

## Baptist at the Door

By Steve Ray

Dear Jerry:

Late is better than never, and even though I have thought about our conversation several times over the last weeks, it is not until today that I have been able to sit down and put a few thoughts on paper. I half expected you to call so we could get together again for more discussions. We can grill more salmon and you can bring your family next time. We don't have to talk about "religion" the whole time; we could also discuss life in general such as business, raising children, or politics. We could also take a walk along the trails we cut through our woods.

Even though our discussion several weeks ago was lively at times, my wife and I sincerely enjoyed the "give-n-take" of your visit; we always respect people who are passionate about their beliefs, and even though we may disagree with some of the conclusions, we feel a comradeship with others who, like us, desire to be in the center of God's will and pleasing to Him.

Since we last spoke I have had several publishers show an interest in publishing the three books I've finished so far; so who knows what the Lord might do. I am now in the middle of three more books: *Abraham and Justification*, *The Church*, and another critiquing Hislop's *The Two Babylons*.

By the way, do you know anything about Alexander Hislop? There is no information on him in the book. I have written to the publisher, Loizeaux Brothers in Neptune NJ, and they know nothing. He is a mystery man. They have absolutely no information on him and they have had the question asked many times. I do not think he is an orthodox Christian, especially in light of the comments he makes regarding the Trinity. I am trying to get to the bottom of this mystery. The theory that he propounds, that the Catholic Church is the "whore of Babylon", is quite an untenable theory, even though I believed it myself for many years. I grew up as a child seeing that book prominently placed on my father's bookshelf. When I get the critique done I'll give you a copy if you are interested.

I'd like to know what you thought of *Baptism* and *The Eucharist* (contained in [Crossing the Tiber](#)). Back when I was a fundamentalist I would not have appreciated them very much, in fact I would have set about disproving them. They would have irritated me and I would have just dismissed the historical portion as some kind of "Catholic history", not understanding why the early Christians would have said and believed such things. The Protestant tradition was such a part of my interior fabric that I was willing to be a bit irrational at times to make things fit into the tradition I had adopted.

Remember we agreed that the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross was the heart of the Gospel? And you said you had a four foot stack of Catholic books that never once mentioned it? You may be surprised but I flipped open the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Catechism is full of the Gospel, from explaining the substitutionary death of

Christ on the cross, to blood atonement, to the need for faith in justification. I have read many Catholic books and seemed to find things you didn't see, or maybe didn't want to see. Or possible, they were not using the exact Baptist nomenclature you have come to be comfortable with.

When you were here we briefly discussed Jesus' dialog with Nicodemus. I did a little more research on John 3:5 and the contextual flow of the passage surrounding the verse. I am referring specifically to the Lord Jesus' response to Nicodemus' question:

*"Nicodemus said to Him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?' Jesus answered, 'Truly truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. (John 3:4,5 NASB)*

In our discussion, and in my book, I explained that the words of Jesus were referring to baptism, and that baptism is the sacrament by which a person, through faith and the Spirit, is born again. Even a year ago this concept would have been odious to me. In 1993 I made sure my daughter understood the "symbolic nature" of baptism before she could be baptized with her friends by Pastor Roland at the First Baptist Church of Wayne. I used Harry Ironside's little booklet *Baptism* as the basis for her instruction.

You had made a comment about the word "and" in the clause "water and (kai) Spirit". Now if I understood you correctly at the time, you seemed to dismiss the words of our Lord rather cavalierly by saying that the Greek word for kai, which connects *water* and *Spirit*, could possibly to be translated "even of" instead of "and". I researched this a bit and found that the weight of the evidence, and the opinion of the scholars, is certainly against such a rendering. Is this the logical flow of the text? Is this the clear contextual way the text would be translated? How did the early Church understand this verse?

In sharing the Gospel with the cults, especially Jehovah's Witnesses, I find they take very little interest in the context. They come to a text with a preconceived idea and they wrestle the "tough passages" into line with their "theology" and force God's word into their mold. I am afraid many sects do that with Jesus's words in John 3:5. Protestant tradition often forces one into the position of "making the word of God of none effect through your tradition". (Mark 7:13 KJV) As a Protestant, or rather as a Baptist Fundamentalist, I was guilty of doing this on many occasions, though I did it with a clear conscience, not knowing that I was wrong to do so. I had certain "blip" verses which created a problem so I just "blipped" over them in order to avoid the uncomfortable conclusions. Jesus and the Apostles said things in such a way as to make us uncomfortable today. They said things in ways we wouldn't think of saying them today. How would you have liked Jesus to reword John 3:5 to better fit *your* tradition?

John is very clear in his Gospel, especially in light of the context, about what Jesus is saying. The Apostle John, who probably wrote his Gospel in the lifetime of Emperor Trajan (AD 98 - 117), would clearly understand how his end-of-the-century readers would understand the dialog between Jesus and Nicodemus, especially since

regenerational baptism had always been, and currently was, the teaching and practice in the lifetime of John. The Apostle John's contextual flow describes the words of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus (the *waters* of baptism and the *Spirit* descending as a dove), then, after the wedding in Cana, He speaks with Nicodemus and mentions being born again by *water and Spirit*. How would contemporary listeners, those without the bias of Protestant tradition, have understood the words of our Lord Jesus?

Immediately after the dialog with Nicodemus John records, "*After this Jesus and his disciples went into the land of Judea; there he remained with them and baptized.*" (John 3:22) and then again, "*When therefore the Lord knew how the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John, . . .*" (John 4:1, KJV). Why would John place these events in this context? Jesus and his disciples baptizing is not mentioned in the Synoptics. Why would he frame the teaching of rebirth by water and Spirit, within such a blatantly baptismal framework? John *knew* his context and, devoid of Protestant prejudices, meant to tell us *exactly* what Jesus meant and exactly what the Church has always understood it to mean. John was no fool, nor is the Holy Spirit. My old parochial traditions had forced me to *nullify the very words of Jesus*, or at least to reason my way around them.

Then one has to wonder what the early Christians, even those who knew Christ and/or the Apostles, understood Jesus's words to mean. There is no need to list the citations here. That has been amply done for OT, NT, and the early Church in my book [Crossing the Tiber](#). Did anyone in the first centuries hold to the contemporary Protestant symbolic view of baptism? Nope. And if you disagree with me, the burden of proof is on you. Did the early Church of the Apostles preach the Protestant theology? No, not even close. If someone disagrees, let them produce the evidence. I was dumbfounded as I read the early writings. Many people have flatly stated that they do not care what the Fathers taught, if something was really important God would have put it clearly in the NT. The same Fathers and Bishops of the Catholic Church who defined and defended the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, *also* taught the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, baptismal regeneration, the sacraments, the authority of bishops, the visible and organic unity of the Church, etc.

The Apostles, their disciples and the Fathers knew nothing of Luther's *sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, and other Protestant deviations. They didn't have a NT and it was these Catholic bishops, the teaching authority, that canonized the NT that is read and accepted today by all branches of Christianity.

By the way, remember you said Calvary Baptist Church on Joy Road in Canton was not a Baptist Church? You commented that it was a "free church" and not really Baptist? I found that rather strange, having been raised in that church. I called them the other day to ask if they had given up their Baptist distinctives. They were shocked and said, "Heavens no, we are very Baptist in our theology!" Did you not know that, or were you trying to "pull the wool over my eyes" so you would not be affiliated with any specific tradition and therefore be free from critique? I find that people like to do that. They want the Catholic to bear the burden of 2,000 years of less-than-perfect history, while they stay

unaffiliated, generic Christians, so that they are not open to scrutiny. I always feel that in an honest discussion, it is only fair for both parties to lay their cards on the table.

Are you ashamed to be a Baptist? a Fundamentalist? an Evangelical? a Protestant? If you really believe that way, don't be ashamed. There are worse things than being called a Fundamentalist. I bore that label for thirty-nine years, *proudly*, and never once denied or cowered from the appellation. If you believe it, be proud of it and speak it to the heavens. If you are ashamed or leery of it, then get a "denomination" you *can* be proud of.

Please realize that I am not trying to be critical. I am still arguing with my past beliefs and it is good for my soul to think through these things again. I know you are a good Christian, and a sincere one. No one would evangelize and care for the lost like you do without a genuine love for the Lord Jesus. Since we both love the Lord and have differences of opinion on certain matters, it is good and right for us to have these "manly" discussions to analyze our understandings of the Gospel and to find out the true doctrine. Please do not consider my meanderings here as an attack, they are not intended in that manner. I am thinking out loud and challenging you as one brother to another, out of love for you, love for the Lord and love for His word.

Do you mind if ask a few more questions now that we're rolling right along? Hopefully we can discuss them further at a future date over a nice dinner. First, we discussed the biblical teaching that Abraham was justified by faith, as written in Genesis and reiterated by Paul in Romans 4:9 where he says that "*faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.*" You commented that the word *reckoned* was aorist (it is actually 3rd person, singular, aorist, passive, indicative) and therefore meant that at one point in time (punctiliar, the definition of aorist). You were absolutely right. We agree.

So, can you pin point the moment when Abraham *believed*? Can you pin point the punctiliar moment he was saved? Since this was such a momentous occasion in the history of mankind, and in the drama of salvation history, it should be clearly shown *when* Abraham actually believed and was reckoned as righteous. From unbelief to belief, from no faith to real faith.

We know that Paul quotes from Genesis 15, but is that where Abraham first *believed* God? the first time he had *faith*? What about in Genesis 12? Doesn't Hebrews 11:8 tell us, "**By faith** Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. (KJV). Was this some other kind of faith? We see here an obedience based on faith. He built altars to God on the plain of Moreh (Gn. 12:6,7), in Bethel (Gn. 12:8), and Hebron (Gn. 13:18). During this time **by faith** "*he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God*" (Heb. 11:10). Please note that this is all **before** the declaration of Genesis 15. There were many years, probably over ten years, between his first mentioned demonstration of saving faith and the subsequent declaration of righteous in Genesis 15. At what point did his faith save him? or was it a process of faith and obedience? The fact that Paul uses the aorist in Romans 4:9 tells us very little, if anything, regarding Abraham's faith and subsequent righteousness.

Further, in the Christian context, justification is seen as the entrance into the New Covenant. When did God give Abraham the sign of the covenant? In Genesis 12 when he first believed at 75 years old? In Genesis 15 when it says he was counted as righteous? or in Genesis 17 when he was ninety-nine years old?

God established His covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17. The sign of the covenant was circumcision, ouch! Abraham was justified by faith, but what would have happened if he had refused to obey and cut off his foreskin? What would his status have been before God then? Would his obedience (good works) or disobedience have entered into the equation? What if Abraham had refused to sacrifice his son?

Now, in the book of James we have another perspective on Abraham's righteousness. I used to dislike the book of James and could clearly understand why Luther called it an "epistle of straw". James also discusses the elements of Abraham's faith and the resulting justification. But from a Protestant perspective James must have been a little confused. He thinks Abraham was not justified in Genesis 15 *or* 17, but much later in Genesis 22, when he offered up Isaac. He states, "*Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?*" (James 2:21 KJV). And then James is bold enough to say, "*So you see, a man is justified by his works, and not by faith alone.*" (James 2:24) You can see why Luther disliked James.

This whole story of Abraham is not as neatly packaged as Luther and his progeny would like us all to believe. I believe as you do that we are saved by faith; it is the faith *alone* that I object to. And since Romans does not say that we are justified by faith *alone*, and James flatly denies it I think one has to ask themselves if they are being true to God's word, or if they are being true to their tradition (which, in this case is only 400 years old) and thereby nullifying and altering the word of God. I challenge you to find the justification by faith *alone* concept taught anywhere before Huss, Wycliff, Luther and Calvin. When we get together again we can read the account of Abraham, and the books of Romans and Galatians in context and see what we come up with.

Somehow the argument Paul is making in Romans has been squeezed into the framework of the Protestant and Catholic debate. Was this in Paul's mind when he wrote to the Jewish believers in Rome, his perceived interlocutors? Paul is not arguing about faith vs. good works (obedience). This isn't even in Paul's mind. When the books of Romans and Galatians are read in context, both sociologically and biblically, it is clear what Paul is doing. Exegetical study means understanding and thinking about what is being said and allowing the text to speak for itself. The opposite of this, and the way most Protestants approach the text with their Catholic vs. Protestant outlook, is called eisegesis. This is the reading of our conceptions and biases *into* the text. One has to consider the current and critical situation Paul is addressing and read the text in that light.

The Jews were not content to let Gentiles *just become* Christians by faith. After all, Jesus was sent to the Jews. He was the Jewish Messiah. The Jews of that time considered it a logical necessity therefore, for the Gentiles to first convert and obey Jewish laws and

customs, and bear the mark of the covenant, before being allowed to follow the Jewish Messiah. They had to obey and comply with the OT laws and customs first. In other words, the Judaizers were trying to make Gentiles become “Jews” first, before they became Christians. They were saying one became a Christian by observing all the laws of the Jewish religion. Paul was not arguing salvation by *faith vs. faith plus obedience!* He was saying, “Did Abraham become righteous by circumcision and obedience to the Ten Commandments? No, he was reckoned as righteous way before these things existed. How was he made righteous? By believing God while virtually in the state of being a Gentile, why? Because there were no Jews yet. There were no Ten Commandments yet, there was no Leviticus and Deuteronomy yet, there was no tabernacle yet?”

Abraham was justified as a Gentile (non-Jew) and did not have to become a Jew first, before he could be justified in God’s eyes. Now, these Gentiles converts, how could they become justified? Did they have to get circumcised and follow all the Jewish legal and ceremonial laws before God would justify them? Did they have to become Jews to become Christians? No, they could be justified just like Abraham was - by faith. James then elaborates what faith is and the crucial element of obedience (works), as does John in his first epistle.

So, the Catholic vs. Protestant argument, the *faith vs. faith and obedience* debate, had absolutely nothing to do with the discussion Paul was having with the Jewish Christians in Rome and Galatia. This was not what was going on, this is not what Paul was dealing with. It is sad that Protestants have done such an injustice to these passages by trying to use them as proof texts for the defense of Luther’s *sola fide*. See why context is so important? Protestants have turned the situation of Abraham’s being reckoned righteous by faith into a *faith vs. faith and obedience* argument and thereby misunderstanding everything Paul is really trying to deal with. I had been so ingrained in the Protestant tradition, in the Protestant “think-nothing-like-a-Catholic” mentality that I was blinded to a lot of what God was really trying to say, which was effectively a nullifying God’s word for the sake of my tradition.

Now, if this isn’t a matter of *faith vs. faith and obedience*, are we saved by faith *alone* apart from good works (obedience to God)? Paul does not address this in the argument. He gives us a clue by framing his “faith” discussion in Romans with the phrase “obedience of faith” in the first and sixteenth chapters. Did Paul do this on purpose? Christ died for our sins and we are justified by believing (faith) in Him, apart from the legal and ceremonial laws of the Jews, but not apart from obedience and holiness. This is the teaching of the Catholic Church. It can be said no more clearly and profoundly than this quote from *Lumen gentium* from the Vatican II documents: “*The followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by His design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in baptism, the sacrament of faith, and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold on to and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received from God.*”

The discussion of faith and obedience (good works), taught by Jesus and the NT writers, can be discussed when we get together again. You may want to check out some passages

like Matthew 18, and notice in particular verse 35. Is He referring to the unbelievers or to those also who had believed? Things are not always as neat and tidy as we would like them to be.

One last comment on your “faith alone” concept, which if understood correctly, is accurate terminology. But, when we talked, you were emphatic that it was Abraham’s one time belief in God that caused God to “reckon it to him as righteousness”. This is Paul’s argument in Romans and Galatians, which we have already discussed. However, are you aware of Psalm 106:31? You may want to start by reading Number 25 to get the background of the story. Phineas was zealous for the house of God and took action. His action was “reckoned to him as righteousness”. I did a little research and found it to be exactly the same Hebrew words as Genesis 15:6 and the same Greek as in the Septuagint (the OT that Jesus and the Apostles used). Amazing, uh?

I checked the complete works of Luther; he never referred to this verse. One out of three Protestant commentaries skip over the verse completely. Kiel and Delitch say it is unusual, that it seems to be presenting another ground for justification. No one from the Protestant camp knows what to do with this verse. It’s kind of like the second chapter of James. One cannot simply say, “*It was really his faith, he was a true son of Abraham*” because that would be reading preconceived ideas and traditions into the text (and remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees when they did that?). To alter the words of the Psalmist (assumed to be David) would be to manipulate the Scriptures to fit your Fundamentalist tradition.

Others may say it is only poetry and one cannot extrude theology from poetry. It would be difficult to support such an untenable position considering the importance of this phrase in salvific history. The Psalmist most assuredly knew and understood this pinnacle event in his father Abraham’s life. David would not have used the words “reckoned to him as righteousness” lightly. The Holy Spirit is careful with *His* words and does not make stupid mistakes with key theological phrases. So what does it mean? I don’t think I want to draw too many conclusions at this point. I *do* know however, that it lends great support to the Catholic position and presents real problems for an honest and knowledgeable Fundamentalist.

We do see the Scripture telling us Abraham was reckoned as righteous based on his belief (which could possibly be considered a “work”, since it says “*he believed God*”; as opposed to not believing) and then we hear David say that Phineas was reckoned as righteous based on his zealousness for God. So, *if* we interpret this passage the way the Fundamentalist interprets Genesis 15:6 we see two biblical means of being reckoned righteous in God’s eyes: faith and zeal.

Do you remember your emphasis on the aorist tense of the words “believed” and “reckoned”? Since Psalm 106:31 uses the exact wording, does the zealousness that caused God to declare Phineas to be reckoned righteous a one-point-in-time zealousness. In other words, was Phineas justified by a single act of zealousness, the way Abraham was justified by a single act of belief? If you asked this question of James the Apostle,

how do you think he would answer it?

I will leave it for you to ponder, knowing you want to be honest and careful with the Word of God. Many more things could be said, and I predict this verse will play a serious role in the future debate over “faith alone”, and will challenge many complacent Fundamentalists to search the Scriptures and take the historical record a little more seriously. I can see why it has been ignored. I don't expect too many Fundamentalists to use this verse or concept in an altar call. It's another one of those bumps in the *Roman's Road*.

One last question: Have you checked the Greek tenses of the verse whereby you “were saved”? While you were here you told me repeatedly that you read John 3:16 and your eyes were opened and you were “saved”? I have dissected the verse a little to show the verb tenses: John 3:16 “*For God so loved (aorist, punctiliar) the world, that he gave (aorist, punctiliar) his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth (present, progressive) in him should not perish (aorist), but have (present, progressive) everlasting life.*” (KJV)

Interesting, uh? The present tense “that whosoever *is believing* in Him” puts a different light on the verse. One would expect the *believe* to be aorist, to show it's a once-and-for-all, a one-point-in-time event. One could ask why Jesus switched to the *present tense* in a verse full of aorists. The present tense implies continually believing, a process of believing, and not the punctiliar belief I was once convinced of. Hewitt in his grammar textbook, *New Testament Greek* (James Hewitt, B.A., B.D., M.A., Ph.D.; Hedrickson Publishers; 1986, page 13) says, “*The present tense is basically linear or durative, ongoing in its kind of action. The durative notion may be expressed graphically by an unbroken line, since the action is simply continuous. This is known as the progressive present. Refinements of this general rule will be encountered; however, the fundamental distinction will not be negated. He who is currently, habitually and continuously believing . . .*

Also, the word believe can't be reduced to mere mental assent. The word *believe* in biblical times carried with it the concept of obedience and reliance. Kittel says “*pisteuo means 'to trust' (also 'to obey') . . .*” Vines says, “. . . *reliance upon, not mere credence . . .*” This is confirmed further by John the Baptist's statement in John 3:36 “*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not (apeitheo) the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him.* (KJV) The work *apeitheo* is understood by all good translators and commentators to mean obedience. The opposite (antonym) of believe is *disobey*. The verse in the RSV says “*He who believes (present tense) in the Son. . . he who disobeys (present tense, progressive, state of persistence) the Son . . .*” The NASB translates the verse like this: “*He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him*”. Kittel, a Protestant reference work, clearly defines *apeitheo* to mean “to be disobedient.” Belief has obedience wrapped in its arms and the opposite of biblical belief is disobedience. One cannot consider themselves to be biblical if they teach salvation by mental assent (which amounts to cheap grace) *without* the subsequent and



corollary obedience.

Finally, there can only be one of two opposing statements that can be true. Christians have fallen into the rut of 20th century relativism. They can accept contradictory beliefs as being equally valid.  $1+1=2$ , it does not equal 3. Frank Schaeffer in his new book *Dancing Alone* describes the situation: *Perhaps the early Protestant Reformers had no idea of the mortal danger they had unleashed, danger to their own culture's underpinnings. Yet within the lifetime of Luther and Calvin, the rapidly proliferating Protestant denominations found themselves in need of a historically legitimating tradition. This need arose because Protestants began contradicting (and killing) one another over their various interpretations of Scripture. Having no one Holy Tradition to which all Protestants subscribed, the only recourse for the divided Protestant denominations was to individual and subjective appeals to Scripture. One problem became glaringly evident: one person's interpretation of Scripture often disagreed with that of others. Protestants soon found themselves ensnared in their endless warring, where they remain adrift today. There is, though, one important difference: no one in the larger secularized culture listens anymore.*"

Well I have gone on long enough, and I would again reiterate that I have only bared my heart out of love for you and the Lord. I tend to be a perfectionist, which can be a disadvantage in the real world, but I hope you aren't angry at me for sharing my thoughts with you. As a long time Billy Graham, Harry Ironside, Francis Schaeffer, R. C. Sproul, Charles Spurgeon, D. L. Moody, J. I. Packer, A. W. Tozer, and F. F. Bruce evangelical, I understand fully where you are coming from. I also know the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the Fundamentalist position.

The Fundamentalist's, and the Protestant's, biggest and most fundamental flaw is not their *sola fide* stance, it is their dilemma with the canon of Scripture. I am sure you are aware of that already. Even R. C. Sproul says the best the Protestant can hope for is a "fallible list of infallible books". Calvin says the final test of inspiration and canonicity is an internal witness. *Sola Scriptura* is a very trying thing for a Protestant; I know. Those who believe in *Scripture alone* cannot prove it from *Scripture alone*. And worse yet is the incoherence of the Protestant teaching that proclaims individual reading of Scripture as the highest authority and at the same time imposes their views as correct.

Like I said at the start of this letter, I respect you for your passion and sincerity. But remember that passion is not a guarantee of correct doctrine, and one can be sincerely wrong. I will be praying for you and hopefully we can pursue the discussion further in the future. If you have an interest in continuing our dialog, please give me a call and we can schedule a relaxed evening together with our families. Do you have children? They would probably have a nice evening with our kids. We could even build a big bonfire and cook marshmallows.

May the grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord be with you.

In the Blood of the Lamb,

Steve Ray