

# Petrobrussians

by William Cathcart

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*William Cathcart's sermon on the Petrobrussians highlights their radical beliefs and practices that challenged the Catholic Church in the twelfth century.*

**Topics:** "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

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## Description

William Cathcart preaches about Peter de Bruys, a Catholic priest turned preacher of the gospel in the 12th century, who vehemently opposed Roman Catholic practices. Peter taught that only believers should be baptized, rejected the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist, and denounced prayers for the dead. He led a movement that destroyed crosses and churches, emphasizing a simplistic worship devoid of idolatry. Despite facing opposition from ecclesiastics like Peter the Venerable, Peter de Bruys successfully converted many to a more Scriptural faith, challenging the authority of popes, bishops, and priests.

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## Transcript

Peter de Bruys was the Catholic priest of an obscure parish in France, which he left, early in the twelfth century, when he became a preacher of the gospel. How he unlearned the gospel of the Seven Hills and was instructed in that of Calvary we cannot tell, but he was educated in both directions. Many Romanists, like Staupitz or Fenelon, have received the saving knowledge of Jesus and retained their connection with the papal church; but Peter abhorred popery.

He taught that baptism was of no advantage to infants, and that only believers should receive it, and he gave a new baptism to all his converts; he condemned the use of churches and altars, no doubt

for the idolatry practised in them; he denied that the body and blood of Christ are to be found in the bread and wine of the Supper, and he taught that the elements on the Lord's table are but signs of Christ's flesh and blood; he asserted that the offerings, prayers, and good works of the living could not profit the dead, that their state was fixed for eternity the moment they left the earth ; like the English Baptists of the seventeenth century, and like the Quakers of our day, he believed that it was wrong to sing the praises of God in worship; and he rejected the adoration of crosses, and destroyed them wherever he found them.

It is said that on a Good-Friday the Petrobrussians once gathered a great multitude of their brethren, who brought with them all the crosses they could find, and that they made a large fire of them, on which they cooked meat, and gave it to the vast assemblage. This is told as an illustration of their blasphemous

profanity. Their crucifixes, and along with them probably the images of the saints, were the idols they had been taught to worship, and when their eyes were opened they destroyed them, just as the converted heathen will now destroy their false gods. Hezekiah did a good thing in destroying the serpent of brass, which in the wilderness had miraculous powers of healing, when the Israelites began to worship it as a god.

Peter's preaching was with great power; his words and his influence swept over great masses of men, bending their hearts and intellects before their resistless might. "In Provence," says Du Pin, "there was nothing else to be seen but Christians rebaptized, churches profaned or destroyed, altars pulled down, and crosses burned. The laws of the church were publicly violated, the priests beaten, abused, and forced to marry, and all the most sacred ceremonies of the church abolished."

Peter de Bruys commenced his ministry about 1125, and such was his success that in a few years in the places about the mouth of the Rhone, in the plain country about Thoulouse, and particularly in that city itself, and in many parts of "the province of Gascoigne" he led great throngs of men and women to Jesus, and overthrew the entire authority of popes, bishops, and priests.

Had the life of this illustrious man been spared the Reformation probably would have occurred four hundred years earlier under Peter de Bruys instead of Martin Luther, and the Protestant nations of the earth would not only have had a deliverance from four centuries of priestly profligacy and widespread soul destruction, but they would have entered upon a godly life with a far more Scriptural creed than grand old Luther, still in a considerable measure wedded to Romish sacramentalism, was fitted to give them.

Peter and his followers were decided Baptists, and like ourselves they gave a fresh baptism to all their converts. They reckoned that they were not believers when first immersed in the Catholic Church, and that as Scripture baptism required faith in its candidates, which they did not possess, they regarded them as wholly unbaptized; and for the same reason they repudiated the idea that they rebaptized them, confidently asserting that because of the lack of faith they had never been baptized.

Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny, was born in 1093, and died in 1157. He was distinguished by scholarship, acuteness of mind, and Biblical knowledge. He and St. Bernard were the two leading ecclesiastics of France. Peter would rebuke a pope if he deserved it without hesitation, and no other human being was above his authority. The abbot had assailed the Jews and the Saracens in two distinct works. And such was the extraordinary success of the Petrobrusians, and the great difficulty of refuting their arguments from the Scriptures, that Peter felt compelled to come forth and defend the deserted ecclesiastics and the church threatened with ruin. We shall quote somewhat freely from the abbot to show the doctrines of these grand old Baptists. At the beginning of his pamphlet he states the five heads of the heresy of the Petrobrusians.

In the first he accuses them of "denying that little children under years of responsibility can be saved by the baptism of Christ; and that the faith of another (alienam fidem, the faith demanded from popish sponsors when a child was christened) could benefit those who were unable to exercise their own (faith); because, according to them, not another's faith, but personal faith, saves with baptism, the Lord saying, 'He who shall believe, and be baptized, shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be condemned.'" This is the abbot's first and heaviest charge against these ancient Baptists. This accusation means that the Petrobrusians refused to baptize children because they were destitute of faith. The charge is repeated frequently by the abbot of Cluny.

"The second capitulum says that temples or churches should not be built, and that those existing should be torn down; that sacred places for praying were unnecessary for Christians, since God when addressed in supplication heard equally those who in a warehouse and in a church deserved his attention, in a market-place and in a temple, before an altar or before a stable." By this we understand that the Petrobrusians did not believe in the sanctity of bricks and mortar, and probably thought that as Romish churches were nests of idols and scenes of blasphemous superstition, their destruction would be no crime.

"The third capitulum requires holy crosses to be broken and burned, because that frame, or instrument, on which Christ, so fiercely tortured, was so cruelly slain, is not worthy of adoration, or veneration, or of any supplication; but to avenge his torments and death, it should be branded with disgrace, hacked to pieces with the sword, and consumed in the flames." The Petrobrusians detested the worship of the crucifix, and prayers offered to it. and, like the Scotch Covenanters, they urged its destruction as a Christ-dishonoring idol,

"The fourth capitulum denied not only the reality of the body and blood of the Lord, as offered daily and constantly in the sacrament (Eucharist) in the church; but judged that it was absolutely nothing, and should not be offered to God." In this opinion all Protestants concur.

"The fifth capitulum holds up to ridicule sacrifices, prayers, charitable gifts, and the other good works performed by the faithful living for the faithful departed." Peter then states that he had answered "these five heads," or heresies, "as God had enabled him." He might have added a sixth capitulum, that the Petrobrusians wanted Scripture for everything and not the sayings of the fathers. This is admitted in his discussion of their errors. The creed given by Peter to these Baptists is excellent as far as it goes. It is the faith of their brethren to-day. The abbot then proceeds to refute these imaginary heresies separately. And under the heading, "Answer to the Saying of the Heretics that Little Children should not be Baptized (Responsio contra id quod dicunt haeretici parvulos non posse baptizari) he commences his attack on the first capitulum. Peter assumes without evidence that the Petrobrusians believed that baptism was essential to salvation; and he takes up their declaration that faith was necessary to baptism, and that not the faith of another but the faith of the subject of baptism, and then he proceeds with great ingenuity to show how the faith of others "saved" persons, as he says, in the Saviour's day. Among the cases which he brings forward is that of the paralytic let down through the roof of the house to the Saviour who was inside, and Peter quotes the gospel narrative. " And when he (Jesus) saw their faith he said~ Thy sins are forgiven."

Peter then says, "What do you say to these things? Behold, I relate this not from Augustine (the godfather of infant baptism, whose arguments have been its defensive weapons for ages, and were very useful to the abbot) but from the Evangel, which you say you trust most of all. At length either concede that some can be saved by the faith of others (aliorum fide alios tandem posse salvari concedite), or deny if you can that the cases I brought forward are from the Evangel." This and several similar instances of healing in the New Testament where the faith of another exercised an influence in securing healing, make the abbot jubilant over the Petrobrusians. But the paralyzed man had faith himself, as well as those who brought him to Jesus. This theory is probably borrowed entirely from Augustine. In his day the baptism of adults demanded faith continually, and when he put forth enormous efforts to change the subjects of baptism, he still insisted upon faith, the faith of sponsors for unconscious babes. Hence he says, "A little child is benefited by their faith by whom 'he is brought to be consecrated" (in baptism) (prodesse parvulo eorum

fidem a quibus consecrandus offertur\*(\*Ausustini Opera Omnia, i. 1304.); "a little child believes through another (the sponsor) because it sinned through another" (Adam) (~parvulus] credit in altero quia peccavit in altero+). Again, speaking of a little child, he says, "It has the needful sacrament of the Mediator, so that what could not as yet be done by its faith is performed by the faith of those 'who love it" (necessarium habet Mediatoris sacramentum, ut quod per ejus fidem nondum potest, per eorum qui diligunt, fiat++). Speaking of baptism, Augustine says, " Mother-church loans them (little children) the feet of others that they may come (to it), the heart of others that they may believe, and the tongue of others that they may make confession" (accommodat illis mater ecclesia aliorum pedes ut veniant, aliorum cur ut credant, aliorum linguam ut fateantur\*\*\*). Augustine 'was in arms to compel all Christendom to adopt infant immersion, He was almost constantly declaring, " Without baptism little children can have no life in themselves" (sine quo [baptismo]nee parvuli possunt habere vitam in semetipsis|); and as Peter the Venerable is fighting a similar battle with the Petrobrusians, he stores his memory with Augustine's arguments, No doubt it was this that led him to say about the faith of those who carried the palsied man to Jesus, "Behold, I relate this not from Augustine, but from the Evangel."

Another common Pedobaptist argument is presented Peter, the abbot, in these words, "The unbelieving husband is saved by the believing wife, and the unbelieving wife is saved by the believing husband." This he gives as a quotation from I Cor. vii., and commenting upon it, he says, "If the unbelieving wife is saved by the faith of the husband, and unbelieving husband is saved by the faith of the wife, why should not the child be saved by the faith of husband and wife together?" This is a very natural question. But unfortunately for the abbot. Paul does not speak of either husband or wife as being saved by the faith of the other. He represents the one as being SANCTIFIED by the other. And the sanctification he refers to after its work is done leaves its subject an unbeliever. It is time legal righteousness of their wedded relations and the legitimacy of their children of which the apostle is speaking. If indeed a Christian lady could give not only her own heart but the love of Christ and the heavenly inheritance to her unbelieving husband, and allow him -still to remain in unbelief and sin, it would make a union with her an unheard-of attraction. And the same would be true of the believing husband. But Peter misquotes the Vulgate, the only copy of the Scriptures which he had. It has not his salvatur, but sanctificatus and sanctificata est.

In ancient times, after the heresy sprang into existence that water baptism was necessary to salvation, it was believed that martyrdom, or a baptism in one's own blood, would supply the place of the saving immersion. Peter turns this to ingenious account. He says, "If the martyrs by a personal faith are saved without baptism (in water), why may not little children, as I have said, be saved by baptism without a personal faith ?" Or we might add, Why may they not be saved like the martyrs without any baptism?

Treating of the commission of the Saviour, the baptismal creed of the Petrobrusians, he says, "'He who believeth not shall be damned.' You think, forsooth, that little children are held by this chain, and because they are not able to believe, that baptism will profit them nothing. But it is not so; the sacred words themselves show this; they do not show it to the blind, but to those who see; they show it to the humble, not to the haughty. 'Go,' says the Lord, 'into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be condemned.' These words terrify the rebellious; they do not condemn the innocent, they strike iniquity ; they do not strike irresponsible infancy, they destroy despisers of grace; they do not condemn the simplicity of nature (innocent children) - - . Restrain, therefore, the excessive severity which you assume, and do not aim to appear more just than him, all whose ways are mercy and truth, nor shut out little children from the kingdom of heaven (by refusing to baptize them), in reference to whom he has said, 'Of such is the

kingdom of heaven.'

" Peter's interpretation of the condemnation of the commission is correct; it does not condemn any who cannot believe. But his inference from it that infants should be baptized is childishness for the imaginary advantage of infants. All infants are saved 'without baptism, as the Petrobrusians believed. The commission has only to do with believers and their baptism, and the penalty of unbelief when persons have heard the gospel in years when faith is possible. Peter proceeds to take up the old argument which Augustine uses, and which has such a modern and familiar sound: "For thus afterwards Christ the Lord placed holy baptism in his church, the sacrament of the New Testament for the circumcision of the flesh." (Sic etiam postquam Dominus Christus in ecclesia sua sacramentum Novi Testamenti pro circumscione carnis sanctum baptismum dedit.

Augustini Opera Omnia, ii. 1087. Migne, Parisiis 1842.) And he says, "For it is very disgraceful and impious that we should refuse that to the little children of Christians which we grant to the little children of Jews, . . . for neither does time law prevail over the gospel nor Moses over Christ the little children of the Hebrews were circumcised by divine command on the eighth day, and purged from original sin. Where, then, was the faith of the boys? What was their understanding of the sacrament which they received?

'What was their knowledge of divine things? Where are you who condemn Christian little children? The little children of Jews are saved by the sacrament of circumcision, and shall not the little children of Christians be saved by the sacrament of baptism? The Jew believes, and his son is cleansed from sin; the Christian believes, and shall not his child be freed from similar guilt? There is no faith in the little children of Christians, but neither is there any faith in the little children of Jews, yet they are saved by the faith of another when circumcision is received, and these (little children) are saved by the faith of another (the sponsors) when baptism is received.'\*

We have made these quotations to show how vigorously the Petrobrusians denounced baptism on the "faith of another" and insisted on personal faith. Much more might be introduced from the celebrated assault of the abbot of Cluny, but from what has been placed before the reader from Peter the Venerable, it is clear that the Petrobrusians were very decided Bible Baptists,--Baptists ready for anything on earth except a renunciation of their Scriptural principles. The other four charges of Peter are quite as favorable to the general orthodoxy of these ancient brethren.

Their immense strength to resist the church and make converts is seen in the extraordinary pains Peter takes to arm himself with all the weapons of Augustine and with such as he had made himself, and in the extremely skillful use which he makes of them. It is refreshing to read a treatise written seven hundred and thirty-six years ago against a powerful body of Baptists by a very able theologian. Augustine directed the most subtle argument against the men who held Baptist principles in his day; but our people, when crushed, have only been overcome for a time, and then received fresh life again; and beyond a doubt our doctrines will finally seize the whole race and bless all nations.

\* Patri. Lat., clxxxix. pp. 722, 729, 752, 754, 755, 757, 758.

Migne, Parisiis, 1854.

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