



When the Roman Bough Breaks: How a History of Violence and Scandal Shaped the Roman Church, and Hope for Catholics in the Gospel

Jeff Nottingham

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Issuing a plea to Catholics to return to the original, unadulterated version of the gospel messages, When the Roman Bough Breaks is a passionate historical and theological survey.

A fresh contribution to a centuries-old theological debate, Jeff Nottingham's history book *When the Roman Bough Breaks* reappraises Roman Catholicism from a post-Reformation perspective.

From its opening pages, the book establishes a clear division between Roman Catholicism and "New Covenant" Christianity. The main differences between these traditions, it argues, are concentrated on their different interpretations of the New Testament's resurrection narrative. Whereas "New Covenant" Christianity sees the death and resurrection of Jesus as a *fait accompli*, requiring nothing from believers but simple faith, institutional Christianity developed centuries' worth of distracting and useless accretions, the book says. The simplicity of the gospels' messages, it claims, is crowded out by such unnecessary burdens—a problem made worse by cynical individuals abusing church power structures to service their own corrupt ends. The book issues a plea to Catholics to return to its vision of the original, unadulterated version of the gospel messages preached by Jesus and the earliest church fathers.

While its arguments against Catholicism are familiar within Protestant-Catholic polemics, the book stands out for the breadth of its approach. Its first half focuses on the supposed moral failures of the Roman Catholicism throughout history, offering a gruesome litany of papal crimes in the Middle Ages and a scathing indictment of the modern Church's response to the sexual abuse crisis. Some related statements sound hyperbolic, though, as with repeated claims that "hundreds of thousands ... of men, women, and children were murdered, raped, and tortured" at the command of the Catholic Church in the medieval era. Such statements receive only scant support from secondary sources, resulting in unanswered questions. The Catholic Church as portrayed here is an unambiguous historical villain—a narrow judgment that discounts *prima facie* the possibility of any spiritual and ethical contributions to world history.

The book's description of "New Covenant" Christianity takes up the latter half of its analysis and includes a radical reframing of the resurrection: Herein, Jesus's death marked an absolute atonement for the entirety of believers' past and future sins, and salvation has nothing to do with human efforts, such that to ask forgiveness in prayer is to overstep on God's prerogative. From this perspective, even the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer were rendered obsolete by Jesus's atoning death. The book places so much emphasis on humanity's inability to help with their own salvation that it discourages centuries' worth of devotional practice from mainline Protestant traditions. And the full consequences of these provocative reinterpretations of scripture and history are treated in a cursory manner, leaving unresolved theological tensions at the book's end.

An intriguing counterpoint to the "extremism" of institutional Christianity, the fascinating religious history text *When the Roman Bough Breaks* adds to ongoing Protestant-Catholic debates.

ISAAC RANDEL (November 18, 2024)

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