

John Preston

From Works to the Light of the Gospel

“*The truth shall make you free*” (John 8:32). The truth of Jesus' Gospel has set millions of people free from their sins, burdens, and worries. This is clear proof that the unadulterated Word of the Holy Scriptures is still “*the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth*” (Romans 1:16). The story of my liberation from the darkness of Romanism into “*the glorious liberty of the children of God*” (Romans 8:21) is additional evidence of the same power.

There is nothing striking in my conversion, no sudden change, or miraculous event to compel me to abandon the Roman Catholic Church and to surrender to Christ. It was only the quiet and steady working of God's grace and the daily realization of the wrongness of a system that is erroneously called Catholic and Christian.

Finding No Assurance of Forgiveness

Born in the north of Italy of Roman Catholic parents, I was baptized and confirmed in the same faith. At the age of 12, I felt called by God to the priesthood and entered a seminary where I spent nine years of intense and severe training. During these years, a deep and lengthy crisis brought home to me for the first time the uselessness of auricular confession. My soul was darkened by sin and my spirit tortured by doubt. I sought desperately for light and peace. I went to confession almost every day, thinking to find in it forgiveness and happiness; but no matter how hard I tried, or how often I confessed my sins to my Father Confessor, no assurance of forgiveness was ever given to me; no strength ever flowed into my heart to keep it pure from more and worse sins.

What a joyous contrast there is now in my present life. Now I have put all my trust in Him; now I know Whom I have believed and know that He is able to keep me “*until that day.*” Now I confess my sins directly to God and He cleanses me and gives me a new heart. He has made me a new creature through the purifying power of Jesus' blood.

Seeking Salvation in Works

It was to overcome this inward crisis that I decided to dedicate myself to a more sacrificial life to be spent among the African people. Thus, I joined a Missionary Order, which in Italy boasts the

glorious name of “The Sons of the Sacred Heart of Jesus” and here in England is known as the “Verona Fathers.”

Although I am indebted to the Verona Fathers for the help they gave me during my last five years of training, I cannot however overlook the way in which they prepare their candidates for the religious profession and for the priesthood. The whole preparation is centered in works, in doing things. Salvation depends entirely on what we do—not on what Jesus Christ did. We merit our eternal life or our everlasting damnation. Jesus is no longer the “*author and finisher of our faith*,” the “*Alpha and Omega*,” “*the first and last*.” Our actions, our merits, our prayers, our year’s alms, and our penances take us into Heaven—not Jesus. That is why, during my two years of Novitiate, I was invited to flog my naked body, to kiss the floor of the dining room, or someone’s feet.

Seeing the Light of the Gospel

At the end of my Novitiate, I attended a four-year course of theological training and was ordained in Milan, Italy in 1952. After one year of ministry and of missionary deputation in northern and central Italy, I was sent to Asmara, in Eritrea, as a missionary and teacher in a big Roman Catholic college. There I made my first personal contact with Christian missionaries and was given some literature by them to read. There also I realized more than ever how oppressive the Roman Catholic system could be. For example, there is the teaching that sacraments are the cause of salvation instead of personal faith in Jesus Christ as demanded by the Scriptures.

Coming to London two years later to improve my English, I went on studying the biblical faith and praying to God for light. While in London, I happened to listen now and then to the biblical speakers at “Speakers’ Corner” in Hyde Park, and their fearless and bold exposure of the Roman heresies helped me to break away at last from the Roman Church. Mr. P. Pengilly, Senior Outdoor Speaker of the Protestant Alliance, was one that influenced me. The performance of good deeds or religious sacraments cannot effect the change that makes one a new person in Christ, that is totally by grace, “*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.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9) God, by grace, makes a new creation in Christ, “*therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new.*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This then is what I truly believed.

In conclusion, I would like to make sure that while writing this testimony I do not bear any grudge against anyone. On the contrary, it is “*my heart’s desire and prayer to God*” (Romans 10:1) that many Roman Catholic people might see the light of the Gospel as I have seen it and come to rejoice in the knowledge of Jesus as their own personal Savior. It was the great joy of this spiritual discovery, and the desire to communicate it to others, that prompted me to write down these lines and trust that God will have all the glory. There is the commandment, given in the Scriptures, declaring that it is God’s will that we personally trust on Jesus Christ, “*this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ*” (1 John 3:23), and again, “*this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day*” (John 6:40).

Turn to God in faith alone for the salvation that He alone gives, by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, based on Jesus Christ's death and resurrection and believe on Him alone, "*to the praise of the glory of his grace*" (Ephesians 1:6)