

can answer the typical questions thrown at Christianity by skeptics. You know about the Reformation and have been told that the Reformers reconnected the church to the true, faithful heritage of the early church.

For reasons that you cannot explain, however, you find yourself feeling a lack of roots. At first, this is not a conscious idea to be examined, but an intuitive sense that you can hardly name, much less explain. At times it strikes you out of the blue that something about your life in society and history feels increasingly shallow, somehow vulnerable. Some days you feel like an ant clinging to a leaf on the surface of a lake that is churning in a storm. The next day all is well. Sometime later you feel like a tree without a taproot that will shrivel up in a drought or be blown over by a storm. Much of the time, however, you don't feel that way and life goes on. But the feeling of rootlessness continues to come back and bother, maybe even haunt you.

The sensation is hard to describe, but somehow it feels like living on the edge, carrying a low balance in life's checking account, being stuck in the present. You find yourself vaguely longing for crazy things, like knowing your family history back into the Middle Ages or having a "people" of whom you are a real descendent. You might catch yourself somewhat admiring observant Jews or other people with strong ethnic heritages. The sensation, however, does not fit the evangelical paradigm, in which your faith is founded on the Bible and you are connected to the "true vine."

Do not run away from this nagging sense. Pursue it. Attend to it. Allow yourself to own it, to examine it. It is not crazy. There are good reasons for your feeling this way. This intuition is telling you something important. Something is missing. You need to find out what it is.

2. Start to notice church fragmentation and disunity. Until now you've never really noticed the extent to which the Christian church is divided or paid it much concern. God knows who his faithful are—and whoever they are comprise the true church. The unity of the church is in "the invisible church," all of the saints in all places and times, not the visible church. Either that or the unity the Bible talks about merely concerns members of specific congregations not fighting too much. Christians disagree about lots of things, but that is no big deal. Evangelicals, at least, pretty much all get along. Look at how well they cooperate in ministry and missions.

TWO

Accumulating Anomalies in Evangelicalism

If you, a good evangelical, want to become Catholic, you need first to start accumulating anomalies that do not fit your established evangelical paradigm. There are lots of them. Most likely the fact that you are even considering Catholicism enough to read this book means that you have noticed some or many of these anomalies already. But in what follows I assume the baseline of pure "normal science" evangelicalism described in the previous chapter. From there we begin to surface some of the anomalies that typically start evangelicals on the road to Catholicism.

Remember that the surfacing of anomalies is *not* about making *arguments* for and against. Anomalies are merely observations that somehow do not fit an established paradigm. They need not suggest any possible changes and are not decisive when it comes to any issue. Anomalies are usually readily dismissed, rationalized, or explained away by adherents of the reigning paradigm. The first steps toward becoming Catholic are therefore not posed as direct critiques or arguments against evangelicalism. They are literally only the sorts of observations and experiences that many evangelicals who may be on the road to Catholicism often seem to have. Here we go.

1. Begin to feel rootless. For most of your life, the evangelical world has felt a comfortable and secure place to you. You feel connected to a bigger truth and cause. You have God-inspired answers to life's questions in the Bible. You have some acquaintance with apologetics, so you

At some point, that view begins to fail you. Something or other hits you that makes you notice in a new way how thoroughly and deeply the visible Christian church is divided. And that starts to bother you. Scores of Bible passages calling for Christian unity and harmony and condemning church division and schism start coming to mind (e.g., Rom 15:5–6, 16:17; 1 Cor 1:10–13, 3:3–4, 11:18–19, 12:12–26; Eph 4:2; Phil 2:2, 14, 4:1; 1 Pet 3:8; 2 Tim 2:23–24). Think, for a most compelling example, of Christ's final prayer for unity among believers in John 17, just before he headed to Gethsemane. "May they be brought to complete unity, to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."

You know that many evangelicals who actually agree on most things theological seem content to remain separated in different denominations and independent churches. Why? The Reformers separating from a corrupt medieval Catholicism was one thing, you think, but literally thousands of different denominations is something else altogether. The uncomfortable idea arises that maybe the entire system of endless denominational and non-denominational churches is wrong, perhaps even sinful.¹ Maybe you are part of a sectarian order. Whatever happened to "one Lord, one faith, one baptism?"

You try to explain to yourself again why the fragmentation and disunity of the visible church is not a problem. That helps for a while. But you keep asking questions, and your explanations to yourself over time and those that others give you become less plausible. They begin to sound like special pleading and rationalizing. Still, you realize that they *have* to be true if the Protestant status quo is justifiable. But increasingly you wonder if the long section of "Churches" listed in the Yellow Pages is a real problem, if that somehow isn't a terrible witness against unity in Christ. Why should anyone believe the gospel of justification, reconciliation, and peace if the people who already believe and profess it can't get their act together enough to stop arguing and splitting off from each

1. There is much truth in Flannery O'Connor's satirization of the evangelical tendency toward private interpretation of Scripture in her novel, *Wise Blood*, in which the con-man street preacher, Onnie Jay, proclaims, "Now friends . . . I want to tell you a second reason why you can absolutely trust this church—it's based on the Bible. Yes, sir! It's based on your own personal interpretation of the Bible, friends. You can sit at home and interpret your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted. That's right . . . just the way Jesus would have done it" (152–53).

other? How could all of this division and disunity be honoring to God? And why does everyone else seem so complacent about it?

Those are great questions. Stop taking easy answers that letting divided Christianity off the hook. The more you tune into this problem, the more you'll notice it, and the more that you notice it, the more it will bother you. That's a good thing.

3. Notice the Bible's inability to settle matters in dispute. Once the previous anomaly lodges itself in your consciousness, this next one follows immediately. You, a good evangelical, believe that the Bible is a divinely-inspired and infallible authority for the faith and practice of the church. You surely believe in the Protestant idea of *sola Scriptura*—the Bible alone as the only authority. You also believe (whether you know the technical terminology or not) in the "perspicuity" of Scripture—namely, that the Bible is clear in its teachings so that even ordinary people can understand it well. No pope or other authorized teaching office of the church is needed to tell you what Scripture says. You know that when you want the final word of God on anything, you go to the Bible.

The obvious anomaly you run up against here is that lots of Christians believe the same as you about the Bible but, lo and behold, end up claiming that the Bible teaches very different and sometimes incompatible things on a host of primary matters. Though they all appeal to the same clear, lone authority, they come away from reading the apparently authorized Scripture believing it teaches a panoply of quite different things. The Bible, in fact, when you are honest, seems to give rise to a variety of different views on a host of different issues.² What's up with that?

This problem may strike you first about "the women's issue." Can women hold authority in church or not? Or it may hit you on other issues, like war and pacifism, predestination and free will, or church polity. In any case, the more you think about it, and the more you search for issues where Christians do *not* disagree on biblical grounds, the longer the list of biblical disagreements grows. Let's see: views of baptism, the atonement, divorce and remarriage, the work of Christ, eternal security, the Lord's Supper, divine foreknowledge, the nature of revelation, charismatic gifts, the millennium, creationism and evolution, the rapture, church and state, the eternal fate of the unevangelized, divine providence, sanctification, hell, proper worship protocols, the role of "good works" in salvation, the fate of the Jews, the "headship" of husbands, Old Testament

2. See Smith, *Bible Made Impossible*.

law, the ethics of wealth, depravity and original sin, church discipline, birth control, tithing, alcohol, swearing oaths, and on and on. With each of these issues you know that there is an arguably good “biblical” basis for two or three positions. That is why sincere Christians believe them. These differences also seem to have a lot to do with the church conflicts and disunity noted above.

How can all this be, given your assumptions about the sufficiency, authority, and perspicuity of Scripture? Something must be wrong. But it is not clear what. You can’t say that all but one of the parties on every issue in these disagreements reads the Bible in bad faith, or wants to believe falsehoods, or is just ignorant about biblical studies. Why then do so many people read the Bible in so many different ways?

Note that this problem of evangelical disunity started with the first generation of Protestant Reformers. They saw disagreements emerging quickly and tried, unsuccessfully, to contain them.³ The Swiss Reformer, John Calvin, for example, wrote in a letter in 1552 to the Lutheran reformer, Philip Melancthon, warning that:

The eyes of many are turned upon us, so that the wicked take occasion from our dissensions to speak evil, and the weak are only perplexed by our unintelligible disputations. Nor, in truth, is it of little importance to prevent the suspicion of any difference having arisen between us from being handed down in any way to posterity; for it is worse than absurd that parties should be found disagreeing on the very principles, after we have been compelled to make our departure from the world. I know and confess, moreover, that we occupy widely different positions; still, because I am not ignorant of the place in his theatre to which God has elevated me, there is no reason for my concealing that our friendship could not be interrupted without great injury to the Church.⁴

Melancthon’s own concerns about such matters he expressed in a 1548 letter to the English reformer Thomas Cranmer. Referring to divisive disagreements among Reformation leaders over controversial issues, especially the Lord’s Supper, Melancthon confided, “There is nothing in this letter that I desire to make known except my grief, which is so great that it could not be drained even by a shedding of tears as abundant as

the water borne in the currents of our Elbe or those of your Thames.”⁵ Calvin’s successor, Theodore Beza, later wrote: “On what point of religion do the churches which have declared war against the Roman Pontiff agree among themselves? If you run through them all, from head to foot, you will hardly find anything affirmed by one which is not immediately rejected as ungodly by the other.”⁶ Luther himself, looking back at the consequences of the Reformation one year before his death, observed with exasperation in a 1525 letter to fellow reformer Heinrich Zwingli:

The tiresome devil begins to rage among the ungodly and to belch forth many wild and crazy beliefs and doctrines. This man will have nothing of baptism, that one denies the Sacrament, a third awaits another world between this and the Last Day; some teach that Christ is not God; some say this, some that, and there are as many sects and beliefs as there are heads; no peasant is so rude but that if he dreams or fancies something, it must in truth be the Holy Spirit which inspires him, and he himself must be a prophet.⁷

Indeed. The more things change . . .

Until now, you’ve looked at the different “biblical” views that Christians hold as an interesting study in theology, a natural part of church history that illuminates different understandings of doctrine. Perhaps you have read and enjoyed some of the many “Four Views of _____” books. But now the multiplicity of biblical views is starting to feel like a problem. You can’t see how it does not contradict your basic assumptions about the Bible. If the Bible is such a sufficient, clear, single, and ultimate authority given by God to Christians, then why does it seem unable to settle so many matters of dispute that so divide Christians, including evangelicals?

5. Melancthon, *Epistolarum*. Lib. XI. No. 4142. Some translate this passage as follows: “The Elbe with all its waters could not furnish tears enough to weep over the miseries of the distracted reformation.”

6. “*In quo tandem religionis capite congruunt inter se Ecclesiae quae Romano Pontifici bellum indixerunt? A capite ad calcem si percurras omnia, nihil propemodum reperies ab uno affirmari, quod alter statim non impium esse clamitet*” (Bèze, *Epistola I*).

7. Luther, “Letter to the Christians of Antwerp,” in *Werke*, 547, Lines 26–34. Nor did Luther note the Reformation producing an increase of spiritual and social order: “Unfortunately, it is our daily experience that now under the [Protestant] Gospel the people entertain greater and bitterer hatred and envy and are worse with their avarice and money-grabbing than before under the Papacy”—quoted in Peters, *Scripture Alone?* 30–31.

3. See Payton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, 98–115.

4. November 28, 1552. Quoted in Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*.

Again, a very good question. You have noticed a huge vulnerability in an important part of the world that you have until now taken for granted as being solid. Do not sweep your questions under a rug. You are not crazy. These are real issues and major problems. You are not going to resolve them anytime soon. So get used to feeling uncomfortable for a while.

4. Start to grow weary of “meaningful” worship services. You’ve been to a lot of good church services with moving and powerful worship experiences. You know good worship from dragging or schmaltzy worship. You can tell talented worship leaders and musicians from those who lack talent. You’re not into being “slain in the Spirit” by any means, but you know what it is like in worship to feel refreshed, blessed, spoken to, or moved. Those experiences have been very meaningful to you at times. So much so that you have sought them out. You have tried repeatedly to “enter into” worship in ways that will again evoke that kind of amazing meaning and power.

The problem is, sometimes you’ve felt some disquiet about it. You’ve worried at points that that kind of worship experience might be more a matter of you “whomping” yourself up for it, than of God himself speaking or moving in it. At times you’ve felt self-conscious about your worship, as if somehow it is your job to generate some kind of special worshipful inner state. Sometimes it feels like you are trying too hard, or that the worship leader is trying too hard. On occasion, you’ve looked around and wondered whether the whole congregation is trying too hard.

Thinking that, you’ve felt like a sacrilegious cynic. But the thought has come back to you. Maybe some of this “meaningful” worship is really more about the subjective affective states of the worshippers than about their objective act of offering praise and reverence to God. Could this just be a lot of people blowing off emotional catharsis or just feeling good together?

You put that thought away. Then sometime later you realize that some people you know seem nearly addicted to finding out the next hot worship chorus so they can really get into it. Or they always seek to discover new contemporary music settings to the words of old hymns. Or perhaps it is only certain, recurrently emotionally moving hymns that you or others want to sing, not the full range of truth-packed possibilities. Then you start to wonder, what *is* worship anyway? What is this all about? And what do worship leaders, guitars, pianos, microphones, wor-

ship songs, praise choruses, ear monitors, and the subjective affective feelings that they can arouse in the worshippers have to do with worship at all? What does it mean when a powerful song that has in the past transported you to great heights of praise now feels routine and empty? Are you going nuts?

You’re not going nuts. You’re raising questions well worth asking. They may seem unbelieving, sacrilegious, or debunking. Sometimes that is exactly what’s needed. God can handle it. Keep asking.

5. Get annoyed and stay annoyed at embarrassing evangelical spokespeople. This one is very simple. You spend your life learning, thinking, speaking, and living in ways that are thoughtful, reasonable, balanced, and acceptable. People need to know that Christians don’t have to be loonies. Christians can be relevant and respectable. “Friendship evangelism” depends upon that. So does the larger influence Christians have in the culture.

Then you turn on the TV, open the newspaper, or click on the radio and what do you hear? Some loudmouth leader, speaking in the name of Christ or even evangelicals, saying crazy things. It may be the self-appointed President of an upstart Christian college talking about God taking his life if they don’t raise more money. It may be some high-profile pastor or book author shooting his mouth off about feminists and gays and abortionists and the end of the world. It might be the head of some right-wing Christian think-tank or political lobbying group talking about “family values” in a way that is rigid and self-righteous. It might be some faith healer acting ridiculously on stage. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that these lunatics are irresponsible, embarrassing, and impossible to shut up—all of which only hurts the gospel. Reasonable Christians like you work hard for years to create a thoughtful and respectable atmosphere in which the Christian message might be heard. Then these idiotic talking heads ruin it all in one sound bite.

Who died and made them king? You well know the usual-suspect list of names of such “leaders,” on whom you wish you could just pull the plug. You cringe anytime you find out they are about to speak. But you can’t pull the plug. It’s a free country with free speech. Evangelicalism itself has no organized way to constrain or regulate the worst types—it’s a diffuse and decentralized movement full of self-appointed entrepreneurs, populists, and media personalities. If they can form a constituency that provides enough money to get on the radio or television, they can say

You stand as a solitary soul before God, prayed for by your family and perhaps by your small group, but otherwise on your own as an individual—fortified only by the knowledge that you indeed have chosen a “personal faith,” you have decided to trust Jesus, maybe even have experienced a personal conversion. But something about ultimately being a solitary individual is odd to you. It feels naked or disconnected.

Attend to that. Start to wonder whether the bare bones, the stripped altars, the austere white walls of Protestantism are all there is. Ponder the question: is knowing God the Holy Trinity really as straightforward as the theology books suggest? Do the pat answers—such as the “penal satisfaction” theory—really capture the fullness of the reality of what salvation is all about? Is the Lord’s Supper really only a “memorial” in the sense of merely *reminding* us of the cross? Is the Church triumphant really absolutely sealed off from the church still on earth? Why should that be?

For most of Christian history, the material and spiritual world was much more enchanted, thicker with spiritual meaning, and full of greater mystery than modern evangelicalism knows. Modernity suffers a “mystery deficit”—an inability to even conceive of unknowns and realities beyond those accessible to rational understanding. Indeed, that mystery deficit is central to the corrosions of secularization. Evangelicalism participates in that mystery deficit.

Start feeling the deficit of mystery—the mystery of the Trinity, of being “in Christ,” of the cosmic meaning of the atonement, of the Eucharist, of the sacraments that laden the material with the spiritual. Start suspecting that reality is much richer, more unknown, more strange than you ever imagined. Then start to want to get in touch with that reality more fully.

8. Hear about someone you respect becoming Catholic. In the old days, Catholics stayed Catholic and evangelicals stayed evangelical. No longer. More than a few evangelicals today were raised Catholic. And more than a few evangelicals are also converting to Catholicism. Why Catholics might become evangelical is clear to you. But evangelicals becoming Catholic is weird. Isn’t that a step backward, a kind of willful betrayal of truth? Still, you know that some high-profile evangelicals have gone off on the Canterbury Trail (to Anglicanism) and others have “converted to Rome.” Francis Beckwith, John Michael Talbot, Scott Hahn, and Joshua Hochschild are some of the names you might have heard. Interesting, from a distance, you think.

Then you hear that someone you actually personally know and respect has become Catholic (or discover that someone you have known for a while and respect is Catholic). (For me, this happened when a beloved Gordon College professor, Tom Howard, from whom I learned Tolkein and Williams and Lewis in his class on “Modern Myth,” who helped draw me out of the depressing emptiness of modern rationalism and secularity, and who volunteered his time and attention in an independent study to teach me how to write better prose, became Catholic in 1984, one year after I graduated.) Huh. What’s up with that? Why did he or she do it? The fact of their conversion itself hardly makes a personal claim or demand on your life. Still, it is not nothing. It opens up an initial crack, perhaps imperceptible at first, to a reality into which the more you peer, the more it opens up and the more you may be drawn.

9. Begin wondering if being “relevant” is simply irrelevant. American evangelicalism is obsessed with being *relevant*. Evangelicalism wants to be culturally and intellectually hip, really engaged with *The Big Boys*, respectable to outsiders—all in the name of Jesus.

That’s the understandable result of evangelical history. Once upon a time, in the early and mid-nineteenth century, evangelicals were the proprietary custodian of American culture. Then they lost that influence and respect in the late nineteenth-century with the rise of secular modernism. The new elites and their liberal lapdogs then kicked evangelicals when they were down, scornfully mocking and tossing them aside as rednecks and yokels after the loss of the fundamentalist battles in the 1920s.⁸ Evangelicals licked their wounds in the shadows, but then launched a counter-offensive in the 1940s and after. By the 1970s and 80s, evangelicals were back on the public stage, throwing weight around in culture and even national politics. 1976 was declared by *Newsweek* the “Year of the Evangelical.” That was more like it.

Still, the insecure fixation with relevance won’t go away. It shapes church growth strategies, rock bands, tee shirts, media productions, evangelism campaigns. “Christians Don’t Have to Be Losers,” evangelicals always want to say. So you need to be sharp and to look good. You need a worship team that is impressive. You need the latest technology. You need to have Christ-centered answers for all of the social and political problems of the world. You need to place believers in positions of status and influence. You need celebrities and pro sports stars who point

8. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

a finger to heaven or thank the Lord on camera. You need to show good numbers. You need to *not* commit the ultimate sin of being out of touch, behind the times, extraneous. That is mortifying.

At some point along the way, however, start asking: isn't this obsession with being "relevant" rather obsequious? Why let the world set the standards for Christians to follow? Do we really think we will ever impress the world into the kingdom? Isn't Christ actually a stumbling block to all human pride? Might there not be more integrity in owning up to the foolishness of the gospel than in doing everything possible to make it relevant? Again, good questions. Keep asking.

10. Notice American evangelicalism's cultural accommodations. Evangelicalism talks a lot about being "salt and light" in the world, about not being conformed to the world, and having the answer (Jesus) for the world's problems and questions. But you are already likely tuned into the fact that, rather than presenting much of an alternative or counter-cultural witness informed by the gospel, contemporary American evangelicalism seems to have significantly accommodated itself to the dominant culture in a variety of ways. A lot of this results from the effort to be "relevant," just described; and to be not-fundamentalist, by living in a way that is palatable and hopefully attractive to mainstream America.

Whatever the reason, however, you detect various forms of cultural accommodation, some subtle, some obvious. You notice, for example, that much of evangelicalism has bought deeply into the self-fulfillment ethos of therapeutic culture. Way too much of the faith is about coping with life, managing emotions and problems, and feeling better about oneself. You also see that a huge amount of popular evangelical book publishing—evident when you browse the Internet websites of any major evangelical bookstore chain—cranks out all sorts of fluffy, feel-good, biblically-thin, theologically-vacuous, human-interest and how-to books that spray a thin "Christian" coating on top of the regular secular fare. It might be *Losing Weight with the Holy Spirit*, *How to Protect Yourself against the Coming Economic Crisis*, *Be the Best You that You Were Created to Be*, *God's Way to Reignite the Passion in Your Marriage*, or whatever—the underlying cultural accommodation is the same.

Politically, you also note, much of evangelicalism can hardly distinguish between its own religious faith and that of the Republican Party. Economically, lots of evangelicals adopt the same material lifestyle aspirations and consumerist mentality as every other American. In worship

styles, too many evangelical churches seem prepared to chase after any latest trend or fad in order not to seem "old fashioned." Militarily, evangelicalism seems unable to muster much critical distance from whatever war a President wants to fight or even the ability to criticize whatever forms of torture of enemies in which the national security regime insists we must engage. Too many evangelicals seem all too happy to simply watch TV, see all the movies, and shop at the mall on Sunday afternoons. Keep all of this in mind, too.

11. Read some church history. A famous nineteenth-century British convert from Anglicanism to Catholicism, John Henry Cardinal Newman, once wrote very perceptively that, "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant."⁹ The more you learn about the long term of Christian history, the less Protestantism makes sense. Your next step, therefore, is to read more Christian history, going all the way back to the beginning.

Try to avoid the many confessional histories written by Protestants that embody strong Reformation biases. Far too much church history on which evangelicals have been raised reads the Church Fathers highly selectively, framing history in a highly self-congratulatory, "whiggish" way, wrongly assuming an *inevitable* progression toward the outcome that so happened to transpire. That tends to embody an unjustified and distorted triumphalism about the Reformation. This can be corrected by reading a combination of original sources, the best of Christian history written by non-Christians, and some good church history written by some of the right Catholics.

For example, do not read books *about* St. Augustine of Hippo or about the Reformers' claims to be the true heirs or interpreters of Augustine. Instead, read Augustine himself, his original works. You will discover in so doing that Augustine is in fact a thoroughly Catholic thinker and bishop, utterly dedicated to the Catholic Church, and a forceful advocate of a host of Catholic doctrines that contemporary evangelicals reject. Likewise, read the original works of Ignatius of Antioch, Athanasius, Origen, Clement, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Polycarp, Ambrose, Cyril, and John Chrysostom—that is, central figures who established the foundations of Christian truth against heresy—and you will discover the same: they are utterly and devotedly Catholic.

9. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 8.

In the abstract, of course, we all know that these church luminaries were part of the early Catholic Church, since that was the only Christian church existing at the time. But directly reading their very own words somehow drives this point home in a way that makes perfectly clear with great existential force that the separatist movement that was to erupt 1,000-1,200 years later, known as the Reformation, actually feels highly alien to the writings of the Church Fathers.

Keep reading. Like most evangelicals, you were probably raised to believe that the Christian church was rescued from the darkness of a disastrous medieval Catholicism by a coherent, smooth, stable, and glorious Reformation. So, read *The Reformation*, by Diarmaid MacCulloch, a balanced, world-class historian of the Reformation. You will discover there depressing heaps of misunderstanding, conflicts, disasters, violence, bad faith, and lost opportunities both within the Reformation movement itself and set into motion socially by the Reformation.¹⁰ While you're at it, read *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings*, by James Payton.

You may also assume that the Reformation was happily welcomed with open arms by the mass of Christians who were suffering under a decaying Catholicism. If so, then read *The Stripping of the Altars: English Traditional Religion c1400-c1700*. This highly-acclaimed, discipline-reorienting history of the English Reformation was penned by Eamon Duffy, an eminent Cambridge University professor and historian. You will discover there mounds of evidence suggesting that the late-medieval English Catholicism that Henry VIII dissolved and plundered in fact enjoyed the widespread devotion of the people, was institutionally vibrant, and was only abandoned by most with immense reluctance and sorrow, under pain of punishment by law. Very many of them, in fact, welcomed the brief Catholic restoration during Queen Mary's subsequent reign—after the young King Edward's untimely death—with rejoicing.

In short, a great deal of Christian church history—especially that to which most evangelicals are usually exposed—has been more or less biased by partisan Protestant authors in a way that validates, valorizes,

10. Evangelicals also reflect far too little on the fact that the success of the Protestant Reformation depended primarily not upon the inherently superior logic of Reformation ideas, but primarily upon early modern state rulers wanting to flex their political muscles autonomously, without interference from the Vatican. Their motive was largely political and only secondarily theological. This too provides another tie-in of the Reformation to modernity.

and makes “obvious” and inevitable the Protestant Reformation. But reading history not written in that partial, self-congratulating Protestant mode provides a more accurate and illuminating perspective on the reality. Doing so helps to paint a truer picture of the fullness and complexity of Christian church history. And the more one gains such a picture, the more Christian history itself becomes an uncomfortable anomaly within the evangelical paradigm.

12. Start to wonder where the New Testament came from. As an evangelical, the Bible is the foundation of all of your beliefs. At least that is what evangelicals say. You've always taken the Bible for granted. It's always been there. For all you've known, the apostles wrote the Bible after Christ's ascension and the early church bound it together in book form soon after their death. You might even come from among the kind of evangelicals who assume or suppose that God dictated the words of the Bible to its various human authors. But for the most part, evangelicals simply don't think much about where the Bible came from.

Here is your next step: begin wondering how we got the New Testament, start asking questions about it, and do some reading on the matter.¹¹ What you'll learn will be enlightening. The contents of the New Testament as we know it, the authorized Christian scriptural canon (literally: rule, measure), were not finally decided upon and pulled together until the end of the fourth century. For the first three hundred years of church history, in other words, Christians did not possess the New Testament as we know it. That is much longer than the United States has existed as a country. During that time, different churches possessed and read as Scripture copies of different written documents, many of which ended up in our New Testament.¹² But few churches had the entire contents of the New Testament as we know it. And different leaders and congregations held somewhat differing views about what was even scriptural.

11. For starters, I recommend Allert's *High View of Scripture?*

12. Not all biblical scholars agree on all of the details but here is what most say: The three synoptic Gospels were not written down by the apostles soon after Christ's ascension but existed in content as an oral tradition for roughly twenty-five to eighty years (depending on exact dates of writing). It was not until the second century—between 60 and 115 CE—that the synoptic Gospels were put into writing. The gospel of John was written at the end of the first century. The apostle Paul's epistles were written by Paul himself or one of his scribes during his ministry, and copies of many of them were circulated among many of the churches around the Roman Empire and beyond. Some other New Testament epistles, however, perhaps especially the so-called “pastoral epistles,” appear to have been written or compiled by their authors sometime in the second century.

The drive even to define a Christian scriptural canon was set into motion by the heretic Marcion of Sinope (85–160 CE), who wanted to disregard the Old Testament and exclude as non-authoritative what eventually became certain New Testament books. The threat of Gnosticism contributed too. Responding to Marcion's challenge and sorting out what deserved to be canonized took about three centuries. Eventually, leaders from the many churches—Catholic bishops, to be specific—came together in synods to define exactly what should constitute Christian Scriptures. It was not until the synods at Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 and 419 that Western Catholic bishops and theologians representing the various churches finally agreed to the authorized content of the Christian Bible, that is, the canonical New Testament that we possess. In the East, that process continued still longer.¹³

In the end, some of the written texts that some churches had believed were scriptural (e.g., *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *Book of Baruch*, *Letter of Jeremiah*, *1 Clement*, *2 Clement*) were later excluded from that canonical list. Other written texts that some churches believed were *not* scriptural (Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 John, 3 John, Revelation) ended up being *included* in the final New Testament list. And some texts that various churches had never possessed copies of were also incorporated in the final New Testament canon.

These historical facts raise some troubling questions for Bible-only Protestants. For example, with what scriptural authority did the Christian churches operate for their first 350 years, during which time they did not commonly possess the complete New Testament that Protestants today now claim is (along with the Old Testament) the necessary and only authority for Christian faith and practice? Was it whichever texts they happened to possess, even if some of them later turned out *not* to be included in the New Testament? Did different churches that possessed different documents have different authoritative scriptures? How could what eventually turned out to be the contents of the New Testament have possibly functioned (along with the Old Testament) during this time as the sole and sufficient authority in and for the Christian church, when

13. The working canon defined by the end of the fourth century was, to be precise, decided not by ecumenical councils but regional synods. Full dogmatic articulations of the canons were not made until the Council of Trent of 1546 for Roman Catholicism, the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1563 for the Church of England, the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 for British Calvinism, and the Synod of Jerusalem of 1672 for the Greek Orthodox.

it took bishops and theologians of the Church to decide, after several centuries lacking a consensus on the matter, the very content of the New Testament canon itself?

And who or what actually authorized those bishops and theologians to even make those monumental decisions? How can evangelicals trust the New Testament itself—which exists in its received canonical form only and precisely because Catholic bishops and theologians met to define them—since evangelicals, who insist on *sola Scriptura*, do not even believe in the legitimacy or authority of Catholic bishops? Hmm.

Start to realize that the evangelical paradigm cannot have it both ways. Evangelicals cannot both deny that bishops of the Catholic Church possess the legitimate authority to collegially decide on binding teachings concerning faith and life *and* simultaneously insist that the Bible as received is the only and sufficient authority for Christian faith and life. That is a self-contradicting and therefore self-defeating position. The canonical existence of the New Testament as we know it is dependent for its very being on the authoritative decisions of Catholic bishops meeting in synods to define it. To take the New Testament as authoritative therefore presupposes the authority of bishops to define the content of the New Testament—even if they themselves did not create the content.

Some evangelicals will at this point shine the spotlight away from the Catholic bishops and theologians and instead toward the Holy Spirit: "It was the Holy Spirit who led the church to define the right documents as scriptural canon." Of course. Catholics believe that. But note the method. The Holy Spirit did not drop the Bible out of the sky. Nor did the New Testament canon somehow mysteriously form itself under the Spirit's guidance apart from the work of the Church. "Led the Church to define" is a crucial part of the statement above. So why do these evangelicals assume we are dealing with a zero-sum game? The Holy Spirit's crucial role does not make the bishops role irrelevant. If anything, it shows the true legitimacy of the authority of the Church to define matters as important as the contents of Scripture—God, apparently, was pleased to use the Church in this way.

In case my overall argument here has not been clear, let me put it another way. Either the Catholic Church's episcopate had a legitimate authority to define the content of the New Testament Scriptures, or it did not have the authority. If the latter is correct, then the status of the canon of New Testament Scriptures itself is called into question, and what is

scriptural is an open-ended question. If the former is true, then we have a defensible account explaining the composition and authority of the New Testament. But we must then also accept the legitimate authority of the Catholic episcopate for defining matters as serious as the content of the canon of Christian Scripture. We cannot turn around and deny the authority of Catholic bishops—now that they have helped provide us the authorized New Testament canon—and say that the *only* authority is the Bible which the Church helped to constitute.

13. Read J. R. R. Tolkien. You've seen Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* and have probably read *The Hobbit*. Good. Now sit down, read, and soak in the original *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in its full splendor. Wait a year, then read it again. Let the power and pathos of the epic seep into your spirit. Soak up the mystery, the songs, the prophecies, the enchanted power of speech and spells. Hear in Middle Earth's nature a living protest against a dead, industrial, Saruman-esque world, mirroring the modernity of our world. Feel its thickly significant life mock the thinness of our contemporary existence. Wonder who or what is the "Secret Fire" of which Gandalf is a servant. What is the "flame of Anor" which he wields against the Balrog on the Bridge of Khazad Dhum in the Mines of Moria? Contemplate the light providential hand that seems to guide epic events to their rightful end, beyond the capacity of any actor to control and often beyond all reasonable hope. Consider what it means that Gandalf the Grey returns from death in white.

Having soaked in the depths of the horrors and glory of Tolkien's epic, then ask yourself: what connection might there be between his fictional imagination and Tolkien's real, traditional, committed Catholic faith? Why does this kind of literature come from the hands of Catholics, like Tolkien and Charles Williams, or at times from the almost-Catholic, high-Anglican hand of C. S. Lewis?¹⁴ Why don't or can't American evangelical authors write like this? Why instead are the evangelical equivalents that make for its bestsellers more like Frank Peretti's *This Present Darkness*, Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind*, or the scads of cleaned-up, Christian romance novels published as counterparts of their secular Harlequin Romance equivalents? Pathetic. Something more than sheer coincidence is going on here. What is it?

14. Some who knew Lewis believed that he became Catholic in all but name at the end of his life.

14. Start asking why evangelical churches are so segregated by race and social class. The old saw says, "Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week." We've heard it many times. But it is true. Protestant churches, including most evangelical churches, are highly segregated by race and social class. That's a sociological fact¹⁵—despite the many (inerrant) Bible verses about Christian brotherhood, unity, and preference for the poor. Many evangelicals are concerned about the racial division, at least, and have worked hard on efforts at "racial reconciliation." But those have typically been conceived in personal, relational terms. The real racial problems, however, are often complex and structural.¹⁶ So personal "racial reconciliation" has been limited in its effectiveness.

Add to your to-do list: starting thinking about the way churches and the larger religious system are structured that encourages racial and social-class segregation. Focus on the American religious economy, built on free congregational choice, not designated parish location. In it congregations operate like firms, religious believers are consumers, and the choice of church-product depends entirely on the wants, "needs," and preferences of each individual and family (again, think church shopping). Anybody can change their congregation anytime, at will.

Then add the idea of "homophily," that people usually like and want to be around other people who are like them. Presto! You have churches that are highly segregated by race and social class. Birds of a feather flock together, etc.—all made possible by the free-market, choose-your-own-church, Protestant, congregational system.

What might it take to overcome this unbiblical, racial, and social-class system of church segregation? Well, in most places residential neighborhoods are themselves segregated by race and social class, so a simple change to a geographical parish-based system will not automatically solve the problem (besides, a lot of American Catholics have become influenced by the Protestant church-shop mentality, significantly eroding the geographically-based parish system, an erosion you could help work against). But a functioning Catholic parish system, defining which local church one ought to attend based on one's residence (again, something you could help to strengthen), would go a long way toward breaking down the segregation. It already does. It could do even more.

15. Smith and Farris, "Socioeconomic Inequality," 95–104.

16. Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*.

For one thing, the common Catholic faith would dissolve the zillions of denominational barriers to common Christian identity and fellowship. For another, many Catholic parishes even in our segregated American society comprise people from varying races and social classes. The most consistently diverse type of churches that I, as a professional observer of American religion, have visited in my life have been Catholic parishes—whites and blacks and Hispanics and Asians are often commonly seen worshipping together without tension or rancor. Social science studies support this observation to be empirically true.¹⁷ Is that not a better foretaste of the kingdom coming?

15. Feel some dismay about evangelical social ethics. Evangelicalism is big on individual salvation and personal ethics. It is less impressive when it comes to social ethics. This has probably already bothered you. Let it. Pay attention to the fact. Consider the full extent of the problem. When it comes to social ethics, evangelicalism is beset by one of two problems. Either it has few social teachings to offer at all (go save souls, obey the government, etc.). Or else it has a social-ethics position for every political ideology on the spectrum—from “biblically supported” libertarian Republicanism to middle-of-the-road Americanism to liberal do-goodism to gospel-inspired socialism. Take your pick: Rousas Rushdooney, Pat Robertson, James Skillen, Stephen Mott, Tony Campolo, Jim Wallis, Ronald Sider, or Brian Moore. With of course no authoritative evangelical-church teaching on social doctrine, every individual evangelical simply ends up picking their personal favorite approach (often driven by their own social class interests), and the larger disagreement and disunity of Protestantism continues.

Further down the road in this process, you will learn that the Catholic Church possesses a rich, intelligent, coherent, balanced, compelling body of social doctrines. But hold off on that for now. For the moment, simply take note of the neglect and disarray when it comes to American evangelical social ethics.

16. Begin noticing how allergic evangelicals are to Mary. With the exception of some high-church Anglicans, Protestants, we all know, reject the Catholic view of Mary. She is the mother of Jesus, remember? The first generation of Reformers—particularly Luther—continued to believe some of Catholicism’s Marian doctrines, such as her perpetual

virginity. But in due time, the bitter anti-Catholic struggles of history stripped Mary out of the picture.

Mary became a kind of noxious allergen against which Protestants, maybe especially evangelicals, have automatic allergic reactions. A lot of work goes into inoculating the Protestant faithful against Mary, filtering her out of the air in the religious atmosphere. Normally that work is highly successful, so that few Protestants are even aware of Mary’s virtual absence—the matter in the end is simply invisible.

It is of course impossible for evangelicals to eliminate Mary entirely, especially at Christmas time. But that can be managed. Mary is made a mere necessary biological conduit for the Incarnation to happen, who, after the stable and the manger, can be set aside as irrelevant if not potentially dangerous—like Baal or Asherah or Moloch in her threat to become a corrupting idol of worship. Ancient historical Christian theological understandings of Mary as the “Second Eve” and a stunning exemplar of obedient faith in the face of confusion and fear, proclaimed by Church Fathers and Catholic (and Orthodox) believers thereafter, are jettisoned. In all of this, however, there is a certain over-exertion that would be pathetically amusing were the subject matter not so consequential and, well, biblical.

I still remember my sixth-grade school class singing “Faith of Our Fathers”—#487 in the (Presbyterian) *Trinity Hymnal*—at the start of school days. Our earnest Dutch Calvinist teacher (first name: Calvin) pounded away stirringly at the piano, as we voice-cracking twerps belted out:

Faith of our fathers, living still, In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
O how our hearts beat high with joy, Whenever we hear that glorious Word!

Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death.

What a glorious tribute to our valiant and heroic Protestant forebears who for the sake of the Reformation suffered persecution and death at the hands of Catholic tyrants! Could I be faithful enough to endure dungeon, fire, and sword?

Thirty-five years later, I learned that this is actually a Catholic hymn, written by the mid-nineteenth-century British Catholic, Frederick William Faber, whose originally-penned last verse declared:

Faith of our fathers, Mary’s prayers, Shall win our country back to Thee;

17. Emerson and Woo, *People of the Dream*, 28–46.

And through the truth that comes from God, England shall then indeed be free.

Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee till death.

Oh, my. Well, we certainly cannot have talk of a divinely-true Catholic faith freeing England from Protestant oppression! The hymn had to be confiscated and Mary deleted. (Alas for Faber that England has not been won back to the true faith—at best the papists are merely tolerated as the dominant Protestant culture becomes ever more secularized.)

What is the anomaly here? Evangelicals trust in the Bible, on which they say they base their beliefs. But, when it comes to things even only remotely and by association “too Catholic,” like Mary, the verses are read over and past and ignored. It is like Mary hardly matters, as if the verses were not in the Bible, as if Mary deserves no theological reflection. That is no huge crime in and of itself—at least from a Protestant perspective. But it is revealing. All is not confident, healthy, balanced, or settled on the matter. “The lady doth protest too much, methinks,” one might observe, with a Shakespearean flair. Keep that in mind too.

17. Start to grow bored with white bread and vanilla flavored evangelicalism. One of the hallmarks of early Reformation churches was their whitewashing of church walls. All of the idolatrous Catholic paintings and images of the Patriarchs, the prophets, the suffering Christ, Mary, and the saints had to be covered over. Whitewash was the main means to get that done. Bare, stark white walls—that was the Protestant way. Many Protestant churches even today continue that stark, white-wall tradition. You have probably already noticed that many aspects of American evangelicalism also have, speaking broadly and metaphorically, a “white” or “bare” tone to them. A lot of evangelicalism tastes like white bread and vanilla ice cream. Both of those can taste good. But when they’re all one eats, it starts to get old and bland. There are a lot more interesting kinds of bread and flavors of ice cream. Think about the verse, “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:4-5). And allow yourself to admit your boredom with evangelicalism’s bare, stark, white, vanilla approach to faith.

18. Note your dissatisfaction with the heavily cognitive, often rationalist, nature of much of Protestantism. There is no denying it: Protestantism is a religion of the head. What matters most are holding the

right beliefs. And right beliefs are things that reside between one’s ears. Having the right cognitions is the essence of Protestantism. So is possessing, professing, and defending the right words. And those words come from and enter into the head as well. True, evangelicalism includes strains of pietism, charismatic tendencies, revivalist emotion, and a love of practical activism that can help counter-balance the heavily cognitive leanings of Protestantism. But in the end, as you well know, what is ultimately important is having the right beliefs, the right ideas, the right words (even if that is in some ways contradicted among the laity by a simultaneous cultural emphasis on the subjectivistic opinions and feelings of individuals when interpreting the Bible, as discussed below in point 25).

Sometimes, this cognitive bias even takes on a strongly rationalist feel in evangelical apologetics and theology. And even the standard way that ordinary Protestants obey the scriptural teaching to “confess your sins to one another” is to have repentant private mental conversations with God in the head. Very strange.

So, your next step: start feeling your discontent with this religion of the head. Allow yourself to recognize that there is something constricted, even emaciated and distorted, about such a heavily cognitive, mentalist, rationalist sort of faith. Start asking yourself: if God created the material world and our bodies as good, and if God himself took on human flesh amid this world of matter in the Incarnation, then why are flesh and materiality so minimized, even shunted aside, in so many evangelical churches and forms of spirituality? Is the heart of Christianity really about believing correct ideas? What about the movement of the body in communal liturgy? What about kneeling and standing in reverence? What about ingesting the Body and Blood of Christ? What about water and oil and incense and color in abundance as part of worship and spiritual life? Why should confessions of sin not be spoken out loud, by real mouths, to real people, through sound waves in the air, who tell us vocally in reply that our sins are indeed forgiven through Christ? Why shouldn’t visual images of saints—of the “great cloud of witnesses”—help to inspire us to holy living? Why shouldn’t God’s grace be mediated through a variety of material and bodily sacraments, including anointing of the sick and holy marriage? What is it about bodies and materiality, when it comes to Christian faith, that Protestantism, that American evangelicalism, is so afraid of?

19. Start noticing that evangelicalism seems to thrive on external threats and alarmist claims. What is the “juice” on which American evangelicalism thrives? What fuels its engine? Well, lots of things, of course, including some good things. But among them all, a very important source of evangelical thriving is not so good: a continual perception of internal crises and external threats which require a reaffirmation of committed identity and renewed mobilizations of resources. In short, evangelicalism thrives on being embattled—of seeing itself as continually “fighting the good fight” against those who are out to wreck the true faith. Evangelicalism sustains its energy and perpetual self-mobilization in significant part by continually feeling threats to the gospel and to Christianity’s influence, whether through laxity and accommodation on the inside or from hostile forces menacing from the outside.¹⁸ All social groups engage in this kind of behavior more or less intensely and in different ways—evangelicalism just happens to be particularly incessant and alarmist about it.

This embattled-and-thriving dynamic, once started, is addictive and relentless. It requires constantly having an enemy, a peril, or a threat to meet, to overcome, and defeat. If real threats do not naturally present themselves, it is all too easy for leaders to invent them. For not to have a threatening “other” with which evangelicalism can do battle means a drying up of its very life, its vitality, its turbo-charging fueling system. Sometimes, once you tune into all of this, you can witness in real time evangelical leaders inventing a new or pumping up an old threat against which they then sound the “gospel” alarm and volunteer to lead the faithful into battle in order to overcome. The tail is wagging the dog.

You will not at this point need me to tell you what step to take here. You’ll already know the right questions to ask: Isn’t something wrong with a Christian enterprise that requires some threat, inside or outside, real or imagined, to sustain its vitality? Shouldn’t it be the love of Christ, and not ever-menacing threats in the world, that is our source of life? Does not the evangelical reliance on being embattled for its thriving build into its identity a permanent culture of insecurity, alarmism, and sectarian defensiveness? Doesn’t it all lead to the continual drawing and

18. Which I have written an entire book describing: Smith et al, *American Evangelicalism*. I have also written elsewhere about how this feeding-on-threat dynamic tends to distort evangelicals’ public use of statistics, even to the point of being scandalously idiotic and dishonest. Smith, “Evangelicals Behaving Badly,” 11.

poling of symbolic boundaries, rather than a confident and open entering into the life of the world for the sake of the gospel? Once this dynamic is recognized, such questions become obvious and troubling. Keep asking them.

20. Begin to see how very thin the “biblical basis” of many evangelical beliefs are. American evangelicals make no secret of their conviction that their beliefs are “based on the Bible.” And when you’re inside that world, it sure seems that way. By comparison, evangelicals also often criticize Catholics for having little biblical basis for some of their beliefs.¹⁹ What is interesting, however, (in addition to learning about the actual biblical basis of so many allegedly “unbiblical” Catholic teachings) is pushing against the claims about how solidly biblical evangelical beliefs are. In more than a few cases, one starts to notice that the biblical bases for such claims are actually quite thin.

Take, for example, the obvious need for churches to have paid, ordained clergy. That’s pretty central in evangelical life, but in fact only weakly supported by the Bible. Yes, there are some New Testament verses about “double honor” (not that any good teacher in church ever gets paid double salary) and “do not muzzle the ox while it is threshing.” But both of those are somewhat cryptic in meaning. In any case, you’ll have to look long and hard, maybe forever, to find scriptural support for the kind of professional clergy role that is ubiquitous in evangelical churches today.

Or take the belief common among some evangelicals that every individual needs an identifiable point of personal faith conversion to create a “personal relationship with Jesus.” That’s certainly a key to evangelical revivalism, and one can definitely find various Bible verses that seem to buttress such a claim. But, altogether, the direct biblical evidence for that theology and rhetoric is in fact pretty thin.

The same is true about husbands being the “spiritual heads” of their households (not one verse says that), about Sunday and not Saturday being Christians’ set-apart day of rest and worship (just ask Seventh Day Adventists), about the church’s essential need for theological seminaries and divinity schools (did Barnabas and Silas get MDiv degrees?), among a variety of other similarly biblically thin beliefs. It’s just not there.

Looked at from a different perspective, if evangelicals really wanted to be truly biblical about church, and not simply follow traditions developed over church history, they would, for example, not meet in church

19. See, however, Armstrong, *Catholic Verses*.

buildings but rather in the homes of believers (e.g. Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15) and would greet each other with holy kisses (literally) (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 16:12; 1 Thess 5:26). Scriptural support for such practices is a lot more solid than some of the items mentioned above. But not many evangelicals are going to be “biblical” in those ways.

The point is this: more than a little of what evangelicals take to be obviously and solidly biblical about their beliefs and practices are, upon closer inspection, actually not obviously so. Oftentimes lame proof-texting and unjustified leaps of interpretive logic are required to make it work. That itself is not damning. It need not be fatal that evangelicals are not as scripturally consistent as they think they are. Still, it does raise questions about crucial issues of authority and consistency related to the smooth operation of normal science in the evangelical paradigm. If you suspect that you should keep contemplating become Catholic, pay attention to this too.

21. Start wondering why authors and publishers of evangelical prophecy books are never held accountable for their failed predictions. It happens every time. Whenever there is some significant political or military event in the Middle East, a new crop of books from various evangelical presses is published warning readers about the specific events and their historical actors being foretold in the Bible, to declare that the end of the world is coming, and explain how it will climax in an apocalyptic battle involving Israel and many other armies on the Plain of Megiddo. It might have been triggered by the OPEC Oil Embargo of 1973, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979–80, the Gulf War of 1990–91, or some other such event. Russia and Egypt are always involved, as are ominous politicians or military leaders, like Saddam Hussein or Leonid Brezhnev. One way or another, however, this predictable evangelical publishing exercise never fails.

What *does* fail, however, are *all* of the books’ predicted scenarios (at least to date). OPEC did not turn out to be the anti-Christ. The Soviet Union was not the third horn of the Beast. Saddam Hussein was not one of the four horsemen poised to pour fire onto the earth.

Curiously, however, neither the book authors nor their publishers are *ever* held accountable for their failed predictions. Never mind that their warnings and forecasts were “biblical.” Never mind that they made public claims that have turned out time and again to be wrong. The unsold copies are simply put out on the \$1 table. And when the next

political-military event happens, the next round of books is published, and the ridiculous mess is repeated.

Now ask yourself: what is wrong with this picture?

22. Think about why American evangelicalism continually spins off a never-ending supply of problematic preachers, like Robert Schuller, Jimmy Swaggart, Jim and Tammy Bakker, Pat Robertson, and Joel Osteen, to name a few. Little explanation or commentary is needed here. It’s a simple, historical fact. Every religious tradition—including Catholicism, God knows—has its share of problematic clergy. But American evangelicalism seems particularly adept at generating a constant flow of high-profile, lone-ranger preachers and televangelists who, by nearly everyone’s account, are real problems.

With a bit of thought, you realize it is no accident. It has something to do with evangelicalism’s free-wheeling, individualistic, market-driven, populist, entrepreneurial culture and structure, which lack any system or norm of collegial accountability. That’s part of where evangelicalism’s vitality comes from. Unfortunately, it’s also the source of the recurrent lunacy. Any hack or smooth talker can simply grab a microphone, raise an audience, and—if they can collect the dough—“be someone” who gets to say whatever cockamamie hoo-ha they want, in the name of Jesus. The problem is systemic. And nobody else in evangelicaldom can do anything about it (until the “someone” breaks the law or gets caught with a prostitute). *Is everyone okay with this?*

23. Notice that too many evangelical pastors and other leaders seem to thrive and perhaps even entertain themselves and others by disputing minor doctrinal issues. Again, little commentary is needed here. You already know that more than a few evangelicals are great at majoring in the minors, making mountains out of molehills, splitting doctrinal hairs. This is especially, though not exclusively, true of those who lean in fundamentalist directions, whether it be a Reformed fundamentalism that specializes in doctrinal legalism, or the garden variety fundamentalism that is adept at all legalisms.

What’s going on here is not an aberration. It is the Protestant separatist tradition on American evangelical steroids. It is the inevitable result of life in a fractured church run by too many autonomous leaders who are hyper about “biblical” precision, super-vigilant about creeping liberalism, and over-invested in their particular version of reality.

I suspect it is also a perverse form of self-entertainment, misrecognized as serious business. When clergy and seminary professors and denominational bureaucrats are not sufficiently engaged directly with real issues and real people in the real challenges of the real big world beyond their own limited and safe subcultures, it is easy to major in the doctrinal minors. It is easy to make livings off of trivialities—whether or not it actually honors God or serves his kingdom. This, too, is anomalous to the evangelical paradigm when it is at its best.

24. Pay closer attention to any of your own or others' primordial, emotional reactions against Catholicism. Evangelicals usually focus their opposition to Catholicism on doctrinal issues, such as the papacy, Mary, infallibility, the necessity of good works, and so on. In many cases, however, I strongly suspect that those are not the real issues why many evangelicals resist Catholicism.

For one thing, a lot of evangelical beliefs about Catholicism are, as we will see below, just plain wrong. Yet most evangelicals seem to want to resist correcting their beliefs with the facts. For another thing, when one gets into conversations with evangelicals about Catholicism, what often comes out are visceral anti-Catholic *emotions* that actually have little to do with theology. Those gut emotions are well worth paying attention to.

One anti-Catholic evangelical I know is primordially reactive against all authority and power, mostly due, from what I can tell, to a bad childhood relationship with her father. She associates Catholicism with abuses of power and so automatically rejects it. Protestantism, by contrast, grants total individual freedom. At first, discussions with this person focus on doctrinal objections. It turns out, however, that she actually knows very little about theology beyond certain slogans. But very soon the discussion shifts to the emotionally-laden matter of power and individual freedom. At bottom, the problem with Catholicism has little to do with the Immaculate Conception. It is really about symbolic religious representations of her problematic father and her ongoing emotional wrestling into middle age with his abusive authority. I am sorry to know that this person's father was authoritarian. But that is not itself a good reason to reject Catholicism.

Another anti-Catholic evangelical I know similarly throws up initial theological concerns in conversations. But eventually it comes out that the deepest source of his hostility to Catholicism is actually the experience sixty years earlier of having been socially excluded and teased

in elementary school for not being Catholic by his Catholic classmates in his Catholic-dominated public school. Shame on those Catholic kids. But again, this is not a good reason to remain separated from the Church today.

Yet another anti-Catholic evangelical I know was raised Catholic by parents who did not take their faith seriously. He loves his parents but associates Catholicism with heavy drinking, swearing, and materialistic Christmases and so cannot imagine being Catholic. Needless to say, the “Catholicism” this person rejected is not authentic Catholicism. Others I know have emotional reactions to “Vatican bureaucracy” and “all the men who are in charge.” I could multiply such stories, but the point is clear: all too often theological arguments seem to be smokescreens that obscure the strongest reasons why many evangelicals oppose Catholicism, which often turn out to be viscerally emotional, having little to do with doctrine. Psychologists call this kind of emotional behavior “transference”—something I think is all too common in this area of life, even though it often poses itself simply as theological concern.

In some cases, emotionally-driven anti-Catholicism may have less to do with autobiographies and more with broad cultural associations. For some anglophile American Protestants, for example, Catholicism can feel so . . . well, “immigrant”—so Polish, Hispanic, Irish, Italian, Portuguese, etcetera. Deep down, to many WASP Protestants, Catholicism “smells” by cultural association of olive oil, tamales, kielbasa, and beer and wine aplenty. As part of this, Catholicism in America was historically associated with urban ghettos, bars and pubs, brawling Irish, dirty working classes, and (supposedly) un-American, anti-democratic loyalties to Vatican tyranny. American Protestantism has a long, ugly history of disdain for and violence toward Catholics and Catholicism. But all of that has in fact been mostly about ethnic superiority, social-class control, and nationalistic individualism, not about authentic Christian faith and practice.²⁰

Now ask yourself: should such residual cultural prejudices and stereotypes, however emotionally powerful they may be, have anything to do with understanding where the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” in history rightly subsists?

At an even broader and deeper level, I am certain that some evangelicals hold unconscious, primordial cultural associations that again have little to do with theology but which tacitly mark Catholicism as bad

20. See Jenkins, *New Anti-Catholicism*.

and evangelicalism as good. Catholicism easily associates with the Dark Ages, whereas evangelicalism associates with modernity and democracy. Catholicism associates culturally with the Old World of Europe, while evangelicalism associates with the New World of America. People feel such associations often below the level of consciousness, in their bones, so to speak. For much of my own life, I did. That makes such emotion-driving associations both more powerful in their effects and harder to even identify and evaluate.

Another possible factor in possible affective reactions against Catholicism might be personal likes and dislikes in art styles. Speaking for myself, I like most early Christian, Byzantine, Orthodox, Medieval, Romanesque, Gothic, and some Renaissance Catholic art. But I quite dislike some other Renaissance, most Baroque, Rococo, and nineteenth century, and some twentieth century Catholic art. When I simply lay eyes on Baroque or Rococo Catholic paintings, I typically have an automatic negative reaction that easily associates for me with Catholicism generally. When I think rationally about the issue, however, I realize that this is merely a matter of my autobiography and personal taste, not doctrinal truth.

So, again, ask yourself: are such culturally-constructed, historically contingent emotional associations really the thing that should determine one's beliefs and commitments about Christianity and the church? And prepare yourself: it may be that your change from evangelicalism to Catholicism will require you getting over a certain subconscious anglo-ophile Americanism that you did not even know was there.

25. Attend one too many Bible studies that turns out not to be about the Bible, actually, but instead about the largely-uninformed "opinions" and "feelings" of the participants. It sounds like this: "Well, I'm not really sure what this passage is saying, but what it means to me is that . . ." and "You know, this verse really 'speaks to me,' because the other day, when I was . . ." In such cases, the Bible study as a context does not actually study the text as a text in order to understand and obey it. Rather, it uses the biblical text as a *pretext* to enable the opinions and ideas and feelings of the people sitting in a circle—the real focus of the group discussion—to be voiced, explored, and mutually affirmed. "Well, what I feel that this text is probably saying, based on my experience, is . . ." and "The thing about this verse that I really connect with is my thought that . . ." Blah, blah, blah.

For all of evangelicalism's belief about the authority of the Bible (not to mention the emphasis from pulpits and books on holding the right beliefs, noted in point 18 above), a lot of evangelical laity are actually really good at superficially skipping past what the Bible says and focusing instead on their own views, experiences, and affective states *related to* "what it seems to say." Too often it degenerates into a lot of mutual sharing of ignorance, all in the name of good Christian fellowship and Bible learning. Having attended one too many of these, ask yourself: where can I actually find some authoritative teaching about Christian faith?²¹

26. Ask yourself why we need a "new monasticism" when Catholicism still has Christianity's old monasticism. Evangelicals love to re-invent the wheel time and again. First, they cut themselves off from historical tradition. Then they face the same basic issues and problems that have formed Christian historical tradition for two millennia. But rather than learning from the past, they simply invent their own versions of new solutions. And what they make up on the spot usually proves less grounded, satisfying, and sustainable than what historical tradition offers.

Examples are myriad. One of my favorites is evangelical parachurch organizations incessantly writing their own "statements of faith," to be approved by their boards of trustees, which are often composed primarily of successful evangelical business people with little theological training.

Another example is the so-called evangelical "new monasticism" movement.²² What that movement is trying to do I think is mostly admirable. But why do we need a *new* monasticism? Christian monasticism has been around for nearly 2000 years. And a lot has been learned about monasticism in the meantime. The "new monasticism" is, I am afraid, yet another instance of a presumptuous American evangelical hubris, which is particularly ironic when it comes to monasticism, of all things. That hubris automatically assumes that all that has gone before is contaminated and so evangelicals can and must invent everything anew to be right, unsullied, and relevant.

21. Catholicism admittedly has its share of this kind of individual subjectivism in Bible studies, though it at least possesses an authoritative Church teaching against which such claims and practices can be weighed and judged.

22. See, as descriptions of this movement, for example, Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism*; Rutba House, *School(s) for Conversion*; Bessenecker, *New Friars*; also see online: <http://www.newmonasticism.org/>.

News flash: the Catholic Church in the United States includes thousands of monastic religious orders and communities that have been living and continue to live the kinds of values, commitments, and practices that the “new monasticism” teaches. Isn’t it funny that evangelicals feel the need to invent their own, new brand of it?

27. Start wondering whether “getting into heaven” is the core of what Christianity is about. American evangelicalism’s strong populist and pragmatic evangelistic streak has over time packaged “the gospel” into a few tightly bundled sound-bites and slogans. The Four Spiritual Laws is one example. “Accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior so that your sins can be forgiven and you can go to heaven” is another. Evangelicalism’s interest in communicating with ordinary people at the grassroots is admirable. But you rightly find yourself wondering now and again if the message has not gotten squashed in the package.

When a lot of evangelical-speak about the gospel comes down to it, especially at a popular level, it often seems to boil down to *getting a ticket to get into heaven*. The old “fire insurance” image is often not far off. “If you were to die tonight, do you know for sure that you would go to heaven?” is a standard evangelical pitch (for those who still engage in overt evangelism). Perhaps particularly in the South, where I have lived for years, one will often hear in conversation, “Sure, I believe in Jesus, so my soul’s goin’ to heaven.” But I don’t think this soul-going-to-heaven mentality is limited to the South.

Ask yourself: is having your “soul go to heaven” really what Christianity is *about*? It seems like an emaciated version of the long work of God in history. And meanwhile it seems to leave a pretty narrow job for Christians and the church here on earth, before we die—to not lose one’s ticket to heaven and to help get even more other souls into heaven, it would seem. If it were all that simple, then why is the Bible so elaborate and complex? And why do so many different churches have so many different ideas about what is true and right in the Christian faith and life? Keep wondering.

Okay, so you have started accumulating anomalies and have gotten through step #27. Even if you have gotten this far, you are still nowhere close to becoming Catholic. This is only the beginning of the road to your new identity. Remember that very little of the observations and ideas in the steps so far are, in and of themselves, arguments against evangelicalism or for Catholicism. We have not yet gotten to explicitly arguing for

or against. The matters so far concern merely anomalies, things that do not fit the evangelical paradigm very well, that are hard to explain, from an evangelical normal-science paradigm. If you have gotten to this point, you are ready to move on to the next steps: seeing and accumulating even bigger anomalies.