Luther's emphasis is a corrective.
But, a corrective made into the normative, into the sum total,
is eo ispso [by that very fact] *confusing in another generation*
(when that for which it was a corrective does not exist).
And with every generation that goes by in this way, it must
become worse, until the end result is that this corrective,
which has independently established itself, produces characteristics
exactly the opposite of the original. And this has been the case.
Luther's corrective, when it independently is supposed to be
the sum total of Christianity, produces the most refined kind of
skepticism and paganism.

—Søren Kierkegaard, Danish Lutheran, 1854[1]

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

—Carl Trueman, Westminster Theological Seminary[2]

Is the Reformation over?

—Mark Noll, University of Notre Dame[3]

1. Kierkegaard, "Luther's Emphasis," in *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, 333.
2. Trueman, *Minority Report*, 99.
3. Noll and Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over?*

Introduction

Like many evangelicals of my generation, I was raised in a church environment that assumed Roman Catholics were not real Christians and so most likely were not going to heaven. That was because Catholics did not believe in the Bible, worshipped Mary, and believed in salvation by their own good works. Real Christians who were going to heaven were evangelical Protestants who believed the Bible, had the right theology, and trusted in Jesus alone for salvation. When Catholics died they would surely find out the hard way that their church was wrong and my kind of church was right. The truth of all of that was of course very clear in the Bible for anyone who would simply read it—but Catholics, apparently, did not or would not read the Bible. So a good part of our job was to stand firm against the errors of Catholicism (and, of course, liberal Protestantism).[1]

Two of my best neighborhood friends growing up—Steven and Nicky—were Italian Catholics. Their parents were first-generation emigrants into the suburbs from the crowded row houses of South Philadelphia. Years we spent together playing in the creek and swinging on the rope swing, building tree forts and riding bikes, playing tackle football and shooting BB guns. Their dads were blue collar workers, and their living-room couches had transparent vinyl slip-covers. My dad was a professional engineer, and our couch's slip covers were blue cloth. But that didn't matter. We grew up together in what was a wonderfully fun boyhood of freedom and adventure. The fact that my church said that Steven and Nicky were probably going to hell because they were Catholic was

1. Many evangelicals younger than I am, I realize, probably grew up in more accepting environments when it came to Catholicism; the evangelical subculture has been softening up since the 1960s and 70s.

never a problem for me. On Sunday mornings, they had their world and I had mine. The only other time their Catholicism crossed my path was when we spent all our saved-up allowance money at the annual carnival held on the parking lot of the Our Lady of Good Council Church. The rest of our time we were busy with rafts to build and dead squirrels to skin.

On April 24, 2010, my wife, Emily, and I were received into the full communion of the Catholic Church in the Log Chapel of the University of Notre Dame. It was a wonderful event for all who took part. We could not be happier to have joined the Church. Our final resolution to become Catholic, which had remained up in the air for years, was a great joy. After years of discernment, involving countless hours of reading, thinking, talking, listening, and praying, when we finally made the decision, everything became clear and confident. Although we had struggled for years for clarity on the matter, once we made up our minds, the idea of doing or being anything else made no sense. Catholicism was obvious.

Emily and I both hold only the deepest appreciation for the spiritual and faith formation and doctrinal training that we enjoyed growing up as evangelicals. None of our four parents were born into Christian homes. All four became Christians as children or young adults through the outreach efforts of evangelical Bible studies and Sunday schools in the 1940s and 50s—and to those who reached out to them we are eternally grateful. Most in our families remain evangelicals, and we love them all very much. Emily and I both grew up attending a Reformed evangelical Christian school and are the beneficiaries of fine educations received at Gordon College and Wheaton College, which formed us intellectually and relationally in some very positive and important ways, for which we are also thankful. We have many friends and acquaintances who are committed evangelicals who are among the finest people one might have the pleasure of knowing. We hold many evangelical churches, organizations, and parachurch ministries in very high regard. And we continue to believe that evangelicalism comprises certain powerful elements of truth and excellent proclivities of thought and life.

Nevertheless, despite our upbringing and many positive experiences in evangelicalism, we eventually both concluded that the evangelical tradition did not ultimately make sense, even on its own terms, that it could not live up to its own claim to truth, and was not a version of church in which we could continue. We became Catholic, then, by carefully considered conviction.

We are not alone in that. Many evangelicals have become Catholic and today continue to become Catholic. What is going on? What does it take for that to happen? How does a good evangelical become Catholic?

About This Book

I never thought I would write a "How To" book. I am a professional sociologist who writes scholarly books and articles. And yet here is a book with my name on the cover and "How To" in the title. And "How To" is really what this book is about. It is not a theological treatise, nor an apologetic argument for Catholicism. It is not an autobiography, although my own and my wife's experiences inform what follows. It is not primarily sociology, even though I am a sociologist. This book is not a systematic analysis of the biblical passages or doctrinal ideas relevant to evangelicalism and Catholicism. It is none of those things. Instead, this book simply offers some "How To"-do-something advice for those readers who may want to become Catholic.

That means that this book has a specific audience. It is written for American evangelical Protestants who for whatever reasons are intrigued enough to be open to the possibility or may be even actively contemplating the idea of becoming Catholic. That also means that this book is *not* particularly intended for other audiences. It is not written, for example, for people who are not committed to Christian faith. You have to be a serious Christian first for any of the following to make sense. Nor is this book written for those who are not open to doing what the "How To" of this book is written to help readers do. Evangelicals who cannot entertain the possibility that Catholicism has something good and true to offer might as well read something else more edifying to them. This book is for American evangelicals who find themselves somewhere between the sense that Catholicism is intriguing and those who are well on their way to reception into the Catholic Church. I hope it helps all of them to sort out their lives of faith and to move in good directions.

One more clarification about my intended audience. There are two kinds of "How To" books. One is for people who have already committed to doing something and simply need to be shown how to do it. *How to Build a Deck* might be an example. The second kind of "How To" book is for people who are *still trying to decide whether they even can and want to do* the thing that the book tells about. Part of the purpose of reading

this second kind of book is precisely to help decide about doing it. An example of that kind of book might be *How to Get "Off the Grid" with Solar, Wind, and Other Alternative Energy Sources for Your House*. Doing what the book tells how to do would be a major project involving a lot of investment. So people read the book in part to learn what is involved, as part of the process of possibly committing to doing it.

The book in your hand is the second kind of "How To" book. I do not presume that the reader has already committed to becoming Catholic. I only assume that he or she is somewhere between curious-about and very-interested-in becoming Catholic. The reader may want to become Catholic, but is not yet sure about it. Part of the function of this book, then, is to lay out what for many are the typical issues, reasons, and steps involved in becoming Catholic—precisely in order to help readers discern whether they are really ready to make that change in their lives.

Despite that, at times the book may read like the first kind of "How To" book, as if the reader has already decided to become Catholic and simply needs to be told how. But many of the 95 steps prescribed below turn out to be not as simple as digging postholes and sawing lumber to build a deck. Evangelicals becoming Catholic involves a personal discernment process. And that means that each person involved might decide in the end to become or not to become Catholic. Furthermore, different readers will come to this book at different stages of their discernment processes. I have written it as if all readers are starting from the beginning, although I know they are not. But I am confident that all readers will be able to see how the book fits their own personal situation and so will know where and how to engage in the steps below.

Unlike many "How To" books, this one does not promise that the recommended steps will be easy or simple. In fact, many will be difficult. Shifting from being evangelical to Catholic is no small thing. Most people starting off as good evangelical Protestants find the road to Catholicism—for all of its rewards and sense of rightness—to be long, laborious, and often fraught with troubles. Among other problems involved, one usually encounters any number of friends, family members, and acquaintances who simply cannot begin to understand why one would become Catholic. Not having undergone their own "paradigm shift" on the matter, which I describe below, the very idea seems insane, not much different from becoming Mormon or a Jehovah's Witness. And that can be an unpleasant situation with which to have to deal. The book's title therefore is frank

in its full disclosure: going from evangelical to Catholic is probably not going to be easy, but rather difficult. (Then again, whoever said Christian life lived as faithfully as one knows how would be easy?)

I have attached numbers to my "How To" instructions below because there are many of them and "How To" books often number their steps. The numbered steps in this book tend to progress in clusters, in the experience of many who have trod this path, in rough chronological order as proposed. Certain typical concerns and understandings do tend to come before others in this process for a lot of people. But obviously the numbered steps need not be followed in a sequential, linear order. Readers are free to rearrange the order or skip steps as it happens to work for them. The paths through which we understand God moving in people's lives can vary greatly. While there is often a broad typical pattern, there clearly is no formula. Some evangelicals come into Catholicism through paths quite different from the kind I outline below.[2] So, while I offer the following in hope that it will help many, I do not pretend to claim that it is the main or only way for evangelicals to become Catholic.

Paradigm Revolution as this Book's Organizing Framework

Most evangelicals who become Catholic do not simply find out some new information, change their minds as a consequence, and then join the Catholic Church. The change is usually more complex and profound than that. It is more like what I am calling here a "paradigm revolution." Perhaps you have heard that term before. It means a basic reorientation of assumptions, perceptions, and concerns that changes the way one views and lives life. For you to become Catholic will likely require a revolution in your Christian paradigm, not simply a change of affiliation. It will mean a big shift from your current evangelical paradigm to a new Catholic paradigm.

The best way to understand the kind of change I am talking about here is to refer to the model of how science develops that was proposed by an historian of science named Thomas Kuhn. I spell out Kuhn's theory in more detail in the appendix, but for readers less interested in such theory I summarize the essential points here. In his famous 1962 book,

2. Some, for example, "feel" their way into the Church through intuition, aesthetics, and ineffable experience, rather than taking the more reasoned, ideas-centered path I describe in this book.

The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Kuhn observed that scientific development and change often does not actually take place in a gradual, incremental, and continuous way. Big scientific advances often do not happen by adding more bits of research findings to established bodies of scientific knowledge.

Instead, Kuhn says, scientific development and change happens dramatically, through revolutions. In those scientific revolutions, entire established research programs are overturned and replaced by upstart programs that seem to explain the observed world better. Kuhn calls those research programs "paradigms." When scientific paradigms go about their normal business of conducting scientific research, Kuhn calls that "normal science." But one established scientific paradigm being overturned by a rival paradigm is a "paradigm revolution." Your becoming Catholic will be something like that—your "normal-science" evangelical paradigm will be challenged and overturned by the alternative Catholic paradigm.

But how and why do paradigm revolutions occur? Kuhn says this happens when established paradigms become increasingly unable to explain new observations. Kuhn calls these observed facts for which an established paradigm cannot account "anomalies." Sometimes then a different paradigm comes along which does a better job of both explaining the anomalies and conducting the science in which the original paradigm was engaged. That leads to paradigm shifts.

Established paradigms of course do their best to ignore and explain away anomalies. But sometimes the anomalies become too many to handle. When too many anomalies accumulate, some of the adherents of an established paradigm begin to doubt its validity and so may be thrown into a "paradigm crisis." Those are the people who are primed for a paradigm revolution. All they need is to encounter an alternative paradigm that promises to do the work of science better than the previous paradigm does. Then the "ah-ha" light goes on and the paradigm revolution is underway.

In a paradigm revolution, the old paradigm is displaced, scientists increasingly embrace the better-explaining paradigm, and a new program of scientific research that is governed by different assumptions and concerns is set into motion. Scientists then go to work to develop and consolidate the new paradigm and explore all the new scientific knowledge it can help to generate.

Kuhn points to a number of historical cases in order to illustrate this model of scientific change. One is the sixteenth and seventeenth century shift away from an earth-centered ("geocentric" or Ptolemaic) paradigm of astronomy and to the sun-centered ("heliocentric" or Copernican) paradigm championed by Galileo. That shift—which told scientists to assume that the sun, not the earth, is the center of our planetary system—required a veritable *revolution* in outlook, evidence, and explanation—an often mind-blowing reorientation to thinking and seeing. Your becoming Catholic will likely involve something like that.

There are many strong parallels between Thomas Kuhn's theory about scientific change through paradigm revolutions and your possible shift from evangelicalism to Catholicism. I therefore use Kuhn's theory as the organizing framework for the ideas of this book. So, to understand what comes in the following chapters, you'll need to be somewhat familiar with Kuhn's basic concepts and arguments.

The appendix describes Kuhn's approach in greater depth, for those who want to go there. I recommend it. Meanwhile, at the very least, what all readers need to make sense of the following chapters is a basic grasp of the meaning of the terms "paradigm," "normal science," "anomalies," "paradigm crisis," and "paradigm revolution." Again, to summarize, "paradigms" tell people what matters, what to look for, and how to explain things in life. "Normal science" is the routine activity that people conduct within the logic and outlook of a given paradigm. "Anomalies" are facts or observations that do not fit into paradigms, that a paradigm cannot explain. A "crisis" happens when people who have taken an established paradigm for granted begin to doubt it and look for a better alternative paradigm. And a "paradigm revolution" is the fundamental shift in presuppositions, interests, and explanations that takes place when people move out of an old paradigm and into a new one.

And If the "How To" Doesn't Work?

What about evangelicals who read this book and decide that they should not or cannot become Catholic? That, of course, is their just prerogative by virtue of—from the Catholic point of view—their God-given birthright of individual conscience[3] and of the American political system's

3. The Catholic *Catechism,* for instance, teaches this: "2106. Nobody may be forced to act against his convictions, nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with

guarantee of religious freedom. God bless them. Nobody should become Catholic who is not persuaded by Catholicism. In fact, Catholicism will not *allow* anyone to become Catholic who is not persuaded by its truth and does not affirm those beliefs proclaimed to be divinely revealed.

(Of course, persuasiveness itself does not make anything true. Not becoming Catholic could be the wrong thing to do. Becoming Catholic could also be wrong. If everyone absolutely knew and agreed about one or the other of these possibilities, then there would be no need for this book. But all people do not know and agree. Many hold different beliefs. Hence, searching people should try to discern as best as they can. And, in that, in the end persuasion is all that any of us ever has to go by, thankfully. When all is said and done, we all need to trust that God's grace is bigger than our puny capacity to discern and know what is true—which it surely is.)

Evangelicals who remain unpersuaded about becoming Catholic shouldn't become Catholic. And then? They will remain—from the Catholic perspective—as "separated brothers and sisters," to be treated "with respect and affection as brothers [and sisters]" and as "brothers [and sisters] in the Lord." They will be viewed as not guilty of the sins of schism and disunity committed by past generations of both Catholic and Protestant Christians. They will be seen as living as fellow Christian believers in a state of "real" though "imperfect" communion with the Catholic Church, which recognizes many elements of truth and sanctification in non-Catholic churches, brought about by the genuine working of the Holy Spirit in them, which lead to the salvation of many people through them.[4]

his conscience in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others, within due limits. This right is based on the very nature of the human person, whose dignity enables him freely to assent to the divine truth which transcends the temporal order. For this reason it continues to exist even in those who do not live up to their obligation of seeking the truth and adhering to it. 2107. If because of the circumstances of a particular people special civil recognition is given to one religious community in the constitutional organization of a state, the right of all citizens and religious communities to religious freedom must be recognized and respected as well. 2108. The right to religious liberty is . . . a natural right of the human person to civil liberty . . . . This natural right ought to be acknowledged in the juridical order of society in such a way that it constitutes a civil right." Also see the Second Vatican Council's (Vatican II) "Decree on Religious Liberty," *Dignitas Humanae*.

4. See point #86 for the full text.

Not bad treatment—coming from a faith tradition that claims to be the Church in which the fullness of Christian truth subsists. Considering that not too many centuries ago Catholics and Protestants were killing and being killed by each other, things have happily come a long way. Even so, the question of truth remains.

A Note on Terminology

Two phrases commonly used to designate becoming Catholic are "swimming the Tiber" and "returning to Rome."[5] These are fine, but not my preferred way of describing the matter in question. I have zero problems with Rome, the pope, or the Vatican per se. But for present purposes it is important to realize that Catholicism is an immense, global church with varying expressions in every country it inhabits. What will matter most in the routine lives of evangelicals who become Catholic will not be the waters of the Tiber or the grandeur of Rome but ordinary life in their local parishes and dioceses. One's priest and bishop will be as or more important than the pope when it comes to most practical matters of faith and life in the Church.

Descriptors that focus on Rome and the Tiber I think also needlessly play into the hands of Catholicism's ill-informed antagonists, in ways that may distort, in the minds of those discerning these issues, the nature of what they are doing. Catholicism's Protestant adversaries, I have observed, tend to harp on the matter of *Rome*. They rarely say or write simply "Catholic" or "Catholicism." It is always *Roman* Catholic and *Roman* Catholicism—even though Catholicism does not routinely use that language of itself. I suspect they think that by shoving *Rome* in people's faces they will both highlight the obvious deplorability of papal primacy and rescue themselves as legitimate, (small-"o") orthodox, (small-"c") catholics, among all professed Christians, in their own right.

Let them. Arguing such terminology will never change their minds. And thankfully there are fewer such Protestant antagonists around these days. What matters more for present purposes is that evangelical converts to Catholicism should not, as a result of that kind of rhetorical behavior,

5. Many speak of the matter as a "conversion." But, to be precise, the Catholic Church does not consider Protestants becoming Catholic to be a matter of conversion, but rather of "being received into the full communion of the Church." When it comes to conversion, Catholicism rightly speaks of conversion *to Christ*, not the Church.

accept the premise that what matters most about Catholicism is that it is *Roman*. Again, Rome, the pope, and the Vatican have their essential and important place. But that is not as "corporate headquarters" of a "Catholic denomination," but rather to unify and serve the Church Catholic, the reality lived out around the world. That is worth keeping in perspective.

I also worry a bit in all of this that, for all of the standard associations of apostasy and error that "Rome" evokes for some Protestants, the same "Rome" may stir up unduly romanticized visions among evangelicals who are contemplating "swimming the Tiber." Becoming Catholic, we must remember, is not primarily a matter of venturing off "to Rome" to soak up the splendor of Saint Peter's Basilica, the wonder of the ancient Catacombs, the endless memorials to Christian martyrs, and the like. All of that is good and fine, as long as it is not turned into some kind of "Catholic Disneyland." But Rome is not ultimately what Catholicism is about.

Becoming Catholic is primarily a matter of learning to live out from and carry on the daily life of the Church, as received from the apostles, in one's own local context—in different parts of the world, in various and sundry circumstances, in the hum-drum of ordinary life, and faithfully, in whatever culture and society is one's own. Rome is certainly an indispensible, authoritative sign of Christian communion, a testimony and instrument of the authentic catholicity of the believers and churches which stand in full communion with her. But Rome is not everything. Rome is one thing in one place—as central, indispensible, and valuable as it is. The Catholic Church, by contrast, is nearly everywhere, doing lots of things, in various ways.[6]

It is upon the Catholic Church in the places where "converts to Rome" will actually live their daily lives as Christians that I think those discerning becoming Catholic ought to be primarily focused. It is from that perspective that the true meaning and importance of Rome can be properly understood and not unduly romanticized.

6. The Catholic Church is typically viewed by outsiders as a single, hierarchical body radiating throughout the world from its center in Rome. That view is not incorrect. But it is also truth that the Catholic Church is an assembly of thousands of distinct dioceses spread throughout the world that are united through the bonds of mutual communion, especially as embodied through their full communion with the bishop of Rome and all bishops throughout the world. It is the latter view, which sees one diocese and parish as one's true local home, which I wish to emphasize to evangelicals considering any "return to Rome."

What Follows

The next chapter briefly describes the typical starting point of American evangelicalism, from which many readers will be working. This, following Kuhn's terminology, is the "normal science" mode of assuming, seeing, thinking, and explaining that takes place in the standard evangelical paradigm. Although the details will vary with each reader, what I describe will be for many readers the baseline position from which possible moves toward Catholicism will take place.

Chapter 2 begins to lay out some specific initial steps recommended to American evangelicals who might consider or perhaps are considering becoming Catholic. Those steps consist of taking note of a number of "anomalies," to use Kuhn's terms, which do not seem to fit into or be explained well by the established evangelical paradigm. Simply following the steps proposed in chapter 2 will do nothing itself to make anyone Catholic. Lots of evangelicals are "on to" the kinds of anomalies suggested there and figure out various ways to deal with them. But it's a start. To keep moving forward, chapter 3 proposes even more—and more serious—anomalies that evangelicalism has greater difficulty explaining away. By the time readers have experienced the anomalies offered in these chapters, evangelicalism will have begun to look more tenuous and the Catholic alternative might start to begin to make sense.

Chapters 4 and 5 then shifts to the level of "revolutionary science," to use Kuhn's phrase again. Readers who get to that stage should start to feel the old paradigm falling apart and an alternative paradigm beginning to seem plausible, if not sensible. Here is where the focus starts to shift away from problems within evangelicalism and toward the compelling and sense-making nature of Catholicism. Once the vision of revolutionary science is grasped, it is often difficult to revert to and remain satisfied with the old paradigm.

Finally, chapter 6 proposes the kind of last steps needed to solidify the move from evangelicalism to Catholicism. Once one has worked through the "revolutionary science" of the matter, described in chapters 4 and 5, one still needs to consolidate the new presuppositions, questions, outlook, understandings, beliefs, and explanations in the Catholic paradigm that one has embraced—or, perhaps more accurately, by which one has been embraced. Chapter 6 proposes the kinds of steps needed to accomplish that solidification and consolidation.

In the end, readers who have completed the proposed 95 difficult steps will have undergone a process that leads many evangelicals who have done so, perhaps even you, to become Catholic. Nothing is guaranteed, of course, despite what some "How To" books claim, and I cannot offer your money back. But following the 95 steps proposed below is something like what very many American evangelicals have done to become Catholic. So it is a pretty good way to get the goal of this book accomplished, if that is what by reading it you discern that you should do.

Two Last Words

First, nothing in what follows suggests or should be interpreted to be saying that evangelicals are bad, dumb, or insincere people. Very much the contrary is true. American evangelicals are, on the whole, very impressive and likable people. Evangelicals are among some of the most serious, committed, sincere Christians I know. Some evangelicals with whom I have the privilege to be friends and acquaintances are incredibly smart and insightful people who do good things for God's kingdom. And I remain very impressed with the excellent work in which some evangelical para-church ministries, such as World Vision, are engaged.

Furthermore, nothing in what follows suggests or should be interpreted to be claiming that evangelicalism as a religious tradition is worthless, bankrupt, or not to be taken seriously. I do not think that at all. The following chapters do imply and state various criticisms of evangelicalism, offered in the service of those who want to consider becoming Catholic. But, even so, I think it is important to recognize the crucial role that evangelicalism has rendered American Protestantism in struggling to keep something like a doctrinally orthodox faith alive in face of the threats of Enlightenment skepticism and theological modernism during the late nineteenth and the twentieth century. I, for one, am deeply impressed, when I study the history, by the immense difficulty of that challenge and the sincere efforts made by the countless evangelicals (and, we must admit, fundamentalists) to address it faithfully (as they understood that) and sometimes smartly.

Any informed observer must also acknowledge that much of American Protestantism, especially evangelicalism, is particularly strong in many areas where American Catholicism is often comparatively weak. For example, significant sectors of Protestantism, particularly evangelicalism, enjoy relatively stronger participation of laity in church, knowledge of the Bible and sometimes even theology by church members, lay hospitality, strong practices of financial giving, and relatively effective church and parachurch ministries to children and youth. Protestantism has also historically been and remains an important force in the world for religious freedom and modern democracy. All of that is to be commended (even if it does not justify Protestant evangelicalism per se), and needs to be brought into the Catholic Church for Christian unity to be made more perfect.

So, the criticisms in what follows are not directed at evangelical people. Nor are they meant to dishonor the good that evangelicalism as a movement has accomplished in the past. Rather, the criticisms in what follows concern many of the deep presuppositions and current practices of evangelicalism as a subculture. Despite all that is also good in evangelicalism, some of its presuppositions and practices are problematic. And they cannot be evaded. Simply being in the evangelical subculture means one has to deal with their influence. If we grant evangelicalism's presuppositions and beliefs as true, then there is not a lot to argue about. My contentions below instead concern some of evangelicalism's very premises, and the problematic ways that they play out in evangelical belief and practice. But in the end, in any case, there is no need for anyone to take this personally. Again, what matters is not what we are attached to or the particulars of our biographies, but what is good, right, and true.

Second, although I reiterate this point about process later in this book, it is well worth stating now, up front, as well: as you focus on your discernment of the possibility of becoming Catholic, be patient. Give yourself time. Try to restrain yourself from making premature, seemingly-self-assuring declarations either for or against Catholicism. See how it turns out in the end. Eventually, you will be in a position to make definitive statements. But don't rush them in the meantime.

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Normal Evangelicalism

What does normal American evangelicalism look like? What are the baseline assumptions, questions, and concerns of evangelicals? What are the identities, activities, artifacts, and associations that comprise the subcultural starting point for many of the readers of this book—perhaps including you? Many evangelicals are familiar enough with their own subculture. But a few pages describing it will help to set the stage for the transitions that follow.

American evangelicalism is a complicated thing. If you are an evangelical, you are a child of the sixteenth century Reformation, European pietism movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, American Puritanism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the First Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, the missionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the fundamentalist-modernist controversy (on the fundamentalist side) of the twentieth century. You may also be an heir of the charismatic movement of the late-twentieth century or the Pentecostal movement of the same century.

Denominationally, you may be Baptist, Presbyterian, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, Holiness, Christian Reformed, Free Church, Brethren, Missionary, Mennonite, or from one of a host of other denominational types. You may belong to a pocket of evangelicals found among United Methodists, Episcopalians, or other mainline Protestant churches. Or you belong to an independent, non-denominational, community, or Bible church.

Theologically, as an evangelical you believe in the Bible as God's only revelation of truth. You probably believe the Bible to be "inerrant." You believe all Christians should read the Bible regularly and obey its teachings. You haven't thought much about where the Bible actually came from historically—it's just always been there. You also believe a gospel message teaching that only those who choose a personal faith in Jesus Christ can be saved from their sins and go to heaven. Faith in Christ is a personal matter that must be embraced, sustained, and made subjectively meaningful through various practices, such as prayer, devotional readings, and "quiet time."

Everyone needs a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." That means "accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." Nobody is born into faith or inherits salvation. Each individual must consciously and willfully choose to believe in Jesus (though Calvinist evangelicals who believe in a certain version of predestination would modify this language). Therefore, you believe in—or at least know that you are supposed to believe in—working for the faith conversion of other people who do not yet believe, so that they too can go to heaven. That includes children raised by evangelicals, who need in due time to make their own personal profession of faith. You also believe that Christians should be active in the world, persistently mobilizing resources, movements, and activities to carry out works of ministry, service, and evangelism. Being a Christian means bringing light to spiritual darkness, resisting evil social trends, relieving suffering, and caring for the needy.

Normal-science evangelicalism means you go to your local church every week and attend a Sunday school class. You are also likely involved in a "small group," which meets regularly for fellowship, prayer, and support. You may be in a Bible study or other prayer group. And you are probably involved in some other ministry or activity connected to your church, such as teaching Sunday school, volunteering for nursery, helping with vacation Bible school, or attending a men's prayer breakfast or missions support group. You do your part to sing well in church, and perhaps even occasionally take notes on sermons or Christian education lessons.

Institutionally, you are connected in some ways to at least a few of the institutions that knit together the evangelical world. In high school, you may have been part of Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Youth for Christ, or Young Life. You were probably also in your church's youth group. In college, it might have been Campus Crusade for Christ,

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Reformed University Fellowship, or the Navigators—especially if you went to a secular college or state university. Colleges and universities directly connected to your evangelical world include Wheaton, Calvin, Gordon, Westmont, Bethel, Houghton, Asbury, Messiah, Taylor, Greenville, Trinity, Covenant, Eastern, Dordt, Malone, Seattle Pacific, Azusa-Pacific, the various Nazarene and Wesleyan colleges, and any number of other schools in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. You also likely have some connection to one or more other parachurch organizations, such as Athletes in Action, Back to the Bible, Ligonier Ministries, Focus on the Family, Promise Keepers, or Teen Mania Ministries. You may send money to support the good work of World Vision, Compassion International, World Relief, or the Mennonite Central Committee.

You know what L'Abri and Urbana mean. You know who John Stott, Chuck Swindoll, Chuck Colson, and Francis Schaeffer are. You have at least heard of Gordon-Conwell Seminary, Fuller Seminary, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. You have books on your shelves published by Zondervan, Baker, InterVarsity Press, Eerdmans, Moody, Thomas Nelson, or Crossway. You know that "The Vineyard" is not something about grape arbors. You know that YWAM is not a word in Arabic or Nepalese. You know something about the "church growth movement." You have an opinion about the "emergent church" movement. You are amused but also curious when you hear about a "Toronto Blessing" and its reported "holy laughter." You have read *Christianity Today* and maybe *Charisma*, *Moody Monthly*, or *World* magazines. You may also subscribe to *Books & Culture*, *Men of Integrity*, or *Today's Christian Woman*.

As a good evangelical, you know a lot of hymns to sing in church, but you also know at least some "praise and worship" songs. You can carry your own on "How Great Thou Art" as well as "Shout to the Lord" and "Better is One Day." If you're the kind of person who pays attention, you know the names Chris Tomlin, Stuart Townend, and Keith Getty. If you dislike praise choruses, you at least try to tolerate them. If you like praise and worship songs, you probably have a CD or two of them to listen to in the car or the kitchen. You also likely have CDs by musicians like Jars of Clay, Casting Crowns, Michael W. Smith, Jeremy Camp, Michael Card, and Third Day. If you're cool, you have Switchfoot, Skillet, Tobymac, or Relient K. If you're not, you have The Gaithers. If you're old enough, you might have vinyl records of Keith Green, Randy Stonehill,

Second Chapter of Acts, and late-1970s Bob Dylan collecting dust in your closet. If you are younger or have kids of your own, you or they have watched a bunch of *Veggie Tales* videos or DVDs and listened to hours of "Adventures in Odyssey."

The homes of other evangelicals you visit for dinner, small group, or Bible study have religious items on display. One near the front entry says, "As for Me and My House, We Will Serve the Lord." On the kitchen counter sits a "Names of Jesus Stones" plaque, in which "Bread of Life," "I Am," "Emmanuel" and other named stones are set around the "Jesus" stone at the center. A "Trust in the Lord" magnet holds up coupons on the fridge. Or hanging nearby may be an "Amazing Grace" hand towel. In the family room you may find a "Lion and Lamb" tapestry, or a three piece carved teak saying, "Love," "Hope," and "Pray." A "God's Love" candle orb sits on the coffee table, alongside a copy of John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart* or maybe Bruce Wilkinson's *The Prayer of Jabez*. A "Footprints" throw might be tossed across the couch. "Love Never Fails" may be calligraphied on the dining room wall clock face. In the living room, a plaque declares, "I Know the Plans," "God Answers Prayer," "Trust in the Lord," "God Keeps His Promises," "Sing Unto the Lord," or "Great is Thy Faithfulness." The artwork may include baby footprints, butterflies, Celtic crosses, a trio of running horses, Washington's prayer at Valley Forge, or soft lithographs of pastoral scenes or lighthouses overlooking beaches. Out in the garage, above the work bench, you may find a "Serve the Lord" tire clock. In the guest bathroom, you might spot "The Serenity Prayer" or a "Friends in Christ" angel. Inside the kids' bedrooms "God Created Everything" and "Jesus Loves Me" nightlights glow. Curious, you poke your head into the master bedroom. "A Woman Who Fears the Lord" music box may sit on the dresser, next to a pewter "As You Live on in Heaven" framing the photo of a smiling, deceased parent.[1]

When running errands at the area mall or shopping center, you stop into the Christian bookstore. You purposefully ignore the large section across from the cash register displaying the kind of plaques, figurines, needlepoint, graduation gifts, garden stepping-stones, wind chimes, jewelry, ball ornaments, magnets, tea sets, Bible covers, Holy Land gifts, home accents, and other collectables and kitsch that you saw at the house

1. Of course Catholics have plenty of kitsch too, but, as we will see below, they at least have an explicit theological rationale for how and why visible "sacramentals" strengthen faith.

you visited. You probably have a particular interest in theology, biblical studies, or ethics, so you head there. You wonder why those sections are so small and why some books have been put there. Is Lee Strobel's *The Case for Christ* really theology? Or John MacArthur's *Terrorism, Jihad, and the Bible* really Christian ethics? You browse. The music section has a Christian/secular music-comparisons display. If you like Goo Goo Dolls, consider Newsboys. If you like Counting Crows, consider Jennifer Knapp.[2] And so on. You don't like the idea of Christian music simply replicating secular equivalents and markets.

The Bibles section is huge—there is a Bible packaged for every evangelical demographic type imaginable. You didn't know there was an NIV compact Thinline bride's Bible in bonded white imitation leather, or a NKJV Life Principles Daily Bible for Working Women. You notice that *Every Man's Battle* has spun-off versions for *Every Single Man's Battle, Every Young Man's Battle, Every Man's Marriage, Every Man's Challenge, Preparing Your Son For Every Man's Battle, Every Woman's Battle, Every Single Woman's Battle, Every Young Woman's Battle, Every Woman's Marriage*, and *Preparing Your Daughter for Every Woman's Battle*—in paperback, audio CD, and downloads, with related workbooks, accompanying versions of the Bible, "Promise Books," and Bible studies, to help with *Discovering God's Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment* and *Igniting the Joy and Passion You Both Desire*. You start to feel overwhelmed. The young-Amish-women romance novel series, Resurrection Easter Egg sets, "Guitar Praise: Solid Rock" on CD-ROM software, I-Can-Do-All-Things canvas tote bags, and the rest are starting to get to you. You head out and catch lunch at Chick-fil-A.

When it comes to your broad religious identity, whether you think about it much or not, as an evangelical you have been defined by your subculture as being *not* Catholic, in fact, as being against Catholicism. Catholics are off-base on lots of issues and not very serious about their faith. You are also against Protestant liberalism. That is what took over most mainline denominations decades ago, corrupted doctrine and churches, and pushed evangelicals out into their own smaller denominations and independent churches. They've got it really screwed up. Your evangelical identity has also been defined since the 1970s as against "secular humanism." These are the people who don't believe in God, who

2. This one will quickly be changed, however, as Knapp recently came out as a lesbian.

have lots of power in American institutions and culture, and who are trying to purge religious influences from America.

Finally, you are against Christian fundamentalists. These are your crazy faith-cousins who are well meaning but who wear crew cuts, are afraid of teens holding hands, insist on the King James Bible, won't touch a drop of beer, and think everyone but their own kind are going to hell. Fundamentalists embarrass you, partly because they are such close "relatives" in the Christian family, too close for comfort. Their strident narrowness also spoils evangelicalism's public image, which seeks to make being a Christian look appealing and relevant to unbelievers. Plus, fundamentalist separatism does not know how to enjoy the good things in life, like nice furniture, prestigious college degrees, a glass of wine, and the occasional R-rated movie at the theater. These, then, are your out-groups: Catholics, liberal Protestants, secular humanists, and fundamentalists. You, by comparison, live your life on the more reasonable and faithful grounds of evangelicalism.

You find yourself negotiating a middle position between Christians who are either too conservative or too loosey-goosy for you. Bob Jones University is always fun to dump on. So are formerly Protestant colleges that have been secularized. People who believe in gay rights and abortion rights you cannot agree with, but Christians who picket abortion clinics make you uncomfortable. Christians who are into "Meet Me at the Flagpole" and "True Love Waits" may be too zealous for your taste. But single Christians you may know who are sleeping together are self-centered and hypocritical. Leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are not your cup of tea. But you are probably not ready to jump on board with Ron Sider or Jim Wallis either. By your lights, some dispensationalist or hyper-Calvinist authors and seminaries are too narrow or extreme. But rumors you heard about postmodernist funny business at places like Regent College in Vancouver or the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto make you wonder as well.

Christians who write books about the next military-political crisis in the Middle East being foretold by the Book of Revelation and signaling the end of the world you think are ridiculous. But you also question scholars who seem to suggest that not everything the Bible describes necessarily really happened in history as possibly soft on inerrancy. You are annoyed by patriotic Christians who mindlessly wrap the Bible in the American flag. You also think the absolute separation of church and state

is probably a bad idea. You wish that most televangelists would just get off of TV. Some of the shows on secular cable television, however, you suspect would be worth censoring. You have heard of some hip evangelical churches that turn their services into rock concerts or whose sermons contain blunt talk about hot-button issues—they make you worry the church is accommodating to culture. But you also want church services and programs to be vibrant, alive, and "relevant" to the culture. You are not confused or duplicitous in any of this. You are simply trying to strike a smart middle ground between the extremes that is reasonable, balanced, and attractive to outsiders.

And what is church? Church is any local community of Christians who share the same beliefs in Jesus and who get together to worship, fellowship, and learn. Where two or three are gathered, Jesus is with them. Churches are formed by people who agree to become churches and to meet together. They are collections of individuals who have chosen the same path of faith. They raise their own money, hire their own pastors, decide on their own building campaigns, and choose their own missionaries and ministries to support.

You may believe that individual congregations can stand on their own, independently, as self-contained churches. Or you may believe that individual churches should band together into like-minded denominations, associations, or conventions by state or regionally or nationally. But you tolerate people who "feel differently" about such matters. Different Christians, after all, have lots of different views of very many such issues. What matters is that evangelicals hold together on the core essentials of faith and work, despite their other differences, in effective coalitions of witness, ministry, and mission.

You have done some church shopping. Having looked around at different churches to see which one best fits your needs, interests, and tastes, you have ended up at one with which you are fairly happy. It is not perfect. But you like the music well enough and the preaching is pretty good. It helps too that you have friends there. It is a good community. If you ever move away from your current home, you will take a good while to check out all of the church possibilities in your new area. It is important to find the right one. And if too much were to change at your current church, you might start looking elsewhere again.

People around you and maybe you yourself pray with a lot of particular, but by now so-familiar-that-they-usually-go-unnoticed, phrases,

such as, "Father God," "we would lift up," "I just have a heart for," "as unto the Lord," "knit our hearts together," "we are convicted," "if it be your will," "pray a 'hedge' around," and "in Jesus' name." About 10–20 percent of the words used in the informal prayers of more than a few of the people around you consist of the one word "just"—as in, "Lord, we just ask that you just give us the eyes just to see you, Lord." Your community believes in praying authentic, spontaneous, personal prayers—not rote, ritualistic, formal, dusty, traditional prayers. It once occurred to you, however, that most people's spontaneous, personal prayers sound an awful lot alike. They actually seem to follow standard formats. You yourself wish you could be a better pray-er—and might have some books on your shelf about improving your prayer life—but you usually fall back into your old habits and familiar prayer wordings.

As to the teachings of Scripture, when Jesus in the Bible says that the apostle Peter is the rock upon which he will build his church, you know perfectly well that what he meant by "rock" was only Peter's *confession* of Christ as the Messiah, not Peter as an apostolic leader. When Jesus says, "This is my body, this is my blood," you know he is only using a figure of speech. When the Bible hails Jesus' mother, Mary, as "full of grace" and says that "all generations will count [her] blessed," you know, without even having to think, to not pay much attention.

When you confess that you believe in "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" (if you are into such creedal statements), you know that "catholic" there only means "universal," that is, all true Christians from all times and places. You also know that "apostolic" means nothing more than faithful to the teachings of the apostles as recorded in the New Testament. When Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians instructs believers to "hold firm to the traditions which you were taught . . . by word of mouth," you know that that could not mean that Christians today should pay attention to church traditions, since traditions are human and prone to error and even Jesus condemned them.

You have learned all of this instinctive knowledge about correct Bible interpretation from teachers, preachers, parents, and books you've read. It all makes sense. The Bible is pretty clear to those who read it with good intentions. Those who disagree, like Catholics, are simply not interpreting the Bible correctly. They probably have too much at stake in defending their long-held beliefs.

Not only are you against the alleged authority of tradition, for the reasons just noted, you in fact are also suspicious of any Christian leader or institution which claims to have authority. Authority means power, and power means power-*over*. And that means abusive constraints on free, individual conscience and judgment. Christ has authority. The Bible is an authority. Other than that, the rest of us are simply followers. And Christians have been set free by Christ, we are free from human rules and authorities. Legalism of any kind is a real problem.

Every Christian is a saint, nobody is special, not even clergy. Church authority and saints and priests and the like, you semi-consciously associate with the Dark Ages, a time of religious oppression and human misery. How the true gospel survived such a bleak epoch is hardly imaginable, not that you think about it much. You get a better feeling when you think about the Enlightenment brought by the Reformation, the reestablishment of the true church, and perhaps the rise of modern democracy and capitalist prosperity that somehow seems to be associated with that. You are not big into the "Christian America" mantra, but you certainly appreciate the individual religious liberties that America guarantees.

So, what then are your tasks in life? What is your mission? Well, lots of things. Live a clean life. Get married and have a nice family. Don't have marital problems or get divorced. Don't curse or smoke. Pay your taxes. You might drink alcohol, but not too much. Be loving and forgiving. Live with the kind of visible integrity that will be a good "witness" to those around you. Try to be as successful in society as you can—Jesus, after all, has nothing against success, and Christians need to get into more positions of social influence where they can be "salt and light." The suburbs are a good place to live. Look for opportunities to share your faith, maybe invite someone to church, serve perhaps on a short-term missions trip or evangelism project. Get involved in your church. Volunteer, support the programs, get to know people, maybe give money. If the occasion arises and you "feel called," maybe become part of a "church plant" team in a new neighborhood.

Read Christian books, enough at least to maintain your spiritual health and to not get out of touch with what's happening. Go to an occasional conference or seminar on worship or missions or how to have a good Christian family. Make sure your kids turn out good—no drugs, no drinking, no sex, no rebellion. Don't refuse any of life's blessings. God created the material world as good and wants us to enjoy it. Ideally you

should tithe your money, though that's pretty hard to do. But as long as you give your part (more or less) back to God, and as long as you can afford it, it's also fine to enjoy nice homes, cars, clothes, vacations, whatever. In and through all that, though, you need to read your Bible, pray, perhaps have a regular "quiet time," get "plugged into" a "church body" or other fellowship group, have some kind of ministry you do or support, and generally let your light shine as a good witness to others. Maybe you have had a bumper sticker or Sign-of-the-Fish on your car, but maybe too you've decided you don't like that anymore.

In any case, all of this is not just about your little individual life. You are part of the kingdom of God. You belong to a larger movement of truth and right that is spreading the good news around the world and ministering to people's needs. Your life is connected to the historical and contemporary life and work of Bible translators laboring in foreign tribes, Christian ministers working in inner cities, faithful seminaries training the next generation of pastors, youth ministers working with troubled teens, Christ-based orphanages taking care of poor children, and advocates for religious freedom, the right to life, and development projects in poor countries around the world. Those are your kind of people.

You are in it together with the likes of Billy Graham, Rick Warren, Ravi Zacharias, Chuck Colson, maybe Josh McDowell, maybe James Dobson, and other important leaders who are doing the work of Christ in the world. Your life has historic and cosmic significance in the evangelical movement—made possible by evangelicalism's church and parachurch networks, ministries, campaigns, mobilizations, crusades, and media production capacities. In short, faith matters, church matters, life matters, you matter. Or at least you know they are supposed to matter.

This, or something like it, is your starting point. It is what Thomas Kuhn would call "normal science" in the established American evangelical Protestant paradigm.[3] It offers a fairly coherent outlook on faith and life that makes a lot of sense, when viewed from and lived within the paradigm. Most of the pieces hang together. The paradigm provides adequately compelling answers to critics. And it offers a vision for life and history that is compelling for many who live it.

3. I have played the description here straight. For a more humorous, satirical look at American evangelical subculture, written by an insider, see Kilpatrick, *Field Guide to Evangelicals*.

This paradigm fits well enough into mainstream American society, but not too, too comfortably. That would be a problem. It is important to "get out of your comfort zone" every now and then. This paradigm works particularly for people wanting to live a good life—in more than one sense of the word "good"—and especially those who want to have successful families.

So, once one has "bought into" this paradigm, whether through childhood socialization or a later conversion, there is not a lot that challenges or overturns it from the inside or the outside. Some sad cases crash on the rocks of disbelieving in Biblical inerrancy, going liberal, or perhaps going all the way into religious skepticism. Some others get badly burned in personal ways associated with faith or church that causes them to bail out of evangelicalism. A few others just don't care that much. But, overall, evangelicalism is pretty good at keeping its faithful and supporting a reasonably happy life.

How is it, then, that some evangelicals, perhaps even you, could end up becoming Catholic? What could possibly bring that about?