

## Baptist in a Bookstore

By Steve Ray

Dear Jerry:

I am writing a short letter to thank you for approaching me in the bookstore yesterday to talk, and to make a few comments on our earlier discussion.

As always it was fun talking with you Jerry. I always look forward to such times; they are a high point in my week. I am always intrigued that you claim not to be a “Protestant”, though within one minute of our greetings you were in the thralls of protesting.

Your method of protesting also reminds me awfully much of my many encounters with Jehovah’s Witnesses in which they can’t stick to one topic for more than a minute or two, but bounce all over the place as soon as they fail to make any inroads or their “questions” are adequately answered.

Talking with you for an hour makes me feel like a tired cottontail rabbit—darting through a maze of rabbit trails and never quite getting anywhere. You, like the Jehovah’s Witnesses, have your pet verses and arguments and you bounce from one to the other in no apparent order.

It would be nice sometime just to sit down and exhaust one issue. But, that probably won’t happen until we meet in Glory someday. One thing though Jerry, talking with you sure makes me glad I found the Catholic Church. When I spend an hour with you I remember how sad the Fundamentalist tradition really is.

I used to say that Catholics followed tradition, but I believed the Bible. This was self-deception since no one comes to anything objectively without a background of experiences, preconceived ideas, filters, language barriers, biases, theological conceptions, and a proclivity to be influenced by others in various sociological situations.

People, including myself, would regard you as much more genuine Jerry—much more responsible—if you were willing to admit that you too are a product of religious tradition, and not pure, unadulterated, objective, Spirit-led truth. In other words, why not just admit that you were influenced by Campus Crusade and their “tradition” before you came to a new

“understanding” of John 3:16? Yet you try to imply that you, apart from any bias, tradition, influence, or help from others, read John 3:16 completely on your own and came up with the Fundamentalist doctrines. Come on; let’s be honest.

As you admitted yesterday, the Bible is not always easy to understand, as Peter confirms in his second epistle. You stood in the bookstore criticizing my honest interpretation of that Scripture. Your basic principle is that everyone has the right and obligation to interpret the Bible for themselves with the help of the Holy Spirit. Yet, you Fundamentalists and Evangelicals can’t even agree on many basic things. You deny infant baptism; R. C. Sproul defends it! As Jeffery Russell says, “The radicals [read: “Protestants”] were also split - by the incoherence of their own teaching that proclaimed individual reading of the Scriptures as the highest authority, and at the same time imposed their view as correct.” This is nonsense Jerry and I think you are intelligent enough to realize it.

I would love to spend more time with your comment on John 1:14 but I am limiting my time here. Rarely have I heard such a frivolous case against baptism and the Catholic Church. I think you’re slipping Jerry, or grasping at desperate straws these days. Remembering that John 1:1–18 is the “overture” or introduction to the Gospel of St. John, one expects to find the “themes” outlined generally, or with a broad brush in the “overture” and then expanded as the “symphony” develops the themes later in the work. John discusses those who have received the power to become the children of God who “were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” One then asks, “Where in this symphony is this developed by John?” Even an amateur Bible-reader should be able to direct you to John 3 where we find Jesus discussing new birth with Nicodemus.

To say that a priest can schedule a baby’s baptism and thus it is the “will of man” (as you claimed) - the priest - that determines or regenerates the baby (or adult, for that matter) is the one of the silliest things I’ve heard of in some time. I don’t mean to be harsh, but I was struck by the utter silliness of such an argument. It belies a utter failure to understand the rudiments Catholic theology; and I might add, it belies an utter failure on your part to understand that the argument you attempted to make, cuts the foundation out from under your own belief, since even a Baptist believes one has to use their will to accept Christ as Lord and Savior.

I will develop this a bit further, reiterating two comments I made last night regarding the “priest’s scheduling a baby for baptism”. First, how is that fundamentally different from a Fundamentalist’s view of salvation which is, for the sake of argument, correspondingly dependant upon the “will” of a man - actually two persons -, first the one who does or doesn’t preach the gospel (Ro 10:14), and second, upon the hearer’s act of the will to exercise faith in Christ (which is, by the way called a “work” by Christ in John 6:29). Both of these actions are the acts of a human will (and, as a Catholic would affirm, “By the enabling and prompting grace of God”). So then, your salvation Jerry, even from your standpoint, depended upon, if you are fair in your analogy - and which you usually refuse to be - your regeneration depended upon “the will of two men”.

But the Catholic Church never teaches that it is the priest that makes the person born again. First of all the Scriptures, in the words of Jesus Himself, state that regeneration is not an act of man, but of the Holy Spirit. Maybe you failed to carefully read my section on baptism in [Crossing the Tiber](#). Jesus said that one is born from above by water (baptism) and the Spirit (the divine act of the God’s Holy Spirit). You need only pick up the Catechism to understand that.

“No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” This knowledge of faith is possible only in the Holy Spirit: to be in touch with Christ, we must first have been touched by the Holy Spirit. He comes to meet us and kindles faith in us. By virtue of our Baptism, the first sacrament of the faith, the Holy Spirit in the Church communicates to us, intimately and personally, the life that originates in the Father and is offered to us in the Son (CCC 683).

I think this is quite clear that regeneration is a work of the Holy Spirit, not brought about by the scheduling restrictions of a priest. If however, you are denying that God uses men as His intermediaries, you will have something to teach Paul who was told by Christ—after he had a personal encounter with the Lord (who could, by the way, have just told him to “accept me as your Lord and Savior right now Saul and there is no nothing further to do!”)—”I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise, and enter the city, and it shall be told you what you must do [not believe, interestingly enough].” An intermediary, by the name of Ananias was in Damascus and Paul was told by Ananias “And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” Paul did not

baptize himself, I think we can safely assume, but an intermediary did that for him, to wash away his sins in the Name of the Lord.

Is it either the Holy Spirit or Ananias or baptism that brought Saul to regeneration? Or, does the Bible show all three involved? It's not either-or; it is both-and. Why do you insist on such artificial dichotomies? The Lord uses intercessors and intermediaries (Rom 10:14 is a classic example, so is Peter and Cornelius), yet you continue to force an unnatural breach between things the Bible presents as being unified. Revisit *Crossing the Tiber* for I go into this matter in some detail there, especially in the section on Baptism.

You kept trying to make me say that if someone fails to, or is unable to avail themselves of the sacraments, that they can have no salvation. For example your children and the "body and blood of Christ". I reminded you that I was not on God's throne and it was not my prerogative to determine a soul's eternal destination. I know Fundamentalists regularly practice such omniscience. We are still behind the curtain of time and I certainly don't claim to be privy to each person's interior state before God. I know that Paul tells us that "Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness.'" I am told two things here Jerry. First, it is only God who knows who belong to him and it is therefore presumption on your part or mine to claim such infallible knowledge; and second, that a mark of those who claim the name of the Lord should be a life of holiness, not just, I assume, a "certificate" of "declared righteousness".

Now, are those saved who have not partaken of the sacraments of our Lord? The Catechism explains, and I stand by this explanation.

"The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation. He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them. Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are 'reborn of water and the Spirit.' God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments" (CCC 1257).

The thief on the cross did not receive baptism or the Eucharist, yet he was promised a place in paradise. One is pressed in this case to show that the thief had a clear understanding of “faith alone” since it does not record his “sinner’s prayer”, only an acknowledgement of his civil crime; however, though the sacraments are the normal means of salvation [participated in by and with faith], God “is not bound by his sacraments”. Remember this for the future so we don’t have to go over it again like a broken record.

You also made the distinction between a “Catholic” and a “Christian” and when pressed you admitted that you believed that Catholics were not Christians, though my case presented somewhat of a quandary, since you believe in “eternal security” and I was “saved the Bible way” as a Baptist. I have reproduced here for you the Nicene Creed (which I actually had on the back of my T-shirt when we spoke last night).

Take a look at it and let me know what there is about the Creed of the Catholic Church that makes us Catholics “un-Christian”. I would be interested in which of these statements you disagree with, and the biblical and historical basis for your disagreement. I would also be interested in why you, with your recently-invented Fundamentalist tradition, feel you are qualified to judge and condemn the Catholic Christians of fifteen centuries that they weren’t Christians, nor did they presumably know how to be saved. This may prove to be an interesting exercise in arrogance and unadulterated ignorance.

Here is the Nicene Creed from 325 AD that has been the test of orthodoxy ever since. This is our Creed. What in it disqualifies us Catholics from your definition of “Christian”? The arrogance of your judgmentalism in this matter still staggers me Jerry. I don’t know if I would have ever been that audacious, even in my most aggressive Fundamentalist moments.

- *We believe in one God,*
- *the Father, the Almighty,*
- *maker of heaven and earth,*
- *of all that is seen and unseen.*
- *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,*
- *the only Son of God,*
- *eternally begotten of the Father,*
- *God from God, Light from Light,*
- *true God from true God,*

- *begotten, not made,*
- *one in Being with the Father.*
- *Through him all things were made.*
- *For us men and for our salvation*
- *he came down from heaven:*
- *by the power of the Holy Spirit*
- *he was born of the Virgin Mary,*
- *and became man.*
- *For our sake he was crucified*
- *under Pontius Pilate;*
- *he suffered, died and was buried.*
- *On the third day he rose again*
- *in fulfilment of the Scriptures;*
- *he ascended into heaven*
- *and is seated at the right hand of the Father.*
- *He will come again in glory*
- *to judge the living and the dead,*
- *and his kingdom shall have no end.*
- *We believe in the Holy Spirit,*
- *the Lord, the giver of life,*
- *who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*
- *With the Father and the Son*
- *he is worshiped and glorified.*
- *He has spoken through the Prophets.*
- *We believe in one holy catholic*
- *and apostolic Church.*
- *We acknowledge one baptism*
- *for the forgiveness of sins.*
- *We look for the resurrection of the dead,*
- *and the life of the world to come. Amen*

Finally I would comment on the immanent return of our Lord and the understanding of some of the early Fathers. I think [with my private interpretation, of course] that the import of Scripture makes it seem that Christ would come back in the lifetime of the apostles.

You Jerry believe otherwise in the twentieth century, but that is only because you have the advantage of being alive nineteen centuries after the fact and have the empirical proof to the contrary. Jesus tells his disciples in Luke 9:27: “But I say to you truthfully, there are some of those standing here who

shall not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.” Matthew records the words thus, “Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Mt 16:28ff.). Had you stood on the outskirts of Caesarea Philippi and heard these words from Jesus’ own lips, I daresay you would have expected the return of Christ during your lifetime. And if you had sat at Paul’s feet when he taught with wide eyes that “the dead in Christ shall be raised first and then we who remain shall be caught up to be forever with the Lord”, what would you have believed?

What did the Fathers believe? Many of them believed many things that were later developed and understood more fully as the Holy Spirit led His Church. Were the Fathers infallible? Of course not. What is the problem?

We commented briefly on John 21 regarding the “death of John”. I mentioned that many of the disciples believed that Jesus would return within John’s life. You insisted that John was correcting the disciples, that Jesus would come back in their lifetime - but that is not at all what he corrected them about. There were two issues involved: 1) would John ever die, and 2) would Jesus come back in John’s lifetime. Jesus clarified the first point, not the second. At the time of Jesus’ words and at the time of John’s writing of John 21 no one was yet sure if Jesus would still return in the lifetime of John for John was still alive.

You bring this issue of the millennium and the Fathers up as some sort of stumbling block to the Catholic faith. If it is an honest stumbling block for you Jerry, then get some good Catholic theology books and find out what the Church teaches and why. You remind me of a Palestinian learning everything about Israel from Palestinian sources. Read what the Israelis’ write if you want to be honest in your research.

There are several things you will need to understand first: a properly understanding of the “unanimous consent of the Fathers”, the development of doctrine, and what the Fathers actually said and the context in which they said it, including if they intended to teach it as dogma or were only “thinking out loud”. These are important distinctions which partisans usually overlook. A lot of work has to be done before we can conclude, as you appear to have already done, that the Church, based on this eschatological issue, is flawed. Such a conclusion is erroneous and someday we can dispel your fears and hopefully open the door to your return to the fullness of the faith.

You know Jerry, it struck me as I looked in your eyes that there was a palpable and obvious lack of joy, peace, love and Christ-likeness being manifested. Rather, I sensed agitation, anger, hatred, and even arrogance. I hope my assessment was wrong, but I am pretty good at reading people. Until we meet again my friend, may God bless you, and after some of the things you said last night, I also add, may He have mercy on your soul.

Your friend and brother in Christ—if you have been baptized in faith, are willing to claim the Creed and to name the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Steve Ray