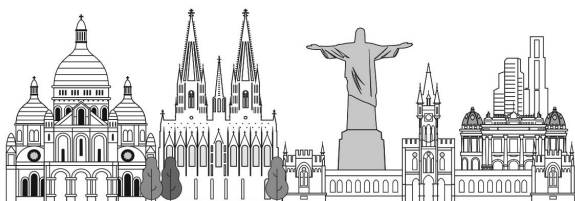
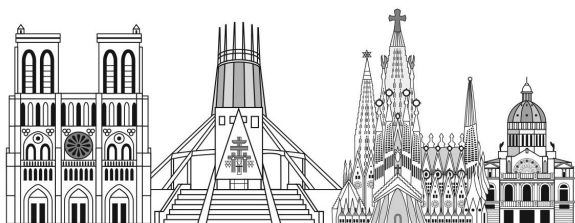




SHARING THE GOSPEL



WITH A CATHOLIC FRIEND



RICHARD BAXTER

10 Publishing

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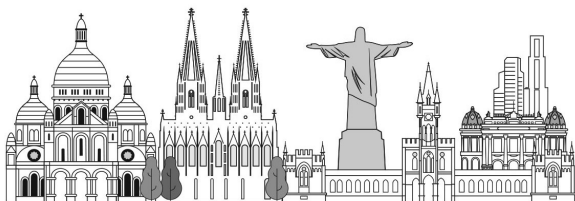


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INTRODUCTION

MY STORY



My name is Richard Baxter, but neither my committed Catholic mum nor my atheist dad knew they were giving me the same name as the seventeenth-century Puritan who wrote *The Reformed Pastor*. Growing up in south-east England, I felt very loved by both my parents, not because of my achievements or obedience but simply because I was their son.

Throughout childhood, I went to St. Joseph's Catholic Church every Sunday evening. Though my dad was an atheist, I can't remember ever not believing in God. In fact, I believed a lot of true things about God. Most Sundays we used to say the Nicene Creed at Mass which taught

me some incredibly important things. Weekly it reminded me that God the Father had created all things, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who entered our world, and that he lived, died and amazingly rose again from death.

As a child I found church services boring, and they signalled the end of the weekend. However, around the age of fourteen, when many young people stopped attending church, I began to take my faith more seriously. I was confirmed and started to enjoy going to Mass. I was an altar server up until my late teens – one time serving for the Bishop of the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton, Cormac Murphy O'Connor, who later became a Cardinal of the Catholic Church.

As a baptised Catholic looking to take my faith seriously, I was aware I sometimes still did wrong things. But here was my thinking: even though I sinned, if I did *this*, *this* and *this* good thing, then God would hopefully love me, forgive me and accept me into heaven.

Going away to university in West Wales, I continued to go to Mass every weekend. I also went to the university's Christian Union meetings – after all, I considered myself a

Christian, so there was no reason I wouldn't! The people at the CU were a little odd; I noticed that they didn't get drunk or swear. They were very nice and welcoming though, and I liked going.

One Friday evening meeting I didn't enjoy, however. The speaker that night grew up as a Catholic in Northern Ireland, had been injured while building a bomb for a paramilitary group, and then became a Protestant through reading the Bible while in hospital.

Growing up in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, my frame of reference for "Catholic" and "Protestant" was the Troubles in Northern Ireland, where it seemed the conflict between the groups had little to do with theological differences. However, as this man spoke, he told us repeatedly, "The Catholic Church teaches X but the Bible says Y."

I was very angry to begin with, recognising that he was calling my Christian faith into question; something that had never happened to me before. By the end of the evening, however, my anger had given way to upset and confusion. How could I know if what he was saying was true? Despite being a keen reader, I had never

read more than a couple of pages of the Bible myself. The Lord in his grace brought over a friend who I had spoken to once or twice before; I told him how I was feeling and he offered to read John's Gospel with me.

In the months following, Jonathan and I met together every week to look at John's Gospel. I began by trying to work out everything the Catholic Church teaches, everything other churches teach, and deciding which is right. After a few weeks I realised I wasn't clever enough to do this, and so instead started to really listen to the words of Jesus; something which Jonathan had wanted us to be doing from the beginning!

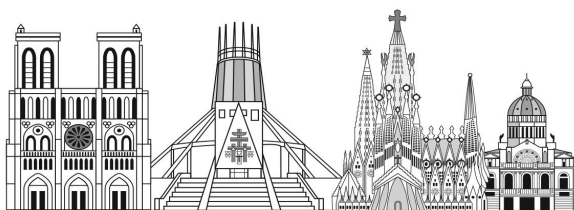
As I did so, I began to realise that my plan to do good things to get to God was a non-starter; Jesus says that everyone who sins is a slave to sin – we can't stop serving it. I began to realise sin's heaviness: it isn't just a small thing to overcome but something that separates us from God. However, I also began to see that though I cannot reach up to God, he has still loved me and reached down to raise me up. Despite remaining conflicted over some issues, I realised

why the Father had sent Jesus: to live the life I had failed to live, to die the death I deserved, and to rise again to give me new life.

One afternoon in tears I told my friend that I now knew I wasn't right with God, but I wasn't sure how to change this. He asked if I had prayed about it and I had to admit I hadn't! As I walked to my room that evening I prayed, asking if God was the one I had been reading about in John's Gospel, he would let me know. I felt an immediate, overwhelming sense of peace wash over me, and it was then that I trusted in Jesus and gave my life over to him.

I discovered, and am continuing to realise now, that God is far more like a loving parent than I had assumed; that though he hates sin, I didn't need to earn his favour. He loved me, and sent his Son to save me. I didn't need to bring myself back to God; Jesus is the one who brings us to God. It was that freeness of the gospel that excited me then, and which still amazes me almost thirty years later.

THREE WRONG TURNS



The Apostle Paul says, “I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel” (Rom. 9:3-4). Paul’s desire to see his own people come to know the Lord is so great, he would be willingly cut off from salvation, in order that they might be saved.

I don’t think I can claim my feelings for “my people” are as strong as Paul’s. However, I really desire to see Catholics coming to know God’s full, free salvation through Jesus, having the comfort of the gospel, and glorifying God as they live in the power of the Spirit.

Given that there are around 1.4 billion baptised Catholics alive today, this is a subject that should be important to all Christians. I'm so glad you've picked up this book, even if you're simply reading it in the bookshop without paying for it. I hope you find something helpful before an assistant asks you to buy it or put it down.

But as we begin, it's worth asking, aren't Catholics already Christians? You may feel uncomfortable talking about sharing the gospel with people who already worship Jesus. Or alternatively, should we assume instead every Catholic is without true faith and therefore dead in their sins? Maybe you feel that we should approach them as we would any other non-Christian.

There are various wrong turns to avoid as we think through engaging with our Catholic friends – but what are they?

TO CONSIDER:

Before going further, please take a few moments to note down some answers to these two questions:

CONTINUE ↓



What Catholics do you know?

What do you know about Catholic teaching?

Reflecting on what, and who, you know will be really helpful as we consider sharing the gospel with our specific friends. We'll come back to your answers in chapter 3.

WRONG TURN ONE: IT'S ALL BAD

When thinking about the gospel and our Catholic friends, we can make a few wrong turns. The first common mistake is to think that nothing the Catholic Church teaches is true or good. From the outside looking in we may see a greater emphasis on Mary than on Jesus, along with people hoping their goodness will get them to heaven and church structures that look very different to those described in the New Testament, and conclude everything about its teaching is totally wrong. That's simply not the case.

Looking back, I'm genuinely so thankful for aspects of my Catholic upbringing. Because we said the creeds regularly on Sundays, I really understood that there is one God in three Persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I knew that Jesus Christ is both God and man, that he had died and risen again.

Every Sunday I would hear readings from a psalm, another Old Testament passage, a New Testament letter, and the Gospels. That's more of God's Word read aloud each week than in most evangelical church services.

There was also so much in terms of ethics and morals that was good and true. Things I was taught about marriage and sexuality for example were completely biblical. Culture has obviously shifted a lot since I was growing up in the eighties and nineties but even then, there would have been things I might have been confused about without the teaching I received.

The Catholic Church also has a genuine concern for the vulnerable, both for the born and for the unborn. We shouldn't forget these common beliefs and values when we are seeking to share the gospel with our Catholic friends.

But then there's ...

WRONG TURN TWO: IT'S ALL GOOD

A second mistake is to imagine that the differences between Catholic and evangelical beliefs are small and unimportant. But there exist big, important differences – not just based on church traditions and preferences – that are central to the good news of Jesus.

Growing up, I knew Jesus had died and risen again. I even wore a crucifix around my neck for years to remind me of that truth. However,

though I believed in the reality of those events, I had no idea about their purpose until I began to read John's Gospel for myself at university.

GOOD TO KNOW:

Official Roman Catholic teaching does recognise Jesus as the sacrifice for sin and that we are not simply saved by our good works, though many baptised Catholics remain confused on this point as Peter Kreeft explains:

“There are still many who do not know ... the gospel. Most of my Catholic students ... do not even know how to get to heaven. When I ask them what they would say to God if they died tonight and God asked them why he should take them into heaven, nine out of ten do not even mention Jesus Christ. Most of them say they have been good or kind or sincere or did their best.”¹

Kreeft, himself a faithful Roman Catholic, recognises the need for Catholics to hear and understand about God's saving grace in Jesus.

CONTINUE ↓



We won't want to argue with that, and we'll want to help our Catholic friends hear that message of God's grace!

Though my understanding of salvation did not accurately reflect official Catholic teaching, it probably reflects the beliefs of many of the Catholics you meet. However, there are also big problems with the official Catholic understanding of how the sacrifice of Jesus works, and particularly how we receive the benefits of it. There are many other important differences too and some of these will be covered in more detail in the second half of the book.

Then there's ...

WRONG TURN THREE: THEY'RE ALL THE SAME

We can imagine that when someone says, "I'm Catholic", they're telling us a lot about what they actually believe. But with about 1.4 billion Catholics in the world, it seems unlikely they will all believe the same things.

In the next chapter, I'll introduce you to five types of Catholics you might meet. This is not necessarily an exhaustive list, however, as you read these descriptions, I hope it might help you understand where different friends are coming from. Perhaps you'll also be able to think about how they match up with people from other faith and non-faith backgrounds too. More importantly, I hope it will help as you consider how to share the good news of Jesus with specific individuals.