

Reaching the Catholic with the Gospel

By Richard Bennett

I had great difficulties as a Catholic priest in listening to evangelists in my fourteen years of searching for the true Gospel. Christian radio programs continually told me the amount of things I had to do to “accept Jesus into my heart.” Christian tracts likewise told me the amount of dedication or commitment I needed in order to make a “decision for Christ.” After an agonizing search in the face of being told what I must do to be saved, I discovered that the first thing that must be understood biblically about the Gospel is that it is “*concerning Jesus Christ our Lord,*” in the words of Paul in Romans 1:3. While the Gospel is proclaimed to all, it is “not” about Christ being accepted in to our hearts, it is centered on the Jesus Christ the Lord, His faithfulness, His death and resurrection, and “our being found acceptable in Him” by His grace.

The Apostle Paul loudly proclaimed the Gospel as the righteousness of God manifested! He declared, “*but now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.*”¹ The righteousness of God is that perfect faithfulness to the law of God in heart and life, which the holiness of God requires. This, the Apostle enthusiastically announces, is now established—for Christ’s faithfulness (to keeping the law) is revealed! Before God’s all holy nature, sin had to be punished and true righteousness established. This has been accomplished in the faithful obedience of the Lord Christ Jesus to live perfectly under the law, which includes His perfect sacrifice on the cross. The Apostle continues, “*Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.*”² The great news is that this absolute faithfulness of Christ Jesus under the Law now rests upon the believer. He actually possesses it, wearing it as a robe, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, “*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD...for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness.*”³ Romans 3:21-22 is showing in legal terms how exactly the true believer is identified with the Lord Jesus Christ. God has provided Christ’s righteousness to sinners who believe. Thus, when one understands that the faithfulness of Christ is vicariously applied to the sinner by a one time gracious act of God alone,⁴ he realizes that Christ satisfied the law on his behalf. The Scriptures teach that Christ was, in a strict and exact sense, the representative Substitute for His people. By divine appointment and of His own free will, Christ assumed all His peoples’ liabilities and bestowed on them all of His perfection. In the wonderful words of the Apostle John, “And of his fullness have all we received, and grace for grace.”⁵

How Not to Evangelize

The greatest obstacle to the Gospel is silence. By remaining silent and hoping that our Christian life will testify for itself we fail to keep the Lord’s commandment. The commandment, “*Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature,*” means to go and speak the Word also to the Catholic! The majority of Nuns and Priests and former Catholics that I know

¹ Romans 3:21

² Romans 3:22

³ Isaiah 61:10

⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁵ John 1:16

who have been saved out of Catholicism all testify to the fact that no Bible believer ever approached them about their salvation. Christ's commandment to give the good news is a commandment, not a request!

In evangelizing a Catholic, one must be absolutely aware not to give any "process message." This means telling him "what he must do." The Catholic has been continually told how to do things to be pleasing to God. The first Fridays, first Saturdays, the Blue Scapular, "The little way of St Teresa," likewise, the apparitions are filled with messages on what to do; the Catholic's life is full of what to do. When one approaches a Catholic, it must be regarding what Christ has done, and the simple commandment to trust and believe. Using expressions such as "Accept Jesus into your heart" and "Give your life to Christ" are quite similar to what the Roman Catholics hear inside Catholicism, sometime those exact words. These messages must be completely left aside if one is to truly evangelize. It is necessary therefore that we discuss some of the wrong ways of evangelizing that are absolutely detrimental to the true Gospel.

"**Accept** Jesus **into** your heart (to be saved)." is one of the most used sentences in modern Evangelical circles. *This humanistic concept is not biblical.* (It puts man in control of his salvation, when all along salvation is "entirely" the work of God. Salvation is not a decision of man; it is a decision of God in the eternal council of the Godhead.) The biblical concept of salvation is that by grace the believer is **accepted in Christ**. We do not accept Him, He accepts us. The whole theme of Ephesians Chapter 1 is summarized in verse 6, *'To the praise of the glory of His grace, wherein He hath made us accepted in the Beloved.'* He is active; we are passive, i.e., He is the Potter; we are the clay. The terminology, "accept Jesus into your heart" is backwards and dishonest. It assumes wrongly that salvation (originates, starts) in the human heart. Consistently in Scripture, salvation is shown to be in Christ and in Him alone. It is not about man and what he should do, it is about Him and what He has already done. "Accepting Jesus" places emphasis on something that man needs to do. When properly reasoned out one sees that this is work's salvation, but believing or trusting Him for what He has done is "through faith" salvation. In Him alone is that perfect righteousness that is sufficient before the Holy God to justify unholy sinners.⁶

It is unscriptural to think that salvation begins by Christ first coming into the sinful heart of a man. It is essential to understand that natural man is totally deficient in and of himself. It is not that he is merely weak and needs stimulation; spiritually he is dead. In the words of the Apostle, *"And you hath He quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins."*⁷ The spiritually dead and ungodly person can be made acceptable to God only as he is *"in Christ,"* as all the teachings of the Apostles Paul, John and Peter testify. Then, and only then, does Christ come into the human heart to sanctify the one already saved. Christ does come into our hearts as believers, thus, His Word says, *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me."*⁸ This is the whole process of sanctification in us that is not to be confused with initial salvation that is to be found in Him.

⁶ Romans 4:5-8, II Corinthians 5:19-21, Romans 3:22-28, Titus 3:5-7, Ephesians 1:7, Jeremiah 23:6, I Corinthians 1:30-31, Romans 5:17-19

⁷ Ephesians 2:1

⁸ John. 15:4

The verses below are often wrongly used to evangelize. Rather, these words are addressed to believers in the Church of the Laodiceans, “*and unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write... ‘Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne....’*”⁹ This misuse of Revelation 3:20-21, a sanctification message, not meant to teach justification, is inexcusable. Sanctification differs from justification. Sanctification is internal and experimental, while justification is objective and legal. Sanctification is gradual and progressive (mutable) whereas justification is instantaneous and immutable. Many who misuse this passage know better, yet for the sake of what they call success in witnessing they persist. Since this abuse of Scripture is so serious and soul damning its important to give examples. Very often one hears the following,

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.”(Revelation 3:20) Jesus Christ wants to have a personal relationship with you. Picture, if you will, Jesus Christ standing at the door of your heart (the door of your emotions, intellect and will). Invite Him in; He is waiting for you to receive Him into your heart and life.”

The Lord Christ Jesus does not stand waiting to come into any sinful man’s heart, He commands all men everywhere to believe in Him. Faith in Christ alone saves, not faith in some inner process that has been subtly given in its place. The sanctification text, Revelation 3:20, spoken by the Lord *to those in the Church*, is totally misused. (It is no wonder that some ministries that use this message also endorse “Conversion as a process” as in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: (ECT 1)*¹⁰ and other similar false Ecumenical documents). Many are deceived upon this vital matter, sincerely believing that they have received Christ as their personal Savior while in fact they have believed in a ritual.

Catholics can be deceived upon this vital matter, i.e., sincerely believing that they have received Jesus into their hearts. These people still remain in the Roman Catholic Church believing themselves now to have done the Evangelical thing to add to their many rituals in Catholicism. It is unspeakably serious to give a deceiving salvation message.

“**Give Jesus control** of your life (to be saved)” is another well known unbiblical approach (to evangelism). *It is also man centered and involves work’s salvation.* This teaching is in error because the Sovereign God of the universe controls His creation. He is the One “*In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to **the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.***”¹¹ Then there is nothing any person might think of to give God in exchange for salvation. In the words of the Apostle, “*not by works of righteousness*

⁹ Revelation 3:14, 20-21

¹⁰ “Conversion is a passing from one way of life to another new one, marked with the newness of Christ. It is a continuing process so that the whole life of a Christian should be a passage from death to life, from error to truth, from sin to grace. Our life in Christ demands continual growth in God's grace.”
Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium (ECT) 1994

¹¹ Ephesians 1:11

which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us....”¹² Christ Jesus Himself was the only sacrifice for sin acceptable to the Holy God, and that sin offering was accomplished completely at the cross. The sacrifice for sin is finished. A person is made right with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by a promise (or commitment) of “controlled behavior”. Controlled behavior is a process following salvation rather than the initiating cause of salvation.

“**Give your life** to Jesus (to be saved.)” This teaching is error for several reasons. First it is the exact opposite that is true. “*Our Lord Jesus Christ...gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father.*”¹³ There is no Bible verse that says or teaches that a lost, spiritually dead person “gives” anything, not even his life, in order to be saved. *Again, this humanistic concept is not biblical.* Eternal life is a free gift from God. “*For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*”¹⁴ A person does not “give” anything for a free gift. The Lord God Almighty gives the free gift of eternal life. In the words of the Apostle John, “*And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.*”¹⁵

Such a phrase as “Give your life to Jesus” wrongly presumes that a person has something worthy to give God. Because man is spiritually dead in sin he cannot give anything that will save him from his sins. (You cannot give what you do not control. Man, rather, is under the control of sin. And why would God want to receive a sinful man or a sinful man’s offering? Note the requirement on God’s priests in the Old Testament when they were ready to offer a sacrifice. A bloody sacrifice had to be offered for *all* their sins “before” they could approach a Holy God. This sacrifice was a picture of the bloody sacrifice of the Savior in atoning for sins. It is no different today. Therefore, a sinful man cannot “give” his sin-controlled life to God. He must first be reconciled to God by “trusting” fully in Christ’s atoning work on the Cross.) If the Catholic is taught to “give his life to Jesus” to be saved, he may think that he has to give his service, time, works, money, etc. and then he will be right with God. This can lead the lost person into a works Gospel—that which can never save. A person is made right with God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone—and nothing else. “*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.*”¹⁶

These are some of the humanistic ways in which modern Evangelicals give a so-called evangelistic gospel. The examples given here are to illustrate the departure from the true Gospel, which is taking place in the modern world, and to alert the Lord’s people to give the true message.

Presenting the Gospel the way the Bible does

First, all men are commanded to *believe on the Lord Jesus*. The Lord put the command to believe in a nutshell when He said, “*This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.*”¹⁷ Likewise the Apostle Paul and Silas declared, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,*

¹² Titus 3:5

¹³ Galatians 1:4

¹⁴ Romans 6:23

¹⁵ 1 John 5:11

¹⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

¹⁷ John 6:29

and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.”¹⁸ The central importance of faith was given by the Lord in the words, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life.”¹⁹ In a word, the Lord summarizes the situation, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.”²⁰ The Lord Jesus Christ states clearly the reason for this, “He that believeth on Him [Christ] is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”²¹

Having seen the command to believe, we must then realize that without God’s grace, no person can believe. The highest expression of the loving kindness of God is grace. The term denotes the very nature of the graciousness of God.²² Therefore, the Scriptures insist, “*That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.*”²³ Salvation does not proceed from anything in the one witnessed to, but rather it issues forth from the kindness and mercy of God.

The Biblical tension between these two points—that every person is commanded to believe, *but without God’s grace, a person cannot believe*—must be clearly evident in our witnessing to Catholics. This tension is expressed in some Scripture texts, for example, John 1:12-13, “*But as many as received Him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them **that believe on His name: which were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.***” Both aspects are also given in the preaching of the Apostle Paul, “*Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins, and **by him all that believe are justified** from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.*” Likewise, the Apostle Peter teaches that true saving faith by which we believe is acquired through God, “*Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ.*”²⁴ The design of the Lord in these and other verses is to show that a person must “believe on Jesus Christ” for salvation, yet to do so he needs grace. In witnessing, we (should) show a person that to believe he must look to the Lord for (His) grace. All those that come to rest in faith on Christ Jesus are not only convinced of the evil of sin, but of the fact that the very power to believe is His gift. This is a crucial understanding in the statement, “*Then said Jesus unto his disciples, ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.’*” A man must deny his worthless works, his egocentric efforts, his rancid righteousness, his rejected religion, and believe only in what God has done through Christ. The graciousness of the gift is highlighted by the Apostle Paul, “*Being justified freely by his grace*

¹⁸ Acts 16:31

¹⁹ John 6: 47

²⁰ John 3:36

²¹ John 3:18-19

²² “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*” John 3:16

²³ Ephesians 2:7

²⁴ 2 Peter 1:1

through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”²⁵ Grace is a free, undeserved gift, unmerited, and stands opposed to what is obtained by one’s own efforts or as a matter of claim.

Repentance

Believing on Christ, trusting on Him, or coming to Him, has an essentially difficult side that is often not mentioned in present day tracts and witnessing. In the Bible, however, this essential aspect of faith is often first. The Lord Jesus Christ’s message is, “...repent ye, and believe the gospel.”²⁶ He came to “call sinners to repentance,”²⁷ and He insisted that, “...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”²⁸ The risen Lord teaches in His word, “...that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations.”²⁹ The Apostle Peter proclaimed, “Repent ye therefore and be converted that your sins may be blotted out!”³⁰ Paul went he preached, “...repent and turn to God and do works meet for repentance,”³¹ “...testifying to both Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.”³²

Repentance is so essential to saving faith that if repentance is missing a person does not have saving faith. Conviction of sin is the first work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the lost.³³ Conviction is the confirming belief that what God’s Spirit shows man about his sins is true and he deserves to be punished for them. If God is *drawing* that man to Himself that conviction will force him to seek God’s forgiveness. John 6:44, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” Without conviction of sin, a person does not have salvation. The Scripture says, “...He shall save His people **from their sins.**”³⁴ Repentance is always part of trusting on Christ because Christ came not to save a person in his sins but from his sins. “[God] now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.”³⁵

For religious and devout Catholics the most difficult sin to repent of is that of trusting that their religion gives salvation.³⁶ The Lord’s strong word to the Pharisees, who likewise trusted in their religion, is most appropriate in this regard, “if you believe not that I am He, you shall die in your sins.”³⁷ Since Catholics believe that their Church has all the resources of salvation they likewise, in practice, are denying His Person. To such religious Catholics the effective word of repentance can be, “If you remain in your traditions you will die in your sins. Trust on Christ and Him alone, not in any Church, and know eternal life that He alone gives”

²⁵ Romans 3:24

²⁶ Mark 1:15

²⁷ Luke 5:32

²⁸ Luke 13:3-5

²⁹ Luke 24:47

³⁰ Acts 3:19

³¹ Acts 26:20

³² Acts 20:21

³³ John 16:8

³⁴ Matthew 1:21

³⁵ Acts 17:30

³⁶ This mindset is officially taught in the RC Church, “‘Believing’ is an ecclesial act. The Church’s faith precedes, engenders, supports and nourishes our faith. The Church is the mother of all believers. ‘No one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as Mother’” *Catechism*, Para. 181.

³⁷ John 8:24

The Biblical Method

Biblical methodology is an important part of the Lord's truth. The Lord's own method of evangelising was essentially by asking questions, and by proclaiming the need to repent and believe as we have seen. The biblical method is to ask questions, as did the Lord Himself.

Some sample questions in witnessing

1. How can we sinners stand before the All Holy God?
2. What is your purpose in life? Then following their response, Before the All Holy God what is your purpose?
3. What is the central message of the Bible?
4. How can you and I have eternal life?
5. Why did the sinless Christ die on the cross?
6. God is all holy; we are all sinners. How can anyone have a relationship with Him?
7. Why did Christ say to Pharisees, "*If you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.*"? (John 8:24)
8. Have you read your Bible today?

Salvation is in Christ Jesus

In the Scriptures, salvation is seen clearly to be "in" Christ. For example, in Ephesians, chapters one and two, such phrases as *in Christ, in Whom, in Him, in the Beloved*, are spoken of 18 times. This is the same in all of the letters of Paul, the Apostle; salvation is always expressed as being in Christ. For example, the Apostle Paul's own testimony said, "*...that I may win Christ and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.*"³⁸ In a similar way in the Apostle John's writing, eternal life is in Christ and it is by believing on Him. "*And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life*"³⁹ Believing in Jesus Christ is the same as having eternal life, i.e., Jesus Christ is eternal life.)

The commandment in Scripture is to, "*believe on the Lord Jesus and thou shalt be saved*" or in the words of Jesus Himself, "*he who believes and is baptized will be saved*". Salvation being in Christ and not in the believer is of utmost importance when witnessing to a Catholic.⁴⁰ Any terminology in witnessing that focuses on the human heart rather than on Christ is not effective because it is not in line with the written Word. (It causes sinful man to focus upon himself rather than the One who can deliver him from sin.) The biblical principle of salvation is that of believing on Christ Jesus the Lord alone!

³⁸ Philippians 3:8-9

³⁹ I John 5:20

⁴⁰ When we have the word "receive" as in 1 John 1:12, the word is explained as those who believe on Him, so that the receiving is the knowledge of Him, whereby we believe on Him. "*But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name*".

Coming to Christ is initiated by the Father who draws each individual to Christ.⁴¹ Salvation is accomplished by God's grace alone. It is His free gift through faith alone. Coming to Christ (trusting in Him) is having eternal life now, and the life of the redeemed will be fully glorified in heaven. In witnessing, talking about "getting to heaven" not only changes the focus from who God is to man's fulfillment, but it also fails to make clear that through the precious faith that is ours now as believers, we already have eternal life. Rather than talking about getting to heaven, we should say to the lost, "*and this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent.*"⁴² The actual words of Scripture should be proclaimed to Catholics, whether in the supermarket, at the hairdresser, or on the telephone; "*These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God.*"

The Apostle Paul's summary of the Gospel is an example of the exact meaning of salvation. "*For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*" Christ Jesus was **not** "*made sin for us*" by the infusion of vice or sin, **nor** is the believer "*made righteous*" by the infusion of holiness. The Lord Jesus was personally All Holy; yet as the substitute for the believer's sin, He rendered Himself legally responsible to the wrath of God. The purpose of Christ's faithfulness in all that He did, culminating in His death on the cross, was that His righteousness might be **credited** to the believer. God **legally** constituted Christ to be "*sin for us.*" In this sense, He was "*made sin*" because the sins of all of His people were transferred to Him. In like manner, God reckons to the believer Christ's righteousness. Quite clearly, salvation is a judicial and gracious act of God whereby a believing sinner has legal right standing in Christ Jesus.

When full credit is given to God and His grace and when His powerful written Word is used in witnessing, He saves the sinner and gives a manifestation of His power, love, and mercy. All is as proclaimed by the Apostle, "*to the praise of the glory of His grace.*"⁴³

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⁴¹ "*No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.*" John 6:44

⁴² John 17:3

⁴³ Ephesians 1:6