

Biography of Tom Cabeen

My parents were baptized as Jehovah's Witnesses in the spring of 1954, shortly after my fourth birthday. My father, a old-fashioned cattle rancher and cowboy, had grown up mostly without church of any kind. My mother had been a nominal Methodist, but did not attend church very regularly. They were attracted to the Watchtower version of Christianity and embraced their beliefs very enthusiastically. Within two years, believing the end of the world (Armageddon) to be imminent, they sold their new home in Phoenix, Arizona and volunteered to move "where the need is great." In 1956, my father was appointed to oversee the Cottonwood, Arizona congregation, which at that time consisted only of our family of three and one very old Witness woman. By 1960, it had grown into a small but zealous congregation of about a dozen families.

Dad brushed up on his high school Spanish and started a small Bible study among a group of Hispanics in the Cottonwood area. Later, at the Watchtower Society's request, we moved to El Centro, in southern California, where he served as Overseer of a Spanish-speaking congregation. My mother and I started at that time to learn Spanish. I learned it rather easily, but she had much more difficulty with it. She never learned to speak it fluently. A couple of years later we were asked to move to a small Spanish congregation in Casa Grande, Arizona.

After I graduated high school in 1967, I became a full-time door-to-door preacher (Pioneer). As a result, I was classified as a Minister of Religion from my local draft board and exempted from military service. In the summer of 1968, at my parents' suggestion, I applied to serve at the world headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in Brooklyn, New York. I was invited to serve there starting November 14, 1968.

Success in Brooklyn

At Bethel (as the headquarters is called), I applied myself diligently to my work. I was also determined to learn as much as possible about Watchtower teachings. My willingness to work hard and a natural aptitude for the work assigned to me resulted in my being given increasing responsibilities, generally much more than was usual for someone my age.

Shortly after I went to Bethel, my parents, encouraged by my example, began Pioneering. My dad was invited to become a traveling Circuit Overseer. He worked with Spanish-speaking congregations in the southwest and northeast of the United States for over ten years.

In New York, I was appointed a member of a Service Committee in my local congregation when I was 19, and subsequently as an elder in 1971, when I was 21. The following year I was appointed a "Bethel Elder." As such, I often spoke as a Watchtower Society representative at their conventions. (I was the featured speaker at a District Assembly in Roanoke, VA, at age 27.)

At Bethel, I was assigned to work on the large printing press which produced *The Watchtower* magazine. About a year later, I became a foreman over several presses. When I was 27, I was appointed overseer of the Pressroom. I cultivated friendships with mature, responsible members of the Bethel staff, many of whom worked in Writing, Service and other offices where the most respected, loyal and mature Witnesses were assigned. I was having many in-depth discussions with them about the Society's teachings and the functioning of the organization.

Late in 1973, I became reacquainted with a lovely young woman named Gloria, also a Bethelite, whom I had met shortly after she arrived in 1971. We dated, fell in love, and were married on May 25, 1974. Gloria, like me, was zealous for the Watchtower Society and a hard worker. We had both decided to completely dedicate our lives full-time in the few remaining years before Armageddon as members of the headquarters staff. We both learned French and volunteered to work with French-speaking Witnesses, mostly Haitians, in Newark, New Jersey.

Disturbing questions arise

Although I had been a Witness for nearly 10 years when I came to Bethel (I was baptized in 1959), I had never read through the Bible. Doing so raised many questions in my mind. The more I read, the more inconsistencies I found between plain statements in Scripture and my Witness beliefs. At first I attributed my lack of understanding to youth and inexperience. But as time went on and I began to be more respected and trusted, I began to cautiously discuss my Bible questions with older, well-respected members of the headquarters staff. I was surprised to discover how many of them were struggling with the same problems as I, and how openly they discussed them.

I began to look at Watchtower teachings in a new way starting after the release of *Aid to Bible Understanding* in 1971. Organizational changes which followed opened the door to a reexamination of other foundational teachings. I wondered "If we have been wrong about so many activities we formerly thought to be solidly based on scripture, why couldn't we be wrong about doctrines, too?" I was not alone in asking this question. During the 1970's, a growing number of sincere people at headquarters began to read other Bible translations than the Watchtower's own *New World Translation*, as well as Bible commentaries, and to gather in informal groups, where we studied and discussed things openly, without the "assistance" of Watchtower publications. By 1979, I became convinced that there could be no reconciling some key Watchtower teachings with the Bible. However, I still trusted that God was guiding the organization, so I believed that big changes were ahead. I awaited them with eager expectation.

My wife Gloria, on the other hand, was unhappy at Bethel. Her difficulties were not primarily doctrinal, but had to do with the way people were treated. She wanted to leave Bethel and start a family. For me, the Watchtower chronology was correct, so I could not imagine why anyone would want to leave with the end so close. I brought the matter up to a trusted friend on the Governing Body, Ray Franz. He gave me a copy of a letter that had been written to the Watchtower Society by Carl Olof Jonsson, a Witness elder from Sweden. Jonsson presented indisputable evidence that the Watchtower chronology was in serious error. His logic and documentation was solid and scholarly. I read and reread the evidence. Finally, I was convinced by the evidence. I was also heartsick.

What was so hard to accept was not so much the error itself but its corollary: Chronology was and is absolutely essential to establish the Watchtower Society's claim to be God's "channel of communication" to mankind in the brief period before the end of the world. I began to seriously consider the possibility that the Watchtower Society was not what it claimed to be. It seemed certain that the leaders of the Society were misled at best, or hypocrites and false prophets at worst.

Although I had thoroughly enjoyed my service with them, and loved my Witness brothers and sisters dearly, it appeared virtually certain that there would be a parting of the ways. I simply

lost my desire to actively support something I no longer believed in. My headquarters career was over.

In the midst of this tumultuous time, my parents came to New York from Texas to visit Gloria and me. Because of some expressions I made about the disfellowshipping of some of our close friends, they sensed that my former totally supportive attitude toward the organization was changing. I assured them that I would never abandon God, Jesus Christ or the Bible, but I could not deny that I had serious questions about the organization's authority.

But with faith in Watchtower chronology gone, there was no reason to postpone our desire to have a family. We decided to leave Bethel as soon as possible. We left on July 15, 1980.

I was not ready to simply walk away from my whole community. Our entire life was tied up with Jehovah's Witnesses. It also seemed that we would be in a better position to help our parents understand how my thinking had changed if we were still associated. Things didn't work out the way I hoped. A deep rift lasting a quarter of a century started then. It continued to grow until I was cut off almost completely from my parents. I was never reconciled with my father before he died in 2002. I still love and miss him.

Our life was now to totally change. We had to start our lives over. We had no money, for the previous twelve years had been spent as an unpaid volunteer. I had studied hard, and had both job experience and technical expertise, but had no college degree. I borrowed \$300 from my father-in-law to move our few possessions to Lancaster, PA. We lived with Gloria's parents for 10 weeks until I could get a job and find a place to live.

Disfellowshipped (Excommunicated)

We had left the headquarters of our own volition, and I was still in good standing with the organization, so shortly after we arrived in Pennsylvania, I was appointed an elder. I had doubts, but I saw no reason to withdraw from Jehovah's Witnesses, as long as my association with them did not require me to violate my conscience. However, I found that to be increasingly difficult, as the main thrust of the Watchtower publications for months was warnings against and condemnation of "apostates" who disagreed with Watchtower teachings. After a year or so, I resigned my position of elder. By this time we had a son, Matthew, born on August 9, 1981.

About a year and a half later, the congregation elders of Lancaster PA asked to speak with Gloria and me after the regular Thursday night Service Meeting. It turned out to be an informal judicial hearing. I was questioned (in Gloria's presence) for an hour or two about whether I had any "doubts." The only specific subject about which I was questioned was whether I believed the Watchtower Society to be Jehovah's organization. I replied that I believed that God had worked through Jehovah's Witnesses, but was unwilling to limit him to working through them exclusively. He is God, after all, I said, and he can do whatever he wants. The meeting ended with no action taken. Although we had been fairly active with the congregation for over two and a half years, few, if any, had any idea that we had doubts. However, within a couple of days, many had heard that we were "doubters".

We were asked to attend a second brief meeting a couple of weeks later. The elders informed us that since our doubts had become "common knowledge" in the congregation, they had to take some action. I mentioned that no one in the congregation knew anything about any

doubts before the elders met with us, so the elders themselves must have spread that idea after our meeting. (One of their wives had told Gloria's sister-in-law about the meeting.) One of the elders replied, "How the information got to be known is not the issue. Now that it is public, we must take action." They announced their decision to disfellowship us. This would mean that our family and friends would be required to completely shun us or face the same action against them.

It appeared to us that the decision to expel us had been made before they met with us, based on factors other than evidence or our own testimony, so it seemed to serve no purpose to appeal the decision. Thus ended nearly three decades of our association with Jehovah's Witnesses. Our religious community had rejected us, and we were on our own.

Does God work through an organization?

Despite how we were treated, there were many admirable things about Witnesses which I was sure were right. I had discovered error, but what I wanted was truth. I needed some reliable way to know which Watchtower teachings were true and which were false. Because I once believed that God uses the Watchtower organization as an exclusive channel to communicate with his people, that was the first focus of my reflections. I hoped to be able to write an essay that would help my parents (primarily) to see why I had changed some of my views about the Watchtower Society.

Using my concordance and Bible dictionary, I began to carefully search the Scriptures for evidence as to whether or not God had ever used any organization as an official instrument to communicate with or direct humans. I concluded that he did not, and published my research in an article entitled "*Does God Work Through an Organization?*" It was eventually translated into several languages and saw fairly wide circulation among exiting Witnesses, particularly after the Internet came into wide use. Although I acted in good conscience at the time, I am somewhat sad now at the degree of success I had, and must accept the fact that most likely many were misled by my writings. Initially, I did not understand the difference between human organizations and the true church, the body of Christ. Later, I revised my article to show that Christ was joined organically with his body, which was not like human organizations. But I still had much to learn about what Jesus had started and preserved: a visible church, a living body in which he dwells.

An outreach to former Witnesses

After we left Bethel, I kept in touch with ex-Witness friends and added new ones. A growing network was forming, exchanging comfort and encouragement. In the summer of 1983, my friend Peter Gregerson invited us and a number of other former Witnesses to a meeting, where it was decided to formalize that network into a ministry. We called our group *Biblical Research and Commentary, Incorporated*, BRCI for short.¹ Its purpose was to produce materials and provide support to help exiting Witnesses make the very difficult transition out of the Watchtower Society and into the "outside world". The next summer, 1984, the first of many annual meetings was held in Gadsden, Alabama.

¹ Many disfellowshipped Witnesses have family members or spouses who are still loyal to the organization. We felt that an innocuous name might make it easier to send materials to someone without alerting Witness family members to the fact that the recipient was talking to former JW's, which is strictly forbidden. As I recall, Ray Franz suggested the name, although he was never a BRCI board member.

We set up a confidential telephone help line to comfort persons who were hurt by leaving the Watchtower organization. Shortly after its publication, my *Organization* article was always included in the packet of information sent to callers of the BRCI Help Line.

Church experiences

For the first seven years or so, Gloria and I read and studied the Bible on our own or with other former Witnesses with whom we met every other week in a small support group. We formed strong social bonds with these dear friends, but our spiritual growth was slow. Usually, our discussions were more centered on things we once believed to be true, but had rejected. We often covered much the same ground every time we got together. Finally Gloria said, "I am tired of going over and over these same old things. I want to learn something *new* and *true* about Christ!" By now, we also had a second son James, born November 22, 1986.

As our two boys began to get older, we felt a growing need to find Bible-believing Christians with whose children ours could associate. Many of the children in our neighborhood were being raised as secular humanists, and did not share either our Christian morals nor our views about the importance of pleasing God.

We visited a local church and quickly became friends with the pastor and his wife. When he found out about my background, he asked me to teach an adult Sunday school class. I was surprised that he did not ask me for many details of my actual beliefs. Nor did he ever attend the class to see what I was teaching. This seemed strange to me, for whom doctrinal accuracy was still important. But I always taught "orthodoxy" in the sense that I could support my teaching both from passages of Scripture and respected Protestant commentaries.

Neither Gloria nor I ever joined that church. Due to our experience with the Watchtower Society, we did not want to become members of any "organized" religious. After I taught there for about a year, the pastor reluctantly asked me to step down as a teacher, as he felt that he couldn't have someone teaching classes who was not a member of the church. I didn't blame him. Overall, it was a good experience. We made many Christian friends. We learned that evangelical Christians do not feel nearly so strongly about doctrinal truth as we did.

We looked for another community of believers, one with plenty of programs for kids. We eventually settled into an independent evangelical Baptist fellowship. We met many fine Christian people there, and quickly got involved in church activities. A few months after we began associating with that church, I was again asked to teach an adult Bible class, which I did almost continuously for nearly fourteen years.

History lessons

Late in the 1990s, I started working on another article to supplement the one I wrote about the organization. Its aim was to help former JWs find and associate with other believers. I wanted to make them feel comfortable by helping them see that many churches of today teach and worship similarly to the first century disciples. I thought it would be helpful to show what the earliest Christians were like, how their congregations were structured, how they lived and worshiped, and how that differed from JW teaching and practice. I wanted them to see that Christian living was what mattered most, and encouraged them to join any "Bible-believing" Christian fellowship.

I started out using only the Scriptures, but soon found that so many things taught and done in churches cannot be supported directly from Scripture alone. I ended up buying history books—dozens, eventually, in addition to doing plenty of research on the Internet. I finished *Where is the Body of Christ?* and received some nice comments on it. But what I discovered raised far more questions in my mind than it answered.

A major paradigm shift

As I did research, I began to run across references to the “Early Church Fathers.” Practically every scholarly source respected them very highly, Catholic and Protestant alike (a few modern scholars excepted). At the time, I knew very little about these writers. When I learned in the late 1990s that my friend David Bercot had published a *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, I bought a copy. I glanced at it but didn’t read much. I had my own ideas about what the early church was like and how they believed and worshiped.

Nearly twenty years had passed since I had left the Watchtower Society, but I still believed that sometime shortly after the end of the first century, the faithful early apostolic church was transformed into the corrupt Roman Catholic Church. The Reformers, I later learned, had a somewhat similar view, except that they dated “the great apostasy” into the fourth or fifth century or even later. Both Luther and Calvin, however, believed that the ante-Nicene church was truly authentic. One purpose of the Reformation, in their mind, was to restore the church to its original ante-Nicene purity.

I began to think about the implications of the “great apostasy” idea. One corollary is that Jesus had no congregation of faithful followers, no visible body of believers or church on earth, for an extended time, possibly many centuries, until some individual (Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Joseph Smith, Charles Russell or someone else), reading only the writings of early Christians, understood them correctly and “restored” true apostolic Christianity to earth. I came to see this view as untenable. It would mean that most people who lived between the apostasy and the “restoration”, whenever it supposedly came about, would have virtually no chance to become true Christians, since apparently no one was capable of recognizing and teaching “the plain truths taught in the Bible” until the reformers came along.

The church: visible or invisible?

I also thought seriously about what the true church of Jesus Christ must look like. Due to my own experience, for many years I found it easy to accept and promote the “invisible church” view, in which all members of the “one holy catholic and apostolic church” are scattered throughout all the world’s nominally Christian denominations, those men and women in each Christian community who really take their faith seriously and attempt to live by the Scriptures, even though most faith communities I saw were full of sinful people who apparently didn’t practice their faith devoutly. But as I thought about it, I began to see that there were insurmountable problems with that “invisible church” perspective.

An invisible church is a “community” of scattered individuals who do not know each other, nor are in contact with each other. In fact, it has no outward, visible characteristics at all (it is *invisible*, after all). We can know nothing for sure about such a church: where it is, what its members believe and how they worship. I came to see the whole thing as imaginary. It looks like whatever we want it to look like, for there is never anything real with which to compare it. It is a “church” of our own construction.

More importantly, it doesn't look anything at all like the church described in the New Testament, which was full of real people, saints and sinners. It had structure, including elders, deacons, to whose leadership the disciples of Christ submitted, to a greater or lesser degree. Every congregation of God's people described in Scripture is not only visible, it is human, with all the problems which exist in any family, group, club, or community of human beings anywhere. How could an invisible church be "salt and light" in the community? How could unbelievers see their good works and give glory to God? Even the reformers, though they rejected the authority of Rome, recognized the existence of a visible body of believers.

I continued reading history books, as well as the early Christian writings, which I saw as accurate representations of what the main body of Christians only a few generations away from the apostles believed and practiced. I was surprised that so many concepts and teachings I once rejected had been presented to me incorrectly, even dishonestly, in Watchtower and evangelical literature, then explained away as illogical or unscriptural. As the early Christians presented them, they usually made more sense and fit the Scriptures better than many of the explanations I had read in Protestant commentaries.

I began to accept a growing number of the teachings I found there simply because they were so clear and sensible and scriptural. As I became convinced of their validity, gradually my understanding of Christianity began to change. "Problem passages" with which I had struggled for years slowly began to disappear. Everything was starting to really fit together (for the first time in my life). My entire understanding of Christianity changed.

Sacraments

The early Christians believed that the bread and wine served at communion, when blessed by the Christian elder officiating, actually *became* the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Of course, this is exactly what Jesus actually says in John chapter 6, but most Protestants take Jesus' words to be symbolic. None of the early Christians did. Few Christians before the Reformation even questioned that teaching.

This was my introduction to the concept of "sacraments" or "mysteries" of the Christian faith, material objects *through which* God could transmit grace to his people. I had never heard about them from the Witnesses or evangelical Christians. The whole idea was new and strange to me. But as I read and prayed and thought about it, it began to make more and more sense.

Briefly, sacramental worship teaches that God works through simple things such as water, bread, wine, oil and human hands. These material objects, when blessed and used by authorized leaders of the church Jesus founded and their successors, became instruments through which God's grace was communicated to fallen humans, playing a key part in healing and restoring them to full fellowship with our heavenly Father. In this perspective, God works *through* his creation, not around or in spite of it.

At first, I thought such a thing to be totally unscriptural. But, guided by the early Christians, I began to see it everywhere in the Bible. One example: Naaman, a Syrian leper, was healed by obeying Elisha's command (transmitted through a greedy servant, by the way) to bathe seven times in the Jordan river. The water wasn't magic, but Naaman had to *obey the command* and bathe *in that specific water* to be healed. (1 Kings 5) Early Christians believed that the waters of

baptism had the power to wash or remove sin from new disciples (Acts 22:16), just as it had removed the leprosy from Naaman.

Other examples: Jesus healed a blind man by making mud, putting it on his eyes, and ordering him to wash in the pool of Siloam. (John 9:6-11) A woman who trusted that if she just touched the hem of Jesus' garment, she would be healed, actually was healed. The cloth wasn't magical, but in combination with her faith, it became the *means* by which Jesus' power was transmitted to her. (Matt 9:20-22) As I read the Scriptures, I began to notice how many accounts of powerful works done by Jesus and the apostles involved physical acts like touching or breathing on the recipients, or used objects like bread, fish, oil or wine.

A shocking discovery!

About that time, I was browsing a used book sale and saw a copy of the *Catholic Catechism* for 50 cents. I bought it and started to read. I was shocked at what I found! The Catholic explanation of the Christian faith and morals, including salvation, baptism, redemption and atonement, were much more like those of the early church than those in any Protestant commentary I had read. It quite often referred to the early Christians as a source of authority.

From that point on, I began to take a serious look at the Roman Catholic church. I was surprised at how closely their teachings and practices agreed with the early Christian perspective. But how could I explain the many Catholics who apparently did not take their Christianity seriously? At first I struggled with the concept, but as I thought and prayed about it, I began to remember that God used ancient Israel as a "container" for the divine self-revelation given through Moses for over fifteen centuries, even though most Israelites and even their leaders were unfaithful. Why could he not do the same thing in connection with the universal, orthodox church which he founded?

Sacred Tradition

I had learned, primarily from Jewish sources, how much of Jewish practice had been handed down for centuries in oral form. Moses communicated the regulations of the Law covenant to the Israelites at Sinai. But not all of it was put in writing. The verbal traditions were first put into written form (in the Talmud and Mishnah) after the destruction of the second temple in the first century AD. Of course, Jesus said that the Pharisees had "made the word of God invalid by their traditions." But, I realized, that did not mean that *all* tradition was bad, only the ones men had created that were in conflict with God's revelation to them.

Scripture clearly says that Christ revealed many things to his disciples which were not written down (Jn 21:25). It also says that "the *church*" (not the holy writings) is the "pillar and foundation of the truth." The things Jesus taught his disciples orally were not "added to Scripture" by the apostles. They were taught orally to the new disciples they made. Scripture was composed *within a fully functioning church setting in which every single Christian teaching had been taught orally for decades*. When the apostle Paul wrote epistles to congregations, he had usually spent much time with them prior to that, teaching them orally. His letters could and often did leave many things unstated. They primarily deal with exceptions, not the normal teachings and practices everyone knew and had been taught orally.

Point of Decision: We Press on in Faith and Are Rewarded

Eventually, the evidence became conclusive. My investigations into the historical early church allowed me to adopt a Catholic perspective without my former prejudice against the Catholic church getting in the way. Gloria took a more intuitive approach, but her heart was also telling her that the Catholic Church is what we had been searching for since we rejected man-made Watchtower teachings. What we have found in Catholic teachings is astounding: deep, scriptural, historically supportable, elegant, logically-coherent teachings, not just satisfying to the head, but also to the heart. We feel like this is where we have belonged all these years. We have found the writings of other converts to Catholic Christianity particularly helpful. We now realize that we have barely scratched the surface in examining Christianity.

Serious Catholic theologians are spiritual giants. By reading them, I have learned so much about God and his ways that I never even knew existed! I read G. K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*, which influenced C. S. Lewis to become a Christian. His *Orthodoxy*, *Heresy* and conversion story truly struck a chord within me. C. S. Lewis, although Anglican, is very highly regarded by Catholic apologists, for his theology is completely orthodox. Frank Sheed's *A Map of Life*, *Theology for Beginners* and *Theology and Sanity* are clear and concise. Books by contemporary converts to Catholicism like Jimmy Akin, Thomas Howard, Karl Keating, Scott Hahn, Dave Armstrong and Peter Kreeft have been particularly helpful at addressing questions Protestants have about the Catholic faith. Dr. Kreeft's *Catholic Christianity* and his *Christian Apologetics* (with Ron Tacelli) are more clear and comprehensive than any Protestant defense of Christianity I ever read. These people are not misled, as I once thought. They think far more deeply about most matters than I ever did, and were willing to risk their lives and careers to follow truth wherever it led.

For a long time, I made the mistake of judging Catholic teachings by Catholic people, most of whom (like their Protestant cousins) are rather indifferent about theology. But after I accepted the historical evidence that the Catholic faith was the original and fullest expression of Christianity, not to be judged by the behavior of sinful believers, my perspective changed.

I began to read Catholic writings enthusiastically. Catholic explanations of Christianity fit the Scriptures, the real world and the human heart. I honestly believe that anyone who followed them faithfully would become a man or woman of God. Catholic teachings are solid, fulfilling and upright. We came to them slowly and carefully, following truth and identifying and rejecting error. I shared the things I was reading with Gloria. She read and reflected. We discussed some things, but I did not want her to be pressured into a decision but to make up her own mind. She kept reading, then one day she said simply, "We should become Catholics." (She had been baptized as a Catholic as an infant.) We consummated our desire to become part of the great ancient Church by meeting with our local parish pastor, Father James Cronin, for several months to review Catholic teachings. We were received into the Roman Catholic Church on Friday, June 9, 2006.

We are thrilled to be Catholics, and we are happy to share the good things we have found with former Jehovah's Witness or evangelical Christian companions, or our new Catholic ones. We are completely happy within the ancient church of Jesus Christ. We are home.