to Mary and asking for her prayers at our death would be enough to get me off my pew and back home feeling defeated. Yet, as the Rosary went on everything I had read about her in Tradition and in Revelation came alive. She was no longer just this teenage girl God plucked out of time, impregnated with His Son, and left alone for all of eternity. She was the young maiden God handpicked among all other girls to bring his Son into the world. She is full of grace because the Lord was with her. In John 19:26-27 not only did she become John's mother but our own mother. In Revelation 12 she becomes the Queen of Heaven with the sun as a cloth, the moon under her feet, and twelve stars as a crown. We ask for her prayers now and at our deaths not because she can save us but because her prayers are lifted up just as the prayers of the Saints in Revelation 4. Perhaps, I was home.

When the mass started and proceeded I found the fulfillment of everything I had studied upon. Before we ever got into the Bible or to Holy Communion everyone stood in unison and confessed their sins, "I confess to Almighty God, and to you my brothers and sisters that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I

have failed to do. And I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you my brothers and sisters to pray for me to the Lord our God.” Just like the first Christians we were publically admitting our shortcomings to one another. There was no mention of asking Mary or an angel to forgive us our sins, but merely asking that they pray for us. What the priest said was even more dramatic, “And may God grant us mercy, forgive us our sins, and lead us into everlasting life.” Full and unwavering assurance of salvation was given to God and to God alone.

We sat down and a woman read from the Old Testament, we sang a Psalm, and she read from the New Testament once more. Next, the priest read a long excerpt from one of the four gospels. Much like Dr. Scott Hahn states in his first visit to a Mass, I hadn’t heard so much Bible read in ages at church. Reading from a lectionary definitely eliminates the tendency to hear one subject preached on for consecutive weeks or even months. After the priest read the Gospel reading he gave an inspired sermon, or homily, for just fifteen minutes. If I had one problem it was this. As a pastor my favorite part of church was the message. Give me some kind of new insight into the Bible I have never seen before. Feed my intellect so that I can love God more. Yet, for Catholics the message isn’t the central part of the service. It’s something deeper and more than a symbol.

After he finished his message we all proceeded to stand up and recite the Nicene Creed, or as the priest put it, “Let us stand and profess our faith.” To the Catholic the Apostle’s or Nicene Creed is more than just their faith written down it is the proclamation of what they hold and have held true for 2000 years. Other churches have a statement of faith or beliefs and values, but the creeds are more than that. They are the faith.

After the offering and some more prayers came the time that had scandalized me the most before. The Eucharist. He stood before the alter and lifted the wafer up and said, “Blessed are you Lord God of all creation, through your goodness we have this bread to eat, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, through it it will become the body of Christ.” The church echoed with a loud Amen. Next, he lifted up the wine up and said, “Blessed are you Lord God of all creation, through your goodness we have this wine to drink, fruit of the vine and work of human hands, through it it will become the blood of Christ.” Again the church said Amen.

After more prayer we knelt in prostration. He held up the bread and wine and proclaimed to the church, “This is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” As soon as he uttered the last word the only thing I could think to say to myself was, “Yes it is him.” It was almost like Thomas in the Upper Room when he realized it was actually Jesus, “My Lord and my God. That is really you present in the Eucharist.” My doubting heart left aside; I knew I was home.

WHERE I AM NOW

One by one I started announcing to family and friends that I had made the decision to become Catholic, and that I felt it was 100% the right choice. Weeks later I started meeting with the priest and began classes to assist in my journey into the Catholic Church with teachings and dogmas I had questions about. After months of preparation, on the Saturday night before Easter of 2009, I was received into the Catholic Church and confirmed under the name of Ignatius because it was his letters that first started things rolling in my journey towards the Catholic

Church.

As I look back over the past year I realize things were scary, uncertain, down right life altering. However, now I am thankful that I made the decision to seek truth even at the cost of losing everything I ever knew. It is with confidence I can say that:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of Heaven and Earth
In Jesus Christ his only begotten son our Lord
He was conceived by the Holy Spirit
Born of the Virgin Mary
Suffered under Pontius Pilate
Was crucified, died, and was buried
He descended into Hades and on the third day rose again
He ascended into Heaven and will come again to judge the living and the dead
I believe in the Holy Spirit
The Holy Catholic Church
The Communion of Saints
The forgiveness of sins
The resurrection of the body
And life everlasting
Amen.