

essentially unfaithful church, then the basis of all of orthodox Christology starts to fall apart.

If the Christian church was not in error by these times, then when *did* the supposed great apostasy happen? And when you've figured that out, ask yourself: why then is the experience of the Catholic Church in the centuries before that time not normative? And, having established when the supposed great apostasy did take place, start thinking hard about what we ought to make of the apparent "black hole" of the 500 or 1000 or 1400 years before the Reformation, during which time the Church was allegedly fundamentally in error and unfaithful. What was that about? Had the Holy Spirit fallen asleep on the job? Had the gospel gone into hibernation?

Then start pondering this kind of possibility instead: along with its strengths and achievements, the Church has always also suffered sin and failures along the way, as do all churches today. But the "great apostasy" narrative as a general background assumption legitimating Protestant restorationism really doesn't work. Or, rather, it only works when one does not think very carefully about the actual history. Once you've grasped and assimilated that anomaly, you've made a major step in the right direction.

**29. Take note that even evangelical churches that are opposed to "human traditions" and "rituals" turn out to have an awful lot of their own human traditions and rituals.** Evangelicalism is about having a direct, personal, vibrant faith in Jesus Christ that makes one spiritually alive and produces continual spiritual growth. When you have that kind of experience and life of faith, human institutions and routines are normally viewed as a threat. In fact, anything involving repetition—except regular prayer and Bible reading—is a problem. Human traditions and rituals are certainly a problem, because they make faith grow stale, routine, dull.

Most evangelicals are thus raised to assume that traditions and rituals are bad. Those are associated with theologically wrong and/or spiritually dead groups, like Catholics and moribund liberal Protestants. Adjectives that instead capture the true heart of an evangelical spirituality are things like Fresh!, Renewed!, Alive!, Refreshing!, and Vibrant! But most of the assumptions behind this outlook are untenable, if not exhausting—it's the evangelical spiritual equivalent of secular radio's laughably impossible amorous refrain, "All Night Long! Making Love All Night Long!"

## three

### Accumulating More Anomalies

You've accumulated a lot of anomalies. Time to accumulate some more, some that are more troublesome than those of the previous chapter.

**28. Start wondering when the supposed "great apostasy" happened and where the true Christian church was for the 1,000–1,400 years between then and the Reformation.** American evangelicals operate with a background belief that, sometime after "the early church," which was the ideal model for subsequent church history, Christianity suffered a great apostasy. And whatever the evangelical Protestant group in question is, *it* so happens to provide the restoration of Christian truth that undoes this apostasy.

Start asking yourself: When exactly was this great apostasy? Was it after the death of the apostles? Maybe after the Christian conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine? Or when? The New Testament canon, we have already seen, was not firmly defined and established until the end of the fourth century. That is more years after Christ's ascension than we today have lived since, say, Oliver Cromwell's death in the mid-1600s. So was the Christian church already fallen into error by then, when it was defining the New Testament canon?

Or if we suppose the alleged great apostasy was after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine, then we have to reckon with this fact: it was Constantine who summoned the Council of Nicaea in 325 in which orthodox Christology was defined. If Nicaea was part of what was already an

But that is not our present concern. The observation that matters to us here, rather, is the fact that human traditions and rituals are simply unavoidable. People can deny and denounce human traditions and rituals till the cows come home. But they always still have their own. For such people, in fact, the insistent repudiation of all human traditions turns out to be one of their own most cherished human traditions. But they also have many others.

A bit of thought turns up an initial list: the particular order of worship services, the consistent forms of “informal, spontaneous” prayers, everyone closing their eyes and bowing their heads (and maybe folding their hands) in prayer, the expected dress of the preacher, one hymn book instead of another, the American and Christian flags at the front of the sanctuary, the pastor walking down the aisle after the benediction to greet everyone exiting the front doorway, vacation Bible school programs, the peculiar ways that Scripture passages are always read in public, the Sunday school curricular material, and on and on. So, you have churches that decry other churches for treating faith as if it were an automatic family inheritance or a taken-for-granted ethnic heritage to simply absorb, and then they turn around and, lo and behold, have their own regular processions of twelve-year-old children standing up to give their own (very similar sounding) personal testimonies about their coming to personal faith, of being converted, of “becoming Christians,” which conveniently fits them for baptism, church membership, and quarterly communion.<sup>1</sup>

Again, the contradictions and blind-spots would all be rather amusing if the larger issues of tradition and ritual didn't matter so much and if it were not such a point of contention and division among Christians. But they do and it is. Happily, simply realizing that human traditions and rituals are inevitable itself frees one up from the futile attempt to escape them. The question is no longer human traditions and rituals versus none. The question is: *which* human traditions and rituals are worth

1. Thanks to John Wilson for pointing out this parallel to me. Analogously, it is well worth noting that everybody—including Protestant denominations—has a functional Magisterium, which is treated as de facto infallible in its judgments. Sociologically, it is impossible for organizations such as churches to function without a functionally authorized teaching office. They are simply required. Catholics are merely honest and explicit about that. Evangelicals instead rely on denominational leaders, seminary teachers, popular book authors, or charismatic figures to function as their magisteria. Evangelical popes, rather than being elected through due process, instead rise and fall according to mass popularity—they are functionally “popes of the market.”

building into Christian life and the life of the church and why those particular ones?

**30. Start asking where the theologically orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and Christology came from.** This anomaly is obvious, when you think about it. Evangelicals rightly believe in God as Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Concerning the Son, they also believe in the two united natures of Jesus Christ, that he is both fully God and fully human in the same person. These doctrines evangelicals receive from the first ecumenical councils of the Christian Church—Nicaea (325 CE), Constantinople (381 CE), Ephesus (431 CE), and Chalcedon (451 CE).

But wait a minute! Those were councils of the Catholic Church, held when the bishop of Rome was increasingly understood as primary among dioceses with bishops. The councils consisted of Catholic bishops and theologians meeting to decide upon authoritative and binding doctrinal truths and to reject heresy. In short, the most important doctrinal core of the Christian faith that evangelicals today champion is the product of five hundred years of discernment and authorized creedal definition by leaders of the Catholic Church.

Now, ask yourself this question: how can evangelicals *both* deny the legitimacy of an authoritative teaching office of the Catholic Church functioning many centuries after the death of the original apostles *and* take as non-negotiable truths the doctrines of the Trinity and Nicene Christology, which were established as orthodoxy against the pressing claims of many heresies by the same authoritative teaching office of the Catholic Church? You can't do both. If someone tries to tell you that the Catholic teaching office was merely incidental in the process, that the conclusions of those ecumenical councils were actually over-determined by a straight reading of the Bible, don't buy it for a second. For one thing, as we have already seen, although the different churches of this era possessed various of the gospels and epistles that eventually became the content of the New Testament canon (and others that did not), that scriptural canon as such had not yet itself been authoritatively defined.

Second, most of the heresies rejected by these councils could and did appeal to very many scriptural passages to justify their errors—the eventual orthodox conclusions were actually not so obviously the only plausible reading of what were taken to be scriptural texts. The Arianism that the Council of Nicaea rejected, for instance, enjoyed all kinds of apparent biblical support. In fact, Arianism for a period of time in this

era actually won the doctrinal struggle and was only eventually repudiated by bishops meeting in council because of the relentless championing of orthodoxy by Catholic theologians like Athanasius of Alexandria and others like him. Believing that the orthodox doctrines concluded by these councils simply flowed out of the pages of Scripture requires a blissful ignorance of history and of the scriptural and doctrinal complexities involved. But since you're on the road to Catholicism, you are learning to know better.

**31. Read Martin Luther's 95 theses supposedly "nailed to the door in protest" at Wittenberg.** Protestants are raised on folk legends about Luther's famous 95 theses. Since few Protestants have actually read the 95 theses themselves, they have reason for not knowing better about their true nature. But you need to know better. So go and search "Luther 95 theses" on the Internet and read them closely.

The first thing you will learn is that Luther's 95 theses were hardly a radical protest. In posting them, Luther was not somehow nailing an unusual "This Church is Toast!" message of early Protestant revolt against Rome. He was rather doing what university professors of theology, of which he was one, regularly did in his day. That was to propose theses for academic debate on the equivalent of a public bulletin board used for such purposes in order to invite participation in a standard theological disputation. Thus, Luther's theses open with this preamble: "The following propositions will be discussed, under the presidency of the Reverend Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Oratory on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are unable to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter." That this reads more like a departmental email announcement than the bold manifesto of a radical, world-transforming protest is no accident. That's essentially what it was.

The second thing you will learn by reading the 95 theses for yourself is that, at the time that Luther posted them, he was very much a late medieval Catholic theologian—and Augustinian monk, no less—who presupposed the authority of the Church and the pope and the truth of Catholic teachings. All of the leverage in his theses' arguments depends upon Catholicism's legitimacy, truth, and authority. In all of them, in fact, he only once (thesis 78) referenced a Bible passage (1 Corinthians 12). Luther was not against what the Catholic Church taught. He only wanted it practiced well, to not see it abused. So his theses proposed to debate

certain questions concerning "the power and efficacy of indulgences." Luther saw that some instances of selling indulgences in parts of Europe for the remission of penalties for those in purgatory were abusing the correct doctrine of purgatory, indulgences, and the reduction of penalties for sin. But Luther was not at all contesting a proper understanding of those doctrines themselves.

The 95 theses assumed the reality of purgatory, the need to rectify sins after death, and the legitimacy of penance, indulgences, canonical church law, intercessory prayers for the dead, the pardoning power of the Church, the treasury of merit, the growth of love by works of love, and the inviolability of Mary as the "Mother of God." Luther clearly believed in and honored the authority of God's "vicar, the priest" (7), the oversight role of bishops (11), "the reverence due to the pope" (81), and the need to defend the Bishop of Rome against the "enemies of Christ and of the pope" (53). Note particularly these distinctly non-Protestant theses:

25. "The power which the pope has, in a general way, over purgatory, is just like the power which any bishop or curate has, in a special way, within his own diocese or parish."

38. "The remission [of penalties for sin] and participation [in the blessings of the Church] which are granted by the pope are in no way to be despised, for they are, as I have said, the declaration of divine remission."

69. "Bishops and curates are bound to admit the commissaries of apostolic pardons, with all reverence."

71. "He who speaks against the truth of apostolic pardons, let him be anathema and accursed!"

73. "The pope justly thunders against those who, by any art, contrive the injury of the traffic in pardons."

91. "If . . . pardons were preached according to the spirit and mind of the pope, all these doubts [voiced by critical lay people against indulgences] would be resolved; nay, they would not exist."

94-95. "Christians are to be exhorted that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell; and thus be confident of entering into heaven rather through many tribulations, than through the assurance of peace."

What Luther wanted at the end of the day was for the sale of indulgences not to allow a neglect of “outwardly . . . diverse mortifications of the flesh” (3) by the repentant (i.e., cheap grace), since “true contrition seeks and loves penalties” (40). He wanted those buying indulgences to be “truly penitent” (31), to express “contrition” (35), and to realize that indulgences only promise the remission of some (instead of all) penalties—except perhaps in the case of “the most perfect” believers, for whom all penalties might be remitted (23). Luther also wanted canonical penances to be imposed after, not before, absolution for sin was given (12). He was concerned that the sale of penances was exploiting the poor (45–46, 50–51). And he wanted Christians to be taught that the power of indulgences ultimately came from God, not an autonomous authority of the Church (6, 26, 62, 68); and that letters of pardon were not necessary for eternal salvation (36). Far from a radical reformation are *those* claims.

Of course we know that the Catholic Church did not respond to Luther’s ideas with the kind of openness with which it might and should have responded. Had it done so, the entire divisive Reformation might have been averted. Matters quickly “went south” from there. Both sides got increasingly upset and inflexible, Luther became radicalized, and the rest is history.

But what might have been is not our main point here. What matters for present purposes is realizing that what later became called “The Reformation” started out not as a major schism but as a genuine effort at reformation focused on a very particular area of abuse in Church life, and that the Catholic Church blew its chance to respond well to the constructive criticism. The 95 theses asked for a reconsideration of some of the practices around standard Church views, not an overturning of those views per se.

Note that, for American Catholics today, purgatory and indulgences are nearly irrelevant matters.<sup>2</sup> Looking back, Catholics now should be able to see that Luther was essentially right on these points and should have been taken seriously. It would have saved a whole lot of trouble and curbed some bad practices in the Church.

At the same time, the Church failing to respond well to constructive criticisms in a timely manner does not itself justify Luther’s reactive radicalization, nor legitimate the theological content of his increasingly

2. They would, however, be more relevant for some Catholics in Latin America and parts of Africa.

historically-novel claims that followed. Where the radicalized Luther went in his thinking after the Wittenberg disputation is another matter altogether. In any case, you now know that the common Protestant idea that Luther’s nailing his theses to the door at Wittenberg launched the Reformation protest is erroneous.<sup>3</sup> And that might make you wonder what other common Protestant ideas and historical accounts are also mistaken.

**32. Begin to realize how very modern evangelicalism is.** Protestantism and evangelicalism were integral to the birth and development of modernity and continue to be profoundly modern realities.<sup>4</sup> Both are a mere 300 or 500 years old, depending on how you count such matters. Protestantism itself was a crucial force setting modernity into motion. The birth of Protestantism marks the onset of the early modern period in history. And Protestantism in all of its forms has grown up entirely within the developing modern world. There is no such thing as pre-modern Protestantism. Protestantism has no authentically Protestant references, resources, or formations that predate modernity.

Now, start to suspect that a Christian church tradition that is of modernity will eventually be consumed *by* modernity and postmodernity. The signs of that are already evident, for those who have the eyes to see them. Begin to wrap your mind around the idea that if the Christian church is to survive modernity it very likely needs to have spiritual, intellectual, theological roots that predate modernity. To be of modernity is to be captive to modernity, not just its ways of life but its basic presuppositions and instinctive outlooks. By this I mean things like autonomous individualism, Enlightenment skepticism, distrust of tradition, moral relativism, consumerist materialism, knee-jerk hostility toward authority, the market’s colonization of non-economic spheres of life (such as church), and the domination of mass media, advertising, scientism, and rationalism.

3. See Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*.

4. By modernity here I mean the process of social and cultural change proceeding from and relating to economic growth, usually dated as beginning in the sixteenth century and rapidly accelerating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the onset of the Industrial revolution in the West. The social science and historical literatures on modernity are bigger than massive, but for present purposes, begin with Hunter, *American Evangelicalism*; Berger, Berger, and Kellner, *Homeless Mind*; Chadwick, *Secularization of the European Mind*; and Heelas, Lash, and Morris, *Detraditionalization*.

In contrast to Protestantism's position, Catholicism goes back to the very beginning with deep roots in the ancient world. That provides references and resources that enable modern Christians to potentially transcend modernity and so perhaps to resist its corrosive effects.

**33. Consider the historic sociological connection between the Reformation and secularization.** Think about these correlations. Liberal Protestantism was originally invented and spread from Lutheran Germany—the heartland of the Protestant Reformation—and Anglican England. Those are theological liberalism's epicenters. The modern European countries that have most thoroughly become secularized, and did so earliest in history, are all Protestant: Lutheran Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway; Calvinist Scotland, the Netherlands, and German-Speaking Switzerland; and Anglican England. By contrast, the Catholic nations of Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Ireland were much delayed in and, until quite recently, remained more moderate in their levels of secularization. (The one exception to the otherwise strong correlation is Catholic France, the secularization of which was enforced by government law, constitution, and policy, which since the French Revolution has been actively hostile to the Church—a cultural orientation, not incidentally, that was strongly promoted by the French Protestant Huguenots.)

What about elsewhere? Among Canadian provinces, Catholic Quebec resisted secularization the longest. Anglo Protestant New Zealand and Australia have become highly secularized. The United States appears to be an exception to the secularization process. But even here, Protestantism is shrinking in numbers and the more obvious forms of external secularization (e.g., declining church membership) have been resisted in part through a devil's bargain with “internal” forms of secularization (e.g., cultural accommodation).

The point is this: a strong empirical, historical correlation exists between the spread of Protestantism, theological liberalism, and societal secularization.<sup>5</sup> That much is historically clear. The chance that this correlation is a random occurrence is extremely unlikely. Rather, it appears that something about Protestantism *per se* contains the seeds of and fertilizer for secularization. Those include Protestantism's demystification of the world (e.g., banishing saints and prayers for the dead), its tendencies toward rationalism, inherent individualism, anti-traditionalism, skepticism of institutional authority, and stripping down of a rich sacramental

5. See Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*.

imagination. That Catholic cultures have also secularized—which they clearly have—reflects a growing influence by what were already more secular surrounding Protestant cultures.

The empirical cases of historic, confessional Protestant churches sustaining theological orthodoxy in face of the secularizing forces of modernity are few indeed. Can you think of any? In the United States, mainline Protestantism has embraced theological modernism with open arms. Consequently, evangelicalism has been forced to break away from historic denominations and start their own (usually small) denominations, conventions, and non-denominational churches. Yet observation suggests that, even so, significant sectors of evangelicalism are becoming increasingly culturally accommodated and so internally secularized. It is not at all clear that American evangelicalism will be able to survive its own success achieved during the mid- and late-twentieth century.

In short, the historical track record of Protestantism seems to be one of recurrent inability to resist the forces of secularization. Not one obvious case to the contrary in the West presents itself. In fact, Protestantism seems to itself embody elements that spawn and promote secularization, its own destruction, and then later to “infect” Catholic countries and cultures. Might not this suggest something important?

**34. Get to know personally some Catholics who believe in Jesus and are impressive in their faith.** Most evangelicals are exposed to few Catholics in their lives. Even fewer are exposed to faithful, practicing Catholics who love Jesus and are serious about their faith. And even fewer build real friendships with them. Yet sociologists have long known that meaningful social relationships and affectively-significant social network ties are a crucial part of religious change and conversion. That certainly holds true for evangelicals becoming Catholic. You need to get to know some Catholics who are committed, practicing, and thoughtful. There are actually a lot of them out there—your evangelical social networks have simply tended to insulate you from them. But getting to know some good Catholics is critical.

That will add to your growing pile of anomalies, because you will learn through those relationships just how “off” some of what you have been taught about Catholicism actually is. Building such relationships will provide a context to see a good version of Catholicism modeled and to get some of your questions answered. Simply to realize at an existential and not simply intellectual level that many Catholics truly

love God, know what they believe, practice their faith, and do not have horns sticking out of their heads is a major accomplishment. In short, let Catholicism become humanized for you. You need this human connection for this process to work. In due time you will need such Catholic friends to be your “sponsors” into the Church (but more on that below).

**35. Take note of sub-standard preaching.** Protestants, especially evangelicals, pride themselves on being “churches of the Word.” They place the pulpit, not the altar, at the center of church platforms and sermons, not the Eucharist, in the center of church services. By reputation, Catholic homilies are notoriously weak—not, admittedly, without some reason.

In my experience, however, and perhaps yours, if you pay more attention, many Protestants grossly overestimate the quality and value of their preaching. Over the years, I have visited many different churches and heard many sermons. Some Protestant preachers are terrific and some of their sermons are excellent—but those, I think, are the minority. Very many Protestant, including evangelical, sermons I have heard are mediocre if not simply awful. They are sprawling, unfocused, interminable, moralistic, not Christocentric, and theologically thin, if not in outright theological error.

At the same time, I have also heard some truly fantastic Catholic homilies. In my experience, contemporary American Protestantism enjoys no comparative advantages in preaching over the Catholic Church. Strong, Christocentric preaching can be found in pockets in both, and mediocre and even terrible preaching can also be found in both. In my observation Catholic homilies nearly always focus on the specific scriptural texts of the day’s lectionary (the commonly designated Scripture passages for the day), whereas Protestant sermons often wander off into pastors’ personal ideas.

Furthermore, bad Protestant sermons invariably drag on for seeming eternities, there being always just one more point to add, and reflecting little self-awareness of how bad they truly are. At least bad Catholic homilies, when they must be endured, are almost always short, like 10–15 minutes long, and are *always* immediately followed by the congregation reciting the Nicene Creed.

In short: if great preaching ever was a hallmark of American Protestantism, it no longer is, from all I have seen, and no longer stands as a particularly compelling appeal of evangelicalism. Pay closer attention to these matters and you might come to see the same.

**36. Entertain the question whether the kingdom of God really stands and falls on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.** Evangelicalism in the twentieth century backed itself into the epistemological corner of having to stake the truthfulness of Christianity on the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Epistemology, again, has to do with how we know what we reliably know. The Catholic and Orthodox belief that sacred Christian tradition serves a necessary authoritative function in understanding Christian truth was officially (wrongly) eliminated by Protestantism. And the liberal Protestant idea that enlightened modern human *experience* should serve a governing role in knowing Christian truth was officially (rightly) also rejected by evangelicalism.<sup>6</sup>

All that was then left to evangelicals, officially, at least, was the Bible. In that context, Christian truth was believed to have to be indubitable, certain, and authoritative. This was necessary in order to defend against the epistemological challenges of modernity, the terms of which evangelicals allowed to be set by modern secular epistemology. So it became necessary to place all of the theological eggs into the biblical-inerrancy basket.

You do not need to reject inerrancy to become Catholic. In fact, the Catholic Church teaches a very strong, high view of the authority of the Bible. But one step toward your becoming Catholic is beginning to doubt whether evangelical inerrancy is or ever could or should be the litmus test and keystone of all Christian truth. At least some definitions of inerrancy definitely seem problematic, when we are honest about the biblical text. In the end, it proves difficult to defend the position that the entirety of the truth and power of the Christian gospel and life of the church depend on an absolute defense of the theory of inerrancy—that it all falls apart if the bulwark of inerrancy is breached.

Why and how, ask yourself, should or must that be so? Doesn’t the fact that evangelicalism has gotten itself painted into the difficult corner of inerrancy itself suggest that something more basic about its larger approach to knowledge and authority is off? As you think about these issues, pray and ask God to guide you into the truth.

6. I refer here to the approach classically advocated by the liberal Protestant German thinker Friedrich Schleiermacher. As it turned out, however, personal experience came increasingly to play a large epistemological role in evangelicalism in the latter decades of the twentieth century—such that one might have reason to think of contemporary evangelicals as latter-day liberals, in their own particular way.

**37. Start wondering what it means to profess "one holy, catholic, and apostolic church."** These are the four marks of the authentic Christian church first articulated in the first century by Ignatius of Antioch, spelled out explicitly at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, and often repeated in Protestant creedal recitations today. Of course some American evangelicals—mostly "primitivists" and "restorationists"—do not believe in any creeds, and so do not adhere to this creedal language. But most evangelicals affirm the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.

The question to next ponder is: what exactly do these terms mean? Visibly, the Christian church is hardly *one*. Protestantism especially comes in a vast assortment of kinds, types, and flavors. Protestantism is not one, but many, myriad. One census counts more than 23,000 different Protestant sects and schisms in the world today; another evangelical scholar counts more than 30,000.<sup>7</sup> Historically, Protestants have skirted this problem by making the oneness of the church a spiritual abstraction. The church is "one" not in a substantively visible sense, but simply in sharing a common, true faith in Christ. Conceptually, that definition of oneness is said not to be violated by the fragmentation of the visible church on earth.

Likewise, Protestantism reinterpreted what it means to be "catholic" to denote, essentially, the aggregate collection of all of those true believers across space and time. John Calvin greatly developed and extended the theological language of an "invisible church" (not a biblical term) to try to give expression to the oneness and catholicity of the real church, in contrast to the divisions, conflicts, and partitioning of the visible church on earth.

Protestantism also redefined "apostolic" not to mean handed down directly from the apostles from bishop to bishop through orderly teaching and ordination. That would be too Catholic, and the Reformation had already broken from Catholic bishops. Rather, "apostolic" was redefined to refer to faithfulness to the apostle's *cognitive teachings* as recorded in the New Testament. One was "apostolic" merely if one taught the same *ideas* that the apostles taught. The relational aspect of standing in full communion with recognized church leaders around the world who were ordained from generation to generation by those whom the actual apostles ordained was irrelevant. It had to be.

7. *World Census of Religious Activities*; See also Barrett, Kurian and Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia*.

In short, when Protestantism violated the historic creedal marks of the Christian Church, they got around that problem by redefining it away. What the Church had always taught and believed those four marks meant were not *really* what they meant. Really they meant something else that, if believed, made Protestantism valid, despite the multiplicity and divisions the Reformation had created. Your next step, then, is to question whether the Protestant accounts of "one," "catholic," and "apostolic" are credible.

**38. Begin wondering what the difference is between evangelical museum pieces, memorials, and kitsch and Catholic icons, statues, and other sacramentals.** Evangelicals dismiss and sometimes make fun of Catholic statues and images and other material trappings. It seems idolatrous. Why would anyone have a statue of Mary, for instance, if one wasn't worshipping her?

The basic problem with this kind of outlook is that evangelicals often have their own versions of such images and statues. But they are so "obvious" to evangelicals that they cannot recognize them as such. Still, just as Catholics take their images and statues as normal, evangelicals take their own for granted. In many ways, they are not that different. To perceive that, you simply have to be able to see things the right way.

Consider, for example, the idea of a religious tradition naming and honoring saints. On the surface, it seems that Catholics do and evangelicals don't. The truth, however, is that evangelicals have their own saints. They just don't call them that. But the functional effect is the same.

Wheaton College, for example, is an archotypically evangelical institution. Yet it possesses the relics of evangelical saints which it preserves in material form for veneration by the faithful. If you do not believe this, then visit the Marion E. Wade Center museum. Therein is kept "The Wardrobe" of C. S. Lewis, in which he and his brother, Warnie, played as children. This is the wardrobe which, legend has it, inspired Lewis' imagined portal to Narnia in his book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Evangelicals take pilgrimages to pay homage to it like Catholics visit Lourdes. The Wade Center also houses a bust statue of Lewis and relics of other literary saints venerated by evangelicals, including Charles Williams, George MacDonald, and Dorothy Sayers.

Close by, in Wheaton's Billy Graham Center, you can also visit with relics of Billy Graham himself. These include some of his grade school papers, classroom notes from his Florida Bible Institute days, medals and

keys to cities, and even his very own traveling pulpit with sermon notes and Bible, behind which visitors are allowed physically to stand.

Material images venerating other Wheaton saints elsewhere on campus include a highly poignant one in Beamer Student Center. This memorializes a Wheaton graduate, Todd Beamer, who acted heroically on September 11, 2001 to help prevent Flight 93 from being used by the al-Qaeda hijackers as a weapon of terror. Beamer helped to bring the plane down in a field in rural Pennsylvania rather than have it crashed into a building in Washington, D.C. The memorial is quite moving.

Keep looking around. One of the walls of Blanchard Hall, the main icon of Wheaton, has the names and years displayed of all alumni who, time out of mind, had graduated and gone to serve on the foreign mission field. These graduates were of course being honored and revered for what in that subculture is essentially held to qualify one for sainthood: becoming a foreign missionary.<sup>8</sup>

In short, Wheaton College has plenty of its own saints and displays their images, statues, memorials, and relics in material form for believers to visit, honor, even venerate. To be clear, I am not belittling or criticizing any of this. It is all highly appropriate. The point here, rather, is simply to notice the *functional* similarity between such things and the images and statues in Catholicism. Viewed sociologically, the actual differences are slight, perhaps nil.<sup>9</sup>

It is not just Wheaton. I recently visited a different evangelical liberal arts college, a good school doing impressive things (though I'll leave it unnamed). I noticed during my campus tour that this college had built a "Hall of World Changers." It was a handsome two-story rotunda dedicated solely to the honoring of evangelicals who had "changed the world." The circumference of the hall was lined with bronze busts of inductees, including James Dobson, Bill and Gloria Gaither, Tony Dungy, Frank Peretti, and Joni Earekson Tada. The obvious purpose was to connect current students, parents, and visitors in a reverential atmosphere to this "great cloud of evangelical witnesses" who have led saintly lives in

8. The embarrassing thing, when I was a student at Wheaton in the late 1970s, was that over the previous decades the number of Wheaton alumni becoming missionaries had significantly dropped. A sense was in the air, sometimes spoken in chapel, that something had gone wrong, that contemporary students had lost much of the vision of these former students who stood as a great cloud of witnesses.

9. That is, at a human level. Catholics, however, rightly believe that there are major differences at a spiritual level.

"impacting the world for Christ." There were of course no kneelers or candles to burn. But the material representations in statues, the veneration, the intent to encourage and inspire were all there.

I have focused here on the matter of material representations of saints. With a bit of thought one could ponder similar parallels between Catholic visual paraphernalia and the great jolly gobs of evangelical material kitsch sold in Christian bookstores and displayed with spiritual seriousness in many evangelical homes. The pieties and practices involved in these are not strictly identical to that involved in Catholic material religion. But the parallels are more functionally similar than evangelicals normally ever imagine.

Could it simply be that the banishing of saints is a futile and misguided Protestant project? Might it be that the Protestant proclivity to move all things spiritual out of the material world and either into the human head or heart or into heaven is sadly misguided? Think about it.

**39. Ask yourself why and how what began as a reform and renewal movement became entrenched as yet another established religious institution.** Evangelicalism is at heart a reform and renewal movement. Its impulses of spiritual awakening, reformation, pietism, and revivalism have always sought to purify and renew the church and Christian living. There is much good in that, particularly in its intentions.

But evangelicalism, like everything else human, inescapably encounters what the sociologist Max Weber calls the "routinization of charisma." Entrepreneurial movements of the Spirit become denominations. Inspirations are institutionalized. The oppositional church becomes the organized church and sometimes the ossified church. Entropy happens.

From a Catholic perspective, accepting much about the stable, routinized, institutional aspect of the Church is fine. That is not the only important aspect of the Church, but it is part of the things that are important. Of course the Church continually prays for renewal, rejuvenation, appropriate reforms, and deeper spiritual insight. But it is in and through the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church—and not endless splinter groups and movements—that such renewal and reform takes place. The one Church is the object of loyal renewal, not the enemy against which renewal must continually rebel.

American evangelicals, however, are caught between the horns of a dilemma on this matter. They cannot abide the kind of institutionally envisioned and committed view of church that is embraced by Catholicism.



Yet their own churches inevitably do, have, and always will become settled, routine, established, bureaucratic institutions—like it or not. That tension then sets into motion an incessant subcultural drive. The drive is to worry, to defend, to accuse, and to be ever ready to break, leave, and start something again that is more pure, more vibrant, more faithful. That is the Puritan way. In its worst forms, revival and renewal become a kind of addiction that is satisfied for a while but then needs again and again to be satiated by new breaks and initiatives.

To be a Protestant is to be a *protester*, one who protests, ultimately, against Catholicism, against Rome. Now ask yourself: Do you really want your Christian identity, doctrine, and life to be defined primarily as a protest *against*? Is that really right? In the long run, is faithful Christianity actually about standing on the outside of the center and perpetually protesting in opposition to it?

**40. Start doubting that the next evangelical renewal movement will really renew the church.** The latest renewal movement among some evangelicals is the so-called emerging or emergent church movement. It has generated a lot of controversy among and (for some) hope for evangelicalism. Your next step on the road to Catholicism: start to doubt it. Begin to realize that all kinds of renewal movements have come and gone in Protestantism, some making a mark, others not. More than a few have been fads. Notice how renewal movements today that are arising out of discontent with established evangelicalism seem, if anything, to base their promised renewal on “action” and “practice” at the expense of thought and doctrine. “Forget theology, let’s just *live* faithfully,” is the idea. Warning signal: Dead End Ahead.

**41. Read G. K. Chesterton.** Begin with his book, *Orthodoxy*. Enjoy the wit, bemusement, criticism, and insight. Keep in mind that Chesterton became a converted, committed traditional Catholic. If that is not enough for you, then also try out the Victorian poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who also converted from High Church Anglicanism to Catholicism.

**42. Take notice of John Paul II.** Pope John Paul II was simply incredible. His integrity, outreach, teachings, and courage in so many things, from defending life from beginning to end to confronting and helping to bring down Soviet communism are amazing. Learn about John Paul II and look to him as a shining example of what impressive Catholic leadership and living can be.<sup>10</sup>

10. See Weigel, *Witness to Hope*.

**43. Start to wonder if American evangelicalism, not to mention Protestantism, actually ever really reforms itself.** Protestants like to think that they are continually reforming themselves. They habitually reiterate the Reformation slogan, “Reformed and ever reforming!” They also assume that Catholicism is stuck forever in error.

The historical track record of the twentieth century, however, in fact, shows the opposite. Recent history shows the Catholic Church reforming itself in good ways more than Protestant denominations doing so. A fair-minded observation discovers a highly self-reflective, self-adjusting, self-reforming Catholic Church that has—even with difficulty—sustained continuity with tradition while re-reading and reforming itself in important and in some cases dramatic ways. The Second Vatican Council and much else are clear evidence of this, when taken seriously.

Meanwhile, Protestantism, including evangelicalism, hardly ever actually reforms itself. That is because anytime things get too bad, the disaffected people simply leave and start their own new group, and the old stay in place. Reform is thus neutralized by the joint dynamics of resistance and exit. In my experience, in fact, some evangelical churches—being so sure that they have the truth—can be among the *most* resistant of all to internal change and reform. If anything, in terms of change more broadly, when it does happen, Protestantism in the long run tends either toward theological liberalism and cultural accommodation or toward defensive sectarianism. A stable middle ground seems nearly impossible to sustain in Protestantism over time. And that is a big anomaly for the evangelical paradigm.

**44. Start to wonder where all the evangelical intellectuals are.** Okay, there are some greats. Alvin Plantinga, George Marsden, Mark Noll, Nick Wolterstorff, and some others. But not too many. Furthermore, the first three I just mentioned gravitated not to an evangelical research university (there isn’t one) but to the Catholic University of Notre Dame. Moreover, most of these were not formed intellectually by vanilla American evangelicalism but by Dutch Calvinism, a particular European-rooted confessional Protestantism. Beyond these observations, I need write nothing more on this point, since Mark Noll already summarized it himself in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*—the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is no such thing.

By contrast, consider the list of major Catholic intellectuals: Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Elizabeth Anscombe, Jacques Maritain, Mary

Douglas, Robert P. George, Mary Ann Glendon, Michael Dummett, René Girard, John Finnis, Jean-Luc Marion, Peter Geach, Etienne Gilson, John Rist, Christopher Dawson, Edith Stein, Louis Dupre, Gabriel Marcel, John Haldane, William F. Buckley Jr., Russel Kirk, Immanuel Mornier, Max Scheler, Josef Pieper, Gustavo Gutierrez, Karol Wojtyła, Bernard Longeran, John Henry Cardinal Newman, Ralph McInerny, Germain Grisez, Romano Guardini, and so on. Think too about the list of Catholic writers: J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton, Walker Percy, Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Hillaire Belloc, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Orestes Brownson, Henri Nouwen, Shusaku Endo, Ronald Knox, Paul Johnson, Léon Bloy, Victor Hugo, Malcolm Muggeridge, Robert Hugh Benson, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, Tony Hillerman, Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac, Marshall McLuhan, Rumer Godden, Muriel Spark, John Lukacs, and Thomas Merton (besides these there are many others writing in other languages with whom American evangelicals are not likely to be familiar). And, for that matter, what's up with the fact that six of the nine Supreme Court justices (as of the time of this writing) are Catholic, while there has never been one modern evangelical serving on the Court?

Who among evangelicals compares to these intellectuals and writers and jurists? Of course, such observations are not decisive in matters of faith. But the dearth of major American evangelical intellectuals tells us something significant about the depth and generativity of its religious tradition. Ponder that too.

Okay, if you are still with me, then you have accumulated more anomalies. The weight of observed evidence that is not fitting the evangelical paradigm has grown heavy. Increasingly, if all has gone well, you are realizing that something has to give. Either you need to find some major new answers to deal with all of these anomalies and so salvage the evangelical paradigm. Or else you need a new, quite different, more convincing approach that explains things better. You are on the cusp of a possible paradigm shift, a revolution in basic outlook. You still may not become Catholic. It is still possible to pull back, to find ways to account for the anomalies, and to remain evangelical. In order to become Catholic, you need to start seriously entertaining the possibility of "revolutionary science." That's what comes next.

## four

### Catholic Revolutionary Science

This is the stage in your transformation process that gets really interesting, if you keep moving forward. What was previously secure starts to feel uncertain. What you have always relied upon, you start to have doubts about. You begin to catch glimpses of very different possibilities, alternative outlooks that can feel quite radical. You for the first time begin to entertain the idea that something big might have to change. You start to suspect that the fixes to the problems you have discovered cannot be merely piecemeal. Band-aids won't do it, nor will theological gymnastics. You begin to suspect that the fixes needed are systemic. You start to allow yourself at times to envision yourself not as an evangelical but as something else, maybe Episcopalian, maybe Catholic, maybe Eastern Orthodox.

Just as often, you find yourself telling yourself that this whole thing is crazy, that you are probably over-blowing issues and making big problems where there really are none. That works for a while. A lot about what is familiar to you is comforting. But then the weight of all of the already-accumulated anomalies returns, and you start to face the fact that, no, you have actually stumbled upon some real problems that won't go away. It is probably too late to turn back or pretend they do not exist. You need to do something about them if you are to maintain your spiritual and intellectual integrity. You are reaching the point of no return—time to bail quickly or get ready to go all the way.