

Drowning in the Tiber (Part 2)
Responding to Francis Beckwith's 2009 Book:
Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic.
-A Jet Tour Through the Book-

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Transcript of a Sermon Preached at Christ Church of Clarkson
by
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Please stand and open your Bibles to Galatians chapter two. Galatians, the second chapter, beginning at verse 1:

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? “We are Jews by nature, and not sinners from among the Gentiles; nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified. “But if, while seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have also been

found sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? May it never be! “For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. “For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God. “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly.”¹

[Opening Prayer]

My goal for this morning is to give you a detailed overview of Francis Beckwith’s book, *Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic*. It was a year and a half ago that Dr. Beckwith shocked the evangelical world when he announced, while he was serving as President of Evangelical Theological Society, a society to which I belong, that he was returning to the Roman Catholic Church of his baptism.

As I said last time, this has become a rather new phenomenon. Disgruntled evangelicals, those who identify or who identified with "the evangel," the Gospel, that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, those who have claimed to be born again, those who claim to believe that the Bible is an all-sufficient source for all things spiritual – it is a rather new phenomenon that such individuals would jettison their evangelical Christian beliefs and exchange that for those of Roman Catholicism. That is to exchange an understanding of being born again by the power of the Holy Spirit that makes one a Christian by grace through faith, for an understanding of being born again by baptism, generally conferred upon one as an infant. It is to exchange the belief that one is justified solely by God’s grace with good works following, for a belief that one is justified by God’s grace and human merit or works. It is to exchange the belief that the Bible is God’s all-sufficient Word and the foundation for all we believe, for a belief that the Bible is expanded upon and clarified by authoritative church dogma and that the Roman Catholic Church is the true church that has the power and authority to add to Scripture. It is to exchange the belief that Jesus Christ was sacrificed once for all two thousand years ago, for a belief that He is sacrificed again and again and again at each Roman Catholic mass. It is to exchange the belief in the priesthood of the believer for a mediating class of priests and the entire system which is the papacy. It is to exchange that belief that those whom Christ saves He saves completely, and those whom He saves completely will be glorified at death and fit to enter His presence, for a belief that only the most holy have that privilege. For the rest, time will have to be spent in a place called purgatory where the rest of one’s sins have to be purged in the fire, perhaps for many, many, many years. I could go on, but suffice to say as John MacArthur has, “The Roman Catholic Church is not a different denomination. The Roman Catholic Church is a different religion.”²

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Bible citations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (The Lockman Foundation, 1971).

²John MacArthur, "The Pope and the Papacy" (lecture, Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA, message 90-291, 2005).

As a former Roman Catholic, I have been keenly interested in this new phenomenon, what I would call the apostasy of our age. For the first time in our history, we have a small but powerful minority of Roman Catholics who serve as devastating apologists for Rome. And if you are unprepared, brethren, and you run into one of them, they will hand you your shirt in a debate, much as a well-equipped Jehovah's Witness would. I believe that this book, Francis Beckwith's book which came out this year, will be one of the greatest (if not the greatest) tools for Roman Catholic evangelism in America. So I want the church, I want the true Church of Jesus Christ to be aware and equipped, because this is not a phenomenon which is going to go away.

As I said last time, I wanted to do a detailed overview of the book this week and that's my goal. In the weeks that follow I will then attempt to deconstruct the arguments that Beckwith gives in his book.

The book itself is about one hundred and forty pages; I've read about ninety percent of it. I really wanted to get through all of it before this morning's message, but wasn't able to do that— not even after spending nine hours straight on the seat of my pants with the book and my laptop. I've taken hours of notes on that ninety percent; in fact, I have over sixty pages of single-spaced notes on my computer. I'm going to attempt to squeeze that into an hour presentation.

One of the interesting things is the list of endorsements that covers this book. As you know, most books, especially non-fiction books, have endorsements on the cover and on the fly leaf. Well, this book is no exception. There's a list of endorsements that adorn its cover and its fly leaf, and interestingly the endorsements includes some evangelical scholars, such as Edwin Yamauchi of Miami University, who was the 2006 Evangelical Theological Society President. He is featured in the widely-read Christian apologetic work *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel, and has done much work in the area of first-century Christianity. Then there's apologist J.P. Moreland, who is currently a distinguished professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology at Biola University in La Mirada, California. He also writes a complimentary approval of the book. And Ralph C. Wood, a university professor of theology and literature at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. He is one of Francis Beckwith's co-workers and co-professors at that school, Baylor. And Wood's endorsement on the back of the book reads, "Frank Beckwith's memoir is a remarkable act of evangelical charity. He recounts his reversion to Catholicism in ways that honor his evangelical past even as he shows how its riches are being transformed by his new life in the communion of Rome." *Evangelical riches transformed in the communion of Rome*. No surprise the book is also endorsed by Roman Catholics such as Scott Hahn, a Presbyterian convert to Roman Catholicism. He has been a key apologist for them. Many people, using his wife's words, have started to call him, "Luther in reverse" since he led the way in 1986 for a number of Protestants to convert to Rome.

Then there's the venerable Richard John Neuhaus, an ordained Lutheran minister, who served for years in the conservative Lutheran church, Missouri Synod, then went to the more liberal Evangelical Lutheran Church of America before being received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1990. A year later he was ordained a priest by Cardinal John O'Connor. He promoted ecumenical dialogue and social conservatism. Along with Charles Colson, he edited *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*

Toward a Common Mission. Neuhaus, interestingly, expressed a strong hope in universal salvation, but stopped short of teaching it as a doctrine, emphasizing it as a hope, not a belief. And he said, "In sum, we do not know, only God knows, but we may hope that every single individual will someday be saved."³ He wrote that:

Absolutely no one is beyond the reach of God's love in Christ; all are found and therefore none are lost. Some may choose not to accept the gift of being found, and that's quite another matter; we pray and hope that all will receive the gift of salvation that is most surely available to all. At least for the Catholics, the teaching is definitive: God denies no one the grace necessary for salvation.⁴

And he went on to say that he doubted if anyone could know if hell is populated by anyone, and thus follows in the footsteps of John Paul II, our former Pope.

Here's one that will make you scratch your head. In 2005, Neuhaus the Roman Catholic was named one of "The Twenty Five Most Influential Evangelicals in America" by *Time* magazine. I don't know if that's to the detriment or ignorance of *Time* magazine, or Evangelicalism as a whole in America; probably both. Neuhaus died just a month ago at the age of seventy-two. So he got his last blurb in on the book.

Well, a reoccurring theme for those who endorse the book is that they are, perhaps without exception, highly ecumenical. Those who claim to be Evangelical are very sympathetic to Roman Catholicism and would see them as brethren in Christ. Those who are Roman Catholic have as their goal some sort of merger with Protestants, and in some cases, that hope takes the form as formally hoping and working to the end of Protestants coming into Rome and becoming Roman Catholics. In other words, we will all be Roman Catholic one day. And in other cases it's just that we put aside our differences and recognize one another as brethren in a common cause. And that ecumenical theme occurs again and again and again in the book, even as Beckwith attempts to demonstrate that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true church.

In his introduction, Beckwith asks that his Catholic and Protestant readers avoid certain temptations. He asks that his Catholic readers avoid temptations towards what he calls "triumphalism." In other words, in seeing him as a marquee convert to Rome that they won't be tempted to do the *na na na na na na na* thing, you know, "we got one of yours!" Protestants, he said, may be tempted not towards triumphalism, of course, but towards trying to find some sub-rational reason as to why he returned to Rome. And he mentions a May 2007 radio program in which a seminary president discussed his move to Rome with one of the school's theologians and how one of them stated (at his amazement) that someone with Beckwith's intelligence could become Catholic. Listen, nowhere are we told that

³"Richard John Neuhaus." Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_John_Neuhaus (accessed March 28, 2009).

⁴Ibid.

regeneration, being a Christian or otherwise, is somehow based on one's academic abilities. Some of the most intelligent people in the world are pagans and cult members. 1 Corinthians 1:26 and following:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there are not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things that are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised. God has chosen the things that are not to nullify the things that are. Why? So that no man should boast before God, but by His doing you're in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

It's not a matter of one's intellect; it's by His doing. And there's certainly the danger of having a fraternity of scholars who have academic credentials but haven't been born again. And since they are not partakers of the Gospel, they are certainly not going to be worried about defending it, at least not outside its most broad, common, ecumenical denominators.

But at this point, as Beckwith relates the story of overhearing this seminary president and one of his theologians make this statement, he makes one of his many unguarded statements. In talking about one's intelligence dictating what he believes, he writes that this is:

. . . a road down which no evangelical Protestant should go unless he is willing to hold his own theological tradition and its converts and former members to the same level of scrutiny. After all, for every well-known pastor, scholar, or writer who as a young Catholic was drawn to the love of Jesus he or she found in Evangelical Protestant communities, there is a Protestant scholar, pastor or writer who, after years of study and reflection, was compelled to convert to Catholicism.⁵

How does he know? There's a one-to-one equation! For every one going this way, there's another going this way? Now I would question the truthfulness of that statement, especially in light of the fact that Roman Catholic churches are closing their doors by the hundreds; lawsuits over pedophile priests have bankrupted more than one diocese. And, in places like Latin America, there's been a revival of converts out of Roman Catholicism. The entire missionary movement around the world has been fueled by evangelicals. But even beyond that the argument is a red herring. Counting numbers isn't an indication of truth. This isn't, "Let's take a poll and whoever has the most converts, wins." But the quote seems to indicate that Beckwith includes himself in that latter number: he is one of those, who *after years of study, was compelled to convert to Roman Catholicism*. That seems to be the implication. But later in the book, by his own account, it was less than six months of study that he had that led him to convert to Rome.

⁵Francis J. Beckwith, *Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 13.

In the introduction, Beckwith gives his purpose for writing the book. He says:

What I hope to offer here is an account of a personal journey that focuses on my own internal conversations, or struggle, between the Protestant theology I embraced during most of my adult life and what I've come to think of as my Catholic constitution, *which I have to believe had always been there*. Much of this book is a celebration of the Christianity that has shaped my life, intellectually and spiritually, *both in its Protestant and Catholic forms*. I do indeed explain how and why my mind changed, but with respect and admiration for the Evangelical Protestants whom the Holy Spirit used to deepen my devotion to Christ, which I carry with gratitude into the Catholic Church.⁶

See the ecumenicism? *I do indeed explain how and why my change came, but with respect to Evangelical Protestants whom the Holy Spirit used to deepen my devotion to Christ, which I carry with gratitude into the Catholic Church.*

So by his own admission his "Catholic Constitution" was there all along. Listen, former Catholics that I know, including myself, who have come to embrace the Gospel could never look deep in their hearts and say, "You know what? I've kinda carried it along with me all this time, some sort of element of Roman Catholicism and I'm sympathetic toward Rome." No, I think that we who have left understand that we've counted the cost and that we can't go back! But Beckwith wants us to be one happy family, and he says, "Much of this book is a celebration of the Christianity that has shaped my life intellectually and spiritually both in its Protestant and Catholic forms." So, there are forms of Christianity that are both Protestant and Catholic. And it would make me wonder, are there forms of the Gospel that are both Protestant and Catholic? Now I'm not talking about some common doctrines we would uphold, such as the divinity of Christ. I'm talking about, "*What is the Gospel?*" What does a man have to believe or do (or not do) in order to be saved?

There are not different forms of the Gospel that are equally true, one being Protestant and one being Catholic. How can one group say it's not by works but through faith, and another group deny that, contending that salvation only comes through the Mother Church? Both cannot be true. *Both can be wrong*, but logically both cannot be true. There are not multiple forms of the Gospel that contradict one another, and both of them standing true. That's elementary logic. It's the law of non-contradiction. And certainly Beckwith as a philosopher should know that.

In Chapter One Beckwith begins his tale by relating the account of his reconciliation with Rome. It was on a spring afternoon in Texas on April 28, 2007. On that day he walked into St. Jerome's Catholic Church in Waco, Texas, and he entered the confessional booth for the first time in over thirty years. And he writes, "At the completion of the sacrament I would be in full communion with the Catholic Church."⁷

⁶Ibid., 15-16 (emphasis mine).

⁷Ibid., 17.

He goes on to say:

Upon entering the confessional, I sat face-to-face with the priest. I said, 'Father, forgive me, for I have sinned. It has been over 30 years since my last confession.' Then I said, 'I'm not sure I can remember all of my sins.' In his thick, East Indian accent, he replied, 'That is all right. God knows them all.' I responded, 'I was afraid of that.' The priest then heard my confession and granted me absolution. I found my way to the main sanctuary, where I did my penance, which consisted of one 'Our Father' and one 'Hail Mary.'⁸

Thirty years of sins wiped away. How? By reciting a prayer that Jesus never intended to be recited over and over and over again (in fact, He warned against that), and with another prayer to the mother of Jesus: "*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.*" Listen, if that's not trampling underfoot the Son of God and regarding as unclean the blood of the covenant and insulting the Spirit of grace, and I do not know what is!⁹

From there he goes back in time to his dilemma regarding his position as president of ETS and how he originally planned to wait until his term as president ended in November of 2007. Remember, he converts back to Roman Catholicism in March of 2007. His term as president of ETS ends later in that year, and he said, "I had this dilemma and I wanted to make sure that my return to the Catholic church brought as little attention to the Evangelical Theological Society as possible."¹⁰ Remember, he's President of ETS; *do I resign in the midst of my presidency, or do I wait until after my term is over?* He was afraid that waiting until after his term would be over would illicit all sorts of Jesuit conspiracies that he was an undercover Catholic. However, in saying: "I don't want to embarrass the ETS" I find a claim that rings a little hollow, considering the fact that on the cover of the book, in bold white letters one reads, "Why the President of the Evangelical Theological Society left his post and returned to the Catholic Church." That doesn't sound like someone is really trying to bring as little attention to the ETS as possible.

But he wasn't sure what to do as far as the timing was concerned. Should he resign now while president or wait to convert to Rome once his term was over? And he claims that he received his answer and what to do after visiting his parents in Washington DC, when his cell phone rang. It was his sixteen-year-old nephew, and his nephew requested that Francis Beckwith be his sponsor when the nephew received the sacrament of confirmation. At this point Beckwith states that several months earlier he had written a letter explaining the importance to his nephew of affirming his

⁸Ibid., 18.

⁹Cf. Hebrews 10:29.

¹⁰Francis J. Beckwith, *Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 18.

Christian baptism at his confirmation. That letter was dated (by his account in the book) March 6, 2007, yet he says it was several months earlier, so I don't know if that is a typo because in reality March 6, 2007 was only about six weeks before his conversion. But regardless he writes this letter to his nephew congratulating him. He begins the letter by saying:

I'm writing to offer you my encouragement as you partake in the sacrament of confirmation. I am sure you were taught much in your catechism about the meaning of confirmation and its significance in affirming in public your commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and your desire to be one of our Lord's followers. . . I want to focus in this letter of encouragement on the spiritual and intellectual tradition in which you find yourself. It is a tradition that includes some of the wisest, smartest, holiest, and influential minds in the history of humanity. To quote the author of Hebrews, 'we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses . . .' (Heb. 12:1)¹¹

From that point he goes on to give a defense of the historical Jesus, including C. S. Lewis' *Trilemma: was He Lord? Was He liar? Was He lunatic?* C. S. Lewis was the one who popularized, if not originated, that argument, basically saying Jesus Christ had to be Lord because He couldn't have been a liar and He certainly wasn't a lunatic. So Beckwith goes over that argument with his nephew, and then he says:

Under the leadership of St. Peter and St. Paul, the church grew from a small band of believers to an international phenomenon that through its message slowly but eventually dismantled the spiritual infrastructure of the greatest empire the world had ever known, the Roman Empire. As the church moved through history, it began to reflect on its own theology and produce some of the clearest creeds ever penned, such as the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed. . . Throughout church history, and even to this present day, gifted Christians became well versed in their philosophy, literature, sciences, and arts of their day. For they believed, as we all should believe, that all truth is God's truth, that the Christian worldview illuminates our understanding of the world and the order and nature of things. The enormity of Christian influence in the shaping of Western civilization boggles the mind.¹²

He goes on to write (now remember, he is at this point not yet converted to Rome when he writes this):

Ideas about human nature, economics, the sciences, the arts, ethics, architecture, music, mathematics, and politics flourished. under the direction of Christian intellectuals and leaders. . . without Christianity's understanding of God and nature, much of what we take

¹¹Ibid., 19.

¹²Ibid., 21.

for granted today--including our legal system, our understanding of truth, and the success of the sciences--would have never come to be.¹³

Now, as to his last statement, the growth in human nature, economics, the arts and particularly science, I would argue that it was the Reformation of the sixteenth century that was the real catalyst for that growth. If anything, the Roman Catholic Church inhibited the progress of science and education. One only has to look at the scandal of Galileo in the sixteenth century. Galileo, an astronomer who championed the Copernican theory of the universe, that the earth revolved around the sun. The Roman Church declared that this was heretical and that the earth was the center of the solar system. Galileo was eventually forced to recant his views and spent the last years of his life under house arrest by order of the Roman Inquisition.

But one remarkable thing about Beckwith's letter to his nephew is the lack of any substantive reference to regeneration or the Gospel. Much about evidential apologetics – “oh, this is why we know that Christianity is true because Jesus is the true Christ of history and we know this because of that” – and much about the Church's contribution to history, much about the person of Christ. But like the new perspective on Paul, which I'll tell you about at a later date, there's great significance on the person of Christ, but not much talk about the work of Christ. And certainly when we talk about the Gospel, those two things are necessary. We need to understand who Jesus Christ is, His person, but we also need to understand what He has done, His work.

Well, it was this letter and his nephew's request that he sponsor him in his confirmation that was the sign that Mr. Beckwith needed to convert to Rome and not to wait until his presidency of the ETS was finished. As he writes:

But in order for me to be his confirmation sponsor I would have to be in full communion with the Catholic Church. Because I had received the sacraments of Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation all before the age of fourteen, I needed only to go to confession, request forgiveness for my sins, ask to be received back into the Church, and receive absolution. And that is what I did on that spring day in Texas, April 28, 2007. The next day I was publically received back into the Catholic Church at the 11:00 a.m. Mass at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Bellmead, Texas. My wife, standing beside me, was accepted as a candidate for full communion. She was received into the Church on August 18, 2007, at the culmination of her catechesis.¹⁴

Chapter 2 of his book sums up his growing up in Las Vegas. He begins by saying that he was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1960 to an Italian-American Roman Catholic mother and a father of English descent, an Episcopalian with Roman Catholic roots. His mother was one of the thousands of Italian Catholic immigrants that passed through Ellis Island. His family moved to Las Vegas in

¹³Ibid., 21-22.

¹⁴Ibid., 22.

1967, where his dad worked as an accountant and interning auditor for a number of hotels including The Dunes, Caesar's Palace, and the Stardust.

And then Beckwith gives the account of his aunt becoming a Christian. He says:

Needless to say, my Uncle Fiore was not a practicing Catholic or Christian of any sort. However, his wife, my Aunt Doris, became a committed Christian a few years before her husband's 1976 death, though she never returned to the Catholic Church of her Baptism. Several of their children have had born-again experiences.¹⁵

Then he talks about cousins that followed suit, and one cousin that went on for a time to become a Pentecostal pastor. He talks about how this particular cousin had a remarkable transformation from being a pimp and a drug user to being an outspoken Christian.

His parents take him through twelve years of Catholic school and he goes to mass every Sunday. Beckwith was the eldest of four children. Now each of the children received the sacraments of baptism, communion, and confirmation. And he writes that shortly after his confirmation in 1973 he became fascinated with the person of Jesus, and he describes a dream he had of Jesus sitting there talking with him. He says:

Over thirty years later I cannot honestly recall the words He uttered, but I do remember waking up the next morning with a sense that I had experience a reality that was unlike any dream I ever had.¹⁶

Another thing that we will note is the mysticism, not only in Beckwith's story but in other conversion stories: visions, that sort of thing. He says that he it was not coincidental that as this time his father was visited by a friend who was involved in the Catholic charismatic movement. The Catholic charismatic movement of the seventies had a tremendous impact on him, and his friend left a copy of *The Good News for Modern Man*, a modern version of the Bible, and Beckwith read it with great interest, not even knowing it was a Bible. And the next time the friend visited, he asked him about the Bible and the man's faith, so the man invited Francis to join him in the services of a small Jesus People church in downtown Las Vegas run by hippies (this is the mid-seventies), part of the Jesus Movement in the sixties and seventies. And it was here that Beckwith says he:

. . . learned Scripture, heard dynamic teachings, sang freely of our faith, and were introduced to books and tapes by a variety of writers and speakers who seemed to have real insight into theological matters. Some of the earlier folks I read and listened to included the 'Bible Answer Man' Walter R. Martin, Lutheran theologian John Warwick Montgomery . . . Pentecostal evangelist David Wilkerson, Chinese missionary and mystic Watchman Nee,

¹⁵Ibid., 28.

¹⁶Ibid., 33.

Calvary Chapel founder, Chuck Smith, and dispensationalists Hal Lindsay and Salem Kirban, both of whom were precursors to the 'Left Behind' book craze. It seemed to me that the people at Maranatha House were serious about their commitment to Christ. Except for my experience in the Catholic Charismatic Movement soon after visiting Maranatha house, I had seen nothing like it in the Catholic Church.¹⁷

Beckwith enrolls in a Roman Catholic high school; soon afterwards he becomes an agnostic, and he says that his skepticism ended up bringing about a serious depression his senior year. He says:

During one afternoon in February 1978 I knelt down next to my bed and asked God to help me in my apparent unbelief. On my dresser behind me an FM radio blared a classic rock song. . . . All of a sudden, moments after I had made my petition to God, the music on the radio seemed slowly to turn into white noise. As the white noise faded into the background I began to hear the voice of a disk jockey on the local Christian radio station. He was saying something about committing one's life to Christ. This was really spooky to me. So, I walked over to the radio to see what was going on. It was indeed tuned to the rock station, but the Christian station was overtaking the rock station, with white noise subtly fading in and out. I later learned from a friend that what happened to my FM radio is a naturally explicable phenomenon that sometimes occurs. But given the timing and content of my prayer, the radio stations, involved, and the DJ's message, I have never ceased to think of that incident as a gentle tap on my shoulder from the Lord who knew that I had never really stopped believing in him.¹⁸

After he has this experience, he meets with an evangelical public school teacher and tells him his story. The school teacher prays with him so that he could, as he put it, "ask the Lord back into my life."¹⁹ Interestingly here, he adds a footnote that you have to follow to the end of the book, and the footnote says:

For my Catholic readers, this occurs often among Evangelical Protestants. It is sometimes called 'rededicating your life to the Lord.' In a weird way it is the Protestant version of the sacrament of reconciliation. It's almost as if by nature we human beings need something like that, and for that reason Evangelical Protestants have developed a practice that Catholics have practiced more formally for centuries.²⁰

¹⁷Ibid., 33-34.

¹⁸Ibid., 41.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 132 (footnote 6).

I'm sorry, but this whole thing of rededicating one's life to the Lord is not the "Protestant version of reconciliation." In fact, it has more in common with contemporary camp meeting Evangelicalism and the legacy of Charles Finney than it does with historic Reformational teaching. So Beckwith's parallel here is quite misleading and inaccurate.

From the point of his "rededication," he began attending a Foursquare Church (so again, more of the charismatic connection) and he ends the chapter with this statement:

I would be remiss if I did not point out that virtually every Evangelical Protestant I knew during this time was a former Catholic. And I know that my story is not an isolated one in that regard, for I have met hundreds of former Catholics around the United States who are now (or were, until they returned to the Church) committed Evangelical Protestants trying to follow Christ the best they can. In light of this, the American Catholic Church has to ask itself a serious and painful question: is there anything that we did that helped facilitate the departure of these talented and devoted people from our communion?²¹

Yes! The reason is that the Roman Catholic Church will not—and effectively cannot—reform itself in any sense related to the truth of the Gospel! The Councils of Trent along with Vatican I and II have painted the church into a corner of infallibility. So for the Roman Catholic Church to reform would be to say that she was in error and in admission that she was not the true authoritative church after all. *There is no life-saving Gospel in Rome!* There is religion, but no regeneration. So God has been in the business of calling his elect out from the midst of her by way of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. So sorry, Francis, they could not have stayed within the stench of dead religiosity, and those that go back to that prove that they were not regenerate in the first place.

In the next two chapters Beckwith relates his journey into academia. He graduates UNLV in 1983 where he had switched his major from journalism to philosophy. That same year he hears about a new school in southern California, the Simon Greenleaf School of Law. This was primarily a law school but did have an M.A. program in Christian apologetics, so he applies and is accepted at Simon Greenleaf, a school that he describes in his book as broadly ecumenical. It was here that he is introduced to the writings of C. K. Chesterton:

Chesterton, I later found out, was a Catholic convert from Anglicanism. But unlike some Protestant Evangelicals who have a visceral reaction to anything Catholic, I thought nothing of Chesterton's Catholicism. After all, given my already budding commitment to the philosophical work of the great doctor of the Catholic Church, Thomas Aquinas . . . I had no doubt that a Protestant could gain real theological insights from Catholic authors.²²

²¹Ibid., 45.

²²Ibid., 51.

So again, some of the things you note throughout the book are ecumenicism, a friendliness and willingness to receive from the Roman Catholic church, to affirm them as being a true church.

Next he applies to Fordham University. No surprise, it's a Roman Catholic Jesuit school in New York City. He was impressed by their philosophy department. He was accepted and moved to New York City in August 1984, stayed with his grandmother whom he describes as an Italian-American and devout Catholic, lived with her for three years between August of '84 and May of '87. But he returned home, that is, to Las Vegas, for one eventful spring break in March of 1985. It was here that he met his future wife, Frankie. He met her through her sister, whose husband, he writes, "was instrumental in helping to lead Frankie to Christ at Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa on July 11, 1982."²³

After a stint teaching philosophy at UNLV in 1989 and a similar appointment in 1996 at Whittier College, Beckwith receives an offer to join Trinity International University's faculty at their new California campus to teach in their M.A. program on Faith and Culture. He accepts that offer, and it's here that we have some very significant turns in the story. Beckwith writes:

In fall 1997, Trinity's comptroller, John Hughes (who has since, like me, returned to the Catholic Church of his baptism), invited Frankie and me to attend church with him and his family at St. Luke's Reformed Episcopal Church, in Santa Ana. I had told John that we were having a difficult time finding a good Evangelical church in which we would fit. When Frankie and I walked in the building, she turned to me and said, 'This almost seems Catholic.' And sure enough, St. Luke's followed the liturgy found in the Book of Common Prayer, which is similar to the Catholic liturgy. It was my first experience in a Protestant church with a seriously liturgical service. Because we liked St. Luke's and its Sunday service, I became interested in studying more deeply the history of Episcopalianism and its beliefs.²⁴

It was then that they started attending St. James' Episcopalian Church. The American Episcopal Church is to Rome what marijuana is to heroin. It serves as a nice stepping stone to a greater high (or a greater evil):

It was during this time that my wife, Frankie, asked me: 'why aren't we Catholic?' For her the Anglican liturgy and solemnity of worship seemed nearly indistinguishable from the Masses we attended with my family. *Frankie was also drawn by, and became quite interested in, the spirit of Christ she observed in Pope John Paul II.* I explained to her that although I respected the Pope and considered his work as essential to displacing the materialism and unbelief that had overtaken Europe (and seemed to be gaining a foothold in America), I had too many theological problems with Catholicism. My reasons included

²³Ibid., 56.

²⁴Ibid., 63.

the Church's views on justification, the Eucharist, and the papacy. She said, 'I guess you're the theologian in the family. So I'll trust your judgment.'²⁵

Another thing that you see throughout the book is the common connection with fighting some sort of culture war. Anybody who holds to a Judeo-Christian ethic is our ally in fighting this culture war.

Brethren, we're not called to fight a culture war; we're called to proclaim the Gospel. The only way a culture can be transformed is if the hearts of people, men and women, are transformed by the truth of the Gospel. If we haven't learned over the past year that politics can't save us, we never will.

So Francis' wife sees the spirit of Christ in Pope John Paul II, a man who promoted universalism and devoted his life to Mary the Holy One, the mediatrix? And it's telling that even then Beckwith said he respected the pope, again, *for his fight against liberalism*. I'm sorry, but if you really understood the Gospel, would you respect someone who spends his life perverting it? I just do not understand that.

Beckwith takes his sabbatical from Trinity to study law at the Washington School of Law where he earns his Master's of Judicial Studies. Afterward he teaches at Trinity for a year and then is offered a visiting full-time faculty appointment at Princeton for the 2002-2003 school year. It was while at Princeton that a Jewish friend asks him, "Why are you a Protestant instead of a Catholic?"²⁶ He says he gave the typical Protestant sort of answers. After Princeton the Beckwiths move to central Texas where he accepts a position at Baylor as an associate professor of church-state studies and associate director of the J. M. Dawson Institute of church-state studies, a position that he currently holds as well.

Another key moment: Six weeks after Beckwith was denied tenure at Baylor his wife's father died:

In the weeks that followed Joe's death, we discovered, among his personal items, a St. Christopher medal, inscribed 'Bishop Choi to JD.' It is our understanding that the bishop gave St. Christopher medals to pilots in the Pacific during World War II. Soon after the war, Joe, a pilot, joined the ROTC faculty at Fordham University. Impressed by the Jesuits there including the seriousness of their faith, Joe wanted to become Catholic, but my mother-in-law discouraged him. She told Joe that his parents would be devastated if he were to join the Catholic Church. So, Joe acquiesced to his wife and, as far as we know, never made a Christian commitment of any sort, though, ironically, he lived the Christian virtues better than most Christians. This is why when Frankie was received into the Catholic Church on

²⁵Ibid., 65 (emphasis mine).

²⁶Ibid., 65.

August 18, 2007, she took the name 'Joseph' as her Confirmation name, in honor of her father and his unfulfilled desire to become Catholic.²⁷

Now here's where the tale takes a very telling turn:

In June 2006 while Frankie and I were attending an academic conference at a Hilton Hotel in Alexandria, Virginia, we noticed that my Baptist colleague Ralph C. Wood and his wife, Suzanne were there as well. They greeted us at one of the elevators and we exchanged pleasantries. Ralph immediately noticed that something was wrong with Frankie. He inquired about her state of mind and soul. She took him aside and told him about the doubts she was experiencing about her father's posthumous fate. Ralph offered to Frankie a theological case for why he believed that her father would not be condemned to eternal separation from God.²⁸

Beckwith describes Ralph Wood as a Baptist, so here's what a Baptist scholar tells Francis Beckwith's wife.

*He told Frankie that her father's initial desire for full communion with the Catholic Church was an act of faith that God would honor. The Church calls such an act 'the baptism of desire.' And given the Christian manner in which Joe had conducted his life since that time, as someone seemingly touched by God's grace, Ralph had no doubt that Joe is destined for an eternity with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This gave Frankie much comfort.*²⁹

When I read that, I about fell out of my chair! This is tragic; we are talking about highly intelligent, educated people who are clueless as to what it means to be saved, something my seven-year-old daughter understands. *A desire to join a church is an act of faith that God would honor in salvation!?* You've got to be kidding me! Because he lived according to a Judeo-Christian ethic he was touched by God's grace and destined for eternity with a Lord and Savior he never confessed? Beckwith footnotes his father-in-law's "baptism of desire" in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which opens the door for such people and says that if someone wants to become Roman Catholic but is prevented from doing so, their wanting to is as good as having done it. That's catechism #1260 if you want to look it up.

So after Francis and his wife are received into the Catholic church, the same individual, Ralph Wood, wrote the following in a May 7, 2007 email:

Dear Frankie & Frank:

²⁷Ibid., 68.

²⁸Ibid., 69.

²⁹Ibid (emphasis mine).

I wanted to add my own strong affirmation of your decision to be received into (and, in Frank's case returned to) the Roman Catholic Church.

I'm sure you won't remember it, but at our very first meeting at a reception in President Sloan's home, I asked about Frank's upbringing. When you told me that you had been raised a Catholic, I immediately asked why you would leave a tradition so rich and deep? You replied that it had meant little to you as a youth and that your Christianity had come alive only through evangelical churches. I thus see your move, not as repudiating your evangelicalism but rather as returning to its Catholic form. . . .

And as for you, dear Frankie, you were special to me from the beginning of our friendship, and you have remained so ever since. Our conversations last summer about your father's death remain quite vivid to me, as I there learned that your Christian faith runs very deep indeed. As with Frank, I see this more as a further deepening of your witness. . . .³⁰ [69-70]

More signs follow. Several months after receiving the email from Ralph Wood, something strange happened. Beckwith is seven hundred miles away from his wife speaking at a charismatic Catholic conference. His wife attends a 6:00 PM mass in Waco, Texas; they are seven hundred miles apart. As the people were beginning to receive communion she closes her eyes and sees Jesus standing at the table with the disciples at the Last Supper. But it wasn't the Da Vinci painting:

In Frankie's vision, Jesus was in motion. She saw him talking and moving. Then all of a sudden, his beard and his features became bright and expanded over the image in her mind's eye until everything was a bright white light.³¹

Afterwards, she had an image-type thought of her dad as a man in his fifties or sixties teeing off at a golf course.

And then she was flooded with a series of rapid thoughts, the realization, the clear impression, that the reason her Dad never went to the Protestant church with her Mom (and their four little girls) was because if he was going to go to church, it was going to be the Catholic Church or no place at all.³²

His wife has a vision, and then an impression, a thought of seeing her father. That same evening (remember, they're seven hundred miles apart) while Beckwith was in Alabama at a Catholic charismatic conference, there to speak on his return to Rome, he sits down after his last lecture in the church library. Around 6:40 PM a woman, a deacon's wife he had met earlier in the day, comes

³⁰Ibid., 69-70.

³¹Ibid., 70.

³²Ibid.

into the library and asks him if he would like to have a piece of blessed bread. He asks her, “What’s blessed bread?” and she replied that in her Eastern Rite Catholic Church, the priest leaves a portion of the loaf unconsecrated and then blesses it for human consumption. Beckwith takes a piece, eats it, and tells the woman about how his wife was concerned about her father’s soul and how he had wanted to become a Catholic back in the 1940’s. At this point, as he tells the story, the woman’s eyes well up with tears and she says that she believed that because God is good and merciful He would honor his father-in-law’s desire. He says:

About an hour later, my wife and I talked on the cell phone. She told me about the vision that she had at St. Jerome's that evening. She told me that the images were vivid and the message was clear. Seeing the deacons' wife in the church parking lot heading for her car, I stopped her and shared with her what my wife had just told me over the phone. She again began to well up with tears and told me that above the altar where the bread was blessed at her church is a huge mural of the Last Supper, the same image seen in my wife's vision. So, while my wife had a vision of the Last Supper followed by vivid images of her father that conveyed to her a clear message of his desire to become Catholic, I had partaken of the very bread that had been blessed under the mural of the Last Supper which was followed by the assurance of a deacon's wife that God would honor my father-in-laws' desire. I cannot help but believe that his provides us with hope that there is truly a communion of saints that includes my father-in-law.³³

Certainly I have great sympathy for those that have lost loved ones who did not die in Christ (or where there are questions about that). But friends, this is an area where our faith is put to the test. This is an area where we are tested as to whether we love father, mother, brother, sister, son, daughter, husband, or wife more than Christ. This is where we are tested as to whether we believe that the Judge of the universe shall indeed judge righteously. I know there are temptations to adjust our theology so that we can stretch the curtain a little wider to allow those we love to enter into the kingdom. I understand that. But we can’t be deceived by that which isn’t true, even if it is accompanied by some sign or wonder. We’re warned about that throughout Scripture: 2 Corinthians 11 talks about secret workers and false apostles who disguise themselves as apostles of light and it goes on to say that even Satan himself disguises himself as an angel of light. Galatians 1:8-9 declares that if an angel should come out of heaven and preach a Gospel contrary to that which we see in Scripture, Paul says, “Let him be accursed.” First John 4:1 says that we are to test the spirits because not every spirit is from God and many false prophets have gone into the world, so don’t believe every spirit.

From this point of the book Beckwith turns a corner to intellectual reasons why he should convert to Rome. It would take too much time to go over them in depth at this point; we’ll do that a little later, and plus it would be redundant. I’m not going to return much to his story; I thought that was important, and I may bring up some of the commonalities or common markers that I’ve seen along the way. But as far as the intellectual reasons, suffice it to say there is nothing new here. If anyone

³³Ibid., 71.

has studied Roman Catholic apologists and their arguing against what we believe and hold dear as it relates to the Gospel and Scripture, Beckwith doesn't really offer anything that's new. He cites the Early Church Fathers, he pits Father against Father. He cites a set of quotes and says, "Well, these sound like they're Reformed," and then he goes on and cites on the next page another series of quotes that he argues sound like they're Roman Catholic. Interestingly though, most of those quotes I found fit within the idea of perseverance of the saints, so I disagree with him, even though some of them, like Chrysostom, seem to be talking about praying for the dead.

But he pits Father against Father, claims that the early church creeds were Roman Catholic and even the canon of Scripture was decided by Rome, and that's the old argument, "How can you believe in sola Scriptura, Scripture alone, when you the church does not have the authority to even tell you what books should be part of the canon?" So they claim that upon themselves. He argues that the Early Church Fathers were more Roman Catholic than Protestant, he claims that sola Scriptura is not logical and defines what he used to believe as to sola Scriptura (which was not a good definition of it). He even goes as far as to say, "There are essential Christian doctrines and practices that one would not derive from Scripture alone." So he argues on one side from Early Church Fathers and from history, saying that we can't get doctrines such as the Trinity from the Bible alone, and that plays right into the cultists' hands as Jehovah's Witnesses try to tell us the same thing. Certainly we can get the Trinity out of the Bible; it wasn't invented by some church somewhere. But he goes on then to attempt to justify Rome's grace-works salvation from Scripture, and that really becomes a mess. Humbly I have to say that here is where he shows his lack of exegetical ability. He claims that the teaching of Jesus does not square with the belief in forensic justification; forensic justification being that when a sinner is regenerated and believes by the power of the Holy Spirit, God declares that person righteous because of Christ. He says that the teaching of Jesus does not square with that belief, and here is where he borrows from the heretical New Perspective on Paul movement. He talks about the last judgment, the sheep and the goats being about works, so we're going to be judged by our works according to him; therefore, our works are essential in our justification. He talks about Matthew 19: Jesus told a rich young ruler if he wanted to be saved to keep the commandments, and Beckwith totally misunderstands that passage. He takes anything and everything that has to do with good works or change in life and puts it in the category of works salvation, misunderstands the parable of the soils, misunderstands James and his argument of works, mischaracterizes Paul and Romans 4, and sums it all up by calling it "the journey of justification". In other words, we are all on a journey of being justified. He makes category and semantic range mistakes with words, like sanctification, salvation, and justification, giving a static meaning apart from their context.

One might wonder, "What about those things that are not in Scripture? What about the dogmas about Mary? She's called Co-Redemptrix,³⁴ her Assumption into heaven, her birth without sin, and some of these other things that we could bring up. What about those things?" I think this is very telling, he says:

³⁴This title has not been officially adopted by the church which prefers "Mediatrice" (cf. #969 in the Roman Catholic Catechism).

The other issues that most Protestants find to be stumbling blocks--the Marian doctrines and Purgatory--were not a big deal to me. That was because I reasoned that if the Catholic views on Church authority, justification, the communion of the saints, and the sacraments were defensible, then these other so-called 'stumbling blocks' withered away, since the Catholic Church would in fact be God' authoritative instrument in the development of Christian doctrine.³⁵

So Rome becomes the *de facto* authority, and that authority is absolute, and what she says infallibly one must receive.

Let me just give you a couple of final observations, and thanks for hanging with me on this.

First, Beckwith appears to have never really left Roman Catholicism. At least he was always very sympathetic and ecumenically-minded toward Rome.

Second, he has been influenced by the Roman Catholic charismatic movement and mysticism in general. One of the detriments of the Roman Catholic charismatic movement that was started by David Duplessis was the thought that if a Roman Catholic evidences the gifts of the Spirit, he or she must be saved, apart from what they believe as to the Gospel.

Third, his work in the area of church history is simplistic and decidedly one-sided. You can't just pull up a couple of quotes and pitch them against other quotes.

Fourth, his work as a theologian and exegete is wanting to say the least.

Fifth, he gives no evidence of wrestling with both sides of the issue at a top level or having read works by Catholic scholars who refute his own positions, and as a professor of a so-called Christian school, he would have access to all sorts of works like these by way of libraries and journals and whatnot.

Sixth, you get the impression that this was the direction he was heading all along; as you start the book, you kind of sense it. It's where he wanted to go and he only needed some surface rationale for doing so.

Seventh, he seems to view his move to Roman Catholicism much like a major denominational shift (I say "major"), much like someone who was Wesleyan and became Presbyterian, and then would zealously defend their Presbyterianism (God's sovereignty, the solas of the Reformation) against the free will theism of Wesleyanism, and they'd go whole hog into defending a theology, but at the end of the day shake hands and say, "But we're still brothers." So he seems to view his move as a major denominational shift: he's going to zealously defend the Roman Catholic Church as being the true Church, he's going to zealously state that our understanding of justification and salvation is wrong,

³⁵Ibid., 79.

but at the end of the day, we're still brothers and sisters in Christ. That's a position that as a Roman Catholic he cannot hold, and I'll show that to you at a later date.

Eighth, he refuses to face the fact that the Roman Catholic Church anathematizes or assigns to condemnation his evangelical Christian friends. That's ties in to what I was saying with number seven.

Could God have made it that difficult to understand what it means to be saved from sin and inherit eternal life? You start reading the works and arguments of Roman Catholic scholars, and you start feeling like you're knee-deep in the IRS tax codes! There are all kinds of sophistry and this and that; Islam's okay but those who refuse to enter the Roman Catholic Church are not. Men add all sorts of conditions in an attempt to control other people's souls: sacraments, works, allegiance, popes, confessions to priests, prayers to Mary, and different ways to phrase merit ("It's all by grace; God gives you the grace to do the good works that then merit you salvation," that sort of argumentation).

I have to think, Is it all that difficult? Should it be all that difficult? It's refreshing to go back to John 3:16 where the simple message is that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him has eternal life. Or Acts 16:30-31, where you have Paul and the Philippian jailer, and the jailer is saying, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" *Well, you need to be catechized in this church, go through your first communion and confirmation, partake of the Eucharist, and then continue on the journey of justification, you'll land in purgatory for I don't know how long, and then you'll be saved.* No, the simple message is "believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Isn't that refreshing?

That any church or man would pretend to stand in the stead of God's Holy Spirit, barring access to Heaven, is beyond me.

[Closing Prayer]