



Return To Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic

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What does it mean to be evangelical? What does it mean to be Catholic? Can one consider oneself both simultaneously? Francis Beckwith has wrestled with these questions personally and professionally. He was baptized a Catholic, but his faith journey led him to Protestant evangelicalism. He became a philosophy professor at Baylor University and president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). And then, in 2007, after much prayer, counsel, and consideration, Beckwith decided to return to the Catholic church and step down as ETS president.

This provocative book details Beckwith's journey, focusing on his internal dialogue between the Protestant theology he embraced for most of his adult life and Catholicism. He seeks to explain what prompted his decision and offers theological reflection on whether one can be evangelical and Catholic, affirming his belief that one can be both.

EXCERPT

It's difficult to explain why one moves from one Christian tradition to another. It is like trying to give an account to your friends why you chose to pursue for marriage this woman rather than that one, though both may have a variety of qualities that you found attractive. It seems to me then that any account of my return to the Catholic church, however authentic and compelling it is to me, will appear inadequate to anyone who is absolutely convinced that I was wrong. Conversely, my story will confirm in the minds of many devout Catholics that the supernatural power of the grace I received at baptism and confirmation as a youngster were instrumental in drawing me back to the Mother Church. Given these considerations, I confess that there is an awkwardness in sharing my journey as a published book, knowing that many fellow Christians will scrutinize and examine my reasons in ways that appear to some uncharitable and to others too charitable.

Return To Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic Details

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From Reader Review Return To Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic for online ebook

Ericca Thornhill says

This is a great book for those who question Catholicism. The author is kind toward both Evangelicalism and Catholicism, giving good philosophical and biblical based reasons, including history and the writings of the church fathers, for his reason for leaving Evangelicalism for Catholicism. Interesting book. It gives the best reasoning I've ever heard for just why God had to come down and sacrifice himself on the cross for us, which is something that I've always had trouble to REALLY understand. :)

Bob Lozano says

Dr. Beckwith tells a compelling story of leaving the all-too-often flaccid Catholic Church of the late 1960s and 1970s for the energetic Evangelic region of American Christianity. Still to come is - as implied by the title - his return to full communion with the Catholic Church in 2007. That this occurred at the height of a credible academic career, even as he served as president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) is remarkable; that it occurred at all is a testimony to the irresistible nature of the God who loves us.

Should you not be an academic theologian and harbor fears of a turgid, difficult to follow tome, all I can say is that this is a very approachable story of personal conversion, which easily mixes the broad outlines of theological issues - while not diving too deeply - with, dare I say, a nearly breezy and comfortable story-telling style that is both easily consumable, and ultimately satisfying.

For any non-Catholic who may find it anywhere from mildly odd to deplorably indefensible for an otherwise-rational person to become Catholic, or simply for a more sympathetic person who just is curious as to what would encourage a well known Evangelical figure to become Catholic, at great apparent risk to his professional and personal lives ... in either case or yet another, this book is well worth the time.

Bravo, Dr. Beckwith, and welcome home!

Matt says

This book seemed to be a rehashing of my own experience of being baptized in the Catholic Church, spending time in Protestantism and returning. As a Charismatic Catholic, much of the author's experience resonated, and there were many personal connections as he spoke about people from Calvin College and Baylor. The author was very gracious towards his time in evangelicalism, and wrote about finding out the true spirit that is within the Catholic Church. Much of what draws people to evangelicalism can be found in the Universal Catholic Church if done right.

Brian says

In early May of 2007 I found out that Frank Beckwith, then president of the Evangelical Theological Society, had converted to Catholicism. I knew of Frank's name primarily from Greg Koukl, his co-author of *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*. I followed the story with interest for a month and it is just now that I'm getting around to reading Frank's book about the reconversion.

I want to focus on the theology more than the background Frank provides so I'm going to skip ahead to the fifth of seven chapters and dive right in. Here is his list of the main theological issues that originally prevented him from becoming Catholic: (1) the doctrine of justification, (2) the Real Presence in the Eucharist, (3) the teaching authority of the Church (including apostolic succession and primacy of the Pope), and (4) Penance (79).

He writes, "One may wonder where the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* factored into all this. To be blunt, it didn't. Primarily because over the years I could not find an understanding or definition of *sola scriptura* I found convincing enough that did not have to be so qualified that it seemed to be more a slogan than a standard" (79). He then quotes D.H. Williams that the "Magisterial Reformers such as Luther and Calvin did not think *sola scriptura* as something that could be properly understood apart from the church or the foundational tradition of the church, even while they were opposing some of the institutions of the church" (79-80). This seems to be a fundamental misunderstanding about the *sola* in *sola scriptura*. The entire idea is that authority comes from the Scripture alone so why should we think that Luther would think that the authority of Scripture alone is only understandable with assistance from the church? That's what he was fighting against, and when being examined by Johann Eck he spoke in German - so the people could understand him - that a peasant armed with one verse of Scripture has more authority than a Pope or a church council who do not rest their doctrine on the Scripture.

Frank goes on to say, "I had for some time accepted a weak form of *sola scriptura*: any doctrine or practice inconsistent with Scripture must be rejected, though it does not follow that any doctrine or practice not explicitly stated in Scripture must suffer the same fate, for the doctrine or practice may be essential to Christian orthodoxy" (81). I would love to know what doctrine or practice that is essential to orthodoxy is not found in sacred Scripture. Once again the dividing line of Scripture and tradition is at the forefront.

"Luther and Calvin had unfortunately assimilated philosophical ideas that were deleterious to the Reformers' noble intent for the proper restoration of the Church. For this reason, the task of proper restoration fell to thoughtful Catholic reformers that led to the Council of Trent and its successors" (77). However, the 4th session of the Council of Trent opens with a statement that the council "clearly perceives that these truths [of the Gospel:] are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions..." and it originally read "these truths are contained partly in the written books and partly in the unwritten traditions." Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church has binding authority on the conscience and the magisterial has the right to interpret Scripture. This lengthy passage from that same council makes that point abundantly clear:

"Furthermore, to check unbridled spirits, it [the Catholic Church:] decrees that no one relying on his own judgment shall, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian Doctrine, distorting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conception, presume to interpret them contrary to that sense which holy Mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation, has held and holds, or even contrary to the unanimous teaching of the Fathers, even though such interpretations should never at any time be published. Those who act contrary to this shall be made known by the ordinaries and punished in accordance with the penalties prescribed by the law."

Luther wanted tradition judged by Scripture but this passage shows the ultimate authority residing in the Church, where tradition would judge Scripture. On his web site, Frank approvingly quotes Peter Kreeft, "The

Protestant Reformation began when a Catholic monk rediscovered a Catholic doctrine in a Catholic book. The monk, of course, was Luther; the doctrine was justification by faith; and the book was the Bible." The problem with this, of course, is that it is a Christian doctrine in the Christian Bible. Frank ends up rejecting the Reformation and instead finding solace in the Church Fathers, who were closest in their thinking to Roman Catholic teachings. He found in that tradition the backdrop to embrace Catholic teachings and never does more than touch on Penance or the Eucharist, and completely ignores the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary and baptismal regeneration.

But earlier he did say that, "The other issues that most Protestants find to be stumbling blocks - the Marian doctrines and Purgatory - were not a big deal to me...because I reasoned that if Catholic view 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's authoritative instrument in the development of Christian doctrine" (79).

I could have spent as much time as I have so far on the discussion of justification but I will come to a close here with something I call Beckwith's wager and it goes like this: "if I return to the Church and participate in the Sacraments, I lose nothing, since I would still be a follower of Jesus and believe everything that the catholic creeds teach...But if the church is right about itself and the Sacraments, I acquire graces I would have not otherwise received" (115-16). However Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, writes that there is but one Gospel and plenty to lose if you get this wrong: I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9 ESV).

Readnponder says

I was curious to see what the author himself had to say about his switch from Protestantism back to the Catholicism of his childhood, as opposed to commentary from others. This book provided that. Some of the theological reasons he gave were over my head. When I understand more, I may go back and re-read those sections. However, I'm glad he included the sections for those who can track with the arguments.

Chad Toney says

Compelling and engaging. Will likely leave many evangelicals with *more* questions about how the president of the Evangelical Theological Society could do such a thing (!), but will leave little doubt as to Beckwith's sincerity and his love for his evangelical brethren.

Adam Shields says

Short review: this is a short Catholic to Evangelical back to Catholic conversion story. I think it is useful to read books like this to both humanize the religious struggles that real people have and to understand what actually motivates people's religious thoughts. One of the most interesting parts of this was that Beckwith (a

philosopher) said that he was not concerned with many of them traditional evangelical concerns about Catholicism (apocrypha, role of pope, purgatory, etc) because either the Catholic church had authority to make those decisions (and he would just accept them) or they didn't (and he wouldn't move back to Rome). This is a level of trust that is nearly unheard of in the Protestant world and makes a lot of sense. At the same time I would like to have heard more details.

I did find his discussion at the end about the problems of evangelical 'sola scriptura' theology very good. And I pretty much agree (as a Protestant) that sola scriptura as currently popularly understood is broken. *prima scriptura* is a better model and much closer to the actual reformer's positions.

My full review is on my blog at <http://bookwi.se/return/>

Christopher says

This was another book recommended to me by a good friend. I have undertaken an organic interest in Evangelicalism and what exactly it is. For more on that, check out my review of another book on Evangelicalism.

Return to Rome is Francis J. Beckwith's testimonial on how he initially left the Roman Catholic Church, became the president of the Evangelical Theological Society and subsequently returned to the Roman Catholic Church, leaving his post behind him.

Beckwith is a superb technical writer...

Finish the review on my blog: wetalkofholythings.com
Link to post: <http://jmnz.us/XJREJD>

Julie says

This was a good book but I wished it was a little longer. I would like to have heard more about his journey.

Jason says

Francis Beckwith explains his decision to convert from Protestantism to the Catholic Church. His decision attracted attention because he was the sitting president of the Evangelical Theological Society at the time of his return to the Church where he had been confirmed as a young man.

An interesting insight into what prompted this high profile conversion. Beckwith understands why people remain protestant. The reasons for his conversion were not necessarily clearly proven arguments. In the end, he finds the argument for Catholicism to be more convincing.

This makes sense to me in matters of faith and mirrors my own conversion. While I am convinced of the truth of the Catholic Church, I understand the people can come to different conclusions based on how they weigh the evidence.

Rosamund Hodge says

I had never heard of Francis Beckwith before he became a Catholic in 2007, but it was big news in some circles because he was well-known as the president of the Evangelical Theological Society. I picked up this book because I had enjoyed some of his essays and was curious about his story.

It's a very short book, and feels rather like an expanded magazine article. As such, it's fine, and it certainly gives a clear, concise picture of his journey. It's not quite satisfying as a book, though--not only is it very short, but it's split between autobiography and theological discussion. Result: it doesn't give much insight into the personal experience of conversion, while it skims over the theological points, all of which I've seen discussed before in other conversion stories. If you're looking for a general Book About Conversion, it's not your best bet.

But if you're looking for That One Guy's Story, well, there you have it.

Debbie says

Francis J. Beckwith stunned the Protestant Evangelical world when he returned to the Catholic Church of his youth on April 29, 2007. This brief account from the former president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) of why he left his prestigious post to return to the Catholic Church is a quick read, but at times extremely deep.

Francis Beckwith has a PhD from Fordham University and currently is a professor of philosophy and church-state studies at Baylor University (a Baptist school). Prior to his return to the Catholic Church he had written and co-authored many treatises on Protestant Reform theology, which he knows inside-out. He discusses the theological implications of Reform thinking with traditional Catholic understanding of issues from salvation and good works to the efficacy of the sacraments and Biblical inerrancy.

At times he seems almost too reserved in his attempt to avoid alienating any of his Protestant colleagues, but his charity and good will makes him all the more accessible to non-Catholics. He even has a blurb on the back cover of his book from the 2006 ETS president.

But I do like a good argument, so my favorite part of the book has to be the final chapter, where he explains the differences (as he sees it) between faithful Catholics and faithful Evangelicals. He even re-prints the ETS press release which they issued immediately after his resignation and his counter response to them.

Overall this is a very charitable and at the same time thoroughly engaging and readable book.

Chet Duke says

I was really impressed with this book, so much so that I read it in one day. Beckwith is a good philosopher, and I respect the boldness with which he speaks about his journey of faith. He is respectful and generally cordial in his tone, though I detected some animosity towards the ETS. I definitely want to better understand

Catholicism after reading this (especially Ratzinger).

A couple of things I wish he had done: he approached Protestantism from a distinctly Reformed perspective. This is understandable considering his experience in Protestantism. I would have enjoyed more interaction with/response to Arminian theology. "Protestant" and "Reformed" were used almost interchangeably, and I understand that; I just wish he had touched on an Arminian perspective as well. Secondly, I wish Beckwith's book dealt more with the doctrine of Immaculate Conception, Penance, and baptism. These doctrines were mentioned but not really discussed.

Bojan Tunguz says

A couple of years ago Francis Beckwith created a small sensation in Christian circles when he decided to return to the Catholic Church while still the president of the Evangelical Theological Society. This book is his account of the events and deliberations that prompted him to make such a move. Even though the book focuses on this particular move, it is filled with theological and personal reflections that can be of interest to many who are interested in the role that Christian life plays in America in the past fifty years. Like most conversion stories, this book narrates both the personal experiences and theological reflections. This is not a triumphalist book that will try to pound a particular doctrinal message, but a frank and honest reflection of someone who tries to live his Christian vocation with integrity and sincerity. Rather than stressing the discontinuities between his two lives as a Catholic and one as an Evangelical protestant, Beckwith portrays all of these transitions as part of his spiritual and intellectual growth. He is very charitable and respectful of all of his erstwhile Evangelical Protestant colleagues, and tries to maintain good relations with them. He also makes a powerful case that there is nothing intrinsically contradictory in being an Evangelical and being a Catholic, and a chapter in this book is dedicated to making an argument for inclusion of Catholics in Evangelical Theological Society. He maintains also that there are many things that faithful Catholics can learn from Evangelicals, and hopefully this book can serve the purpose of bridging the gap between those two sometimes-estranged communities.

Darby says

This is a book my Uncle wrote, and I think that it was wonderful. In fact, I am his niece Darby who talked to him about being Catholic. My Uncle is a brilliant man, and I definitely think he writes brilliant, inspiring books. This is an intelligent book, and I recommend it =]
