

From Baptist to Catholic

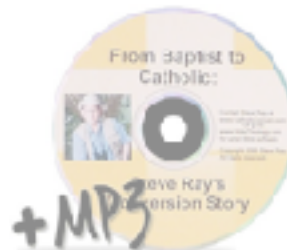
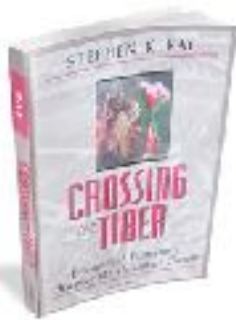
A Brief Account of Steve Ray's Conversion to Catholicism

by Steve Ray

The story below is just a short outline of a story. The full version of our conversion story is told in my book [Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historic Church](#).

It is developed further with the issue of the papacy and authority in my book [Upon this Rock: Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church](#). Both are published by Ignatius Press.

You can hear the audio story of our conversion on audio CD or MP3 format at www.SteveRaysStory.com.



I can still smell the green vinyl of the used couch in our living room as I knelt with my mom, with my face buried in my hands and my nose pressed into the vinyl. She had decided I was old enough — after all I was four years old. She didn't want to wait any longer. She was eager.

When I was born I was taken to the front of Joy Road Baptist Church in Detroit Michigan held aloft and dedicated to Christ. I did not receive infant baptism. The thought of baptizing an infant was repugnant. Where do you find *that* in the Bible? That was a surely a man-made Catholic tradition.

My parents had “found Christ” less than a year earlier. After twelve years of painful miscarriages my parents had discovered Jesus through the preaching of Billy Graham. The radio was on one morning as my mother was getting ready to go shopping. With keys in one hand and purse in the other she stopped in the kitchen before heading out the door. She heard something she’s never heard before.



She heard the compelling voice of Billy Graham passionately explaining the precious blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross. It was shed for my mom to pay for her sins. It could save her from hell and insure her a place in heaven. My mom, raised without any religion, heard John 3:16 for the first time: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

She told me she fell on her knees on the kitchen floor. With tears rolling down her cheeks she “accepted Christ as her personal Lord and Savior and asked him to come into her heart.”

At the same time my dad thought he had cancer and was having a nervous breakdown. He went out on the front porch one night and after looking up to the stars he pleaded, “If there is a God up there, please reveal yourself to me. I don’t know if you even exist, but if you do I need your help!” He then went to bed. (*[Picture: My father at Ford Motor Company](#)*)

The next morning he went through his normal routine and ended up at his office at Ford Motor Company in Dearborn Michigan. A friend walked up and said, “Charlie, can I tell you something?” My dad said, “Yes, of course, what is it?” The friend boldly proclaimed, “Charlie, you need Jesus Christ in your life.” It had been less than twenty-four hours since the prayer of desperation.



Do you think it was a Catholic who approached my father? Unhappily it was not. Catholics too often think their faith in Christ is a “personal thing; not something you talk about.” But this Baptist friend had a different opinion. The Gospel of Christ WAS something you talked about and you talked about it to as many people as you possibly could. My father prayed the “Sinner’s Prayer” with his friend. Within a matter of days they were members of Joy Road Baptist Church.

On my desk sits one of my most valuable possessions. It is a black leather Scofield Reference Bible, King James Version with gold gilded pages. It is mark up to the extreme with notations, underlined verses, scribbled notes and comments. It was my father's first Bible and became one of the loves of his life. He wrote the date inside the cover — May 1954. After their dramatic conversions and much prayer I was born nine months later — December 1954 after twelve years of miscarriages. Two brothers followed.

(Picture: My dad's black leather Schofield Reference Bible)



Now we are back to the green vinyl couch in our small house on Marlowe Street. Mom thought I was old enough to accept Christ as my own personal Lord and Savior. So after some coaching and explanations in words a four year old could understand, she led me in the Sinner's Prayer. I can still remember that moment and the smell of old vinyl always brings to memory to the forefront of my mind.



Now came the task of raising these young boys to love Jesus and the Bible. It began with memorizing Bible verses. I was a rich little kid because my parents were smart. They paid me 50¢ for each Bible verse I memorized (I now do this for my grandchildren but the cost has gone up to \$1.00). Mom knew a young mind was fertile and supple and could memorize easily. After all, Proverbs reminds us that if you "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (22:6). *(Picture: I am top right)*

Of course John 3:16 was the first verse we memorized. It was the heart of the Bible and the perfect summary of the mind and heart of God in his relationship to his people. We also learned to say the books of the Bible, the faster the better: "Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers...." We raced to see who could say them the fastest, keeping it under 15 seconds!

We never missed Sunday School, church, Sunday evening hymn sing, Wednesday night prayer meeting and the ever anticipated Summer Vacation Bible School. Prizes, ice cream, racing around, sticking flannel graph elephants onto Noah's ark and all kinds of other fun stuff.

My parents moved between churches. My dad would question the pastor and disagree about biblical passages and theology. We ended up attending Baptist churches, Reformed, Methodist,



non-denominational, Charismatic and ultimately I ended up bouncing between an Evangelical Presbyterian and a Baptist church. It was great being a boy in a Baptist family in the 50's and early 60's.

But time marches on and interests march on as well. At fifteen years old my mind shifted to girls and motorcycles and the Beatles and other things upon which my parents frowned. The kids in our church youth group were not "cool" and I left them behind. (*Picture: Me in High School*)

At seventeen, right before my 12th grade began at high school, I heard Billy Graham on the television. I always had a soft spot in my heart for God which was never calloused over by rebellion. The compelling arguments sank in deep. Then the mellow baritone voice of George Beverly Shea singing "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me." That did it. I was out the door with tears running down my eyes. I walked down our long country driveway and I said to the Lord, "I am only seventeen years old but tonight I give my whole life to you!"

I started the 12th grade. On the first day a friend brought up a cute young girl with long blond hair. She had just moved to Michigan from Costa Mesa California. That summer she had "found Jesus" too. She had been raised nominal Presbyterian, baptized as an infant and that was about it. But she had gone to a Bible study at school and had been turned on the "new life in Christ." She was baptized by Pastor Chuck Smith in Pirates Cove in the Pacific Ocean. (*Picture: Janet Sklenar just before I met her*)

For those who don't know Pastor Chuck Smith, he is the founder of Calvary Chapel which is mainly in the Southwest, but is spreading. One of their boasts is that 80% of their members are ex-Catholics. My wife was quickly caught up in the excitement.



We met at Plymouth-Canton High School in 1972. She told me that God spoke to her for the first time in her life that morning. She heard "That is the man you're going to marry." But I had other goals and they no longer involved girls. I was now dedicated to Bible study, prayer and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone. But four years later we did marry and it was the best thing I ever did. (We've now been married 35 years with four children and ten grandchildren and counting.)

We loved being Evangelical Protestant Christians. Janet and I made a great team with the same heart and mind. We home schooled our children, taught Bible studies, evangelized, and started our own very successful family business which grew eventually to 800 employees at one point. We had it made with a great family, wonderful Evangelical friends, a flourishing business, a love for the Bible and evangelism and a life full of joy. All our family and friends were not only Protestant, but also anti-Catholic. To ever have a member of the family “go Catholic” would have been unthinkable, an egregious betrayal of the Christian faith and the family traditions.



We taught studies on evangelization. We always had people in our home and not always Evangelicals. We welcomed into our home the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witness missionaries. Atheists, New-agers and Catholics were always a target for evangelism. We knew the best arguments and Bible verses to unleash on any one of them. Catholics were usually pretty easy to pick off the tree. They didn’t know the Bible and from our perspective had no idea how to get saved. They prayed to Mary instead of Jesus, got to heaven by works instead of faith, followed tradition instead of the Bible — in everything they were upside down.



Then it happened — we converted to the Catholic Church!

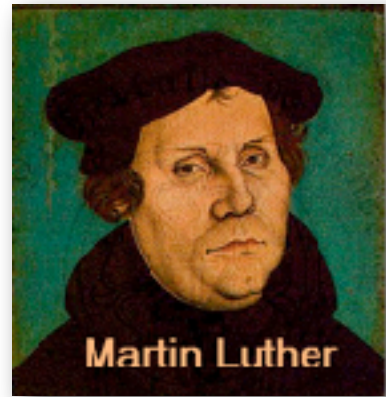
People ask, “What made you willing to lose everything to become Catholic?” Protestants asked, “Why leave biblical Christianity to follow the traditions of men in the Catholic Church?” Others asked (and still do) “What did you see in the Catholic Church that made you want to leave everything you knew to begin such a radical new path in

life?” ([Picture: 1994 reception into the Church](#))

My answer is, “I saw *nothing* in the Catholic Church to make me want to be Catholic! And the Catholics I knew were the biggest argument *against* the Catholic Church. Neither my wife nor I have ever set foot in a Catholic Church out of principle. We had never met a Catholic priest or religious and most unfortunately, we had never met a Catholic who could explain or defend their faith.

Our journey to the ancient Church of the first centuries began by seeing the problems within Protestantism — problems that were incurable. If they would have been corrected it would have become Catholic. Sometimes one has to realize they are very sick before they visit a doctor. Janet and I came to realize over time that something was dreadfully wrong with Protestantism. I will briefly explain the three “biggies” that hit us.

The first one was *worship*, the second one, *interpretation of Scripture* and third, **morals**. Let’s begin with the first one first.



Janet interrupted me one Sunday on our way home from the Baptist church saying, “I can’t listen to preaching anymore and call it worship. Something is missing but I don’t know what it is.” It was the first crack in a locked and bolted door. What was worship? Was it preaching? Charles Haddock Spurgeon, one of our favorite preachers had once said that no form of worship was higher than a good sermon. But Janet knew this was not correct. What was worship? Loud music — “pump up the volume, pump up the volume?” It seemed that Evangelicals did not know either. They were trying all kinds of new worship services to entertain and inspire.

Worship has always involved offerings and sacrifice, and I don’t mean just the offering basket passed back and forth through the pews. I mean real sacrifice. Pagans, Jews, Hindus, early Christians — they all knew this. From the beginning of time people have brought a sacrifice or offering to the gods. The Jews understood and we inherited their God. The Protestants had preaching but what did the early Church have?



Janet and I have now had the privilege of visiting the oldest churches in the world. We have visited the first churches ever built in Israel, Egypt, Italy, Turkey and Greece. We’ve explored them all. Every one of them had something in common with all the others. As the focal point, front and center in every ancient church there is an altar! In front of that altar was a priest. An altar was always a place of sacrifice! And sacrifice was offered by a priest. ([Picture: Steve teaching in St. John’s Basilica in Ephesus](#))

In 1 Corinthians 10 St. Paul speaks of the sacrifice of Jews, pagans and Christians. All offer a sacrifice. Where was this in my Baptist church? We had exchanged the ancient model for a new religion. No longer a priest and an altar, but now we had a preacher in front of a podium. The Catholics had the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

And to my great amazement, the very first Christians believed the same thing about the Sunday sacrifice as the Catholics did today! The disciples of the apostles referred to what we called “communion” as the very Body and Blood of Jesus, the same flesh that was nailed to the cross

(see St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 6, 7). ([Picture: St. Ignatius being eaten by lions in Rome](#))

The *Didache*, written during the New Testament period calls the Eucharist a sacrifice and reminds the first century Christians to confess their sins (Confession) before offering their Sunday morning sacrifice (Section 14).

Much more could be said, but let's touch on the second huge problem of Protestantism. Who speaks for God? The Bible, correct? That is what I thought. But I have thousands of books on the Bible in my house. I bought them because I wanted to know what the Bible meant and how to properly interpret each page, especially some difficult passages. I realized over time that even among my close-knit circle of Evangelical Protestants we could not agree on significant issues.



Should you baptize infants? My Baptist tradition said, “Absolutely NOT!” Yet my Presbyterian wife had a certificate of infant baptism in her files. Can you lose your salvation once you are born again? Absolutely not said my particular tradition. Yet pulling other verses out of context to defend their position, other Evangelicals said, “Of course you can lose your salvation if you deny Christ and chose a life of sin.”

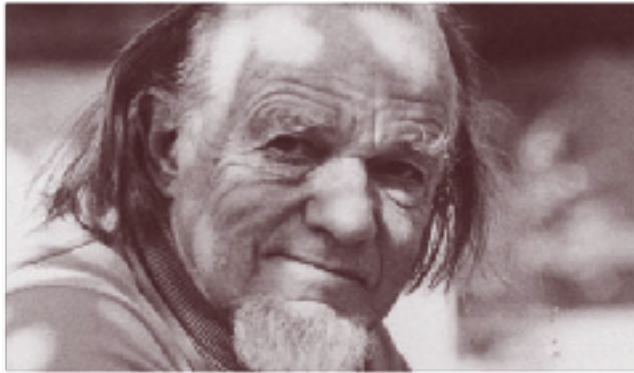
So, who interprets the Bible? Who is the arbiter when conflicts arise? How can I be certain? Ultimately it is up to me to decide these deep matters of theology and salvation since there is no final teacher in Protestantism. Do I have to become my own pope? This became a huge discussion.

I realized early on that the New Testament was even codified and closed as a collection of twenty-seven inspired books until the end of the fourth century. How did the early Christians know how to get saved, what to do on Sunday morning or how to please God? And it was these early Christians without a New Testament yet who were eaten by lions, burned at the stake, and beheaded in front of cheering crowds. How could they follow Christ so faithfully without the “Bible alone?”

The Bible itself never promotes “Bible alone.” We realized that “sola Scriptura” was unscriptural. The early Church had the Apostolic Tradition, bishop in the apostolic succession

and only later a gradually recognized and collected New Testament. And where did the authority to chose and close the canon of Scripture come from? As St. Augustine said, “I would not believe the holy Gospels if it were not for the authority of the Holy Catholic Church (*Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental*, 5,6).

St. Paul himself said that it was the church of the living God that was the pillar and bulwark of the truth, not the Bible (see 1 Timothy 3:15).



The third issue was no less monumental. What about morals? We had just returned from studying with Dr. Francis Schaeffer in Switzerland. Time Magazine referred to him as the missionary to the intellectual and he spoke uniquely to those searching for the truth. He was a Presbyterian minister very evangelical in the tradition of John Calvin and the Bible only and faith only persuasion. ([Picture: Dr. Francis Schaeffer from L'Abri](#)

[Switzerland](#))

Schaeffer encouraged Janet and I to return to America and speak out against abortion. This we did.

However, our first attempt met with dismal failure and disillusionment. The pastor told me to my face “You will NOT talk about abortion in my church. We are here to get people saved and made disciples for Christ. We have no business being involved in politics and medicine. Plus, many women in this congregation are getting abortions and I am not going to allow you to rock the boat.”

Something was seriously wrong with American Evangelicalism! I knew enough from my reading of history that ALL Christian traditions from the beginning of Christianity until the beginning of the 20th century opposed not only abortion but contraceptives, calling them sin. Had God changed his mind? Who spoke for God in this matter?

[illegible]

A row of fast-food restaurant signs. From left to right: a yellow sign for 'Arby's' with a red 'A' and 'CO' above it; a red sign for 'Pizza Hut' with a white 'Hut' below it; a red sign for 'Arby's ROAST BEEF Sandwich' with 'IS DELICIOUS' below it; a yellow sign for 'Arby's' with a red 'A' and 'CO' above it; and a yellow sign for 'Wendy's' with a red 'W' and 'DONUTS' below it.

These three were not the only issues. But worship, Scripture and morals were right up there on top of the heap. We did not see any solution. I began to question the foundations for the faith altogether. Had I gone much further I am afraid a form of agnosticism might have set in.

My friend was Al Kresta, now a well known Catholic commentator on Catholic radio and a speaker and author. We are still best friends and I never cease thanking him for being there at the right time to rattle my cage and force me to look in a new direction. (*Picture: Al Kresta and I shortly after our conversions to the Catholic Church*)

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mobiles or processing Cardinals, no Vatican or Ecumenical Councils.

Surprise, surprise! We were not prepared for what we discovered. But first, why were we never encouraged to read the Fathers of the Church? We always stated, "The Fathers are not inspired; the Bible is inspired and that's all we need." But this new discovery was a real eye-opener. These first Christians lived, preached, worshiped and died before the New Testament was even in existence. They were authentic witnesses to the life, tradition and practice of the apostles themselves. They still have the apostolic voices ringing in their ears.

prove ineffective. A better strategy had to be found. Ah, that's it! We'll go back in history to the first Christians and prove to Al that primitive and apostolic Christianity was Protestant! There were no pope-

"Make certain, therefore, that you all observe one common Eucharist; for there is but one Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, and but one cup of union with His Blood, and one single altar of sacrifice—even as also there is but one bishop, with his clergy and my own fellow-servitors the deacons. This will insure that all your doings are in full accord with the will of God..."

"But look at those men who have those perverted notions about the grace of Jesus Christ which has come down to us, and see how contrary to the mind of God they are. . . . They even abstain from the Eucharist and the public [liturgical] prayer, because they will not admit that the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Savior Jesus Christ, which [flesh] suffered for our sins, and which the Father in His goodness raised up again. Consequently, since they reject God's gifts, they are doomed in their disputatiousness. They should have done better to learn charity, if they were ever to know any resurrection. . . . Abjure all factions, for they are the beginning of evils."

Ignatius of Antioch, disciple of the Apostles, c. 35-107 AD

It was New Year's Eve 1993. Our Baptist friends had us over for two reasons: to usher in the new year and to save us from our lunacy. We had been studying the early church for months now and they saw the effect it was having upon us. They wanted to talk and talk we did. In the midst of the conversation I stood up and said, "Jim, do you realize that if you and I had seen Jesus crucified and risen from the dead we would have never read the Gospel of John?" He retorted, "Why not?" I replied, "Because it wasn't written until about 100 AD and we would have been dead long before that. Jim, how did the first Christians live and practice Christianity without the New Testament?"

On the way home I was quiet for a long time. Janet asked, "What are you thinking?" I said, "This is getting very scary; the more we argue against the Catholic Church the more I realize we are backing ourselves right in the front door!"

The next day was January 1, 1994. It was a delightful day with no phone calls or business. We had no interest in football either. At this point we were consumed with our quandary — what is the Church? What does God expect of us? Where did the Bible come from? Could the Catholic Church possibly be the Church Jesus founded and promised to build?

We had tackled all the obstacles one at a time: the Pope, Mary, purgatory, priests, confession, the Eucharist, faith alone, Bible alone and many more. It was all coming to a head. We had books open all over the living room floor. We were asking questions, reading passages aloud to each other and then ...



... I began to sob. I closed all my books and sat on the floor crying like a baby. With great concern my good wife asked, “Steve, what is wrong?” I responded through my tears, “Nothing is wrong ... I just realized, I am a Catholic!” She responded, “Oh good grief” but she said the same thing as I did less than twenty-fours later.

(Picture: Ray family after reception into the Church, girls with their baptismal stoles; Steve’s parents to right there but not approving)

I called my friend Al Kresta, remember the one I had called stupid a year earlier? I said, “Happy New Year Al. Guess what? I’m a Catholic!” Silence on the other end of the phone. “Al, are you there?” Yeah, but I don’t think I heard you correctly, what did you just say?” After I explained he replied, “You are the last one I thought would ever say that! Then he asked me a question for which I was certainly not prepared.

Al asked, “Steve, tomorrow is Sunday, how would you like to go to Mass with us?” I stopped dead in my tracks. I froze. It had never dawned on my that if I would read my way into the Catholic Church I would have to some day go to a Catholic Mass!! Old sentiments die hard and I had lots of them about the Catholic Mass.

I covered the phone and quickly informed my wife of what Al had asked. She responded as cool as cucumber, “Tell him we will go but we will leave the kids at home, we want to get there late, sit in the back row and leave early.” (People have jokingly told us we were real American Catholics from our first day.) *(Picture to right: Fr. Ed Fride celebrating Mass; picture below: Little Emily getting baptized)*

Al did not keep his promise and we ended up arriving at Mass early and we sat in the front of the church — and I was on the isle. I will never forget that morning. Tears welled up in my eyes for

the second time in two days as I watched an apostolic man process up the isle. I had never seen a priest up close before and I knew exactly what he was. Janet was weeping too. We wept at every Mass for the next six years and still do.

We were received into the Catholic Church with our whole immediate family on Pentecost Sunday, May 22, 1994. We have never looked back. We are not the first to cross the Tiber, we won't be the last – we are in good company!

