



How to Find a “Total Bible Church”

HELPFUL HINTS FROM A SUCCESSFUL SHOPPER

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Over 450 years ago, Martin Luther told this story as true: A Catholic bishop in Germany was found by one of his priests looking through the Bible with a horrified expression on his face. “Your Reverence,” the priest asked, “what is the matter?” The bishop exclaimed, “What kind of book is this? Everything in it is against us!”

In our age of ecumenism and tolerance, we sometimes forget that what fueled the Reformation was the conviction that the Bible condemned Catholicism. The Reformers saw themselves as re-establishing a lost, Bible-based Christianity. The reason it had been lost was Catholicism, which had so badly perverted the Bible as to become a false religion. When Luther had his German translation of the Bible published, the Book of Revelation included

woodcut illustrations of the “Whore of Babylon” wearing the papal tiara. And the frogs shown spewing from the mouth of the dragon represented (so said a footnote) Luther’s most prominent Catholic opponents. John Calvin, for his part, reportedly identified Pope Boniface III as the Anti-Christ.

Today, Protestants faithful to their founders’ intentions still see Catholicism and Christianity as mutually exclusive. Take the 1994 book *Far From Rome, Near to God: The Testimonies of 50 Converted Catholic Priests*. Its introduction proclaims its thesis: “Old Catholic teaching is the truth, or the Bible is the truth. Both cannot stand.” A Protestant ministry founded in 1999 is called “Ex-Catholics for Christ.” Even among many milder and more fair-minded Protestants there lingers the sense that the Catholic Church opposes — and is opposed by — the Bible. I once invited my sister to attend Mass, but she politely declined: “I only want to go where the Bible is preached.” Evangelical churches overflow with Christians like her — vaguely wary that Rome is unbiblical, and skeptical that much can be found in the Bible to support Catholicism.

This article highlights some of the many biblical verses that strike me as being uniquely fulfilled by Catholicism. Some may seem minor, obscure, or easily overlooked, but perhaps that makes them all the more significant: “Whoever can be trusted in very little can also be trusted in much” (Lk. 16:10). If the Catholic Church proves credible with many less prominent verses, might she not also be worth heeding on bigger issues such as

salvation, the papacy, or the Eucharist? I address these hints to all those who may be searching for a fully Bible-based church. (All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version Bible, the leading translation used in evangelical Protestant churches.)

We preach Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:23). For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance; that Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3).

Look for a church that explicitly reminds you of what St. Paul said was first in importance: Christ's death. Every Catholic Mass drives this home in the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, which is laced with phrases like: "Before he was given up to death... Christ has died... Dying you destroyed our death... In memory of his death... Father, calling to mind the death your Son endured... We recall Christ's death... Lord, by your cross... Recall his passion..."

Why did St. Paul urge this continual remembrance of Christ's death? Probably because by nature we're inclined to deny or forget our sinfulness and our need for blood redemption. Catholic liturgy, far from being dead formalism, always emphasizes the core scriptural truth about Jesus' ministry.

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again (1 Cor. 11:26).

Look for a church that celebrates Communion frequently. The Catholic Church celebrates Communion daily. Most Protestant churches have it monthly or quarterly. Yet St. Paul here equates the act of Communion

with the proclamation of the Gospel. The verse implies that more frequent Communion means a better Gospel witness. The how and why of this may be a mystery, but the Bible asserts it, and Catholic worship embodies it.

So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole (Num. 21:8). Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up (Jn. 3:14).

Look for a church that offers visual aids to worship. Moses' snake mounted on a pole is a work of sacred statuary. So is a crucifix. The constant presence of visible images of Christ in the church — in crucifixes, statues, windows, icons, plaques, and Stations of the Cross — is not corrupting your soul with idols. It instead helps your soul to adore Christ in an Old Testament manner that the New Testament explicitly links to Christ.

(What works in church can work at home too. Inside our front door a large crucifix hangs on the wall. When I arrive home after work feeling distracted and unspiritual, I cannot avoid seeing it. One glance pulls my mind back to Christian realities: God, eternity, righteousness, mercy, the sinner I am, the saint I want to be. My whole family benefits from the change in my attitude wrought by that involuntary glance at the crucifix.)

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (Jn. 13:14-15).

Look for a church that washes feet. Just before Easter, at every Holy Thursday Mass, at least one priest will bathe the feet of 12 laymen at the altar. During my very first

Easter inside a Catholic church, I witnessed bare feet, wash basins, and towels on the altar giving literal fulfillment to this direct command of Christ. I'd never seen anything like it. Yet it is a part of every Catholic parish.

Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honor...for his consecration, so he may serve me as priest (Exod. 28:2-3).

Look for a church that garbs her clergy in special vestments. The Old Testament church of the Israelites, at God's command, made her clergy dress in a distinct fashion. This adds dignity and honor to her worship. So too the Catholic Church dresses her clergy in uniquely noble garments to add majesty to her worship. Catholic worship here continues the divinely ordained pattern of the Old Testament church, though most Protestant denominations don't.

Consider now, for the Lord has chosen you to build a temple.... Then David gave his son Solomon the plans...of all that the spirit had put in his mind for the courts of the temple of the Lord (1 Chr. 28:10-12).

Look for a church that has its governance centered at one sacred building in one city. This may seem cultic, like Mormonism's headquartering in Salt Lake City or the Jehovah's Witnesses in Brooklyn. However, the Old Testament church of the Israelites was deliberately structured by God with its locus at one temple of worship in one specific city, Jerusalem. Vatican City in Rome has done likewise for Catholicism since antiquity.

When the ten northern tribes split off to become an independent nation, they set up temples in Bethel and Dan

to replace Jerusalem. The Old Testament editorializes against this creation of new, alternative temples, and attributes to it the spiritual apostasy of the northern kingdom of Israel from the southern kingdom of Judah. The idea of Christ's worldwide Church being directed from a single seat in a specific city is highly compatible with the church structure instituted by God under the old covenant. Further, the breakaway decentralization of spiritual authority inherent in Protestantism bears an unwholesome resemblance to the pattern set by apostate Israel.

From now on all generations shall call me blessed... (Lk. 1:48).

Look for a church that has an explicit program to honor the Virgin Mary. She prophesied about herself that later believers would go out of their way to acclaim her, and the Holy Spirit saw fit to record this in Scripture. Protestants object that the Catholic Church does not honor Mary but rather worships her idolatrously. I would turn the question around and ask what alternative ways Protestant denominations offer of fulfilling Mary's prophecy.

Why would God call us to remember her specially? Perhaps to remind men that women are meant for holiness and not lust. Perhaps to remind women that motherhood is to be prized. Assuredly to give us an example of supreme faith and spiritual obedience.

Protestantism's founders saw no offense against the Bible in elevating Mary. Late in life, Martin Luther affirmed his belief in Mary's freedom from original sin.

John Calvin argued from the Bible for her perpetual virginity. It is the Catholic Church that has kept Mary in her rightful role, while it is Protestantism that has gradually lost sight of her distinct place of honor.

Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly.... He read it aloud from daybreak till noon... .As he opened it, the people all stood up (Neh. 8:2,3,5). Devote yourself to the public reading of scripture (1 Tim. 4:13).

Look for a church that devotes much worship time to the actual reading of the Bible. One Catholic convert estimates that 40 percent of the Mass is Scripture being read or sung, whereas at his former fundamentalist church the worship service had been less than 5 percent Scripture. At every Mass scriptural texts are read or sung aloud, taken from the Old Testament, Psalms, Epistles, and Gospels. While the Gospel is read the whole congregation must stand up in respect, and then affirm that what was read is “the Word of the Lord.” The three-hour-long Good Friday service is full of Scripture read aloud. At Mass on Passion Sunday or at the Easter Vigil, you might be on your feet for fifteen minutes listening to the Gospel. And the Catholic Church requires, like Ezra, that you stand out of respect when the Gospel is read.

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.... The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’ No, he answered, because while you are

pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest” (Mt. 13:24-26, 29-39).

Look for a church that allows entrance to both wheat and weeds. Joining an evangelical church often requires a “personal testimony,” a history of one’s conversion experience. This is evaluated for spiritual sincerity by the pastor or elders, to sift for false Christians, to keep out the weeds. Yet human hearts defy accurate knowing by men. The Catholic Church will admit you on a simple profession of faith, and no verdict will be attempted as to whether you are truly wheat or weed. In this the Catholic Church is both realistic and truly biblical. The Scriptures and the lives of the saints (and perhaps our own experience too) show that some pretty weedy-looking folks turn out to be high-grade wheat.

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

Look for a church that is truly a multicultural body, as is Christ’s Church in Heaven. Only the Catholic Church spans all nations, cultures, and races. Other churches betray their national or ethnic limitations even in their names: The Church of England, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Presbyterian Church in America. Yet even the uppermost body in the Catholic Church, the College of Cardinals, accurately reflects the multiculturalism shown in the Book of Revelation, with large numbers of African, Hispanic, and Asian cardinals.

When I was becoming a Catholic I attended a Mass at Baltimore's cathedral for everyone in the archdiocese who was converting. Next to me — a 40-ish white suburbanite — were a dozen young black men from one of Baltimore's worst ghettos. Though we came from worlds that seldom mix, we stood together professing the same faith, joining the same Church, and sharing equal status. I have since been at Mass where the handshake of peace was exchanged among Asian, black, Hispanic, and Caucasian. This is profoundly unlike anything I experienced during decades of attending Protestant churches. It is also a profound embodiment of New Testament exhortations to evangelize "all nations."

Once while some Israelites were burying a man...they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet (2 Kgs. 13:21). God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. Handkerchiefs and aprons that had been touched by him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them (Acts 19:11-12). Look for a church that has a theology on holy relics, which are the bodily remains of great saints or material objects once owned or touched by them. The Bible holds modestly few references to relics. Yet those few mentions were recorded, thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. A church should not ignore those passages but should have a systematic theology that makes room for them. The Catholic Church does so, as shown by the many Catholic altars in the world containing an embedded relic.

If you tour the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, D.C., you may encounter the mummified body of St. Innocent on display. As an evangelical, I found it macabre; even as a Catholic today I still do. Yet the jarring encounter with St. Innocent is a reminder of my own mortality and of other Christians' martyrdoms. A secularized, death-trivializing culture like our own would do well to have a few Catholic relics placed in its path.

Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning...[and] at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the Lord... (Exod. 30:7-8). Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer...on the golden altar before the throne... (Rev. 8:3-4).

Look for a church that burns incense in worship, as in Exodus, as in Revelation, and as in many a Catholic parish. During Holy Week and at other special times a priest will swing a thurible full of burning incense before the altar, sending up clouds of smoke. This effects a sense of majesty and awe, which is probably why both the Bible and the Catholic Church use incense to worship a majestic and awesome God.

[Jesus said to His disciples:] If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven (Jn. 20:21-23).

Look for a church that has a program to implement this delegated authority from Christ to forgive sins. In the Catholic sacrament of Confession, you privately confess your sins to God in the presence of a priest. The priest then grants you absolution on the authority of Jesus' statement

above. In the Protestant world these verses are taken as a generalized exhortation to preach forgiveness through Jesus, and little more is done with them.

This is a shame because this seemingly grim Catholic obsession with sin has profound life-giving results. Society claims that my basic nature is good. The simple existence of confessionals reminds me that this is a lie. To go there forces me to examine my conscience beforehand. Listening to my own voice recite my sins in the confessional reminds me how real my sin is. It is unusually humbling to reveal the truth about myself in front of another person. But the sacrament of Confession places my forgiveness in a specific time and place, making it an unmistakable fact, a done deal. My sins need no longer haunt me. And Confession builds accountability, because I know if I choose to sin, there's a person I'm going to have to reveal it to.

As a Protestant, I was burdened by some sins that my soul cried out to confess and for which I knew I needed accountability. I knew, too, that James commanded that we "confess our sins one to another." The evangelicals' answer to all this is small-group accountability, mentor friends in whom to confide. A few times I did so. But friendships and loyalties ebb and flow. I wonder now if I haven't handed one among them a possible weapon, a morsel of richly destructive gossip. My secrets are guarded only by my hope that they will remain charitably silent.

How much better to confess in front of a priest who is bound by the Seal of the Confessional to endure death before disclosing anything said. And I am able to go to him

anonymously, hidden behind the confessional's screen. Confidence in this double seal of confidentiality allows me to face my sins with uncommon honesty.

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth (Phil. 2:10).

Look for a church that honors Jesus in this way. When entering and leaving a Catholic church, able-bodied Catholics are to bend one knee. The worship in the Old Testament included much bowing and kneeling. The Catholic Church continues this biblical form, as a reminder to us distracted, creaturely beings that we have crossed into the precincts of the sacred. But to genuflect in a Protestant church is probably to invite an usher to rescue you from falling.

For some are eunuchs because they...have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 19:12).

Look for a church that institutionalizes ministerial service by those who have given up marriage and sex in order to serve Jesus Christ (who Himself died as a celibate virgin) by imitating Him. Catholic priests, brothers, and sisters live out this pattern of service described by Jesus, a pattern de-institutionalized and forgotten in Protestant circles.

During Communist rule in eastern Europe, Catholic clergy were better able to resist Communist intimidation than were Orthodox clergy. Married Orthodox priests had families to protect. Catholic priests, wifeless and childless, were able to resist without fear of causing harm to their dependents. Here in the U.S., some surveys of Protestant pastors say that up to half of them find being husband and

father so incompatible with being a minister that if they were to live life over, they would choose the ministry or a family, but not both.

Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II have both benefited from clerical celibacy. In his autobiography *Just As I Am*, Graham praised the founder of the brand-new Bible college he attended in Florida in the 1930s. Graham said the man was beloved by his students because he sacrificed himself wholly for their sake and for their college. Graham records the reason he could do so — he had deliberately chosen to stay single so as to give undivided attention to his ministry.

As for the Pope — when the Nazis banned most Catholic activities in occupied Poland, an unmarried tailor organized underground “Living Rosary” groups among Catholic young men, one of whom was Karol Wojtyła. This brave tailor, undoubtedly braver because he would drag no family with him to a Nazi grave if discovered, became Wojtyła’s spiritual mentor and is the man Pope John Paul II credits for helping him answer his call to the priesthood. Thus the two leading Christian evangelists of our age both stand on the shoulders of mentors who had chosen celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. Clerical celibacy is biblical and practical; and it is almost exclusively Catholic. So whenever he [Onan] lay with his brother’s wife, he spilled his seed on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother. What he did was wicked in the Lord’s sight... (Gen. 38:9-10).

Look for a church that has upheld this biblical teaching despite its modern unpopularity. In *The Bible*

and Birth Control, Protestant author Charles Provan quotes 67 Protestant commentators over five centuries who, despite their denominational variety, all condemned contraception as unbiblical (based on Onan). Today virtually all Protestant churches, beginning with the Anglicans in 1930, have discarded this heritage.

I've heard few Catholic clergy promote the Church's teaching against contraception. If opinion polls are accurate, it seems that most Catholic laity endorse contraception. Yet official Catholic doctrine on contraception remains true to history's consensus on what the Bible meant about it. The Catholic Church has stood with the Bible in the face of modernity's worship of recreational sex.

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover (Lk. 2:41). Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast... (Jn. 2:21).

Look for a church that regularly sponsors processions and pilgrimages to places of sacred significance. This is a religious practice of the Old Covenant in which Jesus Himself participated, both as a child at Passover and as an adult in His triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

In Baltimore, Cardinal Keeler initiated an annual procession of Catholic teens marching through the city carrying a wooden cross. I thought it silly at first, but during the process of becoming a Catholic I felt the power that comes from identifying oneself with the Church in public rituals. I am sure that most of Keeler's teens vividly remember their procession, and that for some it was a spiritual turning point.

As to feast days, do Protestant churches observe Catholic feast days without recognizing it? Early Calvinists in England and America decried Christmas as unbiblical and outlawed it when in power. (Thus George Washington's famous sneak across the Delaware River on Christmas Day 1776 to attack Trenton, timing made feasible because many northern colonists ignored the holiday.) Christmas only lost its taintedness in America a century later, after Victorian England had made Christmas celebrations fashionable again.

Here with Christmas — as with the prohibition of contraception, as with the veneration of Mary — it is Catholicism that has remained consistent and Protestantism that has reversed direction.

He [Jesus] appointed twelve — designating them apostles (Mk. 3:14). The reason I [Paul] left you [Titus] in Crete was that you might...appoint elders in every town (Ti. 1:15).

Look for a church with local leaders appointed by an outside authority. In many evangelical churches the members elect their pastor or ruling elders by majority vote. But there is no example of laymen electing their clergy anywhere in the Bible. Its pattern is direct appointment by a higher authority, and this is sustained by the Catholic Church in having all priests appointed to their posts by a bishop and all bishops appointed by the pope.

John Calvin exchanged public letters with the French Cardinal Sadoletto, who had been trying to win Calvin back to the Catholic Church. In them Calvin argued that the Church in Geneva was in such a deplorable state that

someone just had to take action and that God's man was Calvin himself. He described a sort of unilateral rescue operation undertaken on no other authority than his own. It is significant that the muscle for his spiritual authority came from the Geneva city government, which hired him as its municipal preacher, and not from any established church.

Protestantism's clerical authority usually rests on congregational elections, or self-anointed leadership, or government sponsorship. Only the Catholic Church can point to a succession of appointed leadership traceable all the way back to Christ's own appointments.

They all joined together constantly in prayer... (Acts 1:14). He [Epaphras] is always wrestling in prayer for you... (Col. 4:12). Pray continually (1 Thess. 5:17).

Look for a church that has institutionalized continuous, unceasing prayer. This is what contemplative orders of cloistered men and women are all about. They are "always wrestling" for us in prayer. This is what the Liturgy of the Hours is about, regularized times of prayer that continue at intervals around the clock every day. This is also manifest in the Eucharistic adoration chapels that dot the Catholic landscape. At these, lay Catholics appear in shifts so that someone is always praying there 24 hours a day, seven days a week. None of these ordered inducements to continuous prayer exists widely, if at all, in the Protestant world. Praying in a crowded chapel at 2 a.m. is a spiritual privilege. Seek a church that offers this. He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come..." (Lk. 11:2).

Look for a church that gives the Lord's Prayer the prominence that it was given by Jesus and the New Testament. In one of its two renderings, it is given as a set prayer for direct recitation by believers, and not just a general model of what a good prayer should be. At every Mass in every Catholic parish, Christ's command is literally obeyed with the public recitation of this prayer that He uttered. Some Protestant bodies (Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist) do likewise, but you can sit in many a Protestant pew for months or years without hearing Jesus' pre-eminent prayer recited even once.

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This has not been an exhaustive inventory of all the overlooked biblical mandates that the Catholic Church uniquely fulfills. But it may be enough to open the minds of non-Catholic Christians. There are millions of well-meaning Christians who will consider joining any church except the Catholic Church because for them the Reformation-era denunciation of Catholicism as anti-biblical remains an unexamined presupposition. Wanting to be faithful to the Bible, they turn their backs on the very Church that has the most to offer Christians who are looking for a Total Bible Church.

Let the Church loudly, clearly, and always explain herself from the book she herself assembled and validated: the Bible. Thus Protestants may rediscover that the biblical foundations of Catholicism are far more solid than they ever imagined.