

Going AWOL out of the Christian Civil War: How My Desire for Christian Unity lead me Home to the Catholic Church

By Tiffany Perkinz

“So, that girl, do you know if she’s a Christian?”

“Uh, well, she’s Catholic...”

This was a statement that I have said more than once growing up. If someone asked me, for whatever reason, if someone the two of us know is a Christian, and if I knew they went to a Catholic church, my response was the aforementioned... skeptical at best.

Indeed, just because someone identifies as Catholic does not necessarily mean they are living the Christian life outside of Church or even acknowledging Christ in their hearts. It was not my place to give a definite answer, because only God knows their true heart. But the problem with my skepticism was the fact that if the person in question identified as Baptist or another “Bible-believing” denomination, my response was much more confident. Ultimately, the general attitude I had about most Catholics was that if they are truly living for Christ in their hearts, it is *in spite* of their Catholic faith, rather than *because* of it.

Like so many Protestants, all I knew about the Catholic Church was distorted misconceptions about what the Church teaches, why the worship is structured the way it is, and what the Church actually *is* in relation to Christ.

The Catholic Church as an institution is corrupt, the followers do not read *or* care about the Bible, and they are merely taught to go through the motions of worship without thinking about the meaning of their actions. And they clearly don’t care about the Ten Commandments, because that commands against idolatry and Catholics worship statues.

Never in my life did I think I would become of *them*. Never in my life did I think I would cross over to the dark side of Christianity, where the Holy Spirit isn’t actually present and the overwhelming majority of its followers are hell bound and in dire need of salvation.

Never in my life did I think I would come to realize that everything in that preceding paragraph is terribly wrong.

I started my walk with God when I was fourteen years old. It was the summer before my ninth grade year, and before that year I didn’t heavily acknowledge God in my life. I believed in the existence of God, I had a Bible at home, and I went to church occasionally, but I wasn’t living a life surrendered to Him. He was a distant relative who crossed my mind occasionally and who I visited from time to time, but putting effort into growing closer to Him was not on my priority list.

Summer before the ninth grade, during a worship and prayer service at a week-long church retreat, God’s spirit gripped me in a way that it never had before. I found myself on my knees, promising with a sincere heart that from that point forward, I would strive to live a life that was

less about me and more about Him. I told God to begin to teach me and mold me into who He wanted me to be, and I would follow wherever He leads. I left that day feeling like a new creation, and I always refer back to that moment as the day I began my relationship with God. About six months later I was baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All of these events occurred in the First Baptist Church in my hometown, and I know that I was blessed to begin my Christian life in a church full of godly role models and amazing friends who held me accountable in my walk with Christ. I was highly involved in the youth group throughout high school, where I grew spiritually through summer camps, mission trips, Wednesday night Bible studies, and various fellowship events throughout the years. I am thankful that I had such a wonderful faith community to call home during my teenage years, in which temptations and threats to my walk with Christ were at every corner.

However, when I was seventeen, I began to question some things I had never thought about before. This question was brought about when I became involved in a young adult program at a non-denominational church in my hometown. As a senior in high school, I would soon graduate from the youth group.

This worried me because my church did not have a strong young adult program, and I knew that I needed community to stay strong in my faith. When I was introduced to the young adult group at this new church just in the nick of time, it was like a godsend. To this day that is still how I view it, because inclusion in this group caused me to question for the first time the reason for multiple Christian denominations.

This new church did not claim a denomination, because they wanted to simply love God free of denominational titles. Nonetheless, their theology did not differ greatly from that of my Baptist church, with a few minor exceptions. These exceptions were few, but they caused a slight division that was noticeable to me as I spent time with both groups. My new group would jokingly poke fun at the Baptist style of worship, which they perceived to be rigid and without freedom. Alternatively, my Baptist youth minister was infuriated with me for involving myself in a church that he thought wasn't entirely biblical.

This division stirred something up in me, and I began to wonder why there are so many different kinds of Christians: Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians are only naming a few, as I soon learned that there are over 30,000 registered denominations and sub-sects. All groups read the same Bible and claim to worship the same God, but are divided by some sort of disagreement in scriptural interpretation or practice. Then there is the identification of "non-denominational".

I initially thought, like many do, that attending a non-denominational church was the answer to refusing the Christian Civil War, as I would not be claiming any type of divided faith. I came to realize, however, this this is ultimately another denomination in and of itself, except that one freestanding church may interpret scripture entirely differently from another in the same five mile radius.

The more I thought about this in the months that passed after high school graduation, the more it began to truly anger me that as Christians, we aren't unified. Christ *wanted* us to be unified. He

wanted us to be *one body*, all in agreement with each other. I came across I Corinthians 1:10, where Paul says “I appeal to you brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you **agree with one another** in what you say, and there be **no divisions among you**, but you be perfectly **united in mind and thought**.” People would often tell me that denominations do not divide the Body of Christ because we agree on most things. We all love Jesus and claim Him as our Lord and Savior, and that is all that is important. But Scripture does not tell us that we should agree on most things but then agree to disagree on that which keeps us in separate churches; it says we are to be *perfectly united with no divisions*.

This was a very hard time for me, as I was so broken about the fact that the Church was split up in so many ways, which is not what Christ wanted. In me grew a passion and desire to reunify the Church and to tear down denominational walls. This calling only overwhelmed me, because I was lost as where to start. Common sense clearly states that there can only be *one* truth, not multiple truths, and certainly not 30,000 truths. And when five different people from five different denominations say the Holy Spirit guided them to a particular understanding of scripture, and none of those interpretations perfectly coincide, that presses the question, “who is right?”

But at this point, the Catholic Church was the furthest thing from my mind as an option I would consider. The only words I ever heard spoken about the Catholic Church were in a negative manner by non-Catholic friends and church leaders, who claimed that Catholics, with the exception of the Catholics who didn’t believe most of Church Teaching, were not going to Heaven due to their lack of relationship with God, worship of Mary and the saints, the ungodly practice of keeping Jesus on the cross, and a host of other allegedly unbiblical doctrines.

I had even read a book, provided to me by my non-denominational young adult group that described “facts” on “false teachings”. Amongst Hinduism and Islam was a chapter on Roman Catholicism, which explained all the reasons why it is clearly unbiblical, a false religion created by deceptive men. If I had this book in my possession now, I am confident that I could point out all the flaws in the author’s presentation of Church Teaching and use of Scripture, but I regress.

It was at this point in my life in which God chose to introduce to me my future husband. God’s perfect timing turned out to be the August after I graduated high school. I had chosen not to date anyone unless I could see myself marrying them, in which case we would explore the possibility of marriage. As Jordan pursued me, I felt a peace about opening my heart to a courtship with him. He met every quality on my future husband “list”, with the exception of one: he was not a Baptist or a non-denominational, but Catholic.

Jordan was raised Catholic, but at the time we met he did not have a strong passion for his faith. He knew the basics of what he was taught growing up, and for the most part attended mass weekly, but this was ultimately the extent of his Catholic devotion. However, he spoke often about praying for our relationship and exhibited fruits in his life that made me confident he was growing in the Lord, “*in spite*” of being a Catholic.

As we became serious and it became knowledge to both of us that we would one day be married, he readily attended church and weekly Bible study with me without ever involving Catholicism

in our relationship. I figured that we would simply continue to go to church there and non-denominational Christianity is the faith in which we would raise our future children.

However, few months later, in a stunning plot twist, Jordan began to get more and more enthusiastic about the Catholic Church. It seemed to happen overnight. One day he was at church with me, seemingly soaking in the charismatic, non-denominational worship and Protestant sermon, and the next he was talking about going to mass, reading Catholic apologetics books, and meeting with a priest for discussion.

I was completely caught off guard by this sudden devotion, and I was scared; Jordan was my best friend and accountability partner, and I honestly felt that he was getting caught up in a deceptive religion that kept souls from experiencing freedom in Christ. I expressed my concerns with him, and he told me things I had never heard before, but that seemed completely off the wall and terrifyingly untrue: Mary is available to pray for us and intercedes for us in the same way a friend on Earth might. The Lord's Supper in a Catholic Church is not a symbolic memorial service, but the true flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. Speaking of Jesus Christ, *he founded the Catholic Church*.

I challenged everything he said. I demanded Scriptures and while often he provided them, he would often challenge me: "where in the Bible does it say that everything must be in the Bible to be true?" I brought up Catholic doctrines that I thought were wrong, and he was able to provide a sound explanation of each, through Scripture, through history, and through applying my understanding of God's character and nature. But I would not be deceived. I knew what I had always been told about the Catholic Church, and I was sticking to that.

This was a very hard time in our relationship. We argued and debated about theology often and as a result, God became a touchy topic that was often avoided. Though he still came to church and Bible study with me, he adamantly refused to miss mass. One day at my church service, he politely passed on participating in the Lord's Supper, later telling me it was contrary to his beliefs that Jesus was speaking literally when he said "this is my body". I cried the rest of the day.

Several times I considered ending the relationship, but I never felt a peace about it. I felt God speaking to me that I should wait out the storm, and one day this would no longer be a barrier between us. I interpreted this message to mean that Jordan would see the errors in the Catholic faith and leave this religion behind. I earnestly prayed day and night. I fasted *and* prayed. I had others in my church pray. I prayed that we would both find Truth, even if it was contrary to the way one of us had always taught. Additionally, I took the same approach of John Henry Newman and sought to become an expert in the history of early Christianity so I could use that information to disprove to him the assertion that the early Christians were Catholic in belief and worship practices.

That was the beginning of the end of my days as a Protestant of any kind. As John Henry Newman said at the end of his own research, "to be deep into history is to cease to be a Protestant".

The historical facts could not be denied. The early Christian Church was not just an unstructured group of men playing songs on a guitar and talking about how much they love God, as I once thought. It was a Church with structured leadership, beginning with Peter, to whom Jesus gave the “keys to the Kingdom of Heaven”, and the authority to “bind and loose” (Mt. 16:18,19). I was stunned when I first looked long and hard at that passage in Matthew’s Gospel, and I soon learned that “keys” were a sign of authority, signifying that an office was being created—one that is bigger than the current holder, and would continue after that person died. I learned that historical writings from the earliest Christians showed that the beliefs of the first Christian Church were the beliefs still held by the Catholic Church today.

I found that my passion against man-made denominations was actually a very Catholic viewpoint, as denominations were indeed created by man, a response to refusing the role of the Catholic Church as the authority of Christ.

I can still recall the night all my studies of history and re-evaluation of certain Scriptures fell into place, and I realized the answer for refusing the Christian civil war. My blood went ice cold, as I burst into tears at the words of realization speaking to my spirit: *Christian unity cannot be possible without a single, binding Teaching office. Private interpretation of Scripture leads to different conclusions, which leads to different churches and denominations, which creates disunity. This is why Christ gave us a Church, divinely guided by His Spirit, to preserve the Truth of God’s Word. And as history shows, that Church IS the Catholic Church.*

I went to bed that night angry with God: angry that I spent my entire relationship with Him living a lie, that I had loved him and sought him and tried to do His will, that I had gone on church mission trips trying to lead others to Christ and had tried to do everything for His glory, when all the time I was not even aware of the whole Truth. The people I had led to Christ on mission trips, I had led astray.

I now know that I had not been living a lie, but rather growing in Christ through that particular stage of my relationship with Him. As a Protestant I had part of the Truth and through that Truth I grew in God, and now I was ready for more, deeper Truth. Just as my baptism was the first step in my Christian life, now I was embarking on a new milestone. But at that moment, I was angry. I was comfortable where I was, and I did not want the Catholic Church to be right.

Nonetheless, there was no going back. At that moment, I ceased to be a Protestant. I did not know everything the Church taught, and some of which the Church taught I was still skeptical; it took some time before I had enough faith to believe Christ was truly present in the Eucharist or before I opened my heart to communion with the saints in Heaven. But that didn’t matter: in choosing to come into the Catholic Church, I was saying “I don’t know everything, and there are some things I am inclined to disagree with.

But if I disagree, it is not because the problem lies with the Church—it is because the problem lies with me and my private understanding of Scripture.” The one thing I knew for certain, and the only thing that mattered, was that the Catholic Church is the only Church established by Christ and not man, and it is in this divinely guided Church where the fullness of Truth and Christian unity lives.

It was scary to leave the only type of Christianity I had ever known. I experienced a “culture shock” of sorts, and wondered if I would ever truly feel at home in such different surroundings. Additionally, I lost a few friends who felt betrayed by my choice to become Catholic. Although I explained to each of them thoroughly all I had learned, they did not experience the same change of heart as I and still believed I was being misled. Many people thought I became Catholic simply for a boy. A friend of mine was told by a leader in her church that I allowed my love for Jordan “cloud” my spiritual judgment.

However, I would be willing to stand before my Lord, look Him in the eye, and say with honest conviction that my decision was based solely on a realization of Truth, after a close study of Scripture and history. Jordan and I were both on paths to the Truth, and I like to say we found it together. It was because of me exposing him to an alternate Christian perspective that he began to look deeper into his own Catholic faith, and it was because he challenged my beliefs that I felt the need to seek Truth.

Jordan and I began RCIA classes in September 2008, me as a candidate (an already baptized Christian) and him as a Catholic update. On April 11, 2009, I received the sacraments of confirmation and Eucharist, entering into full Communion with the Catholic Church. In the years since, we have served as sponsors in RCIA, helping guide other people to the beautiful, Christ instituted sacraments. This is because four years ago, as an evangelical Protestant distraught at the existence of multiple denominations, I asked God to help me reunify the Body of Christ. At that time, I didn’t know where to start, but now I do.

In order for us to worship as one, we all need to be home; Christians of all faith communities need to return to the home Christ built for us 2000 years ago. That home is the Catholic Church.

*“Where the Bishop is, there let the multitude of believers be;
even as where Jesus is, there is the catholic Church”*

–Ignatius of Antioch, 1st c. A.D