



STATEMENT DC185

A Summary Critique: Surprised by Truth by Ralph MacKenzie

Surprised by Truth tells the story of 11 adult conversions to Roman Catholicism. All but one were formerly members of Protestant denominations (both charismatic and noncharismatic) — including Baptist and Presbyterian churches. Some held ministerial positions in these communions.

The editor, Patrick Madrid, is well known to me. He is vice president of Catholic Answers, a Catholic apologetics and evangelistic organization in San Diego, and a contributing editor for the ministry's magazine, *This Rock*. Madrid is a charming and engaging fellow, one who can make a formidable case for evangelicals needing to take the trip to Rome.

As interesting as these stories are, however, the reader should hold off scurrying down to the local Catholic church and enrolling in catechism classes just yet. There are problems of several varieties with Surprised by Truth; the basic arguments of the Reformation still stand.

The book's foreword is written by Scott Hahn who, with his wife Kimberly, has become a high-visibility evangelical. They have written a book, *Rome Sweet Home*, which describes their journey to Roman Catholicism. In the volume under review, Hahn states that part of his journey is a "horror story." This is because of the "staunch, Bible-based Evangelical Protestants who've thought and taught...that Catholics are not even Christians" (p. 10).

Now, I know the individuals Hahn likely has in mind through their writings — and some even personally. Yes, they vigorously defend the principles that emerged from the Reformation (such as *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*), but it is a bit of a stretch to characterize them as Catholic-bashers. (Please, Catholic friend, don't mention the late Loraine Boettner; his work on this subject has been largely discredited by thoughtful evangelicals.)

Hahn then muses about the "beatific vision" in heaven, where the convert to Roman Catholicism (referred to as a "former theological step-child") is presented to "his Father, Almighty God, and to Mary, his mother and queen...next to his elder brother King Jesus...." It must be admitted that some Protestants — reacting to the excessive attention by Roman Catholics to the Blessed Virgin Mary — have undervalued her person and contribution to Christianity. Mary can be rightfully understood as the "God-bearer" in the narrow sense that she is the one who carried in her womb and gave birth to our Savior in His humanity. For this she is indeed due honor from all Christians. However, Hahn seems in the above picture to draw undue attention to her. One slight to our "elder brother King Jesus" at one's eternal peril. On the other hand, no one will be deprived of heaven for not paying enough heed to the Virgin Mary.¹ I will now summarize a few of the doctrinal difficulties that repeatedly surface in these testimonies.

Anti-Catholic Background. Most of these stories mention a strident, virulent anti-Catholicism that permeated the evangelical backgrounds of these converts. I came to faith in Christ through this same background and have moved in evangelical circles for more than 40 years.

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While Catholic bashing was not unheard of (few of us paid much attention to Bob Jones, Sr.), discussions of Roman Catholicism were generally balanced, and the notion that Catholics could not be Christians was not universally held. We understood that despite the disputes occasioned by the Reformation, both Luther and Calvin asserted that the Roman church — while flawed — was nevertheless a legitimate church.²

Faulty Understanding of Luther and Calvin. Paul Thigpen, in his testimonial chapter, speaks of the “arid, rigid predestination of Calvin” (28). This sounds like the Pelagian complaint against Augustine! Calvin (like the other magisterial Reformers) had the highest regard for Augustine, and built his soteriological formulations on Augustine’s (as well as the Anselmic) model. In fact, one Catholic apologist has stated that — with some minor adjustments — the well-known Calvinistic formula represented by the acrostic “TULIP” can be understood as accurately reflecting the traditional Catholic position.³

Martin Luther comes in for some harsh treatment as well. Both Julie Swenson (130) and Dave Armstrong (230) misstate Luther’s positions. Armstrong mentions the insights he received from the works of Hartmann Grisar. This German Jesuit was a notorious Luther-basher (a “Catholic” Loraine Boettner, if you will) whose work has been discredited by both Roman Catholics and Protestant scholars.⁴ Bob Sungenis (111) also engages in what appears to be *ad hominem* attacks against the Reformers.

The Teaching Authority of the Catholic Church. Both James Akin (64-66) and Catholics in general tie the belief that Peter is the “rock” to acceptance of the teaching authority of the Catholic church. Let’s clear the air and state that the Protestant complaint with the Roman Catholic Petrine doctrine is not that Jesus may have designated Peter as “rock” (Matt. 16: 13-20).⁵ Many evangelical scholars believe Jesus was indicating that His church would be built on the apostles (of which Peter was the chief spokesman) and the prophets (Eph. 2:20).

Our concerns stem from the *implications* Roman Catholicism draws from this declaration. One can hold to the Petrine declaration without referring to the bishop of Rome as “the Vicar of Christ on earth.” Eastern Orthodoxy shares this position as well; indeed, this was one of the major causes of the East/West schism (AD. 1054).⁶

The above criticisms notwithstanding, the reader should not assume that the reviewer finds nothing of value in this book. These stories depict seemingly genuine Christians who, for various reasons (mistakenly, I maintain), changed their ecclesiastical affiliations. We would do well to examine their reasons for leaving evangelicalism; some reveal failings within our own camps that need to be addressed. We should take the opportunity to understand our common Christian heritage and sharpen our presentation of Reformed distinctives. We can rejoice in what we have in common and yet be resolute in defending essentials such as *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*.

There is no room in this dialogue for misrepresentation on either side. There are plenty of authentic theological differences between Roman Catholics and evangelicals to address without resorting to *ad hominem* attacks or the knocking down of “straw men,” as happens too often in both Protestant and Catholic polemics.

In dealing with Roman Catholicism, evangelicals should adapt the attitude reflected in the time-honored dictum: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials liberty; and in all things, charity.”

— *Ralph MacKenzie*

¹ Traditional Roman Catholics are not completely unaware of idolatrous tendencies attached to Mariology. See Brian Harrison, O.S., “Our Silent Heresy,” *This Rock*, May 1994, 9-12.

² Luther addressed this theme at the zenith of his polemics with Rome. See Gustaf Aulén. *Reformation and Catholicity* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), 76. Calvin made a similar statement to Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto in 1539; see Alan Thomson, *New Movements: Reform — Rationalism — Revolution* (London: SPCK, 1976). 28, 29. In our book *Roman*

Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, forthcoming), Norman L. Geisler and I make this point repeatedly in Parts One and Three.

³ James Akin, "A Tiptoe through TULIP," *This Rock*, September 1993, 7-13.

⁴ James Atkinson, *Martin Luther: Prophet to the Church Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 12-13. For a Roman Catholic treatment of this subject, see Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969).

⁵ For various interpretations of this event, see the *NIV Study Bible* note on Matthew 16:18.

⁶ These and other disagreements are treated in Geisler and MacKenzie, Part Two.