

PROVEN CATHOLIC

Volume I, Defend Your
Faith Against Protestants



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Proven Catholic

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Introduction

Welcome to Proven Catholic Volume I: Defend Your Faith Against Protestants! In this book we are going to examine real questions from both Protestants and Catholics and see how best to answer them.

Many books and sites exist that give the stock Catholic answers to common questions about the sacraments and other Catholic beliefs. These responses are important and form a foundation of knowledge for successfully dialoguing with a Protestant friend.

But what happens when the discussion goes off the beaten path? That happens in every dialogue of any appreciable length between a Catholic and Protestant. Once we diverge from the “happy path” we need a way to respond and also to steer the conversation back to root topics. That is what I will show you in this book.

In this volume I have anonymized all names, except for well-known Protestants whose works are public, namely Reformed Baptist pastor John Piper, and Protestant scholar Dr. William Lane Craig.

All quotes from John Piper come from his free book, *What Jesus Demands from the World*, which [you can download on his site](http://www.desiringgod.org/books/what-jesus-demands-from-the-world)¹.

Note that, while we have important disagreements with Protestants, many of their beliefs are true, and we desire them to step *forward* in faith to embrace all that God has revealed to be true. That step takes them into the Catholic Church.

Note that this book is only one part of a larger course, [found on ProvenCatholic.com](http://provincatholic.com/courses/evangelize-protestants), called *Evangelize Protestants*².

¹<http://www.desiringgod.org/books/what-jesus-demands-from-the-world>

²provincatholic.com/courses/evangelize-protestants

Sacraments

Protestants reject most of the seven sacraments. And they have substantially changed the doctrines on the two they do claim to accept: baptism and the Lord's Supper. We will look at several questions and challenges from Protestants regarding the sacraments.

This Is Symbolically My Body

John Piper argues for his Baptist belief that the Eucharist is only a symbol by saying: “This is my body, which is given for you” (Luke 22:19) and by taking the cup and saying, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). Was he saying that the cup and the bread were signs of his body and blood, or that they somehow were transformed into the very body and blood of Jesus?

It was natural then, and it is natural today, to point to a representation of something and say that the representation is the thing. For example, I look at a photograph of our house and say, “This is our house.” It would not enter anyone's mind to think I mean that the photograph was transformed into my house.”

The Proven Catholic response: His argument boils down to this: since sometimes people hold up a representation of something—like a photo—and say that “this is that something,” Jesus must have also been speaking only figuratively when he said in the Last Supper that “this is my body.”

This argument can be rebutted immediately by simply pointing out that, while sometimes people do speak figuratively, it is also the case that sometimes they speak literally. The fact that sometimes

people—including Jesus—speak figuratively does not entail that Jesus was speaking figuratively in this particular case.

Piper goes on though to say that “it would not enter anyone’s mind” to think saying such a thing could be literal. The problem with applying that to Jesus’ words are two-fold:

In John 6:50 and onward, Jesus tells the people to gnaw on his flesh and drink his blood. They recoiled at the thought and abandoned him, yet he didn’t say he was speaking figuratively. So they thought he was speaking literally, and he didn’t correct them.

Further, the Church Fathers taught that Jesus spoke literally of the bread and wine becoming His body and blood.

These two facts punch big holes in Piper’s teaching on the Eucharist. We have examples of people who heard Jesus speak taking his words literally in this case, and in Him acting as though they were literal. Then we have men disciplined by the Apostles themselves taking them literally.

So it is not enough to simply wave away Jesus’ words as symbolic here, as Piper does. The burden is on Piper to explain why those that heard Jesus took Him literally, why He responded in the way He did, and why the earliest Christians took Him literally.

Let’s look at the words of the earliest Fathers:

“I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible”
St. Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Romans 7:3 [A.D. 110]).

“Take note of those who hold heterodox opinions on the grace of Jesus Christ which has come to us, and see how contrary their opinions are to the mind of God.

. . . They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes” St. Ignatius of Antioch (Letter to the Smyrnaeans 6:2–7:1 [A.D. 110]).

“We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [i.e., has received baptism] and is thereby living as Christ enjoined. For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus” St. Justin Martyr (First Apology 66 [A.D. 151]).

“He has declared the cup, a part of creation, to be his own blood, from which he causes our blood to flow; and the bread, a part of creation, he has established as his own body, from which he gives increase unto our bodies. When, therefore, the mixed cup [wine and water] and the baked bread receives the Word of God and becomes the Eucharist, the body of Christ, and from these the substance of our flesh is increased and supported, how can they say that the flesh is not capable of receiving the gift of God, which is eternal

life—flesh which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, and is in fact a member of him?” St. Irenaeus of Lyons (Against Heresies 5:2 [A.D. 189]).

This is only a small sampling of the most well-known early Fathers. Read many more [quotes on the Real Presence here](#)³.

Why Would Anyone Knowingly Deny the Sacraments?

A reader asked me: “I can understand how sacraments can be necessary in the ordinary economy of salvation, while at the same time not limiting God’s mercy for those who by no fault of their own do not know of or know the importance of the sacraments. However, I’m having trouble understanding the same concept when applied to other Christians and lapsed Catholics. I’m tempted to say that no one who truly knew the importance of the sacraments would avoid them and so God would not condemn them to hell, but that would simply render sacraments non-essential.

This is something of a mystery. Because, if someone really knew that the sacraments were true, that the Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church, why would they stay away?”

The Proven Catholic response: It is a mystery. In my experience, I have seen people come very close to becoming Catholic, then back away. Family fears keep them back; fear of judgment by others; a lack of in depth study sometimes; other things. Point is that they have had the blinders lifted off their eyes, but still can’t make that act of faith. God alone knows the intricacies of their heart, but He has made it clear to those who seek Him wholeheartedly where to find Him.

³<http://www.catholic.com/tracts/the-real-presence>

Some, like Martin Luther, were Catholic and then caused a schism, preferring their own opinions to those of the Church. Pride. He and others face judgment from God for their actions. God alone knows whether they will be ultimately saved, but it will be through the extraordinary way for sure.

Valid Ministers of Sacraments

A reader wrote: “Why doesn’t a priest have to perform a baptism for it to be valid?”

The Proven Catholic response: Different sacraments have different valid ministers for it. The Church via the Scriptures and Sacred Tradition came to understand who is a valid minister for which sacrament. Here’s a good explanation [about what deacons can and can’t do](#)⁴, specifically.

Born Again Mean Baptism

Reformed Baptist pastor John Piper wrote about what it means to be born again, but as we’ll see he left out a vital part! He wrote of Jesus’ words to Nicodemus in John 3:

“Jesus answered . . . “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”—John 3:5, 7. Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” —John 3:3.

Piper: “Our first birth will not get us into the kingdom of God. But we do not cause ourselves to be born again. The Spirit does that. And the Spirit is free and blows in ways we do not comprehend. We must be born again. But this is a gift of God.”

⁴<http://canonlawmadeeasy.com/2013/09/26/what-can-and-cant-a-deacon-do/>

The Proven Catholic response: Piper never mentions baptism when he writes of being born again! He omits baptism, because in his Protestant beliefs, baptism is not necessary for being born again. And these passages in St. John's gospel, in his mind, don't refer to baptism. How wrong he is. Of course the Holy Spirit is involved in our rebirth, on that we agree. But that rebirth is by faith and baptism. That is the "water" part of being born of water and the Spirit, which the Church Fathers unanimously testified to.

"I will also relate the manner in which we dedicated ourselves to God when we had been made new through Christ; lest, if we omit this, we seem to be unfair in the explanation we are making. As many as are persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, are instructed to pray and to entreat God with fasting, for the remission of their sins that are past, we praying and fasting with them. They then are brought by us where there is water, and are regenerated in the same manner in which we were ourselves regenerated. For, in the name of God, the Father and Lord of the universe, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, they then receive the washing with water. . . . The reason for this we have received from the Apostles." St. Justin Martyr's First Apology (Chapter 61).

"And this food is called among us Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined." (ibid. Chapter 66).

"And when we come to refute them [i.e. those heretics], we shall show in its fitting-place, that this class of

men have been instigated by Satan to a denial of that baptism which is regeneration to God, and thus to a renunciation of the whole [Christian] faith.” St. Irenaeus (Against Heresies, I.21).

Scores more [quotes from the Church Fathers exist that teach baptismal regeneration](#)⁵.

Piper ignores the witness of the earliest Christians to baptism’s regenerating effects. He interprets the Bible apart from the Apostolic Tradition and thus goes astray into heresy. The Church has always taught that baptism is essential in being born again. So if Piper is right then the Church went off the rails into serious error immediately; the Holy Spirit, contrary to Scripture, did not lead the Apostles and their successors into all truth.

Pope Francis on Communion for Divorced and Remarried Catholics

A reader wrote, concerning the Pope’s exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*: “Thank you for your help to answer questions of Catholics who struggle with certain aspects of their faith. Regarding our beloved Pope Francis issuing his “Joy of Love” recently, is it true that divorced and remarried Catholics can receive Holy Communion? Would such Catholics be considered as still married to their first spouses and are only separated from them as far as their Church is concerned?”

The Proven Catholic response: (This question is about [Pope Francis’s exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*](#)⁶ (the Joy of Love), that caused a big stir.)

⁵<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/06/the-church-fathers-on-baptismal-regeneration/>

⁶https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf

The central question is whether the Pope is saying that divorced and remarried Catholics can receive the Eucharist. Unfortunately, the Pope gives an ambiguous answer to that question. (More on whether that disproves papal infallibility in just a bit.)

The exhortation itself has many beautiful passages on marriage and affirms the Church's unchanging teachings on sexuality and marriage. The Pope also wants to encourage those Catholics who are divorced and remarried (but not annulled)—those in so-called “irregular situations”—to be willing to come forward and meet with a parish priest so that discussions can be started.

He feels, no doubt rightly, that many in these situations are afraid of approaching a priest and thus keep themselves away from the Church (and therefore from Christ as well). So, following the warm evangelistic pattern of his entire pontificate, the Pope is encouraging pastors to make a bridge to these couples.

The traditional answer to such people was to start the annulment process for your first marriage to have the Church determine whether you were really married. If the annulment was given, then they were free to be married to their current spouse. If the annulment was not given, they were in a tough situation, and the solution was to live as brother and sister with their spouse, a difficult directive only achievable by divine grace and great virtue.

In the Pope's exhortation, the “live as brother and sister option” is diminished, if not dismissed. And the annulment process option is not emphasized, perhaps because in many parts of the world the process is too expensive, or too painful, or the couple won't even start it. In a minority of cases, the second marriage has a person wanting to become Catholic but the spouse was previously married and refuses to seek an annulment, leaving the person wanting to become Catholic in an impossible situation.

It seems the Pope is reaching out to these people. The possible danger is that it weakens the Church's disciplinary law on who can

receive Communion, and thus by association weakens the force of the doctrine of the Eucharist itself.

Many faithful, orthodox Catholic writers, scholars, and pastors have expressed just this concern. It is not an idle concern, nor is it disobedient to ask such questions. The takeaway:

Don't panic. The Pope has not reversed Catholic doctrine. Infallibility has not been disproved. We are dealing here with an exhortation (which itself has less dogmatic force than other kinds of Church documents), and the exhortation affirms Catholic dogma, while seeking to give priests wider pastoral latitude in dealing with couples on a one-on-one basis.

Infallibility does not mean that the pope will always speak clearly. It does not mean he will always explain the truths of the Faith in their fullness. It is a negative protection: it protects him from teaching error, and only under certain conditions, where he is formally proclaiming binding doctrine.

Wait and see. Give the Church time to incorporate this exhortation and move forward with how to implement it. Give the Pope time to clarify questions about it and refine the directives.

God is faithful, and He protects His Church from error in her doctrines on faith and morals.

The Church

Ecclesiology is the big word for the study of the Church. Protestants see the Church as a purely invisible collection of all believers scattered around the world. Sure, these believers may convene at particular buildings or areas, but no visible, hierarchically organized Church exists. We will look in this chapter at several direct quotes from Protestants and how to respond to them.

The False Dichotomy and Strawman

Reformed Baptist pastor John Piper wrote: “Jesus promised to build his church. By “church” he did not mean a building. That is never the meaning of church (ecclesia) in Greek. He means he will build a people.”

The Proven Catholic response: Piper first presents a strawman argument: that someone (say Catholics) believe that Jesus promised to build “a building.” The Catholic Church doesn’t teach that, nor do I know any Christian group that does.

But that strawman is really a false dichotomy in disguise. He is using “building” to refer to and represent the Catholic teaching that the Church is something visible and hierarchically organized. And so he is claiming that Christ didn’t found a visible Church but rather a people gathered together.

In fact, Jesus founded both together: a people who are called together as living stones, building a visible, hierarchically organized Church that is universal both across all people, time, and geography.

We just burst his false dichotomy bubble.

Anytime you see a Protestant say “it’s not this but that,” always think about whether in fact it is “this *and* that.” That is the case here. Of course the Church is made up of people, whom God has called. But it is also an institution, Christ’s Mystical Body, which forms a unity, just like a body does.

Piper at the Gates of Dawn

Piper actually gets quite close to the truth about the Church in his next section, though he only comes up to the gates and chooses not to step through them into Catholicism.

He writes: “This provision includes the sending of the Holy Spirit, the preservation of inspired truth in the writings of his apostles and their close associates, guidelines for how to handle sin in the flock, and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper....Jesus does not refer to the writings of the apostles but puts in place both apostles and the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of their teaching for the foundation of his church.

He provides an authoritative band of representatives and then gives them the assurance that in their teaching office they will have divine assistance to provide the church with the truth it needs for all of life and godliness. He intends that the teaching of these authoritative spokesmen be preserved for later generations.”

The Proven Catholic response: Notice Piper admits that Jesus doesn’t focus on the writings of the Apostles, but on the Apostles themselves as the foundation of the Church (cf. Ephesians 2:20: “[The Church is] built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone”).

This is a big admission, because it places the person and office of Apostle as foundational rather than the writings (Scriptural books) that God inspired them to write.

He then concedes that the Apostles were an “authoritative band of representatives” that God guided to teach the truth, and that their teachings would be preserved for later generations, presumably (in Piper’s mind), via the Bible.

The key point here is that Jesus did authorize the Apostles and send them out as His representatives. They had authority from God to bind consciences, to lead the Church, to teach and correct, and that is exactly what they did. But their authority didn’t evaporate. It was substantially transmitted to their successors, men like Timothy and Titus, and St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Clement.

We have evidence both in the Bible (see the letters Paul wrote to Timothy for instance, exhorting him about the gift he received via the laying on of hands), and in the writings of these first Church Fathers, that the authority of the Apostles was passed on to them, and that this was God’s design.

“Religious” As a Bad Word

A reader wrote to me: “The problem with which I am struggling is that it has been very insensitively pointed out to me that we Catholics must be indeed religious (as opposed to the righteous faithful non-denominational believer, of course), since we have to attend the Mass on Sunday and if we miss Mass, we have to confess a sin.

While I understand the general idea of it as a great custom we have developed and in fact I am really grateful for a Sunday obligation since it really helps me when my will is weak, I have not been able to find a consistent argument for this in the Scripture. Could you please help me out?”

The Proven Catholic response: The principle is that the Christ founded His Church as a visible institution with rightfully appointed leaders who have authority to bind the faithful on matters

of faith and morals. They are protected from error by God on their teachings.

The Scriptures say to “not give up meeting together” (Hebrews 10:24-25) so even most Protestants agree you can’t be a completely “solo” Christian who never goes to church. However, they decide how often they want to go: once per week or once per month or once per year—whatever they feel like! The Christian Faith is not about what we feel like doing but about following God’s direction.

The Church established minimum guidelines for practicing the Faith: spend one hour per week at Mass (out of 168 hours!), receive the Eucharist at least once per year, support the Church with donations according to your means, etc.

These are not actually burdensome guidelines but Protestants think that everything should be decided individually by themselves. It’s make up your own beliefs rather than submission to the legitimate authority Christ established on earth.

So the attack your Protestant friend made against you is based on their erroneous understanding of what the Church is, and how Christ founded her. Protestantism is choose-your-own-adventure Christianity. You get to decide what and how and whether you believe something or do anything about your beliefs. That sounds pleasant to us because it appeals to our tendencies to bristle at being told what to do, at authority, as well as our laziness and acedia. But it is not the best for us, and not how God designed things to work.