

Michael F. Scotto - Do You Understand What You Read?

I was troubled when I first read the passage. “Bel boweth down, Nebo stoopeth, their idols were upon the beasts, and upon the cattle: ... They lavish gold out of the bag, and weigh silver in the balance, and hire a goldsmith; and he maketh it a god: they fall down, yea, they worship... Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure... yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it. Harken unto me, ye stouthearted, that are far from righteousness: I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry: and I will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory.” (Isaiah 46:1-13)

I had never seriously studied the Scriptures and did not know anyone who did. I had seen my brother reading a Bible in his bed when we were boys, but when I had tried to read it, I often found myself more confused than before I began. However, there I was, looking for answers, stuck in chapter 46 of Isaiah, and torn between two worlds.

I was twenty-five years old and a respected Religious Education teacher in my parish. I had a Catholic pedigree and a list of accomplishments longer than anyone else I knew my age. Why did this passage in Isaiah trouble me so? I thought it had the comforting words I sought. I longed to be sure that God was surely in control of my life and that He could certainly “declare the end from the beginning.” (Isaiah 46:10) I had done everything right, and yet, I found the world around me collapsing and my mind sinking into despair. Was I being “stouthearted”? Surely, God would answer the cries of one who had diligently studied the doctrines of the Church of Rome as I had. Bad things are not supposed to happen to good people. Is that not right?

What was all this about bowing down before idols? What did God mean by “I bring near my righteousness”? (Isaiah 46:13) I had never read the Scriptures like this before. For nearly ten years, I had read the Scriptures solely to defend the religion into which I was born.

Now, after three years, suddenly my fiancé was gone. We had planned our futures, from our wedding in her parents’ new church, to how we would raise our children. Then one day she announced it was over and never wanted to see me again. What was this? It made no sense. I had served God, had been a voice for morality, had defended the One True Church, and supported all the right causes. Now I desperately needed answers.

This strange trip into introspection resulted in a schismatic attempt to join two opposing worlds. My first reaction was to delve more deeply into my faith. I began dedicating most of my free time to the veneration of the Saints and spent countless hours lighting candles and praying before the altar in my parish. I stuffed cash into the collection boxes under the statues of the Saints.

Looking for Answers

In my desire to achieve peace, I found in the Virgin Mary my greatest hope. I began praying to the statue of her in the churchyard and vowed to say the Rosary every day. I began to attend Friday morning Rosary prayer meetings in the church and sang the songs I had learned as a boy for the May Day Procession. I placed my hopes and dreams in Mary’s intercessory powers, and not willing to leave any stone unturned, I went to confession and studied the efficacy of a Novena.

I then solidified my faith by studying the Catholic Encyclopedia and the textbooks I had taught others from in my Religious Education classes. I rediscovered the tape series I had that featured Scott Hahn and Father Mitchell Pacwa which laid out a Catholic apologetic approach to the Evangelical Christian’s argument—a tape series I had purchased after my many run-ins with “born-again” Christians in college.

I befriended a priest who noticed my devotion at the noon Mass. I usually stayed after Mass to light candles and pick up literature that had been left in the pews by The Knights of Columbus.

The other part of my journey involved reading the Scriptures. My brother had bought me a Bible for Christmas when I was twelve. I used to read it during the endless hours of kneeling before the Monstrance during Perpetual Adoration (a week long “grace-laden” worship of the Eucharist). We occasionally opened the Bible in religion class, but we never strayed too far from the primary stories known to most students of western civilization.

Resting on My Laurels

I had been warned as a child that I was not to study the Bible on my own. I was certainly to avoid such things as the book of Revelation. The Roman Church teaches that the pope and the magisterium are the sole interpreters of Scripture. However, I needed answers, and I needed them fast. I had lost focus of a future, which days before had been bright; everything else in life, compared to this, seemed trivial. I filled every waking moment with religious pursuits. When I was not at the church, or reading from the Scriptures, I was seeking religion on the radio and on television. While at work, as I sat at my desk, I tuned in Bible teachers on the radio like Oliver B. Greene, J. Vernon McGee, Donald Grey Barnhouse, and Woodrow Kroll.

I had always been wary of Evangelical Christian preachers and viewed most of them as charlatans who preached a free ticket to heaven for personal gain. These men, however, were teaching something quite different. They were expounding the Word of God as though it were a living document. Their knowledge of all the Scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation, was impressive—for Protestants. They spoke with authority, reflecting their stated belief that the Bible was the absolute, infallible, and direct Word of God. They taught that the Bible was accurate in every way. This opposed everything I had been taught—and none of them asked for money!

This was significant, because I had just finished a semester at our parish teaching that the Bible had historical and scientific errors in it. (Developing Faith Series, Kieran Sawyer; Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978.) This was nothing new; I had learned to marry the Bible to evolution in Catholic school. The Paulist Order (in a book by Richard Chilson) taught that atheists and agnostics could be admitted to the Kingdom so long as they “tried to love others.” (An Introduction to the Faith of Catholics; Richard Chilson, New York: Paulist Press, 1975.) I knew that these were not necessarily authoritative books, although Chilson’s book carries the Imprimatur of the Archbishop of Newark. However, I did not trust the Paulists, a more liberal Order. I had attended grade school and served as an altar boy in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia under the auspices of John Cardinal Krol, and due to his influence, I considered myself a Papalist. Although at Vatican II the Church had approved of the Host’s placement into the hands of the faithful in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, I had refused to change. Even as a boy, I preferred to take the Host by mouth and only from the hand of a priest.

Rescuing the Diocese of Charlotte

My family’s move to North Carolina several years earlier, and our membership in a more liberal Paulist parish there, strengthened my resolve to defend the exclusivity of the only church that I considered to be the true church, the one I believed was founded by Christ Himself.

I had dropped out of my ninth grade Religious Education class because I found the teachers to be unlearned and the subject matter simplistic. The next year I joined the tenth grade class and proceeded to be the class “correction officer,” questioning the source and validity of the lessons taught. I had avoided the parish youth group. I found it to be just as sophomoric as my classes. I had also accepted a role as an acolyte (A person assisting a priest in a religious service), not exactly a position that stirs up admiration from fellow teenagers.

In the eleventh grade, I was urged by my mother to attend a beach trip with the group. The social outlet was attractive to me since I had not assimilated well into southern culture. The youth group was a mix of native Carolinians and children of northern transplants. After only a few youth group meetings, I was urged to attend an intense diocesan youth retreat called Search. I attended the weekend retreat and returned with a new outlook, captivated by the loving, open environment. I wanted to combine the emotional softness displayed at the retreat with the conviction of a devout, loyal Catholic.

My focused devotion, knowledge of church dogma, and a desire for spiritual growth, led me to be elected as the youth group's Spiritual Director. For a shy kid who viewed himself as an outsider, to be elected to one of the most visible positions among the youth, was a real feather in my cap. I relished the role and took it very seriously. I became immersed in diocesan activities and once attended a weeklong summer retreat for youth leaders called Christian Leadership Institute. I attended training sessions to be a Search leader and presenter. My senior year was filled with church activities. In addition to my duties as a diocesan youth worker, I was elected Youth Representative to the Parish Council and Vice President of our youth group.

During my second weekend as a Search presenter, I was informed that the Bishop of Charlotte, North Carolina would be coming by to observe. He was scheduled to visit during my presentation, making me almost as nervous as I was proud. My performance went over well. If only he knew my years of preparation in Philadelphia, I thought, he would be even more impressed.

Becoming more politically active, I attended a Washington, D.C. anti-abortion rally and began supporting pro-life organizations and candidates with the little money I was earning. I had also become aware of several conservative Catholic Orders. I thought they embodied the Papalist agenda I supported. I began to support the Society of St. Peter and the Legionaries of Christ.

Confidence in the Flesh

My devotion to my Catholic faith only deepened when I enrolled at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Upon arrival on campus, I joined the College Republicans and the campus Catholic organization. My exposure to evangelical Christians in high school had primarily been confined to a few Baptists who pestered some of my friends in the youth group. We would mock them as deficient Christians and dismissed them as simple-minded Protestants who knew nothing of history, tradition, or the deeper things of God. Now, in this new environment, they seemed to be everywhere.

I stayed in touch with the diocese and served as a young adult leader for several events, and while in Raleigh, I attended the parish of two of my friends from the College Republicans. It was a conservative parish with a traditionalist pastor. After only a couple of meetings, he was so impressed by both my knowledge and my zeal that he asked me to teach a high school confirmation class. Of course, I gladly accepted the position, wanting to pass on my enthusiasm to yet another group of young Catholics.

I felt secure in my faith and found power in my convictions. I was admired by older Catholic students in the Catholic center, was a popular confirmation teacher, and was still in high demand at the diocesan level. I had met several evangelical Christians who were active in the College Republicans group, but a more direct encounter was just around the corner.

I was walking across the brickyard at N.C. State when I saw this sign: Do You Know if You're Going to Heaven? I was incensed! From my earliest days as an altar boy I had been taught to fear such a presumptuous thought. No man can know, I thought. How dare they? I was so angered that I approached the table they had set up for their literature and asked them in quite an indignant manner if they claimed to know their eternal fate. Much to my surprise and chagrin, they answered, "Yes," without the slightest hesitation and even with great conviction. The leader, of this group called

Maranatha, opened up his Bible and read passages such as, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” (John 5:24)

This young man, my contemporary, continued to quote a number of other verses from both the Old and New Testaments when the discussion spilled out into the open air. I was not as well versed on the Scriptures as this student, but I certainly had history and tradition on my side. A small crowd gathered as I barked out the verses I knew. However, I left the scene angry and frustrated. How could anyone presume to be worthy of heaven? Not even the pope makes such a prideful boast!

I was determined to combat this heresy and searched every Catholic apologetic book I had at my disposal. Lastly, I searched in my Bible for verses that would support my conclusions. I took my new arsenal of information and began to challenge the open-air preachers that frequented the brickyard. Small crowds would gather as I chased every historical rabbit and church document that I could find. The crowds would invariably be behind me, patting my back and cheering my retorts. They had little interest in Roman Catholicism; they just hated these evangelists.

The men were quite reserved. As I ranted and changed topics at will, repeatedly they kept quoting scripture. I left these encounters with pride on my face but trouble in my soul. I knew my Roman Catholicism better than any lay Catholic I knew, so seeking my argument’s bolster through answers from my Catholic peers was a waste of time. As with most Catholics, they were blissfully unfamiliar with most church doctrines and documents. I had to work this through on my own.

Almost Persuaded

An evangelical campus group had started a Bible study in the study room of my residence hall. I joined to try to learn more about what these people believed. During one discussion, I quoted from the Apocryphal Book of Wisdom to a room full of blank stares. After that awkward moment, the group moved on. I took my pride and determined in my heart to never attend one of these studies again. I was still intrigued by the devotion of these students and their knowledge of the Scriptures. If salvation is a gift, and they were assured of heaven, why then were they so devout? To what end was all this activity? Since my youth, my religious activity was designed to either earn indulgences, to shorten my time in Purgatory, or to show devotion to the church and her Saints in order to garner favor from the spirit world. I was maintaining my “state of grace,” but what on earth were they doing?

Sitting in my room one afternoon, two of these evangelical Christians paid me a visit. They used a small whiteboard and presented the “gospel...unto salvation” (Romans 1:16: For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. from the book of Romans). “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) Of course I could agree to that, all men were sinners. It was the Scriptures that followed with which I took issue. “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 6:23) Now I understood where they were going with this. They were going to focus on the “gift.” They showed on their whiteboard how our good works fall short of God’s standard. “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” (Romans 4:4, 5)

It was all I could stand. I was being nice, but now they were “twisting” scripture! They were going to try to tell me that all my works, my life of morality, and my religious activity were worthless! I could be “saved” and just cruise on through life with the full assurance of eternal life. I had heard it before. Such thinking was absurd to me. It made no sense! I wrestled with those Scriptures and searched selectively for myself to find verses to contradict the notion that our works are not salvific or essential to our salvation. I was well aware of James’s teaching that “faith without works is dead” and wanted desperately for that to satisfy my soul; but upon reading the text, it raised more

questions than it provided answers. I wanted to understand their argument without admitting my interest, so I took a trip inside one of their meetings, unbeknownst to my friends, to shed some light on my confusion. Not knowing any of the songs they sang, I must surely have looked out of place. The freedom they had! This love and devotion, seemingly to God, and yet designed to accomplish nothing, frightened me. I thought there was something cult-like about the whole thing. Without the threat of hell, or even Purgatory, why practice such strict moral constraints? I was weary, confused, and longed for familiar surroundings.

In Full Retreat

During the summer, after my freshman year, I retreated to the safety of my home parish where I was honored by the diocese by being asked to be a paid seminar presenter at the massive diocesan youth conference. My topic was "Faith." Unlike most of the other presenters, I had limited my examples of faith to the pages of scripture because I was becoming familiar with more of the Bible. My encounters on the campus had honed my skills at finding select verses I could use in my debates.

After the fall semester of my sophomore year, I transferred to The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), even though it was a far more liberal school with a corresponding more liberal College Republican Club and Catholic Center. Being closer to my home parish, I was able to help with the youth group, and by then I was splitting my time between the parish activities and the Catholic Center on campus. I participated in the Bible study led by the campus priest. He was a rank liberal and the experience drove me to a more traditional parish near campus. I still attended campus events at the Catholic Center, but I was through with the liberal nonsense as I saw it.

Shortly after transferring to UNCG, I joined a fraternity. I was attracted by the code of chivalry and the emphasis on honor I found in the recruitment material. Unfortunately, I soon discovered that most of the activities that surrounded the fraternity had little to do with either chivalry or honor. In an attempt to temper the excesses of my fraternity brothers, I ran for, and was easily elected, chapter chaplain. It was mostly a ceremonial position, but it did carry some weight during certain discussions. I was quickly dubbed "the conscience of the fraternity," a title I proudly encouraged.

"Religious" Education

In 1987, my pride and assurance was even more solidified after a trip to Vatican City in Rome. I was overwhelmed with the history of St. Peter's Basilica. The Catholic luminaries represented there, including Peter's supposed grave, filled my mind with awe. My only regret was that the sealed doors, which promised special indulgences, were still closed and not to be opened for another thirteen years. In my state of euphoria, I took a few moments to light a candle for my brother, Joe. Shortly before we moved to North Carolina in 1980, my brother (whom I had seen reading his Bible in his bed when I was young) had left the Catholic Church. At his wedding in a Baptist church the previous year, I had made an overt show of "the sign of the cross" after each prayer. My family and other spectators were going to be assured that, despite the setting, I was still firmly entrenched in the camp of Rome.

Joe had spent several summers smuggling Bibles into Eastern Europe in the early 1980s. Certainly that was admirable but, outside the Catholic Church, he had no direct access to the grace of God found only in her sacraments. This is clearly taught. His only hope of securing the graces necessary to alleviate his sufferings in Purgatory was for him to return to Rome. It was to that end that I prayed and lit the candle, believing it was the most powerful thing I could do for him.

I returned from my trip to Europe more enamored with Roman Catholicism than ever. Removed from the confrontational environment of North Carolina State, I continued to become increasingly more comfortable in my faith. The episode in my dorm room seemed like a distant, unpleasant memory.

I returned to my home parish and began to teach Religious Education classes. My classes were quite popular and I became something of an unofficial spokesman for the teachers. At one point, there developed a parents' revolt of sorts against the whole program; I was asked to address the angry group in lieu of classes one Sunday evening. Most of the rage was directed at the Religious Education Director. To be more personal, we split into smaller groups where, during one exchange in particular between a parent and another teacher in my group, the parent stated that all she wanted was for us to "Teach my children how to be good people." And, as she said those words, out of nowhere, a thought ran through my mind: "good people go to hell." The thought took me completely by surprise, and I do not remember anything about the meeting after that. This was a foreign doctrine to Roman Catholicism. I had no idea where that thought had come from.

Vatican II had clearly laid out the road to salvation—even for Muslims. They too could achieve their salvation by striving to lead a good life. Ancient papal bulls (Papal bulls are decrees or "solemn edicts" granted by the Vatican.) had stated that apart from submission to the pope no one could be saved, no matter how blameless. But, statements like that had been clarified in the continual revelation found in Sacred Tradition. What on earth was I thinking? "Good people, go to hell?" Where did that come from? It sounded like something those evangelists from North Carolina State might say.

The education wars ended. I was secure in my position as a teacher. The strange thought had passed, and I could continue with my class on the Sacraments. I had graduated from UNCG, had met the girl of my dreams, had become a shaper of young Catholic minds, and my life was planned. I was in a position to combat the liberalism that had infected my parish by directly influencing the youth. I felt safe, sound, and secure.

And the Rain Descended

It was at UNCG that I met my fiancée, Mary, in the cafeteria, but it would take a few months for us to come together. The process advanced quickly when I discovered she was an Irish Catholic from Pennsylvania. I was an Italian Catholic. The Irish Catholics and Polish Catholics were seen as more seriously devout than other groups, so this seemed like the perfect match—as though arranged by the Saints themselves! While in Rome, I prayed God would give me a wife. Mary was certainly the answer to that prayer, I thought.

During our nearly three years together, Mary became a part of my family. She was readily welcomed at all family functions and became a fixture in my parents' home. I had been to her parents' home in Pennsylvania on a couple of occasions as well. The idea of a life without Mary was unfathomable; there was no question that we would be anything except husband and wife. Then Mary left me. The Religious Education teacher, the voice of morality, and defender of the Catholic faith found himself suddenly with no answers. Her rejection of me was what triggered an earnest search for the truth. The utter devastation led me to search out the Scriptures and struggle with the message of Isaiah 46. This loss of control thrust me into two contradictory theologies: the Roman Catholicism I had vigorously defended inside and outside the Church of Rome, and the gospel of the free grace of God through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.

So there I was, diving deeply into my Roman Catholicism as never before while rediscovering the intrigue the Evangelicals at North Carolina State had ignited. However, as noted earlier, I was trying to reconcile two different tracks that would never, and could never, meet.

At the time, I was working at UNCG in the Admissions Office and was traveling extensively in the Northeast. I had a lot of free time in the evenings, which I spent reading the Scriptures, praying, listening to teaching tapes and Christian radio. But, simultaneously, I visited a grotto in Connecticut to pay homage to the Virgin Mary, seeking her intercession. I lit candles and left written prayers. The next night, I attended a Pentecostal healing meeting. During the day, I listened to J. Vernon McGee; I read Catholic tracts at night. I would pray the Rosary, and then I would sit in a dark hotel

bathroom and pray for hours on end to the God of Isaiah 46.

I returned to North Carolina for a week, between recruitment trips. As my dual spiritual life continued, I would walk to the church and spend hours at the altar, and I would then spend hours listening to gospel preachers, all day at work and through the night.

In my despair, I nearly became suicidal. One Saturday morning, ready to end it all, I had it all planned—had even written the letter. However, an unexpected Saturday morning phone call from my sister interrupted my plans, allowing me to regain control of my thoughts. Desperate calls to my brother, asking him to assure me that God was in control, kept me sane after that. According to Isaiah 46, God declared the end from the beginning. He brought things to pass. I clung to that like a personal promise, which is the reason I fell in love with Isaiah 46.

Day after day, I listened to Oliver B. Greene hammer away at my Catholic faith with the gospel of peace. I became familiar with many verses and clung to them as I had to Isaiah 46. The verses from Romans, which I had heard years before, again came to mind as Dr. Greene repeated them. I would meditate and find hope in the Scriptures, wanting desperately to find peace with God. But, there was no room in my thinking that all my good works were worthless. It just could not be so.

I had been an excellent student in religion, attended multiple Friday morning Masses, made all but one Mass or Holy Day of Obligation from the time of my confirmation in the fourth grade through my first year in college. I gave time and money to conservative Orders, was an altar boy and an acolyte. I believed in celibacy before marriage, was pro-life, and a defender of the One True Church in many settings. I was the most moral student of any of the young adults that I knew. I prayed the Rosary, said Novenas, and believed I was in a state of grace! I had performed all required penance, had adored the Saints, and I had read Canon Law and the Sacred Councils. I knew more Catholic doctrine and Sacred Tradition than any lay Catholic I knew. How could all of that be worthless?

Everything I knew, and every apparatus of the Roman Catholic Church, is built upon the “unfinished” work of Christ. In the final analysis, it all came down to the Church, her “Saints,” the sacraments, and me. I was now confronted with the work of Christ on Calvary. Was it complete? Was it sufficient? Was it finished? What about Canon Law? If Muslims, Hindus, atheists, and even agnostics could merit heaven, of what value was Christ’s work? Were the good works of St. Francis, which could rescue me from Purgatory, more meritorious than the work of Christ on the cross? What was the value of faith? Now, since Christ was being exalted in my heart through the Scriptures, my theology of works was collapsing like a house of cards all around me, one doctrine at a time.

Halt Between Two

I was directly confronted at that time by Oliver B. Greene’s series on the wrath of God. He started in Genesis (which he took as absolute truth and history) and traveled all the way through the book of Revelation. Man had no righteousness. There is no one that does good. (Romans 3:12: They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.) Even man’s best efforts and righteousness are filthy rags to God. (Isaiah 64:6) Salvation was either of grace or of works; it could never be of both or maintained by both. (Romans 11:5, 6) What was I to do with these and scores of other passages?

“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” (Romans 5:1, 2) “... God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them... For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” (2Corinthians 5:19, 21)

I determined that I would rather die than continue as a double-minded man. As I lay in bed waiting for death to consume me, I was suddenly consumed with something else: my sin. I was struck

suddenly with the fear of meeting God in my sin. I had just been to confession, but it offered no solace. Sins from my childhood, from my teen years, and now the present, had swept across my mind. I screamed into a pillow so my roommate would not hear me. I was terrified of the wrath of God and prayed that the verses and promises of Christ Himself were true.

I told God that I had no other hope. In that moment, I received the finished work of Jesus Christ on my account, understanding that it alone was my only hope. It was all I had left. I suddenly began to understand what those students at North Carolina State had been talking about. The seed of the Word of God, which they had planted, finally came to fruition.

I took out the Bible my brother had given me years before; I read a number of the Psalms and realized that now I had something for which to live. In complete contradiction to my musings of years earlier, it now made sense to me why Christians pursue holiness. It is not to obtain from God a debt, which He is required to answer; it is to radiate the "new creation's holiness," (Christ's righteousness now lived through me) which God has already wrought. It is understood that in holiness is peace and joy.

For several weeks, I tried to reconcile my new faith in Christ with my Roman catholicism. I searched her doctrines to try to make them compatible; but by then, I knew too much. The Treasury of Merit, the Brown Scapular, Purgatory, Indulgences, Holy Days of Obligation, and scores of other core Catholic doctrines made obedience to Roman catholicism difficult and eventually even impossible. I found myself "bowing before idols," a phrase that for most of my life had meant nothing.

Coming Out from Among Her

I never looked for a way to leave the Catholic Church. Being my home since birth, it was the last thought I had. I had met thousands of Roman Catholics: priests, nuns, and teachers, all of whom had meant something to me. I would not leave without good cause. I had given so much to the Church. She was all I knew.

Shortly after my new birth in Christ, having trusted in Christ's finished work on the cross, I found myself at a Sunday Mass. When the time came for me to go forward for Holy Communion, true to form, I was in the priest's line. As he held up the Host before me and said, "The Body of Christ," for the first time in my life I could not say the word, "Amen." I did not agree.

Christ was not on an altar or in a perpetual sacrifice as I had been taught as a child; He is sitting at the right hand of God, having already obtained eternal redemption for me. The fact that His sacrifice never had to be repeated was scriptural evidence of its efficacy. (Hebrews 7:27; 10:1-14) I left the Roman Catholic Church that day and never looked back.

"...when he [Christ] had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high." (Hebrews 1:3b) "For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins." (Hebrews 10:1, 2) "But this man [Christ], after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." (Hebrews 10:12-14) "Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us." (Hebrews 9:12)

From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures are filled with promises and word "pictures" of the finished work of Christ. There is no room in that book for compromise. I knew the doctrine of transubstantiation, and I knew the basis upon which that doctrine was constructed. As hundreds of thousands before me had done for sixteen centuries, I had to come out of the Roman Catholic

system of works and rituals in order to find rest in the finished work of Christ.

It all had to go: the Treasury of Merit, Indulgences, Holy Days of Obligation, and the like, all contradicted not only the Scriptures but the very work of Christ Himself. I could not truly honor and serve Jesus Christ while outwardly displaying my lack of faith in His work on Calvary—by maintaining a presumed “state of grace”—and seeking forgiveness of sins through rituals and faith in the work of the “Saints” on my behalf.

“Faith without works is dead.” (James 2:17, 20, 26) What we do reflects what we truly believe. I could not say that I had faith in Christ and continue to act in a manner that suggested a faith in myself. If my hope of heaven and the forgiveness of my sins were obtained in indulgences, prayers to Saint Francis, Mass cards, and “doing my very best,” then my faith was in me. Our works betray (Inform us and others) wherein lies our faith.

I have not recounted all my good works here, nor have I disclosed all my experiences in the Roman Catholic Church: the countless arguments, the countless sacraments, and the countless self-sacrifices offered to God. Neither is it possible to list here all the complexities and voluminous dogmas of the Roman Catholic religion that keep its faithful trapped in a system that offers no solutions. I rest in the knowledge that the complexity can be cast aside in the light of the “simplicity that is in Christ,” (2Corinthians 11:3) and in the pages of Scripture which are able to make even a little child wise unto salvation. (2Tim 3:15) Salvation is not a “do my very best” or “hope so” concept; it is a gift (Ephesians 2:8, 9) which can be known! (John 5:24; 1John 5:13)

I understand that the documents of Vatican II (1964 Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.) state that there is no salvation for those who either “refuse to enter in” or for those who “willingly leave” the Roman Catholic Church. I know that missing Mass is to commit a "grave sin" meriting a loss of my "state of grace" (out of which meant: no hope of eternal life). (See Catechism of the Catholic Church, Para 2181) However, once I found rest and satisfaction in the finished work of Christ, coming directly from God the Father in heaven, Who Himself had granted permission; there was no fear in the pronouncements of mere men. However, I am filled with compassion for those still trapped in the Roman Catholic religious system.

Today, I have a small music and teaching ministry to try reaching Roman Catholics with the gospel of the “free” grace of God. I spend much of my time educating Catholics concerning the doctrines of their own church. Most of these lay Catholics are blissfully unaware of the councils, decrees, dogmas, canon laws, and the rest of the tenets that define Roman Catholicism. These doctrines are then contrasted with the simple gospel and the Word of God—a weapon that is stronger than any two-edged sword. In the end, as those fellows at North Carolina State had done, I seek only to plant the seed of the Word of God. It is God who saves and God who gives the increase. To God alone be the glory!