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Holy Ground

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PREFACE

We have free-floating guilt, can identify the Ave Maria within three notes, and likely have rosary beads somewhere in the attic. We also own at least one study Bible, listen to sermons in the car, and know that a “quiet time” is different from a nap.

We are followers of Christ who grew up Roman Catholic and are now Evangelical Protestants.

We wrestle with a series of challenges. Religious guilt still nips at our heels, and Christmas dinner at your brother Philip’s house (the one who is the Grand Poo-bah of the Knights of Columbus) is more than a little awkward. We were simply trying to give thanks before eating our meal, and for some reason Aunt Louise is now compelled to recite the Hail Mary. It’s going to be a long night!

Some of us walked with Jesus as Catholics before we moved in an Evangelical direction. Others of us were converted to Christ as we made the move. Either way, our ambition is simple. We want to live for Jesus Christ by embodying his grace and winsomely sharing it with Catholic friends and loved ones. And this is where the challenge begins.

Through an extended narrative describing my personal journey as a devout Catholic who worked with bishops and priests before eventually becoming an Evangelical pastor, I seek to help readers understand the following:

- the priorities which drive Catholic faith and practice.
- where the lines of continuity and discontinuity fall between Catholicism and Evangelicalism.

- the delicate dynamics that make up our relationships.
- some principles for lovingly sharing the gospel of salvation by grace alone.
- a historical overview of Catholicism from the Reformation to the present.

In treating these topics, my hope is that *Holy Ground* differs from other books on this subject in two ways.

First, books by Evangelicals which address Catholicism often convey an unkind attitude. The doctrinal emphasis of these works is commendable, but the irritable tone rings hollow and fails to exhibit the loving character of Jesus. It's the tone that my seminary professor warned against when he said, "Don't preach and write as though you have just swallowed embalming fluid. As Christ imparts redemptive life, so should his followers." This life is communicated in the content of God's message and *also* in its manner of presentation. Therefore, we seek to express genuine courtesy toward Catholics, even in disagreement.

Second, most books on Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism emphasize doctrinal tenets without exploring the practical dimensions of personal faith. However, there's often a vast difference between the content of catechisms and the beliefs of folks who fill our pews. This book is concerned with understanding the common ideas and experiences of real-life people.

Through years of research, I've interviewed all kinds of Catholics and Evangelicals in focus groups to learn about their most pressing questions and concerns. Thanks to their candid feedback, I've uncovered a wide range of insights. I've also used a web-based survey which has expanded the scope of our study to include anyone with internet access.

Based on those responses, I've decided to address two basic needs which regularly surfaced in conversation. These needs are taken up in the two overarching sections of the book. In part 1, I'll discuss the five major reasons why followers of Christ often leave the Catholic Church,

while touching on key figures from church history who elucidate these reasons. Part 2 is concerned with how to naturally and winsomely emulate Jesus among our Catholic loved ones and friends.

One issue deserving comment is our choice of the word *Evangelical*. It has become one of those slippery words that defy easy definition. Given a host of factors such as time period, locale, cultural forms, and the influence of media upon public perception, to say nothing of genuine doctrinal differences, we could devote the remainder of this book to the question of definition and still fall short. For the purposes of this book, I will instead point readers to a historically respected statement of faith: the Lausanne Covenant, drafted in 1974. Because Lausanne drew Christian leaders from around the world, it has the advantage of representing an international range of thought. The combined input from non-Western scholars and practitioners makes it well-rounded, substantive, and readable. You may access the document on the Lausanne website: www.lausanne.org.



Because our subject is as familiar to me as the home in which I grew from infancy into adulthood, writing this book has been especially tough. It's generally easier to address topics one doesn't know very well. There are fewer uncertainties, fewer grey hues to blend, more black-and-white lines. But for me, growing up as a member of the Catholic Church and working full-time in it, I have had years of first-hand experience. I have participated in many Masses, much banter over coffee with priest friends in parish rectories, and many rounds of golf in which Father so-and-so graciously walked with me through the tall grass looking for my lost ball (while his ball was on the green).

Yet more than familiarity with the subject, the toughest element of writing has been the nature of the topic—describing how former Catholics walk with Jesus. He is a fool who engages such a topic without fear and trembling. Then one must double-, triple-, and quadruple-check the details of his argument and, of equal importance, the attitude

and tone with which they are expressed. This awareness of one's limitations and our requisite dependence upon divine grace is what has given rise to the title *Holy Ground*. It is where we live, with humility before the throne of God, full of inadequacies and yet trusting in God's mercy. It was in this lowly spirit, motivated by a desire to elevate Christ, that the book was written, and hopefully it will also characterize the way it is applied.

Finally, I'll say a word about what you will encounter in the following pages. They contain several intertwining stories, including stories of brokenness: broken assumptions, broken expectations, and broken traditions. Yet it also contains stories of redemption: redeemed faith, redeemed hope, and redeemed relationships. If you're a former Catholic, these stories are yours.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

High-octane energy and sobering fear are a lively combination. As a first-time author, I've known much of this mixture. Some days the energy has made me feel as though I could hug a man-sized tree and rip it from the ground, roots and all. Other days, when the fear quotient rose, I have wanted to stay in bed in a fetal position and suck my thumb. In both instances, God has exercised sovereign oversight in the most curious and confounding ways. Usually he did so through others. These are the people I would like to thank. Without them, this book would have remained nothing more than a collection of notes in my file cabinet.

Kent Hughes, my friend and former pastor, thanks for planting the seed; David Cook, thanks for inspiring me to think as only an Oxford don can; and Harold Smith, thanks for your one sentence that improved my writing.

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To my dear wife, Angelina, for challenging me to think, for supporting my tired arms, and for enriching all of life with your sweet love.

Finally, to the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for your redemptive grace, which enlivens dry bones and makes them dance; to you alone be all glory and honor forever.

PROLOGUE

IT'S ONLY LIFE AND DEATH

I knew I was in trouble when the bishop removed a string of black, shiny rosary beads from his suit pocket. We had just concluded an evening banquet for wealthy donors on St. John's Island in Florida—the kind of donors whose Mercedes and Jaguar sedans were always buffed. As I drove south on Highway 90 to the bishop's home, he announced from the passenger seat his desire for us to pray. Even though I was employed full-time in the Catholic Church, he had reason to believe I was an Evangelical.

How could I—a newly minted Evangelical—pray the rosary?

The bishop suggested that I recite the Our Father while he addressed himself to Mary. Since the Our Father (called the Lord's Prayer by Evangelicals) is in Scripture, I appeased my conscience with a quick rationalization and determined to concentrate on my part of the prayer.

Bishop Symons and I had become friends during the year as we visited parishes together. He spoke on behalf of the diocese, and as the fundraiser, I delivered the motivational speech intended to fill Catholic offering plates with coins. Our dynamic-duo approach had the flavor of an Archbishop Fulton Sheen—the articulate Catholic television preacher from the 1950s—and a young Dale Carnegie salesman making the pitch. Following each presentation, people lined up to kiss his ring and hand me their checks.

While cruising down the highway, I remembered the exhortation my Evangelical pastor had issued to our congregation the previous day: he called it the Sixty-Day Gospel Challenge. We were supposed to share our personal faith in Jesus at least once a day for sixty days. Unfortunately, I had been so engrossed in work that it had slipped my mind.

Suddenly an idea emerged: I could share my faith with the bishop. But how does a young Evangelical Christian witness to a gray-haired Catholic bishop? What could I possibly say? After a moment's reflection, I decided to tell my conversion story. It was long overdue.

With my heart racing and whitened knuckles gripping the steering wheel, I took a deep breath and explained how divine mercy had invaded my life. For fifteen minutes, I tried to explain my encounter with God, describing how Jesus' death and resurrection connected my empty heart with saving grace. All the while, I stared intently at the road before me, afraid to make eye contact. Sweat forming on my forehead, I finally reached the conclusion of my monolog.

And—there was silence! The bishop said nothing. My fear became dread as I anticipated the blast of an anathematizing canon.

When I could no longer bear the quietness, I slowly turned toward the passenger seat. The bishop was also looking straight at the windshield. Noticing his eyes were closed, I assumed he was collecting his thoughts, but then I heard his heavy breathing.

The bishop was fast asleep!

OUR CHALLENGE

My attempt to talk with the bishop about Christian faith expresses the struggle of many who leave the Roman Catholic Church. You might say the challenge is twofold. First, we wrestle to understand how our Catholic background influences our view of God and his church. Second, we struggle with how to relate the gospel to Catholic friends and loved ones.

In regard to the first, when Catholics become Evangelical, we quickly realize that our walk with Jesus has been shaped by our reli-

gious background. For instance, perhaps the most common and spiritually injurious issue is the problem of unhealthy religious guilt. It's a nagging fear that preoccupies the soul, a root of doubt that questions whether we are truly forgiven in Christ. In bed at night I often wondered, "Has my behavior been good enough to merit divine approval?" Like Martin Luther, who attempted to find a gracious God, I never knew whether I had successfully produced a sufficient amount of righteousness.

Throughout his writings, Martin Luther describes his struggle to please God with the German word *Anfechtung*. English lacks an adequate translation. In Luther's day it communicated a severe torment of soul and conscience. It's perhaps best to let Luther describe it. About his days in the Catholic monastery, he writes, "I was a devout monk and wanted to force God to justify me because of my works and the severity of my life. I was a good monk, and kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, I would have gotten there as well. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other works."¹

In subsequent chapters we'll learn how Luther's soul realized divine liberation from his angst and consider how we may obtain the same.

The second struggle occurs when we relate to Roman Catholic friends and family. As an Evangelical pastor, I commonly find these relational breakdowns unfolding in our community: a married couple, one of whom is Evangelical and the other a Catholic, must decide which church they will attend. Do the children join youth group or their parish's equivalent? How about fulfilling sacraments like Holy Communion? Is it okay for Evangelical parents to approve of their children's observance of Catholic customs with which they disagree?

1. Walther von Loewenich, *Martin Luther: The Man and His Work*, trans. Lawrence E. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), 72.

Do such concessions communicate loving support or a negligent compromise? These issues often tear the fabric of marriage and family.

In addition to problems that occur within one's immediate family, there are also difficulties with extended relatives. For instance, Grandma Amelia dies and her family must decide if she is to have a Mass or an Evangelical funeral. Do you put a cross or a crucifix over her casket? Is it okay to sing the Ave Maria? These may sound like insignificant questions; however, families regularly face them, with precious relationships hanging in the balance.

The issue of Evangelical-Catholic relations not only is pressing on families but also has profound implications for large numbers of people, not least of which is the hurting world, which needs to see the life of Christ. Consider this story: Lord James Mackay was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1927, into an extremely devout Evangelical family that belonged to the Free Presbyterian Church. It was there that young Mackay was raised to love Christ. His devotion was evidenced by his thirty years of service as a church elder. In his distinguished career as England's most eminent judge, Mackay's reputation for being a man of faith preceded him.

The problem started when two of Mackay's colleagues died, both of whom happened to be Roman Catholic. After attending the second of these funeral services, Lord Mackay was confronted by Free Presbyterian Church elders. They accused him of sin, asserting that the Catholic funeral services he attended included Masses, which they considered to be an affront to the gospel of Scripture. The charge was not that Mackay had taken the Eucharist but that he had simply attended the services. Consequently, he was not permitted to serve or to take Communion in his denomination until he repented. When he defended his actions, the case was reviewed by the synod. A vote was taken and went against him, thirty-three to twenty-seven. In the aftermath of his censuring, Lord Mackay left the Free Presbyterian Church.

The decision of the synod to discipline Mackay for attending the Catholic funerals was so intensely controversial that the issue divided

Free Presbyterians throughout Scotland. Many spoke out on behalf of Mackay, and when they didn't receive a hearing, entire congregations broke off to form another denomination. They created what eventually came to be called Associated Presbyterian Churches. The interesting twist is that when these churches seceded, a legal battle ensued over the ownership of their church buildings. Who would get the parish land and facilities? Did they belong to the congregation or the denomination? The disagreement was so sharply disputed that it ascended to the highest court in the United Kingdom—the courtroom of none other than Lord Chancellor James Mackay.

THE OPPORTUNITY BEFORE US

The Tiber River is among the longest rivers in Italy, flowing some 406 kilometers down from the Tuscan mountains through the city of Rome. It winds through the old city like a serpent, flowing beneath an intricate network of bridges. One such overpass is the Ponte Vittorio. Heading north over the bridge, one eventually reaches the famous Via della Conciliazione (the Way of Conciliation), the primary access route to the Vatican. A sharp turn and there in front of you is the breathtaking Basilica of St. Peter, where the embracing arms of the Bernini Colonnade reach out to enfold you.

As tourists travel into the Vatican, it is easy to miss the beauty and wonder of the Tiber. After all, it's just a river, and Bernini's architecture is impressive. However, if one were to step onto a boat and travel west on the river, things would look vastly different. Leaving from Ponte Sant'Angelo dock, the Tiber accompanies you into the heart of the city. Enormous trees line the river banks and suddenly clear to provide magnificent views of the Eternal City and eventually of the Vatican itself.

Because the river runs directly beside Vatican City, it is sometimes used to describe one's relationship to the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, "swimming the Tiber" is shorthand for one's conversion to Catholicism. I'd like to suggest that it also says something about how Catholics and Evangelicals relate.

Sometimes the river is calm and placid; often, though, it threatens travelers with whitewater. People who have vacationed on a Tiber riverboat can testify that the voyage is preceded by great anticipation and the promise of lifelong memories. As the boat floats past the Vatican, with the dome of St. Peter's glistening in the sun, camera shutters click and drinking glasses clink while passengers give little thought to the sharp stones sitting below the surface. Thanks to the captain's skill, they navigate safely around danger.

Similarly, we approach gatherings with Catholics full of hope. Whatever the occasion, a holiday or weekly luncheon, the opportunity to relish friendship awaits us. However, like passengers on a cruise, we are sometimes unaware that lurking below the surface of relationships are jagged differences of belief which terrorize their vitality.

As one whose life has been spent floating down both sides of the Tiber, this is a portrait of how I moved from Catholic belief to serving as an Evangelical pastor. Along the way, I've scraped against more than a few stones, each of which represents a lesson. The following pages explore these lessons, intended to encourage you in your pursuit of Jesus.

A pastoral colleague of mine used to say that "it's just a matter of life or death, nothing more, nothing less."² Hanging in the balance are relationships which can either highlight the beauty of Christ's redemption or degenerate into a self-serving waste of time. The former has implications which affect eternity; the latter is nothing more than hollow vanity. This is what makes the need for these lessons so vital.

2.This is one of many lines I've picked up from my former colleague Kent Hughes.

Part 1

PERSPECTIVES ON ROMAN CATHOLICISM

Chapter 1

UNDERSTANDING WHY CATHOLICS BECOME EVANGELICAL

I grew up a good Catholic boy in St. Joseph's Parish on Long Island.¹ The cobblestone walkway to the church entrance was lined with dense clusters of yellow daffodils. Both hands were required to pull open the gigantic oak doors. Upon entering, one was greeted by a russet brick facade, flanked by truncated Gothic arches. The panorama of banners and statuary conveyed a rich history which infused the soul with a joyful gravity. Carved wooden pews appeared to have the posture of an army standing at attention before its general. As a young boy, I wondered, "Am I an enemy standing on foreign territory, or do I belong here?"

I remember on one occasion walking through an amber glow which filtered through the rose glass window. Tiny lint particles floated through rays of light to display a kaleidoscope of color. As these dust clouds slowly ascended and celestial beams shone down, a picture of divine redemption appeared. Humans are dust; God is light.

1. In some conversations and events, names and minor details have been modified for privacy and clarity. When taking this literary license, I have been careful to preserve the meaning and overall accuracy of each story.

However, when the beauty of God's presence shines on us, shadowy pieces of earth are beckoned upward to reflect the reality of heaven. My Catholic parish offered many such lessons.

Early church memories among Catholics often consist of votive candles, patent-leather Easter shoes, Christmas pageants, and flannelgraphs. Mine are not so religious. My chief memory has to do with entering church during winter. Running into the parish from the frosty tundra of a parking lot, most children passed quickly through the foyer to find warmth in the nave. I learned, however, that the defrosting process could be hastened by surreptitiously dipping both of my hands in the font of lukewarm holy water. It only took a few seconds of immersion before sensation was restored. It worked well.

Unfortunately, I once performed this trick when Father Tom was standing directly behind me. He spoke my name in his deep, commanding voice. Frightened, I spun around, flicked the water from my fingers onto his white cassock, and without missing a beat, sheepishly responded, "Bless you, Father," before running away. Years later, he shared the story in a homily as the funniest experience of his vocation and mentioned that he forgot which lad it was. For this lapse of memory I was relieved, but at the time, I envisioned the flames of purgatory.

CONFRONTED BY DEATH

When I was nine, my paternal grandfather died suddenly. It happened on a sunny afternoon when he and my grandmother were at Belmont Racetrack, just outside New York City. After the third race, Grandpa rushed through the crowded walkway to place another bet. While standing in line, he suddenly dropped dead from a heart attack. After an hour of anxious waiting, Grandma left her seat to learn the news.

The following Sunday morning, I sat in church with a flood of questions in my head. It was the first time I thought seriously about death. In my nine-year-old mind, I wondered, "Where is Grandpa today? Is he in heaven? If so, what is he doing? Maybe he's in purgatory. What should I do to help him? Pray the rosary? Go to Mass?" My questions weren't articulated so clearly. Nevertheless, I wondered.

Later in the week I attended my weekly Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) class, where I questioned our teacher, Mrs. Fiero, about it. When she learned of my grandfather's death, she asked one of the parish deacons to talk with me personally.

Joe Lorenzo had been a deacon for many years. He stood about five foot eight and weighed almost two hundred and fifty pounds. His smile was so big and bright that it filled the room. Big Joe (as kids secretly called him) spoke briefly with Mrs. Fiero before he invited me to take a walk with him. Just outside of our classroom and down the hall was the parish sanctuary, where Joe and I sat in a rear pew. I have a vague recollection of the dialog. It went something like the following.

“Chris, look up at the wall. What do you see?”

“A station of the cross.”

“Yes, station number 13 in fact. Jesus is being taken down from the cross with Mary embracing his lifeless body. You don't have to look at it for very long before you begin to feel something of our holy Mother's sorrow.

“Despite the modesty of the crucifix, which features Jesus in a loin cloth, we know that crucified men actually hung beaten and unclothed: an unspeakable disgrace to Jews, and especially so for the Jewish mother for whom the circumcision of her son was the most joyous day of her life. Our blessed Mother's soul magnified the Lord at his birth; now at his death, she suffers in his pain.

“Thankfully, Chris, this is only the second-to-last station. The final depiction of our Lord's passion, station 14, portrays Jesus lying in the tomb. The tomb is a symbol of death, but it also signifies hope—that one day life will flourish.”

Joe's eyes turned to a nearby window. “Let's continue to talk outside.”

WHAT DO CATHOLICS BELIEVE?

As we headed out together, the dim sanctuary was quickly contrasted by the bright world beyond the large wooden doors. The sunlight

was blinding, so much so that for a few moments all I could see was a silhouette of Big Joe before me. The redbrick path outside the doors veered off to an outcropping of flowers, bushes, and fruit trees. At the end of the brick path was a wooden bench where we eventually sat.

Joe initially was quiet as he stared up at the cherry tree in front of us, on top of the woodchip mound.

“Chris, have you ever considered how barren trees look in winter? Branches appear naked and dead, but in fact, life is hidden within. It’s in springtime when what’s concealed is revealed.

“Look for instance at this cherry tree. It is now beginning to break from dormancy. You’ll notice the fragrant white flowers are beginning to bud on the ends of the branches. This is the first step in what will eventually become a cluster of black cherries.

“What do you suppose would happen to this flower if I pulled it off the branch?”

“Death.”

“Precisely. Unless the flower remains connected, it can’t live. You know, your grandpa was baptized into the church. His faith was nurtured by the sacraments. On account of this, we hope that his life will blossom again.”

I looked at the ground, plucked a dandelion, and asked, “So, like, the church is the tree?”

With one of his jovial smiles, Joe responded, “Yes.”

“How does it work?”

“It starts with God, the Creator of all things. Each Sunday when we celebrate the Mass, we express this in the Gloria in Excelsis. It is a beautiful hymn of praise which dates back to the fourth century:

*You alone are the Holy One
You alone are the Lord,
You alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ
with the Holy Spirit,
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.*

“The second member of the triune God became a man, Jesus the God-man, as it says in the Nicene Creed:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven . . .*

“Jesus selected twelve men to be his closest disciples. He gave them authority and called them to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom. This is why we call them ‘the apostles,’ because they were sent to serve as ambassadors of Christ to the world.

“Representing the tribes of Israel, the twelve apostles united under Jesus Christ in a divine mission. Among them, Simon Peter received the primary role of spokesman and leader. The Lord bestowed his authority upon Peter for this purpose, as Matthew’s gospel tells us: ‘And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’²

“Peter was the first pope. His pastoral office is continued by a succession of popes down through history. As the vicar [representative] of Christ, the pope serves as the Roman pontiff and leads the bishops in exercising supreme power over the universal church. Together, they grant access to God.”³

“Joe, forgive me, but how does all this relate to our tree?”

2. Matt. 16:18–19.

3. For a precise explanation of how apostolic succession is thought to work, see Pope Benedict’s chapter “The Key Question in *The Catholic-Protestant Dispute: Tradition and Successio Apostolica*,” in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 239–84.

Joe cracked another warm smile and continued, “Imagine the church as the tree and Catholic people as the flowers. Just as sap flows to the far reaches of every branch, God’s grace is infused to every member of the church. As we remain connected to the tree, divine life is deposited into our souls. This is why the Eucharist is so vital; it provides spiritual nourishment.”

“How does the church deposit life into our souls?”

“The exact way the sacraments work is a mystery of faith, but we can rely on them just the same because they have been instituted by God.⁴ Through them we receive the life of Jesus.”

Before Big Joe continued, the school bell rang, indicating that class was finished. In unison we looked to the church building, where children were starting to exit. After I thanked Joe for his time, he pronounced a blessing over me and we went our separate ways. At the time, I may not have understood all that Joe said, but I knew without question that it came from a man who cared deeply for my soul.

THE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE

Those of us who are Evangelical will find in Joe’s explanation doctrinal elements that are familiar and others that are perhaps foreign. In the upcoming chapters we will clarify many of these details, but for now, I want to identify the fundamental difference between Catholic and Evangelical belief.

Like two sets of dominos that run parallel before moving in divergent directions, the Catholic and Evangelical understandings of Christ and salvation both emerge from a common Bible⁵ and creedal

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 775, ed. 2 (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).

5. Notwithstanding the so-called Old Testament apocrypha, or in Catholic terms the “deuterocanonicals.” These are a collection of writings found in the Catholic Old Testament from the intertestamental period (the four hundred years between the Old and New Testaments) comprising seven books: Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus), and Baruch. In addition, there are also passages of text: the Letter to Jeremiah (which became Baruch chap. 6), the Prayer of Azariah (which became Dan. 3:24–90), an additional 107 verses on the Book of Esther, Susanna

confessions (for example, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed) but thereafter begin to separate. The cause of this divergence comes down to a different interpretation of how the revelation and authority of Jesus extends to his church, and by extension into the world. As Deacon Joe explained, Catholics understand the incarnated presence of Jesus to be in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. This is why the church is thought to have divine authority over God's people.⁶ Evangelicals agree with this connection to the extent that we recognize the church as the body of Christ. At the same time, there are significant points at which we disagree.

Unlike the Catholic position, which is based upon apostolic succession, Evangelicals understand Jesus' infallible revelation to consist of Scripture alone. A simple way to think of it is the correlation between Jesus the *living* Word, and Jesus the *written* Word. As the start of John's gospel puts it, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1; see also 1 John 1:1). Accordingly, Scripture is the way in which Jesus' risen life extends to the church. Through the sacred text, God grants new life,⁷ reveals his will,⁸ and rules over his people.⁹ The Bible is the sole infallible guide for salvation. It stands alone as the supreme source of authority upon which Christian faith is based, the absolute "norm that sets the norm" (*norma normans*).¹⁰ This is different from the Catholic view, which understands Sacred Tradition to be equally authoritative as Scripture.¹¹

(which became Daniel 13), and Bel and the Dragon (which became Daniel 14). These books were made an official part of the Catholic Old Testament at the Council of Trent (1545–63).

6. Sebastian Tromp, SJ, *Corpus Christi quoad est ecclesia*, trans. Ann Condit (New York: Vantage, 1960), 194.

7. John 5:24; Rom. 10:8–10; Eph. 1:13; James 1:18 (compare with Heb. 4:12).

8. Matt. 4:4; 7:21; 1 Tim. 3:6–16; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16–17; Heb. 1:2.

9. John 17:17; 1 Cor. 14:37; Phil. 2:16; 1 Tim. 5:17.

10. Acts 17:11; 1 Cor. 3:11; 1 Thess. 2:13; Harold O. J. Brown, *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 79.

11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 97.

With this basic point of divergence in mind, we can better understand why Catholics and Evangelicals differ.¹² In a single word, it comes down to a difference of “authority.”

Most of the former Catholics who completed our survey pointed to the issue of religious authority as the reason for moving in an Evangelical direction. As our questionnaires and focus groups unpacked this concern, five issues rose to the top. With authority as their common thread, these convictions constitute the particular reasons why individuals eventually departed from their Catholic backgrounds:

1. Every believer is called to full-time ministry.
2. Relationship with Christ must take precedence over rules-keeping.
3. We enjoy direct access to God in Christ.
4. There is only one proper object of devotion — Jesus the Savior.
5. God’s children should be motivated by grace instead of guilt.

After numerous interviews in living rooms with a dozen or so people over coffee and biscotti, I realized something fascinating. Former Catholics enjoy hearing one another’s stories of faith because such stories offer insight into one’s own spiritual journey. These personal accounts provide answers to important questions and supply evidence to support the aforementioned thesis concerning the convictions that drive individuals from the Catholic Church. The following chapters explore the most commonly mentioned reasons for this departure and present three historical portraits from the Reformation period to further illuminate how such convictions get worked out.

12. Another way to understand the divergence is in terms of “allegiance,” as Jaroslav Pelikan puts it in his classic book *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism*. Allegiance to Christ will appear to be different between Catholics and Evangelicals, the former defining it by allegiance to the church institution and the latter in terms of personal faith in Christ (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Riddle of Roman Catholicism* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1959], 179).