

A Pastor's Kid Finds the Catholic Church

By Logan Paul Gage

I loved to choose and see my path; but now
Lead Thou me on! ...

So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on.

-John Henry Newman, "Lead, Kindly Light"

Introduction

More than once when people have asked about my decision to become Catholic I've responded naively, like one who tries to retell a Saturday Night Live sketch. If you've ever done this you've realized that your rendition isn't very funny to one who hasn't already seen the original. Similarly, to one who hasn't had some of the experiences and thoughts that converts typically have, or to one who is looking to knock down Catholic arguments, my reasons may not be helpful. Whether one finds an argument convincing depends greatly on one's experiences, dispositions, and background information.

Our reasons for belief are far more complex than popular, rationalistic apologetics admits. Looking for *the* reason I became Catholic, as though there is one reason (or simply a handful) that could be easily repeated in syllogistic form, is misguided. Even trained philosophers—perhaps especially trained philosophers—make this mistake. We are often trained to look for killer arguments. Initially I evaluated Catholicism like this: "That's not a knock-down argument, nor is that one, nor that...therefore Catholicism is false or unjustified." But this stance fails to appreciate the nature of so-called 'cumulative cases'; we usually have multiple, converging reasons for belief. If you look only for stand-alone arguments and set the bar for success too high nothing will satisfy. This isn't special pleading for Catholicism. When was the last time you reversed deeply held religious or political views because of a syllogism? Human beings don't typically work that way. We accumulate reasons from many sources and form an overall impression of the world.

But arguments are not worthless. With a realistic view of human reason we can charitably and empathetically entertain others' worldviews. We can hear their stories, think about their reasons in context, and perhaps come to see that they are not unreasonable. Over time we might even see that their vision of life is more winsome than our own; it suddenly rings true. Large-scale changes of belief are more like Gestalt shifts than the acquisition of a single new argument. Conversion commonly consists, not in the overthrowing of all past belief, but in seeing old things in a new way.¹

¹ If evidence consists in experience, as my Ph.D. dissertation argued, then it is easy to see how one's evidence isn't easily summarized and packaged for others' consumption.

So I caution the reader: the search for killer arguments that vanquish all foes is in vain. I don't expect the reasons adduced in this book to bowl over trenchant non-Catholic readers. But remember, neither would their arguments bowl us over. We've carefully considered them and found them so wanting that, in some cases, we left friends and family to follow Christ alone. It is in this spirit that I share some glimpses into my own life. I am Catholic because Catholicism seems true to me. Explaining *why* it seems true is much more difficult to summarize.

Early Life

When I first read Augustine's *Confessions* with an Evangelical outlook, I saw it as a conversion story. Everything comes together at the end of Book VIII when Augustine hears "*Tolle lege! Tolle lege!*" ("Take and read! Take and read!"), opens the Scriptures, sees in them the truth against which he has rebelled, and yields his heart to God. But as I read the story again and again I began to notice something different—something that changed how I viewed my own story. The drama of Augustine's life, as I first saw it, was in his radical conversion. In fact, I would feel anxious as I read, wanting Augustine to hurry up and convert. I began to sense that while the conversion at the end of Book VIII was pivotal, the backstory was just as important. Augustine's story is more one of a gradual awakening to truth than a one-time conversion. He has to see the intellectual and moral errors that are clouding his vision; they must be uprooted and supplanted one-by-one before he can find rest in God.

As a young Evangelical, I told my story as one of conversion—the single truly important event for understanding me, I thought, was the moment (at age 14) in which I determined to give my entire life to Christ Jesus. Augustine helped me bring balance to the story: God's hand had been over my life from the beginning. In hindsight I see that my life was shaped by God through my parents and His other provisions—not just through my own autonomous choice. My self-understanding, at this time, was filtered through the lens of the all-important one-time-choice-for-God framework. While neither Augustine nor I want to downplay the momentous nature of such decisions, this emphasis can obscure God's continual providence over our lives and minimize our daily decisions for Christ. So I'll start at the beginning.

I was born the son of a preacher man in San Diego in 1981. In Evangelical lingo, I'm a "P.K." or pastor's kid. While I had to take ownership of my own faith when I grew up, the faith is something I received—more like a precious family inheritance than an item chosen off the shelf. This is God's generosity, provided for me at the request of four praying grandparents (another grace). I've lived in a dozen states. We moved around a lot as my father ministered to various congregations, but most of my childhood was spent near Flint, Michigan. My parents grew up in the Assemblies of God and met at a Bible college. My dad received his M.Div. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the 1970s. While he initially ministered in the Assemblies of God, doctrinal differences developed after years of Bible study, and he was dually ordained with the American Baptist Churches USA (basically the Northern Baptists) and the Southern Baptist Convention.

People often ask me if I had trouble with the priesthood before converting. I didn't. If the Old Covenant contained a priesthood, it certainly isn't crazy that the New Covenant would. Moreover, the New Testament is full of talk about bishops and priests. But I never noticed it—despite beginning to read through the Bible for the first time around age 8—because my NIV Bible translated *episkopos* (the word for bishop) as "overseer" (e.g., 1 Timothy 3:1) and *presbyter* (the word from which we derive the English word 'priest') as "elder" (e.g., James

5:14). The job of most Evangelical ministers is part scholar, part preacher, part committee organizer, part staff administrator, part accountant, part counselor—basically part *everything*. This is hard on family. The Church’s decision, in its wisdom and long experience, that such ministry calls for total service to Christ made sense to me.

I had a typical Evangelical up-bringing. I played on church playgrounds, attended Sunday school, VBS, Christian summer camps, and went to church nearly every Sunday, Sunday night, and Wednesday evening. I recall taking Matthew 6:6 literally and praying the sinner’s prayer in my closet at age 4 or 5. It was so early that I didn’t see much transformation from this event. I had the privilege of being both baptized and married by my father, but I don’t even remember the name of the church where I was baptized at age 12. We viewed baptism as a milestone and a public profession of faith. But I wasn’t very concerned with the faith at that point, and we didn’t see baptism as a sacrament that transforms. So I didn’t give it much thought. My youth was spent playing sports and wandering the woods all day doing boy things—building forts, playing army, exploring nature.

Because our lives were so centered on our church, I don’t recall having a single pious Catholic friend. A neighborhood acquaintance once took me to a Byzantine Catholic Mass. It struck me as very strange. Mostly I remember finding a beer tap in the basement rec hall. This confirmed my suspicion that they were heathens, since no Christians I knew drank. My impression as a kid was that perhaps *some* Catholics are “saved,” but these few were saved in spite of their strange superstitions. This wasn’t serious anti-Catholicism but simply condescension. Given the number of nominal Catholics, perhaps this attitude was sometimes warranted—but surely not as often as we assumed. My impression was simply that all the energy and vitality of the gospel was in Evangelicalism. So Catholicism was never a live option. Our sub-culture spoke “Evangelicalese,” and those who didn’t we failed to recognize as our own. As a boy I recall asking my Dad about the Reformation. He told me it was about getting back to the beliefs and practices of the early church. I think I’ve had a desire to do just that ever since.

Choosing Christ

I experienced two transformative years—ones that have shaped the course of my entire life—between the ages of 14 and 16. Living on the north side of Indianapolis, I wound up at the youth group of a large non-denominational church in Carmel, Indiana. There, for the first time, the faith came alive. Following Jesus suddenly didn’t seem like a parochial thing but a serious and passionate way of life. My ears were opened, and Jesus’ words struck me to the core. God’s presence was palpable in worship and Bible study. I made a very serious commitment to Christ at a student conference—one that I’ve stuck to ever since. I began carrying my Bible to school. I couldn’t get enough of it and wanted to give outward witness to others as to how much my heart was changing. I started to move away from friends I loved but who didn’t place the same priority upon living for Christ as I knew I must and towards those that did.

I don’t think I could overstate the importance of the formation I received during those two years. I tremble at who I might have become without these people—I tremble at what I might value and the meaningless, worldly things that might have consumed my life. C. S. Lewis’s poem “Nearly They Stood” often echoes in my mind:

*Nearly they fell who stand.
These with cold after-fear
Look back and note how near*

*They grazed the Siren's land
Wondering to think that fate
By threads so spidery-fine
The choice of ways so small, the event so great
Should thus entwine.*

That community shaped the person I am and want to be, showing me that it isn't impossible to love God with everything you have and winsomely live the faith in today's world.

In high school my family moved to the northwest corner of Washington state. In the small Dutch-American community of Lynden, Washington I met new Christian friends who encouraged me (and still encourage me) in the faith. They watered the seed sown in Indiana (and indeed the seedling given by my parents). With only minimal talent, I threw myself into music ministry. At one point, I simultaneously led worship at seven different services across a variety of churches and youth groups—Reformed, Baptist, non-denominational, etc. Often when people ask me why so many Evangelicals are converting to Catholicism, I point to the fact that so many of us lack ethnic or nationalistic denominational ties. Unlike previous generations, we've experienced many good churches and won't be Lutheran just because of Swedish ancestry. During this time, I went on mission trips to West Africa, Haiti, and Mexico that both enriched my faith and gave me a larger view of the world. I assumed I would become a missionary.

At age 16 my intellectual curiosity exploded. I quit playing sports because I wanted more time to read and think. I listened to Plato's dialogues while washing carts at a local golf course. I read almost everything C. S. Lewis ever wrote. And I decided that I wanted to study philosophy and theology in college. As I matured, and as my personality and temperament developed I became a little uneasy with Evangelicalism's tendencies toward emotionalism, celebrities, and fads. I didn't (and don't) have any ill-will toward Evangelicalism; I was just looking for more meat. I wasn't interested in the Evangelical books of that time: *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, *Wild at Heart*, and the *Left Behind* series. I wanted a girlfriend, thought my masculinity was just fine even though I prefer the indoors, and didn't have much use for pretribulationist speculation.²

Young Adulthood

I wanted head and heart to meet and find a balance. So when I arrived at Whitworth College in Spokane, Washington in the fall of 2000 I stopped all the busyness to drink in books and ideas. I decided not to become involved in the Evangelical music and leadership scene. College became in many ways a spiritual and intellectual retreat. It wasn't wasted on me that I had an incredibly privileged opportunity to spend four years reading and gaining all kinds of knowledge. I read as widely as possible and committed loads of poetry to memory with cigar smoke wafting up from public benches on campus. Whitworth is affiliated with the PCUSA. I attended the Presbyterian church on campus, as it had a somewhat Evangelical character and never emphasized the rougher edges of Calvinism. Objectively speaking, the church wasn't very liturgical; but it sure was to me. Theology wasn't much on my mind, because as an Evangelical I thought only essential doctrines could be known with assurance. Everything else seemed like intermural debate. So I gravitated toward philosophy.

² Pretribulationism holds that God removes his followers from Earth before an intense period of judgment or tribulation.

After college I helped a think tank establish an office in Washington, D.C. I wrote newspaper and magazine articles, set up book events for C-SPAN, and did liaison work on Capitol Hill. At first I lived with my colleague Mark and his family in northern Virginia while I searched for an apartment in the city. Mark and his wife Katy have nine children. I had never seen (or even heard of) such a thing. I thought it was peculiar, but wonderful. These people were *definitely* Catholic. From my first day with them it was clear to me that they were engaged in a difficult but beautiful project. Meal time was amazing. The table was huge and the conversation energetic and engaging.

As Mark and I commuted along the Potomac River we would discuss our theological differences. He cleared up many of my misunderstandings of Catholicism. Because his father was a Protestant-minister-turned-Catholic-priest, Mark had respect for the good things in Protestantism and spoke both languages. During our friendly arguments I was struck by our different styles. I would get excited about defending some point of doctrine or biblical interpretation, but Mark would show me another, not unreasonable way to look at things. When Mark didn't have an answer for some jab of mine, he would say something like, "Huh, I don't know. That's a good question." He was so calm, and his theology didn't hang on the latest scholarly arguments about some passage of Scripture. His confidence unnerved me because it seemed like he *knew* Catholicism was true.

Mark gave me some books on Catholicism. I read them but wasn't yet in a place where they could speak to me. My walls were still up. I was still in battle mode. After all, these were the only serious Catholics I had ever known. My entire circle of trust was Evangelical—friends, family, favorite academics. In the end, though, the witness of Mark's family and other good Catholics I met in D.C. changed me. It let me put my guard down long enough to honestly consider their arguments. I started to see that while I'd spent my life in church and even attended a Christian college, I really didn't know that much about church history. If Protestantism was about getting back to the early Church, why did we spend so little time studying the early Church and the Church Fathers?

When I moved to downtown D.C., I had to "find a church home," as Evangelicals say. I was always told to find a "Bible preaching church." For the first time I wondered if this just meant a church whose reading of the Bible I agreed with. At any rate, I wound up at a Presbyterian (PCA) church in the heart of the city. I found that the more liturgical service allowed for contemplation and worship in a way that the increasingly rock-concert style of Evangelicalism could not. Most importantly I met my future wife there in 2005. She was raised in a large Evangelical non-denominational church in Charlotte, North Carolina that taught her to love God and memorize Scripture. She met my Catholic friends from work, and we had occasional conversations about Catholicism. But neither of us took it too seriously.

"The Catholic question" increasingly bothered me, however. My best friend in D.C. as well as some of my think tank colleagues converted. These were big surprises. Knowing their deep faith and serious intellectual gifts, it was no longer possible to bury my head in the sand. At a party I got distracted by a bookcase—as you can tell, I'm *real* fun at parties—and chanced upon David Currie's *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic*. I devoured it. I didn't like the title, as I never would have identified as a fundamentalist. But as I read I recognized his description of my childhood Evangelical culture. The book gave voice to my worries about the canon of Scripture, the Eucharist, justification, and more. It made me feel like I wasn't crazy, like someone had already discovered the problems in Evangelicalism and their possible resolution in Catholicism.

I knew I couldn't figure out every issue for myself. They're too complex, and I'm simply not smart enough. For a time I was under the illusion that I could. But I have too many friends with relevant linguistic and theological training who still disagree on baptism, the Eucharist, and more. I increasingly sensed that *if* Jesus desired true doctrine to be known, then he would have left us something more solid than a book. In fact, it struck me for the first time that Jesus *didn't* leave us a book before his ascension; he didn't even write anything. My wife too had been under the illusion that she could sort everything out. Having encountered substantial theological disagreement in Evangelicalism, she took lessons in Greek and planned to study Hebrew in Israel. But the more we considered it, the more it just seemed like it couldn't be God's plan to give us a book and leave us to our own interpretations (or those of historically recent denominations). After all, even at the turn of the 20th Century the world illiteracy rate was around eighty percent. Most Christians *had* to rely on tradition.³ Here we were in the early 21st century, extraordinarily educated by historical standards (my wife is a lawyer by training), and we knew that we couldn't figure it all out ourselves no matter how much we studied. We began to see the need for authority. Catholics had the best claim to authority, but we still thought them mistaken on too many doctrines.

I decided to investigate the two issues that bothered me most: the nature of the Eucharist and the canon of Scripture. By then I could see that Catholicism taught a lot of truth. If Catholics got these two key doctrines correct, I was going to give them much more trust. At first, I found the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist totally bizarre. Why would Jesus want me to eat his literal body? But if I looked historically and Christians had always believed something like this, then I'd stop protesting and yield to the wisdom of the early Church. I figured, though, that it was a superstitious late-medieval invention. More importantly, if Protestants couldn't adequately ground their 66-book canon, then *sola scriptura* seemed irrelevant. It makes little sense to claim the Bible alone is the final doctrinal authority without the right Bible. How can you know *what* it teaches unless you know what it *is*?⁴

Protestantism and the Canon of Scripture

I revered the Bible I knew, and so when Catholics seemed to have seven more Old Testament books (called "apocrypha" by Protestants and "deuterocanonicals" by Catholics), I assumed they were added at some late date. Scholars I trusted claimed they "were never included in the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament."⁵ I began reading everything I could about the canon, sticking only to non-Catholic authors out of suspicion. I quickly learned that the disputed books were present in the Septuagint manuscript tradition (the early Greek translation of the Old Testament).⁶ This shocked me, since I knew the Septuagint was the Old Testament of the Apostles and early Christians—in fact, the entire Greek-speaking world including the Jewish

³ I was instinctively negative toward tradition. I later discovered that my 1984 NIV Bible translated the same word (*paradosis*) as "tradition" in negative contexts (e.g., Matt. 15:3) but as "teachings" in positive contexts (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2).

⁴ Amazingly, the influential Protestant theologian Wayne Grudem rejects the deuterocanonicals, in part, because they contain supposedly unbiblical doctrines. See his quotation of E. J. Young in Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 59.

⁵ Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), p. 167.

⁶ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Whose Bible Is It?* (New York: Penguin, 2005), Appendix I.

diaspora (the majority of Jews at the time).⁷ “For most early Christians,” one Protestant scholar writes, “the Greek Bible was their only Bible from the very beginning of the Christian movement.”⁸ And, another adds, “In the first two centuries at any rate the Church seems to have accepted all, or most of, these additional books as inspired and to have treated them without question as Scripture.”⁹ The Septuagint was in use by the Jews for three centuries prior to Christ. The vast majority of New Testament quotations of the Old Testament are from the Septuagint¹⁰; it was used in early Christian liturgy¹¹; it (including the deuterocanonical books) is quoted *as Scripture* by the Church Fathers¹²; and the view that the Septuagint was divinely inspired was “common among many of the early church fathers”¹³—the leaders of those who discerned the correct New Testament canon.¹⁴ Clearly the default Old Testament canon should follow the Septuagint manuscript tradition.

Numerous Protestants claimed, however, that the official Jewish canon, settled by the Council of Jamnia (90 A.D.), did not include the disputed books. But I could never see how this was supposed to help the Protestant case, since (i) I couldn’t see what authority the rabbis at Jamnia had to settle the canon for all Jews let alone for Christians (especially after the destruction of the temple and the death of nearly all the Apostles),¹⁵ (ii) surely these rabbis would reject the New Testament books as canonical,¹⁶ and (iii) numerous scholars suggest that the increased Jewish reliance on the Hebrew text was a reaction to the Christian adoption of the Septuagint.¹⁷ Regardless, the nineteenth-century Jamnia hypothesis—and that’s all it is, a late-nineteenth-century hypothesis by German scholar Heinrich Graetz—has been discredited by

⁷ Sometimes it is argued that first-century Jews *in Palestine* had a unified canon identical to the current Protestant Old Testament. Yet sects like the Samaritans and Essenes differed, and even the Sadducees held a different canon than the Pharisees. This is why it is problematic to point to an author like Josephus—a Pharisee—and claim that he describes the *true* Hebrew canon in *Against Apion* 1:8:38-42. Note too that Josephus accepts the additional material from 1 Esdras and Greek Esther. Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (London: SPCK, 1985), p. 405.

⁸ Lee Martin McDonald, *The Biblical Canon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 102.

⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Continuum, 1977), p. 54.

¹⁰ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 53.

¹¹ Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 139.

¹² Craig D. Allert, *A High View of Scripture?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), Appendix.

¹³ Craig A. Evans, “Introduction,” Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov, eds., *Exploring the Origins of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 18. In fact, many Jews may have thought the Septuagint inspired as well. See Philo, *On the Life of Moses* 2.37-40 and Jennifer M. Dines, *The Septuagint* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 63-78.

¹⁴ It seems inconsistent to hold, as does Beckwith (*The Old Testament Canon*), that fourth-century Christians botched the Old Testament canon because their memory of the first-century had faded but flawlessly discerned the first-century New Testament.

¹⁵ Tom Brown comments: “A major problem with this canon theory is that it grants to the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day an authority which, it claims, if possessed by the Church, would undermine the authority of Scripture.” Brown, “The Canon Question” (<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/01/the-canon-question>).

¹⁶ Bruce Metzger amazingly says that “the Assembly at Jamnia merely ratified what the most spiritually sensitive souls in Judaism had been accustomed to regard as holy Scripture.” *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 8. This is amazing, not only because one wonders how he discerns which Jews are most spiritually sensitive, but because these very rabbis also rejected Christianity. As Brown asks, “Why...is the opinion of the non-converting Jews more reliable than the opinion of those who converted to Christ and widely used the Greek Septuagint?” Brown, “The Canon Question.”

¹⁷ E.g., R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Scriptures* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), pp. 182-183 and F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), p. 50. Tertullian (*On Women’s Dress* 1.3) thought the Jews rejected books that witnessed to Christ. Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho* 71-73, 120) and Origin (*Letter to Africanus* 2, 5) say something similar about the additions to Daniel and Jeremiah.

more recent scholarship.¹⁸ There simply is no good evidence for the occurrence of a council at Jamnia. Historical records show rabbis debating Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs but no council rejecting the deuterocanonical books. Further complicating the Protestants-simply-follow-the-first-century-Jewish-canon narrative, the rabbinical literature also records disputes among rabbis regarding other books Protestants deem canonical (Ezekiel, Proverbs, and Esther) occurring in the early centuries after Jesus.¹⁹ In fact, “Debates over some books continued in Judaism until the sixth century CE.”²⁰

So why did so many Protestant scholars look to Jewish *tradition* (supposedly from Jamnia) at all, I began to wonder? The answer became obvious: they needed a closed Jewish canon, because the Reformers rejected the wide-spread and long-standing Christian acceptance of the deuterocanonals. As one Protestant scholar writes:

A Jamnia council decision is attractive, since no other prior time can be identified when a significant decision was made about the scope of the Hebrew biblical canon by the rabbinic teachers. No evidence, however, supports any formal action taken at Jamnia, and this view is largely abandoned today. The scope of the Hebrew biblical canon within Judaism was more likely settled in the second century C.E., and possibly even later than that.²¹

Indeed, the second century seems to be the scholarly consensus.²² Agreeing that there was no Jewish conciliar decision, the director of the Princeton Dead Sea Scrolls Project notes that “the texts of the so-called Old Testament were fluid” before 70 A.D.²³ The “Christian Scriptures were larger [i.e., contained the deuterocanonals] because the Jews at an earlier time included more writings than they did later under the influence of rabbinic Judaism.”²⁴

Beyond the deuterocanonals, the big question is: what determines the canon, so that we can confidently know all the writings that have divine authority over our lives? The question isn’t what *makes* a book authoritative: all Christians think the reason some books are authoritative is because they are “God-breathed” (i.e., inspired).²⁵ What we are looking for is a reliable ‘*epistemic*’ criterion by which we can know that these are the God-breathed books. We aren’t just looking to invent a criterion, either. If our criterion wasn’t used historically, then it seems arbitrary, *ad hoc*—invented to fit our presuppositions rather than reality. Further, the criterion must be consonant with our theology. The Protestant holding to *sola Scriptura* shouldn’t appeal to a theological authority they wouldn’t normally accept.

Initially, I thought I could hold that God instrumentally used the early Church to give us the right canon.²⁶ This is not incorrect, but for a Protestant it is a bad strategy. The early Church canon wasn’t the Protestant one. One can point to Catholics through the ages who questioned the Catholic canon—just as some Protestants have questioned the Protestant canon—but there

¹⁸ See Jack P. Lewis, “Jamnia Revisited,” in McDonald and Sanders, eds., *The Canon Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), pp. 146-162.

¹⁹ R.T. Beckwith, “The Canon of the Old Testament,” in Philip Wesley Comfort, ed., *The Origin of the Bible* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2003), p. 51.

²⁰ James H. Charlesworth, “Writings Ostensibly outside the Canon,” in Evans and Tov, eds., *Exploring the Origins of the Bible*, p. 58. Cf. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, p. 175-189.

²¹ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, p. 174.

²² E.g., Law, *When God Spoke Greek*, pp. 19-32.

²³ Charlesworth, “Writings Ostensibly outside the Canon,” p. 63. Cf. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, p. 169.

²⁴ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, p. 102.

²⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 101-105.

²⁶ Cf. James R. White, *Scripture Alone* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2004), pp. 106-109.

seem to be *no* Church Fathers or Church councils holding to the Protestant canon as it presently stands. Not one.²⁷ Moreover, this position is clearly *ad hoc*. How could I trust the early Church on *this*—even invoking the guidance of the Holy Spirit—but not on any other matter of doctrine? As one Protestant rightly asks, “By the later fourth century...many features of the church that evangelical...Protestants find questionable are already functioning. Does it make sense to say that the fourth-century church was making very good decisions about the Bible but mostly poor ones about everything else?”²⁸

How then could I avoid this *ad hoc* move? In a bootstrapping maneuver, many Christians claim that the Bible establishes its own canon. They note that biblical books often claim divine authority, quote other biblical books, and (with regard to the New Testament) are written by apostles. But these criteria threaten to truncate the 66-book canon: not all of those books claim divine authority, are written by apostles, or are quoted by other biblical books. In other cases, these criteria threaten to expand the canon: there are numerous New Testament parallels and allusions to the deuterocanonicals,²⁹ and Jude even quotes from 1 Enoch (a book neither Protestants nor Catholics deem canonical). If maneuvers like this fail, it seemed to me that the canon must be determined by something outside of itself.

Because they held that the Bible is the ultimate doctrinal authority, however, the classical Reformers I encountered proclaimed an external determinant of the canon unacceptable. It would place something above the Scriptures, a rule to which they must conform. They were forced to the incredible position that the Scriptures all but determine themselves. As Dutch theologian Herman Ridderbos explains:

Calvin appealed not only to the witness of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers but above all to the self-attestation of the Scriptures. The divine character of the Bible itself gives it its authority. This divine character is so evident that anyone who has eyes to see is directly convinced and does not need the mediation of the church.... [As] Karl Barth wrote, “the Bible makes itself to be canon.”³⁰

Michael J. Kruger similarly maintains that “the church did not choose the canon, but the canon, in a sense, chose itself.”³¹ Just as many hold to the ‘perspicuity’ of Scripture despite educated, sincere, and wide-spread disagreement, many hold that Scripture’s divine qualities are simply obvious when compared to any non-canonical document—despite centuries of disagreement. The “corporate church, as a whole, would naturally recognize the canonical books.”³²

The classical Reformed confessions (e.g., Belgic, Westminster) adopt the view that Christians discern Scripture by the testimony of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. It struck me as wildly implausible, however, that two new, Spirit-filled believers (or churches) would automatically agree on the canon.³³ Early Christians didn’t possess universal agreement at all

²⁷ Often Protestants point to Jerome and Origen. But this is a mistake. See, for instance, Jerome’s prologues in the Vulgate and his *Against Rufinus* II.33. See also Origen’s list in Eusebius’s *Church History*, Book VI, ch. 25 and his letters to Julius Africanus. Even if I’m mistaken and *one or two* Fathers advanced the current Protestant canon, this would only prove the point that a 66-book canon was uncommon in the early Church.

²⁸ Frederick W. Norris, “The Canon of Scripture in the Church,” in D. H. Williams, ed., *The Free Church and the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 15.

²⁹ McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, Appendix D and Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*, pp. 158-170. Metzger notes (p. 188) that even the 1611 King James Bible contained 113 margin references to the deuterocanonicals.

³⁰ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1988), p. 9.

³¹ Kruger, *Canon Revisited* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), p. 106.

³² Kruger, *Canon Revisited*, p. 107.

³³ Brown, “The Canon Question.”

times and places. Anyone who has attended Bible studies knows possessing the Holy Spirit is insufficient for determining the Scriptures' meaning. Why then think this 'test' sufficient for determining its contents? "It is unlikely," one of the greatest Protestant scholars of the last century notes, "that the Spirit's witness would enable a reader to discern that Ecclesiastes is the word of God while Ecclesiasticus is not..."³⁴ Unless you are willing to say that Catholics and Orthodox just don't have the Holy Spirit, centuries of Christian debate proves this criterion too subjective. And by the time I encountered this classical Reformed reasoning I knew too many such Spirit-filled people. Even if you are willing to bite that bullet,³⁵ you'd also have to conclude that neither Augustine nor Luther (who will be discussed below) was guided by the Holy Spirit, since neither advocated the current Protestant canon.

This view is a muddle, but what else can a Protestant following the Reformation say? They can't use anything outside of the canon itself lest they imply that it has authority over the canon (thus violating *sola Scriptura*).³⁶ It struck me that Calvin offers a false dilemma: either each believer using the Holy Spirit recognizes the canon, or else the canon rests on mere human authority.³⁷ Why can't the Holy Spirit guide corporately or institutionally rather than individually? If the canon was determined by men given authority by God, then we do not set these men above God or his Word. They have delegated but real authority. If the claim that 'human Church leaders with the Holy Spirit discern the canon' places men over God, why doesn't the claim that 'individual human beings with the Holy Spirit discern the canon' do so as well? Regardless, this view is ahistorical: the canon was not individualistically determined.

The Catholic View of the Canon

I began to think the Catholic position more congruent with the historical evidence. Jesus left us an institution—people filling offices with derived authority—rather than a book. He singled out Peter first and then gave power to the others. Even taken as just a historical document, Matthew 16 shows Jesus changing Peter's name (a biblical sign of a new mission reminiscent of Abraham and Jacob), telling him that he will build his Church on this rock (he just changed Simon's name to "Rock"), and giving him special divine authority signaled in (i) the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" and (ii) the power to bind and loose. This parallels Isaiah 22, where we see keys given to a prime minister or steward who has charge over a house, with the king's full authority, while the king is away.³⁸ Later in Matthew 18 we see a similar authority given by Jesus to his disciples. He gives them the power to bind and loose. In first-century Judaism, binding and loosing were rabbinical terms conveying the power to make religious law for the community. Binding prohibits, while loosing permits.

Reading this, it struck me for the first time how Peter was singled out first, the only one to receive a new name; how he alone received the keys and was told that Christ himself would build the Church on him, but not the others. I started to study Peter in the Bible more closely and

³⁴ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, pp. 281-282.

³⁵ Kruger seems willing: Catholics either didn't (don't?) have the Spirit or else they were (are?) blinded by sin. *Canon Revisited*, pp. 200-201 (fn. 11). Collins and Walls heavily rely on Kruger's work to defend the current Protestant canon. Given their commitment to ecumenism, however, it is unclear whether they too are willing to accept the implications of Kruger's work. Kenneth J. Collins and Jerry L. Walls, *Roman but Not Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), pp. 64-70.

³⁶ Ridderbos, *Redemptive History*, p. 35. Cf. Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*.

³⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, ch. 7.

³⁸ See especially Stephen K. Ray, *Upon this Rock* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999), pp. 32-41.

found all sorts of things to which I'd previously been blind. I found he was mentioned around 200 times—more than all the other disciples combined. As a prominent Oxford New Testament scholar remarks, “it is surely significant that Peter is, after Jesus, the most frequently mentioned individual both in the Gospels and in the NT as a whole.”³⁹ I then noticed the *way* the disciples were listed: Peter was constantly first (Matt. 10:2-4, Mark 3:16-19, Luke 6:14-16, and Acts 1:13). I thought this a coincidence until I saw Judas constantly last. Even when only the inner-circle is mentioned, Peter is consistently first (e.g., Mark 5:37). In fact, Peter is *the first* to witness the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:5),⁴⁰ to receive Paul (Gal. 1:18), to preach the gospel (Acts 2:14-41), and to perform miracles (Acts 3:1-10). He speaks for the apostles (e.g., Matt. 16:16, Matt. 17:1-8, Mark 10:28, John 6:68-69) so often that even Protestant authors refer to him as the “the spokesman for the Twelve.”⁴¹ And shortly before his ascension, Jesus again singles out Peter to shepherd His flock (John 21:15-19). Outside the Bible, Peter’s reputation seems so well known that he is commonly listed first in other Christian literature.⁴² As Evangelical apologist Sean McDowell notes, knowledge of Peter’s preeminence is further confirmed by the voluminous apocryphal works claiming Petrine authorship (Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Gospel of Peter, etc.).⁴³

I still thought, though, that apostolic authority—along with Peter’s preeminence—ended with the apostles. So I studied more. What struck me most was Acts 1. Having seen so much moral and theological disagreement within Protestantism, it seemed to me that it would be great if we had God’s on-going guidance. If anything, we need it more than the first generation of Christians. Acts 1 is crucial, because it shows that the apostles held an *office*. After Judas dies the remaining apostles replace him. This doesn’t make much sense unless there was to be an on-going lineage, successors of the apostles. I thought this was all made up later, but there it was in the Scriptures. Quoting the psalmist, Peter speaks for them all, saying, “Let another take his office” (Acts 1:20, ESV). An office is a position multiple people hold over time. So Jesus gave divine authority to his disciples, and they understood this authority as part of an office needing to be filled after death. Matthias was to “take the place in this ministry and apostleship” (Acts 1:25, ESV). This all signals on-going rather than temporary apostolic ministry.

If this is right, then despite the messiness and length of the process, Catholics can have assurance that the texts declared canonical via the continuing apostolic ministry—ultimately the ministry of the Holy Spirit—possess divine authority. The Church discerned the correct list over time because it retained authentic apostolic tradition. It sifted writings according to essential Christian doctrine referred to as “the rule of faith.” As even Protestant scholar Bruce Metzger notes, the fundamental prerequisite for canonicity was “congruity of a given document with the basic Christian tradition recognized as normative by the Church.”⁴⁴ “It was this Rule of Faith against which everything was measured in the second century—even the writings of the developing New Testament,” writes another Protestant scholar.⁴⁵ Christians were a people with doctrinal unity *long* before any sort of unified Bible emerged. This unity didn’t depend solely on

³⁹ Markus Bockmuehl, *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 4.

⁴⁰ Notice how even John waits for Peter to go into the tomb first (John 20:1-10).

⁴¹ E.g., Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 55.

⁴² Paul Foster, “Peter in Non-Canonical Traditions,” in Bond and Hurtado, eds., *Peter in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 228.

⁴³ McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles*, p. 55 (ftn. 3).

⁴⁴ See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 251. Cf. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, pp. 255, 260.

⁴⁵ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, p. 125.

the written words of the apostles (cf. Acts 2:42; 2 Thessalonians 2:15, 3:6; 2 Timothy 2:2). In fact, early Church Fathers (Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria) used ‘canon’ (*kanōn*) to refer to the rule of faith rather than an authoritative collection of Scriptures.⁴⁶ The earliest reference to “the new testament” (*he kaine diatheke*) isn’t to Scripture but to the covenant expressed in the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:25). Christians were a covenant people with orthodox beliefs and practices (baptism, Eucharist, etc.) long before the Bible. The collection of books now known as “the New Testament” were selected by the covenant people, the Church. Evangelical Craig Allert is utterly candid:

No matter how one looks at the history, it is difficult to maintain that the church had a closed New Testament canon for the first four hundred years of its existence. This means that an appeal to the “Bible” as the early church’s sole rule for faith and life is anachronistic.

...The assertion that these documents forced their way into the canon by virtue of their unique inspiration has little historical support. In our desire to avoid the corrupting influence of tradition, we have often missed the fact that the very Bible we claim to accept as our only guide is itself a product of the very tradition we avoid.⁴⁷

Finding that the Church’s existence, authority, and basic beliefs pre-existed the canon—and that the Church tested books against these pre-existing orthodox beliefs to form the canon—holding that *only* the Bible is the rule/measure of orthodoxy no longer seemed tenable.

The Catholic view began to make sense of why differing canonical lists didn’t rip the early Church apart. If the apostles left only writings, and we are to be a People of the Book Alone, it is imperative to get the canon right. But Christians weren’t in a hurry to settle the canon. “The earliest Christians did not,” F. F. Bruce writes, “trouble themselves about criteria of canonicity.”⁴⁸ Proposed lists were slow in arriving and weren’t uniform. Athanasius’s *Festal Letter 39* (367 B.C.) is the first to list the full Christian New Testament as canonical.⁴⁹ Yet the Church had a way to settle disagreements about the canon while maintaining unity instead of splintering into endless new churches and denominations. The Church’s canon begins to be standardized by the late fourth-century councils—Rome (382 A.D.), Hippo (393 A.D.), and Carthage (in 397 A.D.)—which include the deuterocanonicals. Lest this seem too far after the books were written, note that it took the Jews centuries to deem the various parts of the Old Testament canonical as well.⁵⁰ History records no swaths of fourth-century proto-Protestants decrying the supposedly obvious addition of the deuterocanonicals to the 66-book canon. The Orthodox split with the Western Church in 1054 and accept these books. One can find occasional disagreements about the canon, and so the same list was affirmed by the Council of

⁴⁶ *1 Clement* 7.2, *Against Heresies* 1.22.1, and *Stromata* 4.15.98.

⁴⁷ Allert, *A High View of Scripture?*, pp. 144-145.

⁴⁸ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 255.

⁴⁹ Allert writes: “evangelicals generally use Athanasius’s New Testament list for support on canonical issues but tend to ignore his Old Testament list, which includes apocryphal books. If he is authoritative for one, why is he not authoritative for the other?” *A High View of Scripture?*, p. 51 (fn. 39). Allert (p. 74) worries that Evangelicals too quickly paper over the messy history in an attempt to push the date of the canon back as early as possible.

⁵⁰ Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha*, pp. 7-8. Note well: in some sense there was a canon before 382. Augustine, after all, advocates the Catholic list not because of his private judgment but because of the *sensus fidelium* (the acceptance of the churches). See *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, ch. 8. This is why it is a mistake to claim that Augustine and Jerome were at odds over the canon and Augustine’s outsized influence simply won the day over Jerome (the better biblical scholar). See Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), p. 169-170.

Florence in 1442 (before the Reformation) and by the Council of Trent in 1546 (after the Reformation).⁵¹

Despite all this, Luther, the Reformer I somehow found myself following, placed these seven books in an appendix at the end of his German translation of the Bible. He also segregated Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation from what was in his view the real, authoritative New Testament. These books contained doctrines Luther rejected (2 Maccabees 12 speaks of prayers for the dead and hints at purgatory; James 2:24 says that we are *not* justified by faith alone). So he literally re-formed the canon. Realizing that I implicitly followed someone who would do this terrified me. Others later restored the four New Testament books but not the deuterocanonicals (which remained in an appendix).⁵² This was the situation for centuries among Protestants. The 1611 King James Bible included the deuterocanonicals, as did other Protestant Bibles, in various languages, for years. I had been completely unaware that “the Apocrypha were included in every major Protestant version of the English Bible from Coverdale [1535] to the Revised Standard Version”⁵³ in the 1950s and simply faded away—not with a bang but with a whimper. Less than 200 years ago the British and Foreign Bible Society in London and the American Bible Society, after much debate, began dropping the deuterocanonicals from their printed Bibles.⁵⁴ They weren’t in my NIV or ESV. I became irate: what *authority* did Luther, the American Bible Society, or the NIV committee possess?

All this shook me. If Protestantism was mistaken about such a foundational doctrine, what else did it get wrong? History seemed to reveal that the canon neither determined nor preserved itself. Furthermore, having the right Scriptures is only half the battle. My experience in countless Bible-believing churches as well as seeing the way early-Church heretics quoted the Scriptures in their defense indicated that even where there is agreement on what Scripture *is* there need not be agreement on what Scripture *says*. I came to think we need authentic apostolic tradition and living apostolic authority, both to have the right Bible and to read the Bible aright.

The Eucharist

While I was exploring all this, we migrated to a wonderful Evangelical Anglican church in our Alexandria, Virginia neighborhood. The liturgy moved me. But I began to feel uneasy about communion. It took me a while to figure out the source of unease, but finally I realized that the liturgy seemed parasitic to me (only later did I realize it was based on Roman Catholic liturgy). It seemed like exactly the kind of thing you’d do if you believed that the Eucharist was truly the body and blood of Jesus Christ. But Anglicans seemed to allow a variety of opinions on the matter, signaling that they don’t think we’ve received revelation on the matter. I started to worry that, given my Baptist view of communion, I was eating and drinking without discerning the body (1 Cor. 11:29). So I refrained for a time and studied more. Many Catholic friends told me to read John 6. I was so stuck in the Evangelical paradigm, however, that I couldn’t see it as implying the real presence of Christ. I read the chapter over, and over, and over. Then suddenly

⁵¹ II Nicaea in 787 also technically affirmed it since it acknowledged the conclusions of the Council of Carthage.

⁵² Luther’s canon seems driven not only by doctrinal presuppositions but by a historical mistake: influenced by the Renaissance impulse to get back to the original texts, Luther (mistakenly) assumed that the 39-book Jewish Masoretic Text available in his day was representative of the Jewish understanding of a closed canon at the time of Christ. Cf. R. Glenn Wooden, “The Role of the ‘Septuagint’ in the Formation of the Biblical Canons,” in Evans and Tov, eds., *Exploring the Origins of the Bible*, pp. 136-137.

⁵³ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, p. 114 (ftn. 32).

⁵⁴ Metzger, *Introduction to the Apocrypha*, pp. 201-202.

something clicked, like when you finally see the picture in a Magic Eye drawing. Certain features of the text stood out like never before. In John 6:50-53, Jesus claims we must eat (*phago*) his flesh. When hearers balked, he could have—but didn't—explain that it was a mere metaphor. Instead, he doubles-down, makes it even more graphic, and says in verses 54-58 that we must chew (*trogo*) on his flesh to have eternal life.

Beyond lending credibility to Catholic doctrine, this experience confirmed for me that we always read Scripture in light of our tradition. So it is imperative to have the right one. I desired to read the Bible with the Church of the ages rather than with a historically young American Evangelical sub-culture. Reading the Church Fathers on the Eucharist, it was apparent that they would not attend any of the churches of which I had been a part. They struck me as thoroughly Catholic and committed to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.⁵⁵ I initially dismissed them as already corrupt. But I soon realized that this was to adopt something like the Mormon view of history: anyone can say that at some unspecified time Christianity went astray because it doesn't believe what they teach. Reading the apostolic Fathers confirmed that there isn't some gap where the Church suddenly changed doctrine. Ignatius of Antioch—whose ministry overlaps the apostolic age—could not be clearer that the Eucharist is the true flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.⁵⁶ In the next century one finds the same teaching from Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian. Such teachings aren't explained by the accretions of the centuries; they are too early. If Ignatius had radically altered Church teaching, surely he would be rebuffed by the Christian community, who had recently been informed by the Apostles themselves. But no such thing happened. And if the disciples' disciples didn't understand Jesus' teachings, what hope do we have?

Reception into the Catholic Church

After much prayer and consideration, my wife and I were increasingly confident that the Catholic Church was founded by Jesus himself. But we had only been to Mass a few times. When we arrived in Waco, Texas where I would pursue my doctoral studies in philosophy at Baylor University, we met a wonderful priest (who wrote a doctoral dissertation on Baptist theology). Participating in Catholic life, our remaining fears and prejudices dissolved. There we stood; we could do no other. We completed RCIA (adult catechesis) and were joyfully received into the Catholic Church just before Easter of 2010.

This has been the biggest blessing of our Christian lives. While some personal relationships suffered, we have never regretted the decision. Finding not just Jesus but his visible Church has given us the radical life for Christ that I wanted so long ago when I thought I had to be a missionary. Life lived according to its ancient wisdom is demanding but rewarding. The consistent ethical teaching on what I previously saw as “non-essentials” (e.g., contraception) are, in hindsight, fundamental to the cruciform life. By its light we are slowly but surely conformed to Christ through the Eucharist, prayer, repentance, and self-sacrifice in our vocations as mother and father of five small boys. *Soli Deo gloria.*

⁵⁵ For a good summary of what I found, see Tim A. Troutman, “The Church Fathers on Transubstantiation” (<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/12/church-fathers-on-transubstantiation>).

⁵⁶ *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, ch. 7.