

"Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me. Amen!"

Quote Attributed to Martin Luther

Introduction

I recently listened to a sermon by the late Dr. Greg Bahnsen.¹ Dr. Bahnsen was a tremendously gifted Presbyterian scholar best known for his abilities as a debater and apologist for the truth of Christianity. The sermon, "*Was the Protestant Reformation Necessary?*" was delivered within a few scant years of his death.

During his introduction Dr. Bahnsen states:

I am going to preach a sermon to you . . . that in all honesty I never in all my life thought that I would do. I cannot imagine needing to preach this sermon. But I must. . . I must preach, *and others as well must preach*, about a problem we are facing in our day and age that really is quite unexpected.

I grew up in a Roman Catholic community. . . . The vast majority of people around me who were religious . . . were not very much Evangelical Bible-believing Christians, they were Roman Catholics. . . . I knew what it meant for them to fornicate, to swear, to be drunk, to go to confession, have their mass, and to repeat it week after week after week. I knew what it was for them to adore Mary, to learn in their Missals how to pray to her. . . .

I didn't think people found Roman Catholic theology all that credible. When I saw people changing religiously it was in two ways as, I grew up. They either were converted--they left the Roman Catholic way of looking at things, or paganism, and came into the church of Jesus Christ believing that their sins were forgiven by the grace of God through the intercession of Jesus Christ and his substitutionary atonement--they either became converted and Christians as we understand that born-again experience, or they left the Catholic Church and became even more pagan.

I did not see, as far as I can remember . . . I did not see anybody go into the Roman Catholic Church from the outside. You were born into it, you may have been raised in it, but you either left that for the Protestant church or you left it for no church at all--but no one went

¹After years of ill health, Dr. Bahnsen died in 1995 of heart-related problems at the age of forty-seven.

into the Roman Catholic Church. . . . *The fact of the matter is, the Roman Catholic Church does not have "good news."*²

Dr. Bahnsen went on to speak about the dead ritualism of the Church, the lack of biblical substance, the plummeting membership, the failure of Roman Catholics themselves to live moral lives, and the epidemic of immorality among members of the priesthood. From his vantage point it appeared that the influence and relevance of the Roman Catholic Church was disappearing altogether.

Then he heard about a fellow Presbyterian who left the faith and became Roman Catholic. He was incredulous. *This can't be true; that sort of thing just doesn't happen.*

When reality set in, he shrugged his shoulders and chalked it up to a once-in-a-lifetime experience akin to seeing Halley's Comet. Bizarre, rare, probably will never hear of something like that again.

But the comet returned with more accounts of Evangelicals crossing the Tiber to Rome.³

Turn the clock forward

Here I am, about the same age as Bahnsen was when he delivered that message, only it's some fifteen years later. And I confess that I still feel as dumbfounded at Greg Bahnsen did well over a decade ago.

I grew up in the Roman Catholic Church. I was one of millions in my generation who came to a saving faith in Jesus Christ and left Rome behind, as did both of my parents. For us it wasn't some lateral religious move, *"I used to be a Buddhist now I'm a Muslim."* No, it wasn't about religion per se, it was a life-transforming encounter with Jesus Christ grounded in the biblical gospel of grace. I witnessed that transformation, not only in my fathers' life and in my mother's life, but in my own as well. No, this wasn't mere religion, it was the Spirit-wrought regeneration that Jesus spoke of in John 3:3-8.

The idea of going back to Roman Catholicism was unthinkable. You'd might as well ask me to have never been born! I likened it to Hebrews 10:29, *"it would be as trampling under foot the Son of God, and regarding as unclean the blood of the covenant by which I was sanctified. It is to insult the Spirit of grace?"*

²This portion of the undated audio message was transcribed by the author. The complete audio message may be accessed here: www.tonybartolucci.com/briefcase/greg_bahnsen_on_roman_catholicism.mp3.

³The Tiber River runs through the city of Rome. "Crossing the Tiber" has become a metaphor for those who convert to Roman Catholicism.

In fact, as a new Christian I held the Roman Catholic Church in contempt. Not the rank and file of the people mind you, but the system and those that promoted it. I looked at it as a false religion that promised heaven but delivered hell.

Back when I was a recent Christian I took a class on the cults offered at the Bible institute of a large church in Tempe, Arizona. During our discussion on what groups and movements were relevant to the class I caused a bit of a stir when I suggested that the Roman Catholic Church be included! At the time I didn't know the technical difference between a cult, a religion, and an apostate church; but in my early zeal I didn't see much difference between Rome, Salt Lake City or Brooklyn.⁴ As far as I was concerned, the end result was the same.

It was unthinkable to me that anyone would want to become Roman Catholic. I say that in spite of the fact that I knew of a few that did convert. But they did so because it was a hoop they had to jump through in order to get married, that sort of thing. But even after they were confirmed and catechized they lived the same sort of disaffected lives as before. Their conversion served as an outward badge of religion for convenience sake. But for someone to have seemingly had his or her eyes enlightened as to the truth of the gospel and exchange that for Rome? No! That was unthinkable to me!

I remember one of the first times that I heard of such a thing. I was having one of those "What ever happened to" moments. No doubt you've had those moments yourself. Someone famous comes to mind and you wonder, "*Gee, I haven't heard anything about that guy in a long time. I wonder what ever happened to him?*" For me it was the 1960s Rock musician Dion of "Runaround Sue" fame. Back in the eighties he had made a profession of faith and was recording contemporary Christian music. I had a few of his records and my wife and I even attended one of his concerts.

I was thinking about him one day, wondering if he was still doing Christian music (or even alive!). So I jumped on the computer and did an internet search that directed me to his website. As I looked over the various pages I was stunned when I found one dedicated to his "spiritual journey back home to Rome." He related how he and his wife began to have questions about the historicity of their Calvary Chapel experience. They subsequently met with a Catholic priest who opened his arms and said, "Welcome home."

I sat there staring at the computer in dismay. I literally felt the blood run from my face. How could he do such a thing?

Then I heard of more converts to Rome from within Evangelicalism. And I learned about how they made the best Roman Catholic apologists. They were writing books and had websites defending the Church of Rome over against the Protestant Reformation and justification by grace alone apart from works.

⁴Salt Lake City and Brooklyn respectively serve as headquarters for the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah's Witnesses).

A few years ago I started looking into this phenomenon. I began to study the arguments of the leading Roman Catholic apologists. I read through many of Rome's own authoritative writings such as the sixteenth century counter-Reformation Council of Trent, Vatican I, Vatican II, and the Roman Catholic Catechism. I read some of the more recent books and articles that defended evangelical orthodoxy against that of Rome.

Mere Coincidence?

I am happily a preacher. I know that conjures up images in many minds of an uneducated backwoods parson with a southern drawl. That's an unfortunate stereotype for there was a time when preachers were scholars and scholars were preachers.

In the middle of Bible College I sensed that God was calling me to the pulpit, not to the classroom. My first pastorate opened up in 1993 when I was asked to be interim pastor of my then home church. The interim label was eventually dropped and I continued to fill the pulpit at Cornerstone Baptist Fellowship until the winter of 2000. I took a few years off at which time I completed my Master's degree at Phoenix Seminary and God blessed my wife and me with a baby girl.

The time off was fruitful. I served as a lay-leader at the Southeast Valley Baptist Church in Gilbert, Arizona and had a job driving a truck doing light deliveries to nether regions in the state like Flagstaff and Yuma. After a year or so I began to feel the tugs of God's call. He wanted me back in full-time pastoral ministry.

So I put out my resume' and filled out pastoral search forms with a few groups while my wife and I prayed. Our desire was to remain in the Phoenix area. If nothing opened up there, we at least wanted to remain in the southwest. Then a church about 12 miles west of Rochester, New York, came calling.

Let's see, the last time I looked at the map, New York wasn't anywhere near Arizona. But we prayed and God led. In the fall of 2002 we moved across the country and I began to serve the church as preaching pastor.

I almost didn't come. I even tried to back out. And there were times, I've since been told, that the pulpit committee was ready to toss my resume' into the "round file." However, it was destined that preacher come together with congregation and God providentially used several people to ensure that I would serve as Clarkson Community Church's forty-eighth preacher (the church was founded in 1816). No one was more key in that regard than a man that I would later weep over (along with his wife) for his defection to Roman Catholicism.⁵

⁵I still pray that the Holy Spirit will work in this couple's heart granting them repentance. I include their account because it is an important part of the overall story that has led me to write this book in the first place. I do so, however, with the utmost desire to protect them from any embarrassment.

Back in 2007 this man informed us that his grown son and daughter-in-law were converting to Roman Catholicism. I could sense his desire to honor his son along with the allure that Rome offered as an alternative to some very difficult life experiences he and his wife had endured.⁶

These circumstances led to my scheduling a dear friend, Richard Bennett, as keynote speaker for our first annual Clarkson Conference on Practical Christian Thought. Richard was once a Dominican Priest, trained in Ireland and Rome. Then God called him to saving faith in Christ. For the past twenty years Richard has devoted his life to reaching Roman Catholics with the gospel. He has written numerous books and articles and has an extensive internet ministry. He has literally traveled the world defending "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." And so, the third week of February 2008, Richard came and spoke on the theme *From Tradition to Truth*.

It seems ironic that the before-mentioned man and his wife would convert to Rome shortly after we held a conference on Roman Catholicism (no, they didn't attend and demurred Richard's request to meet with them). It seems ironic that this same man was used by God to bring me, *a former Roman Catholic*, to Clarkson Community Church where I have spent the past six years teaching and preaching the truth of the gospel, including the doctrines of grace that were revived in the sixteenth century. It seems ironic that the fire that lit the fuse for me to invite Richard Bennett, a former priest, to head up our first conference was the resignation of the president of the Evangelical Theological Society who surrendered his post because he had returned to the Roman Catholic Church.

That individual, who for two years represented the best scholars of evangelicalism, is a man by the name of Francis Beckwith. In 2007 he shocked the Evangelical world when he announced, *while he was serving as president of the Evangelical Theological Society*, that he was converting back to the Roman Catholic Church of his youth.

That, for me, was another one of those "face-draining moments."

When I learned that he was completing a book chronicling his experience and defending his decision to return to Rome I put the book on pre-order and anxiously awaited its delivery.

The book entitled, *"Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic"* arrived at my door in late December 2008.

My thought was to read the book and do a brief review. Perhaps post it on my website and distribute it among friends. But I was driven to do something more than that. More than a review, a response.

As Greg Bahnsen declared some fifteen years ago: "I must preach, *and others as well must preach*, about a problem we are facing in our day . . ."

⁶Some of these painful experiences are quite similar to those Francis Beckwith shares in his book.

I am one of those others.

More Catholic bashing?

Let me be clear that I hold no animosity to Roman Catholics personally. I may be accused by some of Catholic-bashing or being judgmental, but, as I will demonstrate later, it is the Roman Catholic Church that is the guilty party when it comes to those things. I have a great love and concern for all who are lost, including those who wear the label Roman Catholic—or Protestant for that matter.

While I hold no animosity toward the rank and file Roman Catholic, I cannot embrace the theology of Rome as it is diametrically opposed to the gospel of grace that has set me and millions of others free.

Are there Christians in Roman Catholic Churches?

I will again go on record that I do not doubt that there are genuine Christians within the Roman Catholic Church. *But if they are regenerate it is in spite of Roman Catholicism, not because of it.* The Holy Spirit works as He will, not as we will.

I think my aunt who has attended a Catholic Church all her life. Through my conversations with her I have come to believe that she may very well be born-again. She professes faith in Christ and believes that it is *through him alone* that she can be saved. She attends a Roman Catholic Church because, as she once told me, that's all she has known her entire life. Yet, she does not know that she is under the anathema, *the condemnation*, of her own "Church" for what she believes as to the gospel and doesn't believe as to the claims of Rome.

No doubt there are many such "catholics" who are within the Church of Rome, but are catholic with a little "c." Where the simple truth of the gospel strikes a fertile heart by God's doing there is new birth. That can happen anywhere, anytime.

I've heard accounts of priests in the Church that are attempting to reform it from within. I was recently informed, from a reliable source, about a Roman Catholic priest in one of our cities that preaches justification by grace alone through faith alone. When someone in his congregation comes to saving faith he takes that person aside and tells them, "*Okay, now you need to find another church. You cannot grow here.*" And he directs them to an Evangelical church where they can be discipled.

Who is Francis Beckwith?

Francis J. Beckwith is a graduate of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (B.A. in Philosophy), Simon Greenleaf School of Law, Anaheim (MA in apologetics), Fordham University (Ph.D. and M.A. in philosophy) and the Washington University School of Law, St. Louis (Master of Juridical Studies).

Additionally, he has written or contributed to numerous books and articles and has taught subjects such as philosophy, church-state issues, apologetics, and ethics in several colleges and universities. Considering his age (he was born in 1960) his accomplishments academically are astounding.

In November 2006 he was named the fifty-eighth President of the Evangelical Theological Society. Two years later he resigned his position announcing that he was returning to the Church of his (infant) baptism.

In doing so, and in writing a book about it, he has done more to promote the Roman Catholic Church than millions of dollars spent in advertizing could have accomplished. I've jokingly stated that Pope Benedict should award him a plenary indulgence for what he has done to advance the Church's efforts to bring Protestants "back home to Rome!"

The doctrinal diversity of the Evangelical Theological Society

As Dr. Beckwith points out later in his book, the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) is a theologically diverse group.⁷ All members are required to sign their agreement to the Society's doctrinal standard on a reoccurring basis. However, that standard addresses only two theological issues: the inerrancy of the Bible and the Trinity of God:

The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.⁸

There are members of the ETS that are semi-Pelagian (if not full-blown Pelagian). There are members who are open theists and annihilationists. There are those who hold to forms of works-salvation, including advocates of the New Perspective on Paul. Many of the Society's members are broadly ecumenical. It is a very eclectic group and the danger lurks that those who have much head knowledge of the Bible have little or no experiential knowledge of the gospel.

Moreover, many of the ecumenical members of the ETS are quite sympathetic toward Roman Catholicism. In 2002 the theological journal that the Society publishes featured an article entitled, *From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic*. In that essay, the author, a well-known scholar, examines various reasons why Evangelicals might be drawn to the Roman Catholic Church. Much of what he writes is helpful. However, he never once questions whether such converts ever possessed genuine saving faith in the first place. Quite to the contrary, he writes:

I am an evangelical, but I appreciate and value the entire breadth of the Christian Church, including the Roman Catholic tradition with all its pimples. *I do not think any of the evangelical converts mentioned above or below has done anything wrong, and I certainly*

⁷Francis J. Beckwith, *Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 126.

⁸As found on the inside cover of the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society.

*do not think they have lost their faith, even if I differ theologically at many crucial points. From each of these converts evangelicalism has much to learn.*⁹

While I agree with many of the psychological reasons cited in the above article, I cannot ignore the spiritual issues directly related to the gospel that I believe are foundational to the defection of these professed Evangelicals. For me, this is not a matter of different denominations within Christianity, *but different paths to salvation altogether*, paths that are logically at odds with one another.

Some commonalities

As I've read through Francis Beckwith's book, I've been struck by some similarities that we share:

- We both were born in the 1960s and reared in the Roman Catholic Church.
- We both share an Italian heritage.
- We both were not very interested in academics in High School.
- We both were initially spurned by the woman we would later marry.
- We both were married in the 1980s.

Beyond that our circumstances diverted.

At one time I had ambitions toward being a college or seminary professor, but God called me to preach. Francis Beckwith went the route of the professional scholar. I applaud him for his accomplishments in that regard.

Can't we all get along?

In chapter one I will give a detailed overview of the book which is relatively short, about 140 pages. Dr. Beckwith spends about two-thirds of the book sharing about his life: his childhood, his parents, significant experiences, his trek into Evangelicalism, and how he ended up studying philosophy. He's a witty and competent author who draws you in during the early chapters with heart-warming tales. When the tale shifts toward a defense of Roman Catholic theology, Beckwith applies a veneer of scholarship that the average Evangelical reader may find difficult to subdue.

Clearly, he wants to prove that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true church. He has nothing bad to say about his years as a Protestant and continues to embrace Evangelicals as fellow-Christians. He thus rides the fence between Pope Benedict XVI apologist and Pope John Paul II ecumenist.

While he seems sincere in his desire to be amiable and gracious, he at times sounds condescending and falls prey to the all-too-tempting *argumentum ad logicam* (straw-man).

The Reformation must continue

⁹Scot McKnight, *From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals Become Roman Catholic*. JETS vol. 45, No. 3 (September 2002), 457.

I am not ashamed to stand within the tradition of the sixteenth century Reformation. And I believe that this reformation must continue to move forward, not backward. When it comes to the gospel of salvation, there can be no regression or compromise. As Robert L. Reymond wrote in his excellent book, *The Reformation's Conflict with Rome: Why it Must Continue*:

I would contend that the true church of Jesus Christ must ever be on the guard to insure that the *sola gratia, solus Christus*, and *sola fide* soteric principles of Holy Scripture and of Paul specifically continue to be proclaimed as the sole ultimate way of salvation.

Furthermore, all the more is this vigilant proclamation necessary today since one has only to visit the great cathedrals of Europe, hear the Masses being said, and witness for himself the rows and rows of purchased burning candles "praying" for the souls in purgatory, or visit Fatima in Portugal, as I have, or Lourdes in southern France and observe the Roman Catholic superstitions evidenced there every day, and then try to find a Protestant church in those cities in order to hear the pure preaching of God's Word to realize that doctrinal reformation is as sorely needed today within Christendom as it was in the sixteenth century in order to capture once again the glorious truth of the Pauline gospel of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ's preceptive and penal obedience.

Such a reformation can and will come only through *public* doctrinal conflict with Rome, openly pitting both in books, monographs, and pamphlets, and in sermons from the pulpit, first the carefully exegeted, hermeneutically sound salvific teaching and world-and-life view of Holy Scripture against the superstitions and idolatries of Roman Catholic Tradition, and second, a sound knowledge of Rome's historical origins against its pretensions. Protestants should not be afraid of such conflict, for the theological genius of the Reformation is really a summons to return to the simplicity of the apostolic gospel: from looking away from the institutional church of Christ, from looking away from Mary and Rome's many other intercessors to Christ the sole Advocate, from looking away from the "unbloody" Mass to the immeasurable work of Christ's "once-for-all" bloody self-sacrifice, from looking away from the meritoriousness of our alleged good works to God's justification of the ungodly on the sole basis of Christ's doing and dying. In a day when the Roman Catholic Church is receiving "great press" in the Western Media and growing throughout the world, it is high time for evangelical Protestant preachers and theologians civilly and warmly but also *publically* and *firmly* to distinguish again for their people and the masses the Protestant faith from that of Roman Catholicism. For upon the doctrinal distinctives of the "*sola's*" of classic Protestantism hang the destinies of immortal souls."¹⁰

¹⁰Robert L. Reymond, *The Reformation's Conflict with Rome: Why It Must Continue* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire (Great Britain): Christian Focus Publications, 2001), 128-30.