How do we know it’s True? The Holy Spirit’s Role in Religious Knowledge: Catholic Reflections on Protestant Pneumatology

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How do we account for our claims of religious knowledge? When I was a Presbyterian, I learned to depend especially upon “The Witness of the Holy Spirit.” This is a critical component of the Reformed tradition. From the days of Zwingli and Calvin, leading Reformed theologians have defended the idea that God’s Spirit reliably and immediately communicates the truth of key Reformed doctrines. Above and beyond any objective evidence for the Christian faith, Reformed Christians “know that they know, that they know” by the witness of the Spirit.



***Pentecost***
Jean Restout II, 1732
Musée du Louvre, Paris

For a while, this doctrine was a great comfort to me. When I encountered evidentialist challenges to faith, I rested secure in my experience of the Spirit. To quote Calvin, I knew “in a way superior to human judgment.” (*Inst*. 1.7.5) As the evidence against the Reformed faith mounted, however, the Witness of the Spirit had to do more and more heavy lifting. Eventually, it was all I had left of my Reformed faith. Then I realized I needed to examine this “Witness.” Was it even rational to base epistemological claims upon such a thing?

For reasons I hope to make clear in this post, I came to the conviction that the Reformed doctrine of the Spirit’s witness is neither rational nor biblical. This was a devastating realization, as it left me in theological limbo. Could I have faith in any religious doctrine, or was I consigned to a life of skepticism? Catholicism began to make more sense than Reformed Christianity, but this underlying skepticism remained. How to make an act of faith rationally? I was wrong in my faith once. How could I be sure I would not be fooled again?

Eventually, I came to embrace the Catholic answer to this question, which is very different from the Reformed. First, Catholics distinguish clearly between doctrines that we know by philosophical or historical considerations, and doctrines that we believe on authority (faith). The warrant for this faith is not interior experience, but the objective motives of credibility. In each case, knowledge of the faith and its doctrines is grounded in external, not internal criteria. Secondly, the Catholic faith assigns a different role to the Holy Spirit in this process. We say that the Spirit *helps* us to make an act of faith, but that help is not the grounds for faith, not the justification for faith being rational.

The Catholic approach can be compared to marriage. There are some objective truths about my spouse that I can *know*. I can know that she exists, that she has a certain character, and that she has made certain commitments to me. Based on this knowledge, I have sufficient reason to entrust myself to her. I believe *very firmly* (with good reason) that she will be true, but I could not be said to *know* how our marriage will turn out. Thus, regarding my wife, I have both knowledge and rationally warranted belief.

When it comes to the Christian faith, I am in a similar position. From reason, I can know that God exists, that objective morality requires a transcendent norm, and that the soul is immortal. I can also know the historical existence of Jesus and the apostles, the miracles, growth and holiness of the Church, its correspondence to Old Testament prophecy, and its doctrinal integrity and continuity across history. These considerations, together with the appeal of her message, give me sufficient reason *to entrust* myself to the Church. But this act of faith is not a direct *knowledge* of the mysteries of revelation. As in marriage, it is a rationally warranted decision to *accept* the teaching of the church about these mysteries.

Catholics do not ignore the role of the Holy Spirit in this system. Revelation teaches that the Holy Spirit guarantees the public transmission of the deposit of faith. (Acts 15: 28) The Spirit also moves the individual to believe it. (John 6:44) The difference with the Reformed faith is that the individual never claims to *know* what the faith is or that it is true based on a non-verifiable interior experience. Our reasons for belief and our manner of determining its objective content are always publicly accessible and open to debate, criticism, and falsification.

This difference puts the Reformed Christian and the Catholic Christian on very different footing psychologically. The Reformed Christians claims to *know* things for which he cannot give a sufficient reason. In fact, leading Reformed theologians reject the search for sufficient reasons as fundamentally misguided. In my own life as a Protestant, this sometimes made me feel like I was humming with my fingers in my ears, “I know I’m right, I know I’m right, I know I’m right!”

As a Catholic, I take more responsibility for my faith. I have a clearer understanding of what can be known rationally, and what is mystery. I understand that faith, like marriage, essentially involves a personal commitment, but one with enormous benefits. I have good reasons for making the commitment, reasons to think it will pay off. But I know and accept what I’m getting myself into. My fingers are not in my ears. My eyes are wide open.

In what follows, I seek to elucidate these differences between Reformed and Catholic faith. I am particularly interested in explaining why I came to reject the Reformed doctrine of the Spirit’s Witness, and why I found the Catholic answer to the question of religious knowledge ultimately more satisfying.

**The Witness of the Spirit in Reformed Dogmatics**

Reformed Christians appeal to interior criteria for claims to two sorts of religious knowledge. First, Reformed Christians claim interior or innate knowledge of doctrines that Catholics would consider to be within the purview of reason: especially the existence of God. Second, Reformed Chrisitans claim to know things innately or interiorily that Catholics would claim to know only on the basis of the public teaching of the Church. Both types of propositions pose problems for Reformed dogmatics. However, the second type pose the more serious issues. It is these that I wish primarily to address.

The first of these issues is the determination of the Biblical canon. Reformed Christians hold that knowledge of which books belong within the canon comes from the immediate work of the Holy Spirit, and not simply from historical or objective criteria. The second case is that of biblical hermeneutics. Reformed Christianity asserts that the Spirit’s witness is a *sine qua non* for proper interpretation of Scripture. But unlike Catholicism, the locus of the Spirit’s work is the individual, and not the public teaching of the Church’s Magisterium. Finally, there is the case of personal assurance of salvation. According to Reformed Christianity, the Spirit can and does vouchsafe an infallible knowledge of the proposition, “I am among the elect.”

***The Canon***

Traditional Reformed Christianity asserts that definitive knowledge of the Biblical canon does not arise simply from historical, objective criteria but by way of an immediate intuition. The Gallican Confession (principally authored by Calvin) provides a particularly clear statement of this position:

We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward illumination of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we cannot found any articles of faith. (Gallican Confession, 1559)

Reformed Christians do not deny that historical, objective factors may play a role in forming belief in the canon. Historical factors provide a context in which spiritual intuition takes place. (Michael Kruger, in his recent work on the canon, has argued just this.) Nevertheless, Reformed Christians (including Kruger) specifically deny that any historical, ecclesiastical, or objective criterion can be sufficient to supply knowledge of the biblical canon. As Kruger puts it, “If we try to validate an ultimate authority [viz., the canon] by appealing to some other authority, then we have just shown that it is not really the ultimate authority.”[1](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_0_14290)

One question that naturally comes up is *how does this spiritual intuition take place*? What is the mechanism that allows me to know “This book is inspired; this one is not?” I find at least two different answers to this in the Reformed tradition.

The first answer is Calvin’s: I know the inspired books because they create in me a feeling that is unmistakably divine. Thus, Calvin infers inspiration from his subjective experience of the text. He writes:

Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, *feel perfectly assured – as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it* -that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God . . . *We feel a divine energy living and breathing in it* – an energy by which we are drawn and animated to obey it, willingly indeed, and knowingly, but more vividly and effectually than could be done by human will or knowledge. (*Inst*. 1.7.5)(emphases mine)

Michael Kruger takes a different line. He considers Calvin’s position and rejects it. For Kruger, we do not infer inspiration from religious experience. Rather, through the media of historical, objective criteria (which are, in themselves, insufficient) the Holy Spirit simply works in us an unshakable conviction of Scripture’s authority:

The ground for our belief [in the Canon] is the apprehension of the divine qualities of Scripture itself, not the testimonium or our experience with it. . . . It seems, then that our belief in the truth of Scripture via the work of the Spirit is best construed not as an inductive inference from some aspect of our experience, but, . . . as a more immediate or intuitive belief.[2](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_1_14290)

To the question, “How do you know that this immediate intuition is accurate?” Kruger simply demurs. It is “*une question mal posée*.” One cannot validate an ultimate authority by reference to anything else. There is literally *no sufficient reason to hold these books to be canonical*. They just are and he knows it![3](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_2_14290)

It is important to recognize that Kruger and the Reformed Tradition hold that knowledge of the Canon is possible. It is not simply a matter of choosing to believe on the basis of authority. Kruger summarizes the question of the canon this way:

On what possible basis can Christians have confidence that they have the right twenty-seven books [of the New Testament canon]? How can Christians ever know such a thing? It is here that we come to the precise question that this book is designed to answer.[4](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_3_14290)

In sum, Calvin and Kruger disagree on the mechanism, but they share the belief that the Holy Spirit conveys knowledge to the individual that could not be attained otherwise. In the end, Kruger summarizes the Reformed position thus: “The canonical books are received by those who have the Holy Spirit in them.”[5](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_4_14290)

***Reformed Hermeneutics***

The Reformed faith teaches that the proper interpretation of the Scriptures requires the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Precisely what that means, and how it translates into preaching and teaching has been variously understood in the tradition. For present purposes, I am interested in only one aspect of the doctrine: that the Holy Spirit conveys reliable information to individuals about the meaning of the Sacred Text. This information may differ from traditional interpretation and it may differ from what could be acquired only by lexical/historical study.

The genesis of this doctrine came in the early days of the Reformation. Leading Reformers sought to justify their appeals to Scripture and their rejection of Catholic teaching authority and tradition. They appealed not only to the authority of the Bible, but also to their experience of the Spirit. In effect, they transferred the seat of interpretive authority from the publicly recognizable Magisterium to the individual conscience.

Zwingli was the first Reformed leader to embrace this notion. He articulates it in his *Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God* (1522). Appealing to 1 John 2, Zwingli writes:

Now first note that this anointing is the same as the enlightenment and gift of the Holy Ghost. You will see, then, that once God has taught us with this anointing, that is, his Spirit, we do not need any other teacher, *for there is no more error, but only the pure truth in which we are to abide*.[6](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_5_14290)

In context, Zwingli considers the interpretation of Scripture. He compares the reliability of the Spirit’s anointing to the corrupted interpretations of the Catholic teaching authorities. He sets up a clear contrast between the Scripture interpretation by Spirit-illumined believers and the interpretation of tradition, Bishops, and Popes.

Other early Reformed authors (Farel, the young Calvin) took a similar line, but the radical individualism of Zwingli’s doctrine eventually caught up with them. By the early 1540s, Calvin tempered his advocacy for individual interpretation of Scripture, and leaned more heavily on the idea of authoritative teachers. Reformed authorities also spelled out objective rules for Biblical interpretation. But the basic principle remained: neither teaching authority nor technical skill suffice to uncover the meaning of the Sacred text. There is “an anointing of the Spirit” that is still required.

Reformed thinkers needed this doctrine to ground their core soteriological ideas: providence, predestination, and justification by faith alone. Their problem, simply stated, was *how to account for the fact that not everyone sees these doctrines in the text*. Calvin’s solution, and the one embraced by the Reformed tradition, was to assert that Scripture is clear on these doctrines, but that the polluted mind of man naturally rebels against them. Thus, only those with the Spirit can understand and, even more, embrace these doctrines.[7](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_6_14290)

The Westminster Confession affirmed Calvin’s view as an article of faith:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. (WCF 1.7)

In spite of Scripture’s alleged clarity, the Confession adds:

We acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word. (WCF 1.6)

Robert Shaw, the Scottish Presbyterian, comments on the confession this way:

Notwithstanding the subjective perspicuity of the Scriptures, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in them. This arises from the blindness and perversity of the human understanding, as now corrupted and depraved.–1 Cor. ii. 14. If the enlightening influences of the Holy Spirit were unnecessary, then the greatest adepts in human literature would be best acquainted with the Scriptures; this, however, is not the case.–Matt. xi. 25. In the promises of God, and in the prayers of the saints, the special illumination of the Spirit is represented as necessary to enable us savingly to understand the things of God.–John xiv. 26; Ps. cxix 18, &c.[8](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_7_14290)

Finally, Reformed theologian Greg Bahnsen composed a “[Reformed Confession Concerning Hermeneutics](http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt173.htm)” in which he states:

WE DENY that a holy and righteous handling, summarizing, teaching, proclamation and application of Scripture can be performed by unregenerate men, even though there may be limited value in their discussions of the Scriptures.

In sum, the Reformed tradition holds that Scripture contains an objective meaning that cannot be clearly recognized, communicated, and certainly not embraced, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit.

***Assurance of Salvation***

Reformed tradition teaches that the individual Christian can attain an infallible certainty of his election. That is to say, he can know the truth of the proposition “I am elect.” This knowledge comes through the witness of the Holy Spirit, combined with the promises of Scripture. The Westminster Confession teaches:

Such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus . . . may, in this life, *be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace* . . . This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an *infallible assurance of faith* founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony *of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits* that we are the children of God. (WCF 18, emphases mine.)

In sum, Reformed Christianity promises that the Holy Spirit conveys knowledge to the individual of at least three types of propositions: “This book is inspired,” “this text means such-and-such,” and “I am elect.” Reformed theologians offer two different explanations of how this knowledge is communicated. Calvin contends that we infer these from interior, religious experience. Kruger argues that we know them by an immediate intuition.

**Philosophical Assessment**

The Reformed view of the Holy Spirit raises a difficult philosophical question. How do Reformed Christians account for their claim *to know* something from the Spirit’s witness? The simplest way to account for these assertions would be to claim private, verbal revelation: “God told me that this book is inspired, etc.” However, this is not the Reformed solution. As we have seen, Reformed theologians infer these propositions from numinous religious experience, or they simply assert them as somehow intuited or innate.

Do either of these solutions actually work? Can I rationally conclude that a book is inspired because it produces elevated religious sentiments? Or, can I rationally assert inspiration without regard to objective evidence? Consider that the propositions in question are not metaphysical necessities, but contingent events. (God inspired this book, not that; the inspired author meant this and not that; I have been effectually called to salvation.) I contend that neither solution proposed by Reformed theologians is rationally satisfying.

***Inference from Religious Experience***

We treat first Calvin’s view that doctrinal propositions (i.e., “This book is divinely inspired”) can be reliably inferred from religious experience. There are at least four reasons that we should reject this view.

1) This is not how Reformed Christians actually form religious convictions. It is just how they justify them *ex post facto*.

I would appeal to our Reformed readers for a bit of honest introspection. Is there anyone who can truthfully say, “I came to believe that Esther is inspired and Ecclesiasticus is not because I got divine feelings from the one and not from the other?” I’m open to discussion, here, but I have never met anyone who can candidly assert this.

Religious sociology confirms this basic insight. Peter Berger (among others) has argued convincingly that we absorb our religious convictions largely from the social “plausibility structure” in which they are embedded.[9](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_8_14290) People can be *conditioned* to believe almost anything, no matter how counter intuitive. Only later do we seek justification for those beliefs, especially in the face of “cognitive dissonance.”

I know that I have experienced this personally. I grew up Presbyterian and accepted Reformed dogma implicitly. Only in graduate school, as evidence against the Reformed paradigm began to mount, did I seek desperately for independent corroboration. My trump card, however, remained “the Spirit’s witness.” The same dynamic is typical of Mormonism (“the burning in the bosom”), certain forms of Zen, and other religious traditions.

When we study the history of Reformed dogma, we again see this pattern at work. The early Reformers framed their doctrinal ideas within a particular social and polemical context. Social historians like Lucien Febvre have shown by painstaking research how those ideas reflect the social and intellectual changes in the immediately preceding culture.[10](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#footnote_9_14290) Within that culture, it was understandably very important to justify exegetical and historical conclusions without final reference to authoritative interpreters. The doctrine of Spirit witness offered a non-falsifiable justification for those conclusions.

2) We cannot infer doctrinal propositions from “divine feelings” because the notion of “divine feelings” is useless.

How could we reliably identify a feeling as divine? How could we know that we had had an authentic divine feeling, and not a counterfeit? We cannot, because we lack an adequate concept or definition of a “divine feeling” by which to compare candidate feelings with feelings independently known to be divine. What is a divine feeling?

Compare the claim “I have divine feelings” to the sentences “I think of triangles,” and “I am touching water.” In the latter cases, the propositions are useful because I have an adequate definition of the relevant terms that is publicly verifiable. In other words, I have a way to know whether I’m really thinking of a triangle, instead of something else, or touching water, instead of a tree. In these cases, I know the concept by a public definition that is verifiable by conceptual or sensory awareness. (Wittgenstein’s arguments against [private languages](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_language_argument) are relevant here.) Furthermore, we see many people who claim to follow divine feelings and yet come to contradictory conclusions. This supports the notion that we are not in a position reliably to distinguish "divine feelings" from merely human feelings mistakenly thought to be divine.

3) We cannot infer doctrinal propositions from immediate religious experience because we cannot reliably identify the connection between the putative cause and the effect in question.

In order to infer a causal connection, it is necessary to know something specific about the nature of both the cause and the effect. Consider a simple causal inference: a brick thrown through a window causes the glass to break. Why do we infer this? Because we know something about the nature of glass (it shatters under pressure), we know something about bricks (they exert pressure when, having been thrown, they make contact), and we know something about *this brick* and *this glass* (they came into violent contact). If any of these elements were missing, we would not draw the relevant inference. If I came home to find my window broken, but no brick, what would I infer? Only that the window had been exposed to pressure. But of what kind? Wind? Hail? Temperature change? I wouldn’t know.

In the case of religious experience, we need an argument or evidence to show that this *text-cum-spirit-witness* necessarily produces or is reliably indicated by *this feeling*. But no such argument or evidence is forthcoming. Even if you assume that one can reliably identify “divine feelings” in the presence of a certain text (a highly questionable assumption), you cannot reliably infer *inspiration-cum-Spirit-witness* as the cause. How can you know that this effect was not plausibly caused by something else? All I know for sure is that the text and feeling are coincident.

My own view is that “divine feelings” (elevated, religious emotions) *do* occur in the presence of certain texts, doctrines, or symbols of the transcendent. In their presence, we feel a certain delight and that delight can be a motive *for belief*. (“I’d like to feel that again.”) But they do not constitute an adequate basis for claims of religious knowledge.

4) Finally, even if the notion of “divine feelings” were useful, it is not consistently reliable.

One of the greatest difficulties for Reformed dogmatics, in my opinion, is the problem of false assurance. Calvin and the whole tradition admit that it is possible to have delightful religious emotions and even to assent to Reformed doctrinal propositions, while wrongly interpreting these experiences as a work of the Spirit. Presumably, those who “really get it” will know the doctrines infallibly. But those who do not “get it” will always believe wrongly that they have “gotten it” anyway. And there is just no way to infer from the experiences themselves which camp you are in. (Jason Stellman once put the dilemma quite humorously: "The elect know for sure that they're going to heaven, and I might be one of them.")

For all of these reasons, the idea that we can infer doctrinal propositions from religious experience is unworkable. These problems lead us to the other mechanism proposed by Kruger: Those who “get it,” know that they are right by an immediate intuition, and not as an inference from religious experience. Now, what’s wrong with that notion?

***Innate Knowledge of Contingent Truths***

Michael Kruger has argued that knowledge of the biblical canon comes neither from historical investigation, nor as an inference from religious experience. Instead, the Holy Spirit simply works this conviction in our minds: “This book is inspired.” What are we to make of this? Is it rational to assert that propositions like “This book is inspired;” “This text means such-and-such;” and, “I am elect,” could be known innately? Could we rationally claim to know such things, but without inferring them from other beliefs or experiences?

To be sure, an omnipotent God could infuse such knowledge. The difficulty is that we have very strong reasons to doubt that the specific doctrines of Reformed Christianity are infused in this way. To begin with, Reformed dogmatics is very much a minority position in Christian history, as well as a sixteenth-century novelty. Consider the whole scope of Christian history: Greek, Syriac, Persian, Slavonic, Coptic, Ethiopic, as well as Latin. Within those widely disparate cultures, all possessed the Sacred Scriptures. In how many did anything like Reformed Christianity emerge? Either the Holy Spirit particularly favored 16th century Zurich and Geneva, or the Reformed tradition is involved in special pleading.

This problem is compounded by considering the actual history of Calvinism. As I have shown elsewhere, Reformed Protestants have given diverse and conflicting accounts of the "essentials" of Christian belief. They have also given different accounts of their own religious experience and what counts as an authentic movement of the Holy Spirit. Diversity of Reformed, Protestant belief would make claims to divine illumination seem particularly tendentious.

There is, however, a more rational explanation for Reformed dogmatics that does make sense of the history. Zwingli, Calvin and Luther constructed doctrinal systems for personal and polemical reasons that lacked adequate epistemological foundation. They justified these systems the way all self-proclaimed prophets do. They asserted divine sanction, in this case in the form of Spirit-witness. Their followers clung to this justification as a non-falsifiable last defense, just as Mormons assert the “Burning in the Bosom,” and Zen Buddhists their “enlightenment.”

***The Biblical Case Against Reformed Pneumatology***

The Reformers who taught “Spirit witness” did not make it up out of whole cloth. They appealed to Sacred Scripture. And, indeed, Scripture has a great deal to say about the role of the Spirit in the transmission and acceptance of Christian truth. But Scripture does not teach the Reformed view.

It would be tedious and beyond the scope of this post to attempt a comprehensive biblical pneumatology. Instead, I want to point out just four key facts:

• First, Scripture teaches that divine authorities are accredited by objective signs, (Acts 2:22) while belief in those authorities is credited to the Holy Spirit. (Acts 13:48, 1 Cor. 2:12ff, 1 John 2:20ff)

• Second, Scripture never instructs individual believers to judge doctrinal disputes by their personal experience of the Spirit. Instead, believers are directed to judge doctrinal disputes by the objective criteria of apostolicity, unity, and catholicity. (Galatians 1:8, 1 Corinthians 11:2, 1 John 2:24)

• Third, Scripture teaches that the presence of the Holy Spirit in individual believers is compatible with theological error. (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 3:1)

• And, finally, when the apostles exercised their public teaching ministry, they presumed that the Holy Spirit guaranteed their teaching. (Acts 15: 28) They never invited Christians to weigh and sift their public teaching against private experience.

In sum, Scripture presents the Spirit’s work as a source of hope and confidence, and as the cause of the believer’s faith. However, Scripture nowhere presents the “witness of the Spirit” as a way to evaluate religious truth claims. Rather “the anointing” is what enables the believer to cling to “what you have heard from the beginning,” though it does not guarantee this outcome.

**Conclusion**

I vividly remember the day that the Reformed paradigm finally collapsed for me. I had suffered for months under the accumulating historical evidence that Protestantism was not true. In the face of this mounting evidence, I clung to my “personal relationship with Jesus.” I “knew Him whom I had believed.” “His grace was sufficient for me,” and so forth. At the end of the day, I knew that I knew that I knew because He lived within my heart. Then it all fell apart.

I was finishing my doctoral dissertation and spending time with Calvin’s doctrine of the Spirit. Then it hit me. *How could I rely on interior experience to ground my faith in any doctrine of Christianity*? And as soon as I posed the question, I saw in a flash that I could not. I felt like Neo from the Matrix. I took the red pill, and woke up in another world. Like Neo, I wanted to puke. It was completely disorienting. I never wanted this.

I went through months and months of confusion, depression, and spiritual dislocation. I began to question everything – if it was possible to have knowledge of anything at all? I toyed with skepticism, atheism, agnosticism, even Zen Buddhism and Taoism. But I found that none of them gave me sufficient motive nor the courage for goodness, or even for rationality. And they certainly provided no transcendent hope.

Many of the contributors at Called To Communion know this cognitive dissonance. They left Protestantism because it became too great. The historical, exegetical, and philosophical case against Reformed Christianity appeared unassailable. But why become Catholic as a result? Is the case for Catholicism so strong that it compels rational assent? So that anyone coolly considering the evidence is drawn, ineluctably, to Rome?

Well, no actually. In fact, the Catholic church [has condemned the notion](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2/Page_253.html) that divine faith is produced inevitably by the arguments of human reason. There is good, strong evidence for Catholicism, but not so much as to compel the assent of faith. Faith is still both a gift and a choice.

The choice to become (and remain) Catholic rests on a very different psychological and philosophical basis than the decision to be Reformed. The would-be Reformed Christian confronts a religious community of the self-identified illuminati. Those within the community confess to an experience of God’s Spirit that opens their eyes to the truth of the Gospel, the contents of the canon and its interpretation, and their own election. Ironically, their most sophisticated theologians are the ones most likely [to impugn the search](http://www.ashgate.com/isbn/9780754661757) for *objective evidence* as illegitimate. This creates enormous psychological pressure to confess *getting it*, too. And, Anglo-American Reformed history is [largely the story](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/www.calledtocommunion.com/2012/03/have-you-been-born-again-catholic-reflections-on-a-protestant-doctrine-or-how-calvins-view-of-salvation-destroyed-his-doctrine-of-the-church/) of how people have variously accounted for this experience.

The Catholic Church presents a very different picture. We identified three areas of Reformed dogmatics for which the Spirit’s internal witness is deemed definitive. By contrast, Catholicism addresses each of these in an objective manner. I know the canon and its interpretation by the objective declaration of the Church, not by interior experience. In the same way, I know that grace is objectively communicated through the sacraments. Thus, I have an objective basis for *hope*, but no infallible assurance of salvation. I also have objective evidences in favor of the Church’s claim to speak with divine authority. In the end, my decision to become Catholic does not require*knowing it to be true* by way of interior illumination. We choose, finally, to believe because the doctrines of the faith are supported by strong evidence and argument and because they promise something that fulfills and, in fact, exceeds our longing for the transcendent. In contemplating these promises we are filled with delight, and it is not wrong to ascribe this movement to the work of the Holy Spirit.

The turning point in my own life was the discovery of St. Thomas’s work *De Veritate*, and especially his [treatise on faith](http://dhspriory.org/thomas/QDdeVer14.htm). With great philosophical sophistication, Thomas lays out the approach I have only outlined. At first, Thomas frightened me because I realized that he would have me assent to things *I could not know*. This ran against the grain of my Reformed bringing, which had always promised me *knowledge*. “Do you know for sure?” was a mantra I often heard. But finally, I saw that Thomas’s approach was the only one that made sense of the act of faith. By distinguishing between knowledge and faith, and by assigning the contents of the faith and its interpretation to the public teaching of the Church (guaranteed by the Holy Spirit), I knew that I had found the only rational basis for belief.

**Addendum: Scripture Texts Treating the Evaluation of Doctrinal Propositions**

***The Principle of Apostolicity***:

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed . . . For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Galatians 1:8)

I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you. (1 Corinthians 11:2)

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. (1 John 2:24)

***Catholicity***:

I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain. (Galatians 2:2)

If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11:16)
They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19)

***Unity***

For first of all I hear that when you come together in the church, there are schisms among you; and in part I believe it. For there must be also heresies: that they also, who are approved, may be made manifest among you. (1 Cor. 11:18-19)

***The Presence of the Spirit is no guarantee of Religious knowledge***

For if someone comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. (2 Corinthians 11:4)

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? (Galatians 3:1)

1. Michael Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 91. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_0_14290)]
2. *Ibid*., 103. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_1_14290)]
3. I believe that Kruger’s philosophical analysis of “ultimate authorities” is misguided. An authority can be ultimate *in its sphere*while being validated or supported by other types of authority. For instance, I believe that the sitting President of the United States – Barack Obama – is the ultimate *executive* authority in the U.S. Federal government. But I know this because of the consent of the populace, reported election results, the text of the constitution, and so forth. In the same way I could, if Protestant, believe that Scripture was the ultimate *Rule of Faith*¸ but know this through something that was not the Rule of Faith – and thus, not ultimate for the regulation of faith, worship, and morals. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_2_14290)]
4. *Op. cit*., 20. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_3_14290)]
5. *Ibid*., 101. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_4_14290)]
6. G. W. Bromily, ed. *Zwingli and Bullinger* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 82-83. (Emphasis mine.) [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_5_14290)]
7. “The will of God is, I confess, immutable, and his truth is always consistent with itself; but I deny that the reprobate ever advance so far as to penetrate to that secret revelation which Scripture reserves for the elect only. I therefore deny that they either understand his will considered as immutable, or steadily embrace his truth, inasmuch as they rest satisfied with an evanescent impression.” *Inst*. 3.2.12. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_6_14290)]
8. *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_7_14290)]
9. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy – Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967), 45, 192. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_8_14290)]
10. See especially his essay “*Une question mal posée*.” [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_9_14290)]
11. Kruger, op. cit., 20. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_10_14290)]
12. Cited in Mary A. Donavan, S.C. “At last, God is mine and I am His. Elizabeth Ann Seton and the Eucharist,” *Vincentian Heritage Journal* 27:1 (2007): 77-78. [[↩](http://www.calledtocommunion.com/?p=14290&preview=true#identifier_11_14290)]