

FOREWORD BY CARL TRUEMAN

WHY DO

PROTESTANTS

CONVERT?

BRAD LITTLEJOHN AND CHRIS CASTALDO

**WHY DO
PROTESTANTS
CONVERT?**

ISBN-13: 978-1-949716-19-1

ISBN: 1-949716-19-8

Proofread by Rhys Laverty

Cover design and typesetting by Rachel Rosales

Copyright © 2023 The Davenant Press

Foreword by Carl Trueman

WHY DO PROTESTANTS CONVERT?

**BRAD LITTLEJOHN
AND CHRIS CASTALDO**

Table of Contents

Foreword by Carl Trueman	I
I Conversionitis	1
II The Psychology of Conversion	15
III The Theology of Conversion	33
IV The Sociology of Conversion	52
V A Way Forward	71
Afterword by Brad Littlejohn	93
Why Protestants Should <i>Not</i> Convert	

Foreword

When I served for some years as a pastor with a congregation composed of both blue- and white-collar workers, many members of my church—perhaps around a third—were converts to Protestantism from the Roman Catholicism into which they had been born and baptized. All of them told similar stories: they had ended up as Protestants because they wanted to go to a church where the Bible was taken seriously and expounded to them week by week. They were, to use the old cliché, “people of the Book” and desired a church whose life and worship placed God’s Word at the center. And for most of them, their experience of Roman Catholicism had been that it was a matter of rote performance, of occasional attendance at a service, of

making confession every now and then, and something that was important for the key moments in life: births, confirmations, marriages, and funerals. It was not for them a living, dynamic force. And it had not helped them understand the Bible or the gospel it contained.

Yet even while pastoring I also lived in a different world, and one that I continue to inhabit even now that my years of shepherding a congregation lie long in the past. And that is the academic world, one inhabited by professors and students and marked at its best by the pursuit of knowledge and the desire to find deep answers to life's most profound questions. In that world, admittedly smaller and more self-selecting, the tide seems to flow the other way, with students and colleagues over the years finding the call of Rome to be powerful and persuasive. While I suspect the numbers flowing from Rome to Protestantism among the general Christian population far outweigh those going in the other direction, among young intellectuals that seems to be reversed.

This short volume explores this phenomenon and offers thoughtful answers to anyone perplexed by the attractions of Rome to a generation of Protestant intellectuals. Questions that press in on the church today—matters of authority, of history, and

of tradition, for example—are not matters that Protestantism, at least in its more biblicist forms, has historically taken with particular seriousness. For example, simply quoting scriptural texts to justify the great doctrines of the Christian faith that Protestants wish to maintain is now somewhat more challenging than it was before modern literary theory made interpretation more complicated. And the multitude of novel moral and ethical challenges the church faces at ground level in the ordinary life of any congregation, from matters of sexual ethics to issues such as IVF and surrogacy, has exposed Protestantism's lack of a strong tradition of social teaching. Then there is worship; the idiom of the rock concert with added TED talk is scarcely adequate to convey the holiness of God, the beauty of worship, and the seriousness of the Christian faith.

In each of these areas, Rome might be said to have answers. Authority, history, tradition, liturgy, social teaching, beauty—these are all strong suits for Catholicism, especially when compared to those forms of Protestantism that have ignored them.

And yet, many of us remain Protestant. Why? Because we believe that there need be no ultimate either-or choice in these matters. Classic, orthodox Protestantism has the resources to rise to these challenges while not abandoning its historic com-

Why Do Protestants Convert?

mitment to the centrality of the Bible and preached Word. And this book, in highlighting why Rome is so attractive, also points to why acknowledging this should challenge us to be better Protestants, not to swim the Tiber.

Carl R. Trueman
Grove City College

ONE

Conversionitis

In 1994, at the opening of his classic work *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Mark Noll acidly remarked that “the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.”¹ Since that time, there have been plenty of signs of hope and improvement. The classical Christian education movement, initially spearheaded largely by evangelical Protestants, has grown immensely in numbers and influence, though it remains a fairly

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 3.

small blip on the American educational landscape. New evangelical colleges committed to the renewing of the evangelical mind, such as New Saint Andrews College and Patrick Henry College, though tiny in numbers, punch well above their weight in academic and cultural influence. The number of evangelical graduate students attending top-notch programs has increased greatly over this period (albeit too greatly for the stagnant evangelical job market to bear). The evangelical publishing industrial complex is doing very well, and publishers like Crossway are putting out material of genuine depth and theological weight.

Yet it is no exaggeration to say that the chief beneficiary of this renaissance has not been evangelical Protestantism, but Roman Catholicism (and to a lesser extent, Eastern Orthodoxy). The classical Christian education movement is increasingly dominated by Catholic and Orthodox teachers and leaders, and the top graduates of evangelical colleges are disproportionately likely to convert to Rome. Even among established Protestant intellectuals, one can identify a steady stream of high-profile conversions over the past couple decades, including Scott Hahn, Francis J. Beckwith, J. Budziszewski, R. R. Reno, Reinhard Hütter, and Christian Smith, among many others. The conservative politics of

the Religious Right, once energized by Baptists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, have become increasingly the province of Roman Catholic intellectuals, many of them converts from evangelical Protestantism. Witness, for instance, the trajectory of *First Things* over the past quarter century from the ecumenical platform for “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” to the flagship of conservative Roman Catholicism in America.

The Case of Newman

In some ways, there is nothing new about this. One thinks of a quintessential convert to Rome such as John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Newman, like subsequent figures who traversed the Tiber, including G.K. Chesterton, Malcolm Muggeridge, and Thomas Merton, narrated the reasons for his journey. Newman’s account, however, found chiefly in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, is especially helpful by illuminating reasons and attendant circumstances that routinely lead pilgrims Romeward.

It’s important to note that, for Newman, conversion is a gradual process. “Great acts take time,” he asserts in his *Apologia*.² Or as he had written pre-

2. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua: Being A History of His Religious Opinions* (London: Longmans, 1882), 169.