

Why Were the Catholics Leaving to Join the Baptist Church?

Fr. McDonald is a marvelous priest serving in the Lansing diocese here in Michigan. Before I tell the story I have to make an observation: the people north of Lansing have been blessed beyond measure with such a pastor! They should love and support and encourage such priests without measure! They are blessed to have the kind of shepherd Jesus talks about in the Gospels.

Frs. McDonald has a large parish in a beautiful church up in the farm country. Several of their people have left to become Baptists and other “flavors” of Protestantism. They all joined Protestant Bible studies or had a religious experience which convinced them the Catholic Church was wrong. Then they began attempting to pull others out of the church.

Recently we had a meeting. The priests had received a letter from a gentleman named Dean (and I sincerely mean “gentleman” since he was polite and a pleasure to talk with) demanding answers to a series of questions directed against them. He was convinced that Catholic teaching and practice were wrong and unbiblical and it seemed he convinced a number of people to follow him.

I was invited to come out last evening to answer their questions -- or rather -- their charges and criticisms. There were about eight Catholics and about twenty Protestants—mostly Fundamentalists—one even referring to the ridiculous and thoroughly discredited “[Trail of Blood](#)” as his source and authority for understanding Church history.

As a whole they were a nice group of people but it did not take long to realize that their claim to be “Bible only” Christians was sincere, but very incorrect. They *thought* they followed the Bible alone but in reality they were steeped in traditions and teachings of Fundamentalism which does not allow them to read the Bible objectively. Fundamentalist tradition is like a pair of glasses through which everything is understood and colored -- including the Bible.

It happens with other groups too. If an uncatechized Catholic agrees to listen to the Jehovah's Witnesses and go to their meetings and Bible studies, pretty soon the Catholic begins to see clearly the JW's doctrines in the Bible: “Oh, you are right! Jesus is *not* God; there *is* no trinity; there *is* no hell!” And it makes perfect sense to them. With their new “Jehovah's Witness glasses” on they see it all very clearly now.

Fundamentalists are no different. They invite unsuspecting Catholics to *their* Bible studies and out to lunch and before long the under-catechized Catholic trades his Catholic glasses for a pair of Fundamentalist glasses and begins to say, “Oh, I see! The Bible does not teach sacraments; the word pope is not in here, etc. etc. . . .” It amazes me that they can't *see* what is happening to them. they have not read the Bible objectively first -- no, no! They have swallowed the new tradition hook, line and sinker and now they read the

Bible through the glasses or lense of their new tradition -- a recently invented one too, by the way.

And the more they hate the Catholic Church -- the more vocal they are about it -- the more loved and accepted they are in their new anti-Catholic community.

Anyway, Fr. Cecilio, myself, and my friend [Gary Michuta](#) fielded their questions for over three hours. Gary is the author of "[The Gospel according to James McCarthy](#)". My wife Janet sat at my side and prayed I think the Protestants originally expected to "expose the errors of Catholicism" and vindicate their leaving the Church. They expected to wash over us like a tidal wave, but that is not what happened. The Catholic position dominated the evening and I even felt a little sorry and embarrassed for them in the end. The tidal wave went differently than they expected.

We tried to be kind and charitable throughout the evening and I think we were very successful. Most of them were also charitable, but there was some visible anger and frustration in a few.

They were a typical Fundamentalist bunch. They rattled off the same old misconceptions about Church teaching, misquoted the Bible over and over again, and had no systematic theology or training other than their immersion in Fundamentalist tradition. Virtually all of them were "ex-Catholics" who didn't know their Catholic faith to begin with. They were easy prey for the Protestant evangelists. Their ignorance of Scripture and Catholicism was very obvious from the comments and questions fielded last night.

One of the first popular and unfounded charges were leveled: the Catholic Church banned the Bible and it was Martin Luther who first translated it into German. This is a lie. Check out the great book "Where we Got our Bible" by Graham. After that question charge went down like a lead balloon, the argument progressed over the evening as usual.

Normally it goes like this: "We have 100 verses in the Bible that say salvation is by faith alone, so Catholics are wrong because they say salvation comes by other things like works or sacraments."

(By the way, the only time the words "faith" and "alone" are used together in the Bible is in James 2:24 which says "So you see brothers, we are saved by works, and not by faith alone.")

I then ask them to turn in their Bibles and read 1 Peter 3:21 (which is just as inspired by God as the other verses on faith). Usually they are unfamiliar with this passage and nonplussed by it. It says "Baptism now saves you."

It is always fun to watch the furtive glances and frustration. "Well," they will say, "we don't know about that, but we have verses that say we are saved by faith alone."

“But it is not a contest to see who can come up the most verses to support their favorite method of salvation,” I say, “All of Scripture is inspired, not just your favorite verses. So how do you integrate baptism into the plan of salvation? Even Jesus said we must be born of water and Spirit to enter the kingdom of God.” Usually, they don't want to deal with it.

Fundamentalists, like the good folks we met with last evening—and they were good folks—usually pit baptism against faith. But things are rarely that simple. Faith and baptism are two sides of the same coin. Are we saved by faith or by baptism? Are we saved by believing or by the Spirit? These are false dichotomies that should have no place in our thinking.

Below is a chart from my book [Crossing the Tiber](#). Fr. McDonald read this to the group last evening and no one wanted to comment. I explained that ALL the Bible is inspired and these passages need to be integrated into the whole understanding of salvation and not cut out of the Bible.

HOW DOES ONE RECEIVE SALVATION, JUSTIFICATION, NEW BIRTH AND ETERNAL LIFE?

By *believing* in Christ (Jn 3:16; Acts 16:31)?

By *repentance* (Acts 2:38; 2 Pet 3:9)?

By *baptism* (Jn 3:5; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet 3:21; Titus 3:5)?

By the work of the *Spirit* (Jn 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6)?

By *declaring* with our mouths (Lu 12:8; Rom 10:9)?

By coming to a knowledge of the *Truth* (1 Tim 2:4; Heb 10:26)?

By *works* (Rom 2:6, 7; James 2:21, 24-25)?

By *grace* (Acts 15:11; Eph 2:8)?

By his *blood* (Rom 5:9; Heb 9:22)?

By His *righteousness* (Rom 5:17; 2 Pet 1:1)?

By His *cross* (Eph 2:16; Col 2:14)?

“Can we cut any *one* of these out of the list and proclaim it *alone* as the means of salvation? Can we be saved without faith? without God's grace? without repentance? without baptism? without the Spirit? These are *all* involved and necessary; not *one* of them can be dismissed as a means of obtaining eternal life.

Neither can *one* be emphasized to the exclusion of *another*. They are all involved in salvation and entry into the Church. The Catholic Church does not divide these various elements of salvation up, overemphasizing some while ignoring others; rather she holds them all in their fullness“ (*Crossing the Tiber*, p. 100).

Others said they left the Catholic Church because of problems in the Church: the lack of catechesis, a few sinful priests and bishops, pew-sitters ignorant of the faith and living sinfully, not knowing about a relationship with Christ, no Bible studies, etc. They overlooked all the good things in the Church but noticed the problems and said “That can’t be the church!”

But I reminded them that if had they lived in Old Testament times they would have had the same problem. God’s people were clearly defined within Israel with kings, prophets and priests. They all had to be circumcized, follow the Law and celebrate the ceremonies. They had the Temple, the Scripture and rules for life and worship. However, most of the priests were cheats, the kings sinners, and the prophets self-serving. The people worshiped false gods and live sinfully.

If someone was looking for the covenant people of God, they might say, “Wow, these people sure can’t be God’s people!” But they were!! And when Jesus came he said, “Salvation comes from the Jews” (Jn 2:22). The Israelites were the people of God, as is the Catholic Church is the people of God today, and though there were many problems they never ceased to be the covenant people of God. The prophets never said, “Leave this sinful people of Israel and start a new ‘Reformed Israel’.” No, they suffered and even died keeping the people of God unified and crying out for reform.

Shame on those who leave the Catholic Church before really understanding the profound depth of the Church (and most of the people last evening did just that). Shame of them for misrepresenting her teaching, denying that teaches a need to study Scripture and love Jesus, and dividing the body of Christ into thousands of fragments and causing others to do the same. I understand their reasons and sympathize with their sentiments, but I do not condone their choice to leave.

One accusation was that we Catholics bring people to the Church whereas the “Bible Christians” bring people to Christ. I made the observation that it is not *either-or*. It is *both-and*. We bring people to Christ *and* his Church—the Church Jesus started and promised to build. My wife Janet observed “They want to bring people to the king but not to his kingdom.” Very true. But the problem is really an unbiblical view of the Church.

We are told by St. Paul that the Church is the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12). The New Testament speaks of Christ as the Head (Eph 4:15) *and* as the Body (Col 1:24). He has not been decapitated. He is a whole Christ—head and body. When we bring people to Christ we bring them to the *whole* Christ—which means that we bring them to his Church, his body. It is a foolish thing to say that we bring people to a bodiless Christ or to a king but not his kingdom.

Jesus promised to build his Church (Mt 16:18). He said that final decisions were to be submitted to *the Church* (Mt 18:17) which Paul tells us is the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (not the Bible!) (1 Tim 3:15). The Church and her apostles and bishops were ruling in the visible organized Church *long* before a New Testament was compiled.

If someone offends a fellow believer, Scripture commands them to go the brother. If he rejects the believer, he is to take it to two or three, and if the brother rejects the two or three, the believer is to take it to *the Church*. And which Church might that be? It certainly has to be everywhere, recognizable, with judicial capabilities, and unified as one body working in harmony throughout the world. So, where can we find *the Church* with recognizable leadership?

It seems as though our Protestant brothers and sisters last evening did not know what Jesus was referring to. I guess not. When there is a different “church” on every street corner and you have a problem with a fellow believer, where do you go for judgment in obedience to Our Lord? If I belong to the local Baptist group and a “Bible church” member down the road sins against me—do I take it to *my* Baptist church or to *his* Bible church?

What is *the Church*? Is it an invisible association of “saved” people? If so, to whom do I take an offense for final arbitration?

This scenario demonstrates how the multitude of individualistic “churches” make a farce of Jesus’ words about *the Church*. Only the Catholic Church could come close to fulfilling the words of Jesus. She has the judicial capabilities, jurisdiction of every square inch of the earth with bishops representing every mountain and valley, every city and desert. And she is the only one who would even make the claim to this kind of authority and jurisdiction. Who else could come close to claiming such a thing?

I love the quote by Frank Sheed in his book [*Theology and Sanity*](#):

“Our Lord sees His kingdom and speaks of His kingdom with great precision of detail. Just before His Ascension, He said to His Apostles, “Go ye, teach all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world” (Mt 28:19-20).

“Notice first the threefold “all”—all nations, all things, all days. There has been plenty of disputation over the word “Catholic”. But this one phrase of Our Lord’s should have prevented most of it. Catholic, we say, means universal; but that is merely to exchange a Greek word for a Latin one. Examining the word *universal*, we see that it contains two ideas, the idea of all and the idea of one: universal is some sort of unity embracing all, some way of having all in one. But all what? All nations, all teachings, all times. So Our Lord says. It is not an exaggerated description of the Catholic Church.

Not by the wildest exaggeration could it be advanced as a description of any other (284).

So, we had a wonderful evening. The Catholic Church was vindicated and even if they didn't understand everything, they at least know that the Catholic Church can ably be defended—our teachings are rooted in Scripture, we have a well-thought out theology, we can answer all their objections, and we won't sit by and be falsely accused and misrepresented.

I remember my old days in Fundamentalism. It is a sad place to be. There is often an initial euphoria but it can quickly come to frustration when you realize there are little groups everywhere claiming to have an exclusive corner on the Bible and its correct interpretation. There is no authority. They claim the Bible is their authority, but there is no one who can authoritatively interpret it so with their methodology everyone becomes his own pope. Martin Luther, at the end of his life said, "There are now as many theologies as there are heads!"

The confusion eventually disturbs the honest Christian who tries to wrestle with the truth outside his own head. And when such a Fundamentalist really begins to ask "What is the Church?" they will find no sufficient answer within their own tradition.

I enjoyed the company of these brothers and sisters in Christ. I appreciated their love for Our Lord and their fire for the truth. I pray for the day when they come home and put the fire back in the fireplace where it belongs.

Oh, by the way, I have heard that more people have come back into the church in Fowler in the last few weeks than in the last six years! Praise the Lord! This is certainly a result of a lot of prayer, two marvelous priests, and the beauty and truth of the Catholic faith! Blessed be God forever!

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