

BOOK REVIEW: RETURN TO ROME

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Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic

Francis J. Beckwith

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Paperback, 144 pp.

The blurb on the front cover explains this book: “Why the President of the Evangelical Theological Society Left His Post and Returned to the Catholic Church.”

Beckwith was a prominent theologian in evangelical circles in North America. In 2007, he and his wife joined the Roman Catholic Church. At the time, he held the prestigious position of president of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). The ETS is an organisation devoted to the study and promotion of evangelical theology. Some 4,500 of the most prominent, influential theologians, scholars, professors of theology and churchmen in many Protestant churches and seminaries are members of ETS.

Since “evangelical” refers roughly to non-Roman Catholic, Protestant proclamation and defence of the gospel of salvation by grace alone, Beckwith’s defection to Rome caused no small stir in the ETS, as also more widely in Protestant circles.

The book is Beckwith’s defence of his apostasy. It is, at the same time, encouragement to other evangelicals to follow Beckwith’s lead.

The book by Beckwith is, therefore, not ground breaking. It is only the most recent of the genre. The earliest, and best known, was John Henry Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* [English translation: *An Apology for His Own Life*]: *Being a History of His Religious Opinions* (originally published in 1865). Newman’s book was his account of his leaving the Church of England, in the nineteenth century, for Rome. More recently, the erstwhile Presbyterian, Scott Hahn, has written *Rome, Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993).

Noteworthy Aspects of the Defection

Several aspects of Beckwith's defence of his abandoning evangelicalism for the Roman Catholic Church are worthy of note. First, none of the various evangelical churches that Beckwith bounced around in prior to his joining Rome had a strong, solid ecclesiology. None took itself seriously as a genuine manifestation of the elect body of Jesus Christ, as determined by the infallible marks of the true church listed in *Belgic Confession* 29. Accordingly, Beckwith felt himself committed to none of them. Whenever it was convenient for him, he would leave a supposedly evangelical church and join another. In such a church environment, Rome's claim to be the historic, mother church is irresistible.

For example, one of the churches that Beckwith attended regularly, if he was not a member of it, was a "Foursquare Church" (p. 41). This is the church founded by the rebel against the prohibition of the apostle that a female not be a preacher, the charlatan and the adulteress, Aimee Semple McPherson. If I were confronted with the choice between the woman-made church of McPherson and the man-made Church of Rome, I would choose Rome, also in view of the fact that there is no essential difference between the Arminian gospel of the Foursquare Church and the semi-Pelagian theology of Rome.

Second, Beckwith is superstitious. Circumstances in his life speak to him more powerfully regarding church membership than the truths of Holy Scripture. Direction from God to join the Roman Catholic Church came in the form of a request from Beckwith's nephew that Beckwith sponsor the nephew at the Roman Catholic sacrament of confirmation (p. 19). Beckwith received an important message from God by means of the unusual, accidental switching of stations on his radio (p. 41). Beckwith was confirmed in his decision to join the Roman Catholic Church by the coincidence that Edith Schaeffer, wife of the well-known Francis A. Schaeffer, signed his book on the same day that Beckwith was publicly received back into the Roman Church (pp. 55-56). Assurance of the salvation of Beckwith's father-in-law, who died outside the Roman Catholic Church, is based on two visions God supposedly gave to Beckwith's wife (pp. 70-71).

Rome is the appropriate home of the superstitious.

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Third, Beckwith's admission into the Roman Catholic Church consisted of his involvement in the Roman sacrament of penance. To enter the Church of Rome, Beckwith had to confess his sins to a priest in the confessional. The climax of the spurious sacrament was Beckwith's performance of penance. He performed a work that paid for his sins. Thus, necessarily and appropriately, entrance into the communion of Rome consisted of denying the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ for sins on the cross.

For Francis J. Beckwith, membership in the Roman Catholic Church took place by way of a public denial of Jesus Christ and His cross.

And the nature of the penance was significant: one public recitation of the Lord's Prayer and one public recitation of the "Hail, Mary." "The priest then heard my confession and granted me absolution. I found my way to the main sanctuary, where I did my penance, which consisted of one 'Our Father' and one 'Hail Mary'" (p. 18).

In the Roman Catholic Church, the grace of pardon is cheap—not free, but cheap. The sinner can purchase this grace, and the purchase price is ridiculously cheap: rattle off one Lord's Prayer and one paean to mediatrix Mary.

But the price of forgiveness and of admission to Rome includes adoration of Mary, that is, idolatry. Rome insists on being Rome, even in the case of the joining by a president of the ETS, who knows full well what the "Hail, Mary" means in Roman Catholic theology and liturgy.

Denying the cross of Jesus Christ as the sole and entire payment of the debt of sin and practising the idolatry of the worship of and reliance upon Mary, Francis J. Beckwith is a lost soul. He has plunged himself under the curse of God and, if he does not repent, will perish forever.

The response of the ETS to the apostasy of its former president did not include any such warning. This lack betrays the weakness of the ETS. An evangelicalism that cannot condemn the Roman Catholic Church as a false church is not worthy of the name. The evangel is the gospel of Scripture, and the gospel of Scripture condemns the theology and church that posit another mediator between God and men in addition to Jesus Christ; that judge the cross of Christ insufficient for redemption; and that attribute salvation to the will and works of the sinner, rather than only to the grace of God, to say

nothing of the rejection of the lordship of the risen Christ over the church by the invention of the papacy.

The Urgent Concern: Justification

If these aspects of Beckwith's defence of his falling away to Rome catch the attention of every Reformed reader, there is one element of the defence that ought to be of utmost concern to Reformed and Presbyterian believers today, especially Reformed and Presbyterian office-bearers.

This element is Beckwith's defence of his return to Rome in terms of the doctrine of justification.

Showing a theologian's awareness of the significance of justification regarding the division between Rome and Protestantism, Beckwith put the doctrine of justification at the head of the list of issues that had to be resolved in his mind, if he were to join the Roman Catholic Church.

Our questions focused on several theological issues that prevented us from becoming Catholic and seemed insurmountable: the doctrine of justification, the Real Presence in the Eucharist, the teaching authority of the Church (including apostolic succession and the primacy of the Pope), and Penance (p. 79).

It is Beckwith's resolution of the issue of justification that ought to concern Presbyterians and Reformed today. He resolved the issue by adopting Rome's doctrine of justification and rejecting the doctrine of the Reformation.

What is significant is Beckwith's presentation and defence of the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification to his evangelical critics. It is exactly the explanation of justification that is given by Norman Shepherd and the theology of the Federal Vision in Reformed circles. If one did not know that the explanation of justification in *Return to Rome* is that of Romanizing and Romanist Beckwith, he would attribute it to Shepherd, the men of the Federal Vision and those who carry water for the Federal Vision.

Justification, Beckwith came to be convinced, is not exclusively legal and forensic. It is also, and chiefly, "transformation" of the sinner into a holy and good person by his "sharing in the divine life of Christ" (p. 86).

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Justification is not the *imputation* of the righteousness of Christ to the guilty sinner, but the *infusing* of Christ's righteousness into a wicked person so that he becomes increasingly inherently righteous (pp. 101-102).

Justification is not the definitive verdict of God rendering the justified sinner perfectly righteous through faith, but a progressive activity of God beginning with the infusion of grace at baptism, continuing throughout one's life and concluding at the final judgment (pp. 101-102).

In justification, "works done in faith by God's grace contribute to our ... eventual justification" (p. 102). Beckwith explains Romans 4:1-8 as repudiating only "the works of the Mosaic law" for justification (p. 100). Genuinely good works, that is, good works that proceed from true faith, are taken into account by God when He justifies a sinner.

Justification at the final judgment will take place on the basis of every man's own good works: "Works serve in some way as the *basis on which* his [i.e., Jesus'] judgment of their eternal fate is made" (p. 97; italics Beckwith's).

Justification is a cooperative effort of God and the sinner. God's grace enables the sinner to accomplish his own justification, but the sinner must cooperate with grace by his own free will (p. 112).

Such is the reality of this cooperation that it is a possibility that one in whom God has begun the process of justification may fail to cooperate and, therefore, lose his justification and go lost eternally. In support of this terrifying, God-dishonouring view of justification, Beckwith appeals to John 15:1-5, Jesus' teaching of the vine and the branches (p. 95).

And, of course, James 2 is the decisive passage on justification, teaching "God's justification of the Christian" and teaching that "justification is *not* by faith alone" (pp. 104-105).

A Forewarning

In every respect, Beckwith's doctrine of justification, justifying his journey to Rome, is that of Norman Shepherd and the men of the Federal Vision.

The only difference between Beckwith and the men of the Federal Vision is that Beckwith honestly and openly states, and has acted upon, the conclusion

of his Roman Catholic doctrine of justification: renunciation of the Protestant Reformation and return to Rome.

It does not suit the Federal Vision theologians as yet to declare to their Presbyterian and Reformed audiences that their doctrine of justification, and their doctrine of a conditional covenant, whence the heretical doctrine of justification springs, imply membership in the Roman Catholic Church.

Shepherd has hinted at the implication of his theology:

Is there any hope for a common understanding between Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism regarding the way of salvation [that is, especially justification]? May I suggest that there is at least a glimmer of hope if both sides are willing to embrace a covenantal understanding of the way of salvation [that is, the doctrine of a conditional covenant].¹

The bold declaration of a return to Rome is coming.

In the meanwhile, Francis J. Beckwith, formerly president of the ETS, forewarns the members of Reformed and Presbyterian churches where the doctrine of justification of the Federal Vision will take them and, if not themselves, their children and grandchildren: Return to Rome.

¹ Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), p. 59.