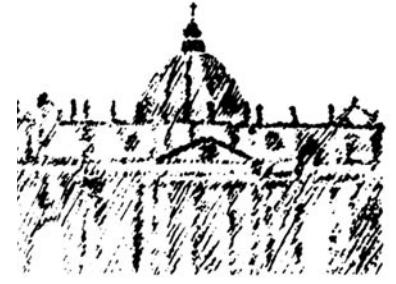


The Coming Home JOURNAL



Volume 2 Issue 2 • *Sola Scriptura*

Logic and the Foundations of Protestantism

by Fr. Brian W. Harrison



As an active Protestant in my mid-twenties I began to feel that I might have a vocation to become a minister. The trouble was that while I had quite definite convictions about the things that most Christians have traditionally held in common—the sort of thing C.S. Lewis termed “mere Christianity”—I had had some firsthand experience with several denominations (Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist) and was far from certain as to which of them (if any) had an overall advantage over the others. So I began to think, study, search, and pray. Was there a true Church? If so, how was one to decide which?

The more I studied, the more perplexed I became. At one point my elder sister, a very committed evangelical with somewhat flexible denominational affiliations, chided me with becoming “obsessed” with trying to find a “true Church.” “Does it really matter?” she would ask. Well, yes it did. It was all very well for a lay Protestant to relegate the denominational issue to a fairly low priority

amongst religious questions: lay people can go to one Protestant Church one week and another the next week and nobody really worries too much. But an ordained minister obviously cannot do that. He must make a very serious commitment to a definite church community, and under normal circumstances that commitment will be expected to last a lifetime. So clearly that choice had to be made with a deep sense of

responsibility; and the time to make it was before, not after, ordination.

As matters turned out, my search lasted several years, and eventually led me to where I never suspected it would at first. I shall not attempt to relate the full story, but will focus on just one aspect of the question as it developed for me—an aspect which seems quite fundamental.

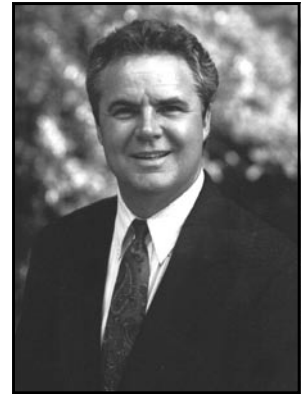
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Welcome to the Fifth Edition of the *Coming Home Journal*.



Once upon a time, there was this Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians. He was in charge of all of her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, and the apostle Philip had been led by an angel to go and meet him. As the Ethiopian official was on his way back, Philip found him riding his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah.

Now, of course, I'm not making this story up. It's found in Acts 8.25-40. Few details are given about the background of this African eunuch: what he specifically believed and why he had been drawn to travel all the way up to Jerusalem to worship. But apparently while he was there, he must have stopped by a local Hebrew scroll-store and purchased a copy of the book of Isaiah. This of course had to be a hand copied scroll—for the printing press was still nearly 1400 years away—and therefore it would have been quite rare and expensive. (It is very important to realize that in those days not just everyone had copies of the Old Testament Scriptures laying around on their coffee tables. This was a phenomenon that did not evolve for many, many centuries.)

When Phillip encountered the official, the angel led him to ask if the African understood what he was reading. The eunuch's response indicates that his problem was not from a lack of being able to read the language, which would either have been Hebrew or Greek (if it were the Septuagint version). No, the problem was one of interpretation, for he responded, "Well, how could I [understand], unless someone guides me?"

For anyone who claims that the Bible alone is sufficient, this account must stand as a main stumbling block—if it doesn't,

then I can't help but believe that they are merely not listening to what the Bible here is so clearly teaching.

The apparently highly educated Ethiopian official was reading one of the clearest prophecies from Isaiah about the Suffering Servant-Messiah:

*"He was led as a sheep to slaughter;
And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
So He does not open His mouth.
In humiliation His judgement was taken away;
Who shall relate His generation?
For His life is removed from the earth."*

The Ethiopian then asked Philip, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?"

Now let's pull ourselves away from the Ethiopian's specific question and Philip's response, and recognize the significance of what is happening: the written biblical prophecy was not sufficient to lead this man to Christ, or to faith and therefore salvation. A human witness and interpreter was needed.

Some might shoot back that Philip's answer as well as those given by Paul, Peter, James, John, Matthew, Luke, etc. became the New Testament which thereby explained the meaning of this and other Old Testament prophecies for any who would ever need an answer. But if this is true, why then are there still thousands upon thousands of sermons being preached and Bible studies being led all over the world, if further explanation isn't necessary?

Because just as this highly motivated Ethiopian eunuch recognized, one cannot

understand the eternal significance of the Scriptures unless "someone guides." *But we have been given the Holy Spirit to provide this guidance?! Then why so much confusion, contradiction and conflict amongst Christians?*

No, just as the apostle Philip so specifically represents, Jesus sent forth his hand-chosen and anointed apostolic band to "make disciples and ...teach" the whole world about who he was and about salvation.

This edition of the *Coming Home Journal* addresses the issue at question here: whether the Bible alone is truly sufficient for all matters of faith. This is a dogma most Protestants believe, or at least upon which they have based most of their doctrinal apologetics, ever since Martin Luther made the following bold statement at the Diet of Worms:

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."

An entire article could be written to address the important obvious as well as hidden implications of this statement (and with hindsight I wish one had been prepared for this issue), but suffice it to say that out of this bold stand (in which Luther was actually holding stubbornly to

his own private interpretations of a select list of verses) has evolved the modern view that "All I need is the Bible to know all I need about Jesus and salvation." The articles in this edition of the *CHJournal* each in its own way addresses how naive if not downright ridiculous this notion is. On the surface it may sound very gallant and faithful—as if one is rightly raising and praising the divinely inspired Word of God—but in reality the person holding to *sola scriptura* too often is giving primary approval to the other two foundations upon which Luther took his stand: "clear reason" and "conscience," the result of which, when unguided by the divinely established and guided authority of the Church have led to all kinds of aberrations, such as the rights to abortion and euthanasia as well as a long list of contemporary lifestyles.

As we've said from the beginning of our work, the goals of the *Coming Home Network International* and the *CHJournal* are not to proselytize, but rather to explain in clear terms the truth about and the truths of the Catholic Church. Most of our authors for the *CHJournal* are converts to the Catholic Church, some having been ordained clergymen of many different denominations, including the Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist and Presbyterian.

It is our prayer that these articles and stories are an encouragement to your faith. If you have any questions or comments, please either contact us or the person who gave you this journal. We want to do whatever we can to help those outside the Catholic Church, those who have left the Church, or those who are lifelong Catholics but have lost the "joy of their salvation," to discover the great joys and truth of the Catholic Faith.

May the Father richly bless you as you seek to follow Jesus His Son through the loving guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Sincerely In Christ,



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What began in November of 1997 as a condensed compilation of the "best" of the *Coming Home Network* newsletters has turned into an exciting and winsome resource for helping those outside the Catholic Church as well as life-long Catholics rediscover the truth and joy of the Catholic Faith.

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P. O. Box 8290
Zanesville, OH 43702
Phone: (740) 450-1175

www.chnetwork.org
mgrodi@chnetwork.org

Marcus C. Grodi
Executive Director & Editor

Fr. Ray Ryland
Chaplain

Bob Smeltzer
Director

Jim Anderson
Assistant Director

Stephen Smeltzer
Information Technologies

Arielle Anderson
Executive Assistant

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Kimberly Hahn M.Div.
Former Presbyterian

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As I groped and prayed my way towards a decision--contemplating the mountains of erudition, the vast labyrinth of conflicting interpretations of Christianity (not to mention other faiths) which lined the shelves of religious bookshops and libraries--I at times came close to despair and agnosticism. If all the "experts" on Truth--the great theologians, historians, philosophers--disagreed interminably with each other, then how did God, if He was really there, expect me, an ordinary "Joe Blow," to work out what was true?

The more I became enmeshed in specific questions of biblical interpretation--of who had the right understanding of justification, of the Eucharist, Baptism, grace, Christology, Church government and discipline, and so on--the more I came to feel that this whole line of approach was a hopeless quest, a blind alley. These were all questions that required a great deal of erudition, learning, competence in biblical exegesis, patristics, history, metaphysics, ancient languages--in short, scholarly research. But was it really credible (I began to ask myself) that God, if He were to reveal the truth about these disputed questions at all, would make this truth so inaccessible that only a small scholarly elite had even the faintest chance of reaching it? Wasn't that a kind of gnosticism? Where did it leave the nonscholarly bulk of the human race? It didn't seem to make sense. If, as they say, war is too important to be left to the generals, then revealed truth seemed too important to be left to the biblical scholars. It was no use saying that perhaps God simply expected the non-scholars to trust the scholars. How were they to know which scholars to trust, given that the scholars all contradicted each other?

Therefore, in my efforts to break out of the dense exegetical undergrowth where I could not see the trees for the wood, I shifted towards a new emphasis in my truth-seeking criteria: I tried to get beyond the bewildering mass of contingent historical and linguistic data upon which the rival exegetes and theologians constructed their doctrinal castles, in order to concentrate on those elemental, necessary principles of human thought which are accessible to all of us, learned and unlearned alike. In a word, I began to suspect that an emphasis on logic, rather than on research, might expedite an answer to my prayers for guidance.

The advantage was that you don't need to be learned to be logical. You need not have spent years amassing mountains of information in libraries in order to apply the first principles of reason. You can apply them

from the comfort of your armchair, so to speak, in order to test the claims of any body of doctrine, on any subject whatsoever, that comes claiming your acceptance. Moreover logic, like mathematics, yields firm certitude, not mere changeable opinions and provisional hypotheses. Logic is the first natural "beacon of light" with which God has provided us as intelligent beings living in a world darkened by the confusion of countless conflicting attitudes, doctrines and world-views, all telling us how to live our lives during this brief time that is given to us here on earth.

Logic of course has its limits. Pure "armchair" reasoning alone will never be able to tell you the meaning of your life and how you should live it. But as far as it goes, logic is an indispensable tool, and I even suspect that you sin against God, the first Truth, if you knowingly flout or ignore it in your thinking. "Thou shalt not contradict thyself" seems to me an important precept of the natural moral law.

Be that as it may, I found that the main use of logic, in my quest for religious truth, turned out to be in deciding not what was true, but what was false. If someone presents you with a system of ideas or doctrines which logical analysis reveals to be coherent--that is, free from internal contradictions and meaningless absurdities--then you can conclude, "This set of ideas may be true. It has at least passed the first test of truth--the coherence test." To find out if it actually is true you will then have to leave your logician's armchair and seek further information. But if it fails this most elementary test of truth, it can safely be eliminated without further ado from the ideological competition, no matter how many impressive-looking volumes of erudition may have been written in support of it, and no matter how attractive and appealing many of its features (or many of its proponents) may appear.

Some readers may wonder why I am laboring the point about logic. Isn't all this perfectly obvious? Well, it ought to be obvious to everyone, and is indeed obvious to many, including those who have had the good fortune of receiving a classical Catholic education. Catholicism, as I came to discover, has a quite positive approach to our natural reasoning powers, and traditionally has its future priests study philosophy for years before they even begin theology. But I came from a religious milieu where this outlook was not encouraged, and was often even discouraged. The Protestant Reformers taught that original sin has so weakened the human intellect that we must be extremely cautious about the claims

of "proud reason." Luther called reason the "devil's whore"--a siren which seduced men into grievous error. "Don't trust your reason, just bow humbly before God's truth revealed to you in His holy Word, the Bible!"--this was pretty much the message that came through to me from the Calvinist and Lutheran circles that influenced me most in the first few years after I made my "decision for Christ" at the age of 18. The Reformers themselves were forced to employ reason even while denouncing it, in their efforts to rebut the biblical arguments of their "Papist" foes. And that, it seemed to me, was rather illogical on their part.

LOGIC AND THE SOLA SCRIPTURA PRINCIPLE

Thus, with my awakening interest in logical analysis as a test of religious truth, I was naturally led to ask whether this illogicality in the practice of the Reformers was, perhaps, accompanied by illogicality at the more fundamental level of their theory. As a good Protestant I had been brought up to hold as sacred the basic methodological principle of the Reformation: that the Bible alone contains all the truth that God has revealed for our salvation. Churches that held to that principle were at least "respectable," one was given to understand, even though they might differ considerably from each other in regard to the interpretation of Scripture. But as for Roman Catholicism and other Churches which unashamedly added their own traditions to the Word of God--were they not self-evidently outside the pale? Were they not condemned out of their own mouths?

But when I got down to making a serious attempt to explore the implications of this rock-bottom dogma of the Reformers, I could not avoid the conclusion that it was rationally indefensible. This is demonstrated in the following eight steps, which embody nothing more than simple, common sense logic, and a couple of indisputable, empirically observable facts about the Bible:

1. The Reformers asserted Proposition A: "All revealed truth is to be found in the inspired Scriptures." However, this is quite useless unless we know which books are meant by the "inspired Scriptures." After all, many different sects and religions have many different books, which they call "inspired Scriptures."
2. The theory we are considering, when it talks of "inspired Scriptures," means in fact those 66 books, which are bound and published in Protestant Bibles. For convenience we shall refer to them from now on simply as "the 66 books."

3. The precise statement of the theory we are examining thus becomes Proposition B: "All revealed truth is to be found in the 66 books."
4. It is a fact that nowhere in the 66 books themselves can we find any statements telling us which books make up the entire corpus of inspired Scripture. There is no complete list of inspired books anywhere within their own pages, nor can such a list be compiled by putting isolated verses together. (This would be the case: (a) if you could find verses like "Esther is the Word of God," "This Gospel is inspired by God," "The Second Letter of Peter is inspired Scripture," etc., for all of the 66 books; and (b) if you could also find a biblical passage stating that no books other than these 66 were to be held as inspired. Obviously, nobody could even pretend to find all this information about the canon of Scripture in the Bible itself.)
5. It follows that Proposition B—the very foundation of all Protestant Christianity—is neither found in Scripture nor can be deduced from Scripture in any way. Since the 66 books are not even identified in Scripture, much less can any further information about them (e.g., that all revealed truth is contained in them) be found there. In short, we must affirm Proposition C: "Proposition B is an addition to the 66 books."
6. It follows immediately from the truth of Proposition C that Proposition B cannot itself be revealed truth. To assert that it is would involve a self-contradictory statement: "All revealed truth is to be found in the 66 books, but this revealed truth itself is not found there."
7. Could it be the case that Proposition B is true, but is not revealed truth? If that is the case, then it must be either something which can be deduced from revealed truth or something which natural human reason alone can discover, without any help from revelation. The first possibility is ruled out because, as we saw in steps 4 and 5, B cannot be deduced from Scripture, and to postulate some other revealed extra-Scriptural premise from which B might be deduced would contradict B itself. The second possibility involves no self-contradiction, but it is factually preposterous, and I doubt whether any Protestant has seriously tried to defend it—least of all those traditional Protestants who strongly emphasize the corruption of man's natural intellectual powers as a result of the Fall. Human reason might well be able to conclude prudently and responsibly that an authority which itself claimed to possess the totality of revealed truth was in fact jus-

tified in making that claim, provided that this authority backed up the claim by some very striking evidence. (Catholics, in fact, believe that their Church is precisely such an authority.) But how could reason alone reach that same well-founded certitude about a collection of 66 books which do not even lay claim to what is attributed to them? (The point is reinforced when we remember that those who attribute the totality of revealed truth to the 66 books, namely Protestant Church members, are very ready to acknowledge their own fallibility—whether individually or collectively—in matters of religious doctrine. All Protestant Churches deny their own infallibility as much as they deny the Pope's.)

8. Since Proposition B is not revealed truth, nor a truth which can be deduced from revelation, nor a naturally-knowable truth, it is not true at all. Therefore, the basic doctrine for which the Reformers fought is simply false.

CALVIN'S ATTEMPTED SOLUTION

How did the Reformers try to cope with this fundamental weakness in the logical structure of their own first principles? John Calvin, usually credited with being the most systematic and coherent thinker of the Reformation, tried to justify belief in the divine authorship of the 66 books by dogmatically postulating a direct communication of this knowledge from God to the individual believer. Calvin makes it clear that in saying Scripture is "self-authenticated," he does not mean to be taken literally and absolutely. He does not mean that some Bible text or other affirms that the 66 books, and they alone, are divinely inspired. As we observed in step 4 above, nobody ever could claim anything so patently false. Calvin simply means that no extra-biblical human testimony, such as that of Church tradition, is needed in order for individuals to know that these books are inspired. We can summarize his view as Proposition D: "The Holy Spirit teaches Christians individually, by a direct inward testimony, that the 66 books are inspired by God."

The trouble is that the Holy Spirit Himself is an extra-biblical authority as much as a Pope or Council. The third Person of the Trinity is clearly not identical with the truths He has expressed, through human authors, in the Bible. It follows that even if Calvin's Proposition D is true, it contradicts Proposition B, for "if all revealed truth is to be found in the 66 books," then that leaves no room for the Holy Spirit to reveal directly and non-verbally one truth which cannot be found in any passage of those books, namely, the fact that each one of them is inspired.

In any case, even if Calvin could somehow show that D did not itself contradict B, he would still not have succeeded in showing that B is true. Even if we were to accept the extremely implausible view represented by Proposition D, that would not prove that no other writings are inspired, and much less would it prove that there are no revealed truths that come to us through tradition rather than through inspired writings. In short, Calvin's defense of biblical inspiration in no way overthrows our eight-step disproof of the *sola scriptura* principle. Indeed, it does not even attempt to establish that principle as a whole, but only one aspect of it—that is, which books are to be understood by the term "Scriptura."

The schizoid history of Protestantism itself bears witness to the original inner contradiction which marked its conception and birth. Conservative Protestants have maintained the original insistence on the Bible as the unique infallible source of revealed truth, at the price of logical incoherence. Liberals on the other hand have escaped the incoherence while maintaining the claim to "private interpretation" over against that of Popes and Councils, but at the price of abandoning the Reformers' insistence on an infallible Bible. They thereby effectively replace revealed truth by human opinion, and faith by an autonomous reason. Thus, in the liberal/evangelical split within Protestantism since the 18th century, we see both sides teaching radically opposed doctrines, even while each claims to be the authentic heir of the Reformation. The irony is that both sides are right: their conflicting beliefs are simply the two horns of a dilemma, which has been tearing at the inner fabric of Protestantism ever since its turbulent beginnings.

Reflections such as these from a Catholic onlooker may seem a little hard or unyielding to some—ill-suited, perhaps, to a climate of ecumenical dialogue in which gentle suggestion, rather than blunt affirmation, is the preferred mode of discourse. But logic is of its very nature hard and unyielding; and insofar as truth and honesty are to be the hallmarks of true ecumenism, the claims of logic will have to be squarely faced, not politely avoided.



Father Brian Harrison is currently teaching at the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico in Ponce.

You Are That Man

By Mark Connell

“I was born and raised in a Catholic home.” This sentence, repeated in all too many ‘conversion’ stories, must be included in mine. It seems so much more tragic to preface a testimony with this sentence, than to relay a happy conversion story that starts, “I was born and raised a staunch Calvinist, but then...” Why? Because when the story concerns a cradle Catholic, it signals that something was missing from what should have been the most wonderful, grace filled Christian experience available on earth.

Yes, the good news is that many of these Catholics are coming Home! But the disturbing news is that these people have felt the need to leave the Church of their youth in order to recognize God’s love.

Often, in an attempt to assuage the guilt of having left the Church over such issues as clerical abuse, lack of spiritual formation or coldness in his or her local parish, an ex-Catholic will turn against the Church and become viciously anti-Catholic. This happened with me. I was not really anti-Catholic when I left the Church; nor did I leave for any heavy doctrinal reason, I left for emotional ones. At the time of my departure, I was very pro-Catholic and longed for the Church to meet my spiritual needs, but was angry that it didn’t.

I left the Church in 1992, joining a small, loving Protestant church. Eventually I would become an elder of this church, lead men’s Bible studies, and host weekly prayer meetings. Independently of anything taught from the pulpit of this church, I grew even angrier and proceeded to build a doctrinal ‘case’ against Rome. Every evening, my grudge against the Church was edged toward full-blown hatred as I reveled in the writings of professional anti-Catholics such as Dave Hunt and James G. McCarthy. Many a dark night slipped by as I continually “let the sun go down on my anger.” Woe to the unprepared Catholic that crossed my path at this time! Woe to my Catholic family members! McCarthy and Hunt’s books allowed me to build an air tight case against the Church, but it seems that I never considered that if air could not get in or out, neither could the Light. And so, in the darkness of my prejudice, I grew as a misshapen plant. I bore bitter fruit on twisted branches.

I wrote anti-Catholic tracts and opened a post office box with the intent of distributing them. I spent long hours in the library researching local Catholic history in order to compile a “spiritual map” of my community. On a large street map, I marked the location of each Catholic Church with an “X” (Eight X’s in all.) This mapping was done in order to target these Catholic Churches for intense intercessory prayer campaigns. I wasn’t praying for anything as noble as an increase in vocations in the Catholic Church, I simply wanted all the Catholic Churches in my community to be emptied. I went to many of these Churches, anointed the buildings with oil, and prayed for the salvation of the members there.

Something Truly Miraculous

In the midst of all this, something truly miraculous happened. I heard a sermon by a Fundamentalist pastor who seemed to hate the Church as much as I did. In a pivotal moment of my spiritual life, I listened to him and comprehended just what I had become. Suddenly, as when Nathan the prophet confronted the murderous King David, I could almost hear God say, “You are that man, Mark!” It was as if someone had held a mirror up to my face and I saw that I had become terribly disfigured. Hate had turned me into a monster. As I listened to this local anti-Catholic preacher, I can vividly remember wondering what Heaven would be like, filled with only the “righteous” like him and me? I came to the conclusion that Heaven would be a miserable and perfectly wretched place if that were so!

Within a month of hearing this sermon, I picked up a book by an ‘obscure’ Catholic

named Mother Teresa. “A Simple Path” challenged my whole conception of Christian service. Here was an elderly nun selflessly giving her whole life to Christ, but there was just one problem: she prayed the Rosary! What was I to do? I knew that the Rosary was an instrument used in ‘idoltrous’ prayers to Mary; how could this woman serve God, and Satan too? For the answer, I turned to Dave Hunt’s book, where he reassured me that, “her [Mother Teresa’s] evangelism leads no one to Christ...”¹ For some strange (and merciful) reason I didn’t buy Hunt’s counsel this time. I began to wonder, *Am I just gathering around me a great number of teachers to say what my itching ears want to hear?*

I shared Mother Teresa’s book with my pastor, a kind and compassionate man whom I love deeply, and he was so moved that he preached a sermon on it. Contrary to Dave Hunt’s assertion, people in this Protestant congregation were brought closer to Christ because of this nun’s witness. Seeing this, I knew I had to radically alter my opinion of at least one Catholic, a tiny nun from Calcutta.

I was being devastated by all that was being revealed to me about my prejudices. I was horrified by the prospect that some of the very people I had been persecuting, may have in fact been ‘saved.’ I, of course, had no intention of going back to the Catholic Church, but at least I would be more charitable in my assessment of Catholics. Not wanting to concede too much, however, I resolved to re-read Dave Hunt’s book to see what I could salvage of my case against the Church.

Sola Scriptura: Hunt or Luther?

I started reading “A Woman Rides the Beast” for a second time, but this time something was different. Whereas in the past this book made me feel smug about my escape from the “Whore of Babylon,” it now caused my case to collapse in ruins. This book is so internally inconsistent and mean spirited, that I could only shake when I read it again. If Hunt had written in the same manner about the Jewish people, he would be termed an anti-Semite and be featured on Nightline. Consider the following quote from his book, “Those conditioned to believe that wine had become Christ’s blood were able to believe Hitler’s myth of blood as well.”²² How could I be so blind to his prejudice?

As I studied this book, something else became apparent. In his rush to pummel Catholics, Hunt also wounded Luther. With his assault on Luther’s ‘heretical’ belief in the Real Presence, he shook my trust in *sola scriptura*. Why? Because Luther and Hunt both believe that Scripture alone should be used to determine doctrine. Yet, while using Scripture, both men were at opposite ends of the spectrum on what seemed to be a key doctrinal question: Is Christ physically present in the Eucharist? Hunt said this belief was “a fantasy” and “a foolish heresy”³ and cited many Scripture verses to support his belief. Luther disagreed, as he explained in, *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament and Concerning the Brotherhood*:

“There are those who practice their arts and subtleties to such an extent that they ask where the bread remains when it is changed into Christ’s flesh, and the wine when it is changed into His blood; also in what manner the whole Christ, His flesh and blood, can be comprehended in so small a portion of bread and wine. What does it matter? It is enough to know that it is a divine sign, in which Christ’s flesh and blood are truly present — how and where, we leave to Him.”²⁴ [Emphasis added]

Hunt claimed that Luther had been unable to jettison this belief from his Catholic upbringing, but Luther’s writings clearly show that he used Scripture to support this belief, as is shown in the following quote from his *Small Catechism*:

“What is the sacrament of the Altar? It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and

wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and drink. Where is this written? The holy Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, together with St. Paul, write thus: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, in the night in which He was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to His disciples, saying, Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you; this do in remembrance of me.”²⁵ [Emphasis added]

Hunt had a problem, and so did I. Using Scripture Alone, we had come to an impasse. *Sola scriptura* did not seem to be a valid method for solving this important doctrinal dispute. Either Hunt was right or Martin Luther was right, or both were wrong. In any event, *sola scriptura* had failed to weed out an error in doctrine. One or both were teaching a lie, but whom? What Luther (using Scripture) saw as the Body and Blood of our Lord, Hunt (using Scripture) saw as a fantasy and heresy.

I saw that it ultimately came down to a stand off between Dave Hunt and Martin Luther’s interpretations of Scripture. I started to wonder, *Am I just following the “traditions of men” by trusting Hunt, or am I following the intentions of Christ?* This question started to burn inside of me. How would I resolve it?

Matthew 18: Our Lord’s Instruction

I was dismayed to discover that I could not even bring this disagreement to the ‘church’ as instructed by Jesus in Matthew 18. In this discourse to the disciples, He had outlined a three-step procedure to use if one had something against a brother. Included were the consequences to be incurred if one would not submit to correction. I reasoned that Hunt’s charge of heresy would qualify as having “ought against a brother.” Jesus’ solution was *not* to take this problem to the Scriptures (Remember, that’s how we arrived at this impasse), but instead to take it to “the church.” It suddenly became clear that I couldn’t do this. Why not?

Well, quite frankly, which Protestant church would I have brought it to? Dave Hunt’s church? The Lutheran church whom he had also charged with heresy? Or perhaps a ‘neutral’ Protestant denomination like the Baptist church? If the Baptists, then which Baptist church? The Regular Baptists? The Southern Baptists? The American Baptists?

Which one of the 25,000 Protestant denominations should I bring it to?

Which Protestant church would be given the final authority to cast one or both of these men out as “tax collectors and sinners”? And if they were cast out, what would stop them from simply starting up another church, a church custom tailored to their own particular teachings? The end result could be denomination number 25,001 and denomination number 25,002 and a direct repudiation of Christ’s command that this excommunication would be binding “in heaven and on earth.”

I began to see that in spite of the Protestant insistence on the Bible being the “court of last appeal,” *sola scriptura* was an unworkable doctrine. Without an authoritative Church with the authority to bind and loose (in heaven and on earth), Jesus’ solution for conflict resolution in the church was ludicrous. I reasoned that Jesus loves us too much to give us worthless solutions, therefore this authoritative church must exist today, just as it must have existed from the time He issued the command. This church also must have been exercising this authority throughout Christian history, definitively judging heresies such as Gnosticism and Pelagianism as being contrary to the Truth.

I read the Church Fathers and saw that the belief in the Real Presence could be traced back to the early martyrs; the early Church consistently held that the Jesus was really present in the Eucharist. From this discovery I developed an intense hunger for the Eucharist which would not dissipate. I wanted to belong to a living Church tradition with a sense of being joined to a family that had its beginnings in the Upper Room, and which had continued to defend the Faith until this present day.

During this time, I discovered that I didn’t have to search for a church to weigh the merits of Luther’s doctrine. Jesus Christ had already established a Church which had done just that. In the end, Dave Hunt had done what the Catholic Church had failed to do. He had destroyed my trust in *sola scriptura*.

Implications

With these revelations came a necessary pruning. As branch after twisted branch of prejudice was cut off, there was great pain and turmoil. I know that were it not for the love of my wife and the grace of God, I would not have survived the process. I did not want

to leave the wonderful people at my church, and, as sad as it might sound, I did not want to leave the comfort of the dark little box into which I had tried to squeeze the richness of Christianity. On another level, I did not want to commit my life to a Church with which I was still angry. And to be even more honest, I did not want to eat the “wheelbarrows full of crow” that people would be lining up to feed me. Not surprisingly, this thinly veiled pride was the last obstacle to be overcome.

But I learned to lay my pride and anger aside as I prayed about Jesus’ question in Luke 6:46, “And why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” I slowly came to the following conclusion: If someone is serious about obeying Christ, and if that person makes an honest and careful study of both Scripture and Church history, he or she will ultimately feel compelled to come into the bosom of the Catholic Church or suffer the utter misery of living a life of compromise.

My return to the Church happened on a quiet evening at the local monastery. There was no fanfare, no grand ceremony. I sincerely stated my intention to obey the teachings of the Church by making a Profession of Faith, and then went to confession with my family. Together with our fellow Catholics, we received our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament during a public Mass. After a four-year rejection of the Eucharist, I could only weep. The sublime nature of the moment was heightened by the realization that this Church was marked by a small ‘X’ on my map.

On the edge of the woods near the monastery stands a statue of Jesus with arms outstretched. A detail of this statue had caught my attention while compiling my map two years earlier: the statue had no right hand. Such was my suspicion of the Church, that this missing hand was proof to me of Rome’s diabolical nature. The Bible had much to say about the importance of God’s mighty right hand, and here was a symbol of the Catholic Church’s negation of God’s power. So, “X” marked the spot.

I pointed to the statue during one of my first meetings with the priest who brought me home. “See,” I challenged, “Christ has no right hand!” Father Gabriel turned calmly towards me and said, “Mark, you are His right hand.” My thoughts turned to Mother Teresa and my own stumbling journey to this place, and conviction followed. I had been so intent upon making God do my will that I hadn’t even considered following Christ’s insistent call to humble service. The sheer

arrogance of my approach to “healing” the spiritual wounds of my community became brutally apparent. Now, when I leave Mass at this monastery, I can see this statue that still challenges me to continue this lifelong process of dying to self.

Floating high above the Church of the Immaculate Conception, the symphony of bells calls the Catholics of this small Midwestern town to worship on this February morning. Far below the bell tower, the sanctuary slowly fills with people as I let my prayers ride upon the sound. It is a miracle that my wife and I are here today. A short year ago, I had told my Protestant pastor that I was going to pray for the Catholic people during Lent, that they would come to know the Lord. Now, here I am in this Church, eyes clouding with tears, heart filled with peace and wonder — a Catholic once again.

I have become graciously undone. All the things I thought I knew, all of my clever reasons for ridiculing these people, lies mercifully in ruins behind me. Heaped there also is my self-righteous facade, the victim of the Truth. This morning, with nothing else to give God but my ragged self, I will offer that to Him again. In a short time, He will give Himself to my wife and me in a very real way. The priest will say, “The Body of Christ,” and we will say, “Amen!” We will proclaim that

which the Church has proclaimed for two thousand years: that Jesus is really and truly present in the Eucharist. Sitting here now, with the sounds and the sights of Catholicism above and around me, and with the expectation of the Eucharist before me, I am filled with awe. What a year. What a tumultuous and glorious journey.

As I write this, I am preparing for Ash Wednesday. Soon, the priest will place ashes upon my forehead as a symbol of repentance, death and resurrection. As he inscribes a Cross upon my forehead with an ash blackened thumb, he will say something like this: “Repent and believe the Good News!” I will gladly bear upon my brow the symbol of our precious Savior’s life-giving death. This will be the first time I will have participated in this solemn ceremony in five years. It will be nearly one year to the day since I voiced my commitment to pray for the Catholic people during Lent, that they might come to know the Lord. Isn’t it amazing how God answers prayer?



For Further Reading on the Issue of Sola Scriptura

Henry G. Graham, *Where We Got The Bible* (San Diego, CA: Catholic Answers)

Robert Sungenis, *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing, 1998).

Mark Shea, *By What Authority? An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996). ...his new book is *Making Senses Out of Scripture; Reading the Bible as the First Christians Did* (Encinitas, CA: Basilica Press)

John Henry Newman, *On the Inspiration of Scripture*, ed. J. Derek Holmes and Robert Murray (Washington: Corpus Books, 1967).

William G. Most, *Free from All Error* (Libertyville, Ill.: Franciscan Marytown Press, 1985).

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“What is Truth?”

An Examination of *Sola Scriptura*

By Dwight Longenecker

Pontius Pilate asked the basic question for all humanity when he asked Jesus, “What is Truth?” The irony of the scene is powerful and poignant because the Eternal Truth stood before him incarnate as a human person. In John 14 Jesus proclaimed, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.” Later in the gospel Peter said, “Where else shall we go Lord, but to you? You alone have the words of eternal life.” So the Christian answer to this profound question is that Jesus himself is the Truth. If you want the Truth, come to him.

This is something all Christians agree on, but this answer does, however, raise more questions: How do we come to know Jesus as truth? How do we get in touch with this Jesus who is truth? We need answers to specific questions, like what should we believe? How shall we behave? How shall we run the church? Jesus may be the Truth, but how do we get hold of that truth? How do we know that what we believe is his truth?

In my evangelical days, I was told the truth was to be found in the Bible and in the Bible alone. In my Fundamentalist Bible lessons at Bob Jones University, I memorized a famous and important verse, 2 Timothy 3.16-17: “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is useful for doctrine, for instruction, for correction and training in righteousness so the man of God may be fully equipped for every good work.*”

In other words, we believed that the Bible was where we were to turn to learn what to believe and how to behave. And we were to believe the Bible because it is inspired—it is God-breathed. But there are some problems with this view. A simple problem is that since 2 Timothy 3.16-17 itself is a part of the New Testament, it could not be referring to the New Testament. Paul—in writing to Timothy—could only have been talking about the Old Testament Scriptures.

But let’s say for the sake of argument that this text also refers to the New Testament. While it certainly says that all Scripture is in-

spired and can be used to determine doctrine and Christian behavior, it doesn’t say that Scripture is the ONLY authority for God’s truth. In fact, nowhere in the Bible do you find such a thing stated. In addition, if this is the only evidence for biblical inspiration, another problem arises as soon as you start to push things a little.

The problem is this: 2 Timothy 3.16 states: “*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...*” This is then used by many to prove that Scripture is inspired. But how do we know that 2 Timothy 3.16 itself is inspired? This reasoning is circular. It goes like this:

“We believe the Bible. OK, why is that? Because it is inspired. Why do we believe it is inspired? Because the Bible says it is inspired and we believe the Bible. OK, how do we know the Bible is inspired? Because the Bible says it is inspired and we believe the Bible because it is inspired.” Too much of this type of reasoning makes you dizzy. There has to be a better answer.

I then encountered another difficulty by the time I got to Bible college. I had always been taught that the Bible was simple to understand; that the basic gospel message was simple and straightforward. But if the gospel message was so simple and straightforward, then why were there so many different Christian denominations all in disagreement with one another?

When I asked one of my teachers, I was told that the different denominations agreed on the basics—those things which were plain

and simply understood from Scripture—but they disagreed on the extras. However, when I examined for myself what the different denominations taught they not only disagreed on little things—like whether women should wear hats to church, or whether you had to be baptized by immersion or sprinkling—but they also disagreed on important things, like baptism in general, communion, how one can be saved, who was in charge of the church, who was going to heaven, and many other things. If Scripture was the only legitimate source of authority, shouldn’t the Church—or churches—be united around one simple, clear teaching from Scripture?

Another verse I was required to memorize was 2 Peter 1.20: “*No scripture is of any private interpretation, but holy men of God spake as the Holy Spirit instructed them.*” Obviously all the different Christian denominations disagree because they all have different interpretations of the Bible—which they each believe is the most accurate. It struck me that if they all have different interpretations of the Bible, then they must be interpreting it on their own. But 2 Peter 1.20 warns that the Bible must not be interpreted privately. Something was definitely wrong here.

So I wound up with two basic problems:

1. If the Bible is the only support for its own inspiration, then it is merely proving itself which is illogical. There has to be some other authority that can validate the

inspiration of the Bible.

2. If the Bible is the only source of authority for Christians, then why are the different churches so divided? Again there has to be some other authority which can decide how the Bible is to be understood.

In both cases, therefore, I was driven to search for this authority.

LIVE WITH DISAGREEMENTS?

In the face of these questions, a lot of people nowadays give up believing in the inspiration of the Bible. About the disagreements in the Body of Christ they say, "Well, sometimes, this side of heaven, you just can't be sure of the right interpretation. You have to live with these disagreements."

But can that be true? Is it possible that Jesus called himself *the Way, the Truth and the Life*, promised his apostles that they would know the truth (John 8.32, 16.13, etc.), commanded them to go out into all the world to preach the gospel, if, at the end of the day, they and we can't really know what is true after all? Is it possible that we have a gospel to proclaim, but God hasn't provided a certain way for us to know what that gospel consists of and how it is applied? Have we merely ended up like Pontius Pilate, shrugging our shoulders and saying cynically: "Ahh, what is 'truth' anyway?"

There are, however, some excellent rock-solid answers for these questions. The Bible IS inspired, but the evidence for its inspiration rests on something more than 2 Timothy 3.16. There is also a sure-fire way to know the right interpretation of the Bible, but the evidence for that sure interpretation is profound and goes to the very roots of Scripture itself.

THE PROBLEM OF THE CANON

The Bible didn't just drop down out of heaven. Although we believe it was inspired by God, this inspiration happened through real people in real situations in a real place and time. The Scriptures were written by the people of God, for the people of God. They were read by the people of God, used to teach the people of God, and used for the worship of the people of God. Maybe the best way to describe the Bible is to say that it is the story of the relationship between God and His people—the Church—both the Old Testament Church and the New Testament Church. The Bible was never just a list of

things—a theological textbook—about God telling His people what they must believe. Neither was it merely a set of rules to be obeyed. Instead the Bible was first and foremost the story of God's loving relationship with humanity.

Furthermore, the same people who wrote the Scriptures—used the Scriptures, prayed the Scriptures and learned from the Scriptures—chose which holy writings should be included as Scripture. Before Christ was born the books of what we now call the Old Testament were well established. During the first century of Christianity the gospels and epistle letters were all written either by the apostles chosen by Christ or one of their disciples. By the mid-second century, the early Christians were unanimous in accepting the four gospels and the thirteen letters of Paul. However, also during these early centuries of the Church many, many other writings appeared vying for equal acceptance as apostolic documents. Different local churches accepted varying and sometimes contradictory lists of books as authority, until finally in 382 AD, at the Synod of Rome, a final canon of the books of the Old and New Testaments was presented as authoritative. This is identical to the list found in any contemporary Catholic Bible.

This, therefore, draws our attention to another deep problem with *sola scriptura*. Not only is the Bible itself impotent to prove its own inspiration or ensure its own interpretation, it could not specify exactly which of the hundreds of books were to be considered inspired Scripture. Another God-given authority needed to do this, and in the very words of the Synod of Rome we see this authority identified: "*Now indeed we must treat of the divine Scriptures, what the universal Catholic Church accepts and what she ought to shun.*"

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH

In the inspired Scriptures—the canon of which, therefore, being determined by the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—we discover the very authority we need to determine *what is truth*. In 1 Timothy 3.15, the Apostle Paul says something very important: "...*God's church is the household of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth.*"

In Ephesians 3.10, he likewise taught

that it was God's "...*intent that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.*"

In other words it is through the Church that we learn the truth about Jesus—not just through the Bible. It is by belonging to the living body of Christ—the Church—that we come to understand and know the mystery of Jesus Christ himself.

Paul says that the Church is *the pillar and foundation of truth*. So the Church is the basis and the support for the truth. It is on the Church that the whole edifice rests and is supported. It's no exaggeration to say then that not only did the Church establish and validate the inspiration of the Bible, and determine which specific books were to be considered inspired Scripture, but that without the Church we wouldn't have a Bible at all.

ORAL TRADITION

But the Church did not pass on the teaching of Christ only in written form. From the earliest days the teaching was also passed on in oral form. In his letters to the young Bishop Timothy, Paul wrote, "*devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.*" And, "...*continue in what you have learned... because you know those from whom you learned it and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures.*"

Paul here of course could only have been referring to the Old Testament, which he therefore held as authoritative. But he also believed, however, that his own teaching, both written and preached, were to be taken as authoritative for determining doctrine and right Christian behavior. This is stated most clearly in Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians, 2.15: "*So then brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions we passed on to you whether by word of mouth or by letter.*" So the teachings which Paul received from Jesus he passed on both in writing and by word of mouth.

There are many who believe that the word of mouth tradition lost its authority as soon as the biblical books were written down, but it is significant to recognize that in the very quote above, Paul acknowledges that both sources of teaching existed side-by-side when he wrote to the Thessalonians. We also see that while Paul was writing what would later be declared inspired Scripture, he was not only receiving oral tradition from

others, but continuing to pass it on to his hearers: “By this gospel you are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you... For what I received I passed on to you as of the first importance.” (I Corinthians 15. 2-3)

Paul promotes the continuing importance of the oral teaching as well as the written when he tells Timothy: “What you heard from me keep as the pattern of sound teaching with faith and love in Jesus Christ: guard the good deposit which is entrusted to you.” (2 Timothy 1.13) Elsewhere he praises the Corinthians for ‘upholding the traditions which I have passed on to you.’ (I Cor.11.2)

Catholics believe that this ancient teaching of the apostles has been handed on from generation to generation and kept alive by the constant and continual life of the Church. Did Paul think this oral teaching was to be passed on? Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2.2: “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” In other words, he commanded Timothy to hand on the oral tradition which he had received from Paul. It’s interesting that in this passage Paul is referring to four generations of succession—his own, Timothy’s, the people Timothy would teach and the ones they would teach in turn—which the Church would later identify as the process of Apostolic Succession.

THE DEPOSIT OF FAITH

The documents of the early Church in the years just after the death of the apostles show that they believed their Church leaders had inherited a precious deposit of faith—both in the writings of the apostles and in the oral traditions of the apostles. In about 95 A.D. Clement, the Bishop of Rome wrote to the Church at Corinth: “the faith of the gospels is established and the tradition of the Apostles is revered.”

Writing about the year 189 A.D. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, wrote: “What if the apostles had not left writings to us? Would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition which was handed down to those to whom they entrusted the churches?” Elsewhere Irenaeus also pointed out how important this apostolic tradition is for people to know the full truth. “It is possible then for everyone in every church who may wish to know the truth to contemplate the Traditions of the Apostles which has been made known throughout the

whole world.”

This helps us answer the difficult question—where do we turn for a faithful interpretation of the Bible? Is there a body of teaching which has been faithfully passed down from the apostles that would help us to interpret the Scriptures the right way? If such a body of teaching exists then it provides a rich mine for us to turn to when we try to interpret the Scripture. If an ancient strand of teaching exists which goes back to the apostles themselves, then we have not only the Scripture for a source book, but we have a rich tapestry of teaching which helps us to understand the Scripture.

As Catholics, we believe that we have just such a source for the proper interpretation of the Bible. So when we have a difficult question of biblical interpretation we don’t just read the rest of the Bible to find the answer to the difficult question. We turn to the tradition as preserved and protected by the Church to see what the people of God believed before us. Did they face the same questions? How did they answer them? Did they face similar circumstances? How did they confront them? Did they face the same doubts, problems, heresies and attacks? How did they stand up for the truth in their day? How can it help us determine the truth today?

THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The answer to these questions is based on the belief that Jesus always keeps his promises. He promised that he would send the Holy Spirit upon his apostles to guide them into all truth (John 16.13). He also promised that he would be with his followers forever (John 14.16; Matt. 28.19). As a result, the Church has always believed that she carries the responsibility of preserving and protecting the Truth as handed down from Jesus through his apostles, in both written and oral form. And this Spirit of Pentecost is still poured out on the Church—guiding and protecting and teaching.

Some, however, may point with confidence to First John when he assured his disciples: “You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and know that no lie is of the truth...the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you

have no need that any one should teach you...” (1 Jn. 2.20-27)

Therefore, they claim that have no need of a Church to teach them; they have the Holy Spirit within them. They claim that they are not making *any private interpretation* of Scripture, as Peter warned, but are interpreting it through the Holy Spirit. But this is not what either the apostles meant; the apostles are using their apostolic authority to correct their Spirit-filled hearer’s sometimes erroneous interpretations.

In 2 Peter 1.16-18, Peter claimed teaching authority because he was an eyewitness of Jesus’ life and glory, and received the truth directly from Jesus. He then states in 3.2 that the truth of God which was once was delivered by the holy prophets was now given through the apostles.

What is important to see here is that Peter compares the role of the New Testament apostles to the Old Testament prophets. God directly inspired the prophets. Their preaching was considered to be a direct word from God to the people of God. The apostles, chosen and empowered by Christ, are the God-inspired teachers of the New Testament people of God. When Peter says “No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation” he means that only the Prophet of God—that is, the apostle—is entitled and empowered by the Holy Spirit to give the right interpretation.

Paul agrees with him. In Ephesians 3.5 he says that the mystery of God has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets. And it is this same Spirit-led group of men who are the foundation of the Church. So Paul says in 2.20 that the Ephesians are members of the Church, the household of God which is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus as the chief corner stone. Jesus is the corner stone of this Church, but it is the apostles and the prophets—inspired by God’s Holy Spirit—who provide the foundation for the Church. (Cf. Rev. 21.14)

This verse fits together with Paul’s other teaching that the Church is the ‘pillar and foundation of truth’ (I Tim 3.15) So the Church—based on the teaching of the apostles—which was inspired to write the Scripture and inspired to choose which books were to be included in the Bible, is also its chosen, Spirit-filled interpreter of Scripture.

WHERE DOES ONE FIND THIS APOSTOLIC CHURCH TODAY?

If it's true that the apostles were the ones to interpret Scripture, and the apostolic Church was therefore the one to interpret Scripture, does that same apostolic authority exist today? If so, where can we find it?

We have seen that Paul explicitly handed on his teaching authority to Timothy and commanded him to hand that authority on to others who would in turn hand it on to their successors. But Timothy wasn't the only one. Paul also sent Titus to Crete to establish the Church there. Calling Titus his son in the faith, he said, *"The reason I left you behind in Crete was for you to get everything organized there and to appoint presbyters in every town the way I told you."* And what kind of a man must this presbyter be? *"He must have a firm grasp of the unchanging tradition so that he can be counted on to expound sound doctrine."* So in the New Testament we see Paul clearly setting up the Church with his sons in the faith as his successors in the various locations.

The writings of the early Church testify that the first generation of Christians after the apostles believed their Church leaders had somehow inherited the same teaching authority that the apostles had.

So Clement, the Bishop of Rome, around 95 AD writes: *"The Apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ...and they went out full of confidence in the Holy spirit...and appointed their first fruits...to be bishops and deacons. Our apostles knew there would be strife on the question of the bishop's office, Therefore, they appointed*

these people already mentioned and later made further provision that if they should fall asleep other tested men should succeed to their ministry." So Clement of Rome believed that the apostles—one of whom, John, may still have been alive—had wished for their teaching office to be continued in the Church.

Ignatius of Antioch was martyred in the year 115. In writing to the Trallian Church he equates the Church presbyters with apostles: *"Therefore it is necessary (as is your practice) that you should do nothing without the bishop, but be also in subjection to the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ our hope..."*

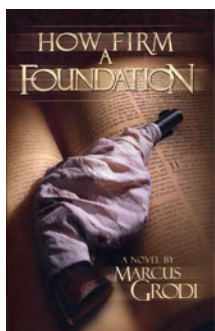
And Irenaeus who wrote around 180 AD also believed firmly that the Church had inherited the authority of the apostles to teach the truth faithfully. According to him it is because the Church leaders have inherited the apostolic authority that they can interpret Scripture properly. So he writes, *"By knowledge of the truth we mean: the teaching of the Apostles; the order of the Church as established from earliest times throughout the world...preserved through the episcopal succession: for to the bishops the apostles committed the care of the Church in each place which has come down to our own time safeguarded by...the most complete exposition...the reading of the Scriptures without falsification and careful and consistent exposition of them—avoiding both rashness and blasphemy."*

Remembering that Paul handed on his teaching authority to Timothy and Titus, and seeing how through history that authority has been handed down from generation to generation, Catholics believe that the dynamic and living teaching authority

continues to live within the Catholic bishops who have received their ministry in direct line from the apostles, passed down over the last 2,000 years.

Because of this direct link, Catholics believe the Church has a living connection with the apostolic authority, and that within the living apostolic tradition of the Catholic Church we can find a rock-solid, sure, historic and unified body of teaching which illuminates and interprets the Bible without fail.

This is an edited version of Dwight Longenecker's apologetics series for London's Premier Radio. Dwight was brought up in an evangelical home and graduated from Bob Jones University. He went on to study at Oxford and be ordained as an Anglican minister in England. Five years ago he and his family were received into the Catholic



How Firm A Foundation

By Marcus Grodi

Stephen LaPointe is a minister who loves Jesus, loves to preach, and considers the Bible as the one sufficient, firm foundation for his life. He left a career to attend seminary because he wanted to devote his life to helping others experience a true conversion of heart. He knows that one day he will stand before God accountable for what he preaches, and it is in this conviction that his crisis begins, for how can he know for certain that what he preaches is eternally true? This crisis threatens his calling as a minister, his marriage, and even his life.

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The Practical Problems of *Sola Scriptura* by James Akin

Simply stated, the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) teaches that every teaching in Christian theology (everything pertaining to “faith and practice”) must be able to be derived from Scripture alone. This is expressed by the Reformation slogan *Quod non est biblicum, non est theologicum* (“What is not biblical is not theological,” cf. Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology, Richard A. Muller, Baker, 1985).

An essential part of this doctrine, as it has been historically articulated by Protestants, is that theology must be done without allowing Tradition or a Magisterium (teaching authority) any binding authority. If Tradition or a Magisterium could bind the conscience of the believer as to what he was to believe then the believer would not be looking to Scripture alone as his authority.

A necessary corollary of the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is, therefore, the idea of an absolute right of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Each individual has the final prerogative to decide for himself what the correct interpretation of a given passage of Scripture means, irrespective of what anyone-or everyone-else says. If anyone or even everyone else together could tell the believer what to believe, Scripture would not be his sole authority; something else would have binding authority. Thus, according to *sola scriptura*, any role Tradition, a Magisterium, Bible commentaries, or anything else may play in theology is simply to suggest interpretations and evidence to the believer as he makes his decision. Each individual Christian is thus put in the position of being his own theologian.

PRIVATE JUDGEMENT

Of course, we all know that the average Christian does not exercise this role in any consistent way, even the average person admitted by Fundamentalists to be a genuine,

“born again” believer. There are simply too many godly people who are very devout in their faith in Jesus, but who are in no way inclined to become theologians.

Not only is the average Christian totally disinclined to fulfill the role of theologian, but if they try to do so, and if they arrive at conclusions different than those of the church they belong to—an easy task considering the number of different theological issues—then they will quickly discover that their right to private judgment amounts to a right to shut up or leave the congregation. Protestant pastors, even Luther and Calvin, have long realized that, although they must preach the doctrine of private judgment, to ensure their own right to preach, they must prohibit the exercise of this right in practice for others, lest the group be torn apart by strife and finally break up. It is the failure of the prohibition of the right of private judgment that has resulted in the over 20,000 Christian Protestant denominations listed in the Oxford University Press’s World Christian Encyclopedia. The disintegration of Protestantism into so many competing factions, teaching different doctrines on key theological issues (What kind of faith saves? Is baptism necessary? Is baptism for infants? Must baptism be by immersion only? Can one lose salvation? How? Can it be gotten back? How? Is the Real Presence true? Are spiritual gifts like tongues and healing for today? For everyone? What about predestination? What about free will? What about

church government?) is itself an important indicator of the practical failure of the doctrine of private judgment, and thus the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. However, there is a whole set of practical presuppositions that the doctrine of *sola scriptura* makes, every one of which provides not just an argument against the doctrine, but a fatal blow to it. *Sola scriptura* simply cannot be God’s plan for Christian theology.

In fact, it could never even have been thought to be God’s plan before a certain stage in European history because, as we will see, it could have only arisen after a certain technological development which was unknown in the ancient world. Before that one development, nobody would have ever thought that *sola scriptura* could be the principle God intended people to use, meaning it was no accident that the Reformation occurred when it did. If God had intended the individual Christian to use *sola scriptura* as his operating principle then it would have to be something the average Christian could implement. We can therefore judge whether *sola scriptura* could have been God’s plan for the individual Christian by asking whether the average Christian in world history could have implemented it.

Not only that, but since God promised that the Church would never pass out of existence (Matt. 16:18, 28:20), the normal Christian of each age must be able to implement *sola scriptura*, including the crucial patristic era, when the early Church

Fathers hammered out the most basic tenets of Christian orthodoxy. It is in this practical area that the doctrine comes crashing down, for it has a number of presuppositions which are in no way true of the average Christian of world history, and certainly not of the average Christian of early Church history.

PRESUPPOSITION #1

First, if each Christian is to make a thorough study of the Scriptures and decide for himself what they mean (even taking into consideration the interpretations of others) then it follows that he must have a copy of the Scriptures to use in making his thorough study (a non-thorough study being a dangerous thing, as any Protestant apologist will tell you, warning against the cults and their Bible study tactics). Thus the universal application of *sola scriptura* presupposes the mass manufacturing of books, and of the Bible in particular.

This, however, was completely impossible before invention of the printing press, for without that there could not be enough copies of the Scriptures for the individual Christians to use. *sola scriptura* therefore presupposes the inventing of the printing press, something that did not happen for the first 1,400 years of Church history.

It is often noted by even Protestant historians that the Reformation could not have taken off like it did in the early 1500s if the printing press had not been invented in the mid-1400s. This is more true than they know, because the printing press not only allowed the early Protestant to mass produce works containing their teachings about what the Bible meant, it allowed the mass production of the Bible itself (as Catholics were already doing—one does realize, of course, that the Gutenberg Bible and the other versions of the Bible being produced before Protestantism were all Catholic Bibles). Without the ability to mass produce copies of the Scriptures for the individual Christians to interpret, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* could not function, since one would only have very limited access to the texts otherwise—via the Scripture readings at Mass and the costly, hand-made copies of the Bible kept on public display at the church. Thus *sola scriptura* presupposes the printing press.

This is a key reason why the Reformation happened when it did—several

decades after the invention of the printing press. It took time for the idea of the printing press to make its mark on the European mind and get people excited about the idea of easily available books. It was in this heady atmosphere, the first time in human history when dozens of ancient works were being mass produced and sold, that people suddenly got excited with the thought, “Hey! We could give copies of the Bible to everyone! Everyone could read the Scriptures for themselves!”—a thought which led very quickly into *sola scriptura* in the minds of those who wished to oppose historic Christian theology, as it would provide a justification for their own desire to depart from orthodoxy (“Hey, I read the Scriptures, and this is what they said to me!”). Of course, the invention of the printing press does not itself enable us to give Bibles to every Christian in the world (as all the calls for Bibles to be sent to Russia illustrate), which leads to the next practical presupposition of *sola scriptura*.

PRESUPPOSITION #2

Second, besides the printing press, *sola scriptura* also presupposes the universal distribution of books and of the Bible in particular. For it is no good if enough copies of the Bible exist but they can't be gotten into the hands of the average believer. Thus there must be a distribution network capable of delivering affordable copies of the Bible to the average Christian. This is the case today in the developed world. However, even today we cannot get enough Bibles into many lands due to economic and political restraints, as the fund raising appeals of Bible societies and their stories of Bible smuggling inform us. However, in the great majority of Christian history, the universal distribution of books would have been totally impossible even in what is now the developed world. During most of Church history, the “developed world” was undeveloped.

The political systems, economies, logistical networks, and travel infrastructure that make the mass distribution of Bibles possible today simply did not exist for three-quarters of Church history. There was no way to get the books to the peasants, and no way the peasants could have afforded them in the first place. There just wasn't enough cash in circulation (just try giving a printer 5,000 chickens for the 1,000 Bibles he has just printed—much less keeping the chickens

alive and transported from the time the peasants pay them to the time the printer gets them).

PRESUPPOSITION #3

Third, if the average Christian is going to read the Scriptures and decide for himself what they mean, then he obviously must be able to read. Having someone read them to him simply is not sufficient, not only because the person would only be able to do it occasionally (what with a bunch of illiterates to read to), but also because the person needs to be able to go over the passage multiple times. He must look at its exact wording and grammatical structure, quickly flip to other passages bearing on the topic to formulate the different aspects of a doctrine as he is thinking about it, and finally record his insights so he doesn't forget them and keep the evidence straight in his mind. He therefore must be literate and able to read for himself. Thus *sola scriptura* presupposes universal literacy.

PRESUPPOSITION #4

Fourth, if the average Christian is going to make a study of what Scripture says and decide what it teaches, he must possess adequate scholarly support material, for he must either be able to read the texts in the original languages or have material capable of telling him when there is a translation question that could affect doctrine (for example, does the Greek word for “baptize” mean “immerse” or does it have a broader meaning? Does the biblical term for “justify” mean to make righteous in only a legal sense or sometimes in a broader one?). He must also have these scholarly support works (commentaries and such) to suggest to him possible alternate interpretations to evaluate, for no one person is going to be able to think of every interpretive option on every passage of Scripture that is relevant to every major Christian doctrine. No Protestant pastor (at least no pastors who are not in extreme anti-intellectual circles) would dream of formulating his views without such support materials, and he thus cannot expect the average Christian to do so either. Indeed! The average Christian is going to need such support materials even more than a trained pastor. Thus *sola scriptura* also presupposes the possession—not just the existence—of adequate support materials.

PRESUPPOSITION #5

Fifth, if the average Christian is to do a thorough study of the Bible for himself, then he obviously must have adequate time in which to do this study. If he is working in the fields or a home (or, later, in the factory) for ten, twelve, fifteen, or eighteen hours a day, he obviously doesn't have time to do this, especially not in addition to the care and raising of his family and his own need to eat and sleep and recreate. Not even a Sunday rest will provide him with the adequate time, for nobody becomes adept in the Bible just by reading the Bible on Sundays—as Protestants stress to their own members when encouraging daily Bible reading. Thus *sola scriptura* presupposes the universal possession of adequate leisure time in which to make a thorough study the Bible for oneself.

PRESUPPOSITION #6

Sixth, even if a Christian had adequate time to study the Bible sufficiently, it will do him no good if he doesn't have a diet sufficiently nutritious to let his brain function properly and his mind work clearly. This is something we often forget today because our diets are so rich, but for most of Christian history the average person had barely enough food to survive, and it was almost all bread. "Everything else," as the British historian James Burke put it, "was just something you ate with bread"—as a condiment or side-dish. This means that the average Christian of world history was malnourished, and as any public school dietitian can tell you, malnutrition causes an inability to study and learn properly. That is one of the big motivating forces behind the school lunch program. If kids don't eat right, they don't study right, and they don't learn right, because they don't think clearly. The same is true of Bible students. Thus *sola scriptura* also presupposes universal nutrition.

PRESUPPOSITION #7

Seventh, if the average Christian is going to evaluate competing interpretations for himself then he must have a significant amount of skill in evaluating arguments. He must be able to recognize what is a good argument and what is not, what is a fallacy and what is not, what counts as evidence and what does not. That is quite a bit of

critical thinking skill, and anyone who has ever tried to teach basic, introductory logic to college students or anyone who had tried to read and grade the persuasive essays they write for philosophy tests can tell you (I'm speaking from personal experience here), that level of critical thinking does not exist in the average, literate, well-nourished, modern college senior, much less the average, illiterate, malnourished, Medieval peasant. This is especially true when it comes to the abstract concepts and truth claims involved in philosophy and theology. Thus *sola scriptura* also presupposes a high level of universal education in critical thinking skills (a level which does not even exist today).

Therefore *sola scriptura* presupposes (1) the existence of the printing press, (2) the universal distribution of Bibles, (3) universal literacy, (4) the universal possession of scholarly support materials, (5) the universal possession of adequate time for study, (6) universal nutrition, and (7) a universal education in a high level of critical thinking skills. Needless to say, this group of conditions was not true in the crucial early centuries of the Church, was not true through the main course of Church history, and is not even true today. The non-existence of the printing press alone means *sola scriptura* was totally unthinkable for almost three-quarters of Christian history! All of this is besides the limitations we mentioned earlier—the fact that the average Christian, even the average devout Christian has no inclination whatsoever to conduct the kind of Bible study needed to become his own theologian and the fact that he is encouraged by many pressures from his own pastor and congregation (including the threat of being cast out) to fall in line and not challenge—especially publicly challenge—the party platform.

CHRISTIANITY FOR THE COMMON MAN?

It is thus hard to think of *sola scriptura* as anything but the theory spawned by a bunch of idealistic, Renaissance-era diletantes—people who had an interest in being their own theologians, who had a classical education in critical thinking skills, who had adequate nutrition, who had plenty of leisure time for study, who had plenty of scholarly support materials, who had good reading skills, who had access to Bible-sellers, and

most importantly, who had printed Bibles!

The average Christian today, even the average Christian in the developed world, does not fit that profile, and the average Christian in world history certainly did not, much less the average Christian in the early centuries. What this means, since God does not ask a person to do what they are incapable of doing, is that God does not expect the average Christian of world history to use *sola scriptura*. He expects the average Christian to obtain and maintain his knowledge of theology in some other way.

But if God expects the average Christian to obtain and maintain the Christian faith without using *sola scriptura*, then *sola scriptura* is not God's plan.



James Akin is a convert from conservative Presbyterianism. He is senior apologist at *Catholic Answers* in San Diego and author of *Mass Confusion: The Do's and Don'ts of Catholic Worship*.

The Perspicuity (“Clearness”) of Scripture

by David Armstrong

Martin Luther stated the classic Protestant understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture in his own favorite (and arguably most important) writing, The Bondage of the Will (from tr. by Henry Cole, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976, pp. 25-7,29; emphasis in original):

But, that there are in the Scriptures some things abstruse, and that all things are not quite plain, is a report spread abroad by the impious Sophists; by whose mouth you speak here, Erasmus . . .

This indeed I confess, that there are many *places* in the Scriptures obscure and abstruse; not from the majesty of the things, but from our ignorance of certain terms and grammatical particulars; but which do not prevent a knowledge of all the *things* in the Scriptures . . .

All the *things*, therefore, contained in the Scriptures, are made manifest, although some *places*, from the words not being understood, are yet obscure . . . And, if the words are obscure in one place, yet they are clear in another . . . For Christ has opened our understanding to understand the Scriptures

. . .

Therefore come forward, you and all the Sophists together, and produce any one mystery which is still abstruse in the Scriptures. But, if many things still remain abstruse to many, this does not arise from obscurity in the Scriptures, but from their own blindness or want of understanding, who do not go the way to see the all-perfect clearness of the truth . . . Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear scriptures of God . . .

If you speak of the internal clearness, no man sees one iota in the Scriptures, but he that hath the Spirit of God . . . If you speak of the external clearness, nothing whatever is left obscure or ambiguous; but all things that are in the Scriptures, are by the Word brought forth into the clearest light, and proclaimed to the whole world.

This is what I call the “sin” explanation, which is often brought forth to account for the obvious fact that agreement on Scriptural content and meaning on many, many doctrines has never been achieved by Protestantism, to put it very mildly. It is woefully inadequate, and I assert that Luther’s principle crumbles in light of the factual considerations below. One cannot invoke “sin” as the all-encompassing reason for Christian disagreement (as Luther—typically—does). That is absurdly simplistic as well as clearly uncharitable and judgmental.

Most conservative, classical, evan-

gelical, “Reformation” Protestants agree with Luther’s sentiments above totally or largely and hold to the view that—when all is said and done—the Bible is basically *perspicuous* (able to be clearly understood) in and of itself, without the absolute *necessity* for theological teaching, scholarly interpretation, and the authority of the Church (however defined).

This is not to say that Protestants are consciously taught to ignore Christian historical precedent altogether and shun theological instruction (although, sadly, the tendency of a-historicism and anti-intellectualism is strong in many circles). Rather,

perspicuity is usually said to apply to doctrines “essential” for salvation. Accordingly, it follows that whatever is necessary for salvation can be found in the Bible by any literate individual without the requisite assistance of an ecclesiastical body. This is presupposed in, for example, the widespread practice of passing out Bibles to the newly evangelized, oftentimes with no provision made for further guidance and supervision.

But what could possibly be imagined as more fatal to this abstract view than more than 20,000 denominations? The Bible is indeed more often than not quite clear when approached open-mindedly

and with a moral willingness to accept its teachings. I assume this myself, even as a Catholic. But in actual fact many Christians (and also heretics or “cultists”) distort and misunderstand the Bible, or at the very least, arrive at contradictory, but sincerely held convictions. This is the whole point from the Catholic perspective. Error is necessarily present wherever disagreements exist—clearly not a desirable situation, as all falsehood is harmful (for example, John 8: 44, 16:13, 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12, 1 John 4:6). Perspicuity (much like Protestantism as a whole) might theoretically be a good thing in principle, and on paper, but in practice it is unworkable and untenable.

Yet Protestant freedom of conscience is valued more than unity and the certainty of doctrinal truth in all matters (not just the core issues alone). The inquirer with newfound zeal for Christ is in trouble if he expects to easily attain any comprehensive certainty within Protestantism. All he can do is take a “head count” of scholars, pastors, evangelists, and *Bible Dictionaries* and see who lines up where on the various sides of the numerous disagreements. Or else he can just uncritically accept the word of whatever denomination he is associated with. In effect, then, he is no better off than a beginning philosophy student who prefers Kierkegaard to Kant—the whole procedure (however well intentioned) is arbitrary and destined to produce further confusion.

MERELY SECONDARY ISSUES

The usual Protestant reply to this critique is that denominations differ mostly over *secondary* issues, not *fundamental* or *central* doctrines. This is often and casually stated, but when scrutinized, it collapses under its own weight. Right from the beginning, the fault lines of Protestantism appeared when Zwingli and Oecolampadius (two lesser Reformers) differed with Luther on the Real Presence, and the Anabaptists dissented on the Eucharist, infant baptism, ordination, and the function of civil authority. Luther regarded these fellow Protestants as “damned” and “out of the Church” for these reasons. Reformers John Calvin and Martin Bucer held to a third position on the Eucharist (broadly speaking), intermediate between Luther’s Real Presence (*consubstantiation*) and Zwingli’s purely symbolic belief. By 1577, the book *200 Interpretations of the*

Words, “This is My Body” was published at Ingolstadt, Germany. This is the fruit of perspicuity, and it was quick to appear.

Protestants will often maintain that the Eucharist and baptism, for instance, are neither primary nor essential doctrines. This is curious, since these are the two sacraments that the majority of Protestants accept. Jesus said (John 6:53): *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* This certainly sounds essential, even to the extent that a man’s salvation might be in jeopardy. St. Paul, too, regards communion with equally great seriousness and of the utmost importance to one’s spiritual well-being and relationship with Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:14-22, 11:23-30). Thus we are already in the realm of salvation - a primary doctrine. Lutherans and many Anglicans (for example, the Oxford *Tractarians* and C.S. Lewis), believe in the Real Presence, whereas most evangelicals do not, yet this is not considered cause for alarm or even discomfort.

SOTERIOLOGY

Protestants also differ on other *soteriological* issues. Most Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, pentecostals, some Baptists, and many non-denominationalists and other groups are Arminian and accept *free will* and the possibility of falling away from salvation (*apostasy*). On the other hand, Presbyterians, Reformed and a few Baptist denominations and other groups are Calvinist and deny free will and the possibility of apostasy for the *elect*. In contrast to the former denominations, the latter groups have a stronger view of the nature of *original sin*, and deny that the Atonement is *universal*.

Traditional, orthodox Methodism (following founder John Wesley) and many “high church” Anglicans have had views of *sanctification* (that is, the relationship of faith and works, and of God’s enabling and preceding grace and man’s cooperation) akin to that of Catholicism. These are questions of how one repents and is saved (justification) and of what is required afterwards to either manifest or maintain this salvation (sanctification and perseverance). Thus, they are primary doctrines, even by Protestant criteria.

BAPTISM

The same state of affairs is true con-

cerning *baptism*, where Protestants are split into *infant* and *adult* camps. Furthermore, the infant camp contains those who accept *baptismal regeneration* (Lutherans, Anglicans, and to some extent, Methodists), as does the adult camp (Churches of Christ and Disciples of Christ). Regeneration absolutely has a bearing on salvation, and therefore is a primary doctrine. The Salvation Army and the Quakers don’t baptize at all (and neither celebrate the Eucharist). Thus, there are five distinct competing belief-systems among Protestants with regard to baptism.

Scripture seems to clearly refer to baptismal regeneration in Acts 2:38 (*forgiveness of sins*), 22:16 (*wash away your sins*), Romans 6:3-4, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Titus 3:5 (*he saved us, . . . by the washing of regeneration*), and other passages.

For this reason, many prominent Protestant individuals and denominations have held to the position of baptismal regeneration, which is anathema to the Baptist / Presbyterian / Reformed branch of Protestantism--the predominant evangelical outlook at present. We need look no further than Martin Luther himself, from whom all Protestants inherit their understanding of both *sola scriptura* and *faith alone* (*sola fide*) as the prerequisites for salvation and justification. Luther largely agrees with the Catholic position on sacramental and regenerative infant baptism:

Little children. . . are free in every way, secure and saved solely through the glory of their baptism. . . Through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, . . . the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by impoured faith. Nor should I doubt that even a godless adult could be changed, in any of the sacraments, if the same church prayed for and presented him, as we read of the paralytic in the Gospel, who was healed through the faith of others (Mark 2: 3-12). I should be ready to admit that in this sense the sacraments of the New Law are efficacious in conferring grace, not only to those who do not, but even to those who do most obstinately present an obstacle” (The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520, from the translation of A. T. W. Steinhauser, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, rev. ed., 1970, p.197).

1979, p.873).

Likewise, in his *Large Catechism* (1529), Luther writes:

Expressed in the simplest form, the power, the effect, the benefit, the fruit and the purpose of baptism is to save. No one is baptized that he may become a prince, but, as the words declare [of Mark 16:16], that he may be saved. But to be saved, we know very well, is to be delivered from sin, death, and Satan, and to enter Christ's kingdom and live forever with him... Through the Word, baptism receives the power to become the washing of regeneration, as St. Paul calls it in Titus 3:5... Faith clings to the water and believes it to be baptism which effects pure salvation and life...

When sin and conscience oppress us... you may say: It is a fact that I am baptized, but, being baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and obtain eternal life for both soul and body... Hence, no greater jewel can adorn our body or soul than baptism; for through it perfect holiness and salvation become accessible to us... (From ed. by Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1935, sections 223-224, 230, pp. 162, 165).

Anglicanism concurs with Luther on this matter. In its authoritative *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1563, language revised 1801), Article 27, *Of Baptism*, reads as follows:

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.

The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ. (From The Book of Common Prayer, NY: The Seabury Press,

The venerable John Wesley, founder of Methodism, who is widely admired by Protestants and Catholics alike, agreed, too, that children are regenerated (and justified initially) by means of infant baptism. From this position he never wavered. In his *Articles of Religion* (1784), which is a revised version of the Anglican *Articles*, he retains an abridged form of the clause on baptism (No. 17), stating that it is “a sign of regeneration, or the new birth.”

THE IRRESOLVABLE PROTESTANT DILEMMA

The doctrine of baptism in particular, as well as other doctrinal disputes mentioned above, illustrate the irresolvable Protestant dilemma with regard to its fallacious notion of *perspicuity*. Again, the Bible is obviously not perspicuous enough to efficiently eliminate these differences, unless one arrogantly maintains that sin always blinds those in opposing camps from seeing obvious truths, which even a “plowboy” (Luther’s famous phrase) ought to be able to grasp. Obviously, an authoritative (and even infallible) interpreter is needed whether or not the Bible is perspicuous enough to be theoretically understood without help. Nothing could be clearer than that. *Paper infallibility* is no substitute for conciliar and/or *papal infallibility*, or at least an authoritative denominational (Creedal / Confessional) authority, if nothing else.

The conclusion is inescapable: either biblical perspicuity is a falsehood or one or more of the doctrines of regeneration, justification, sanctification, salvation, election, free will, predestination, perseverance, eternal security, the Atonement, original sin, the Eucharist, and baptism, all “five points” of Calvinism (TULIP) and issues affecting the very *gospel* itself—are not *central*. Protestants can’t have it both ways.

Or, of course, people like Martin Luther (due to his beliefs in the Real Presence and baptismal regeneration), John Wesley, C.S. Lewis, and entire denominations such as Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Churches of Christ, various Pentecostal groups, and the Salvation Army can be read out of the Christian faith due to their “unorthodoxy,” as defined by the self-proclaimed “mainstream” evangelicals such as Baptists, Presbyterians and Reformed (even so the last two groups

baptize infants, although they vehemently deny that this causes regeneration, whereas Baptists don’t). Since most Protestants are unwilling to *anathematize* other Protestants, perspicuity dissolves into a boiling cauldron of incomprehensible contradictions, and as such, must be discarded or at the very least seriously reformulated in order to harmonize with the Bible and logic.

Whether one accepts the Tradition and teachings of the Catholic Church or not, at least it courageously takes a stand on any given doctrine and refuses to leave whole areas of theology and practice perpetually up for grabs, at the mercy of the “priesthood of scholars” and the individual’s private judgment—which in turn often reduces to mere whim, fancy, or subjective preference, usually divorced from considerations of Christian history and consensus. For this so-called “dogmatism” and lack of “flexibility,” the Catholic Church is often reviled and despised. But for those of us who are seeking to be faithful to Christ within its fold, this is regarded, to the contrary, as its unique glory and majesty, much preferable to the morass of competing truth-claims (i.e., relativism) which prevail within Protestantism (even among the subgroup of evangelicals).

Orthodox Catholics believe that Christians can place full confidence in the firmly-established Tradition which is found not only in Holy Scripture, but in the received doctrines of the Catholic Church, appointed by our Lord Jesus Christ as the Guardian and Custodian of *the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* (Jude 3).



Dave Armstrong was received into the Catholic Church in 1991 from Evangelical Protestantism. His complete conversion story can be found in Surprised by Truth.

“Pastor, Can I Ask You Something?”

by Marcus C. Grodi

Those of you who were pastors know from experience your need to steel yourself—to baton down the hatches and get the women and children below—whenever certain parishioners begin a question with these seemingly innocent words. The following is such an experience, taken from a novel I recently completed entitled, “Be Thou My Vision.”

The scene takes place at the monthly board meeting of First Congregational Church. The recently hired Reverend Stephen LaPointe has just conveyed his plans for the upcoming new members classes, when he is interrupted by a concerned board member.

Stephen began to sit down, but was stopped in mid-position. “Pastor, can I ask you something? I’m a bit hesitant to do it here with this peanut gallery ready to jump down my throat, but there’s something that’s been bothering me ever since we joined in ’87.” Larry Barker, a successful insurance salesman in his late forties, and his wife Sue, who was most often seen at the local tennis club, had joined the church after attending an interdenominational charismatic prayer meeting held weekly in the basement of the local Presbyterian Church. This changed their lives, and brought new spiritual vitality to their seemingly dead life-long Catholic faith. They had what they called a powerful born-again experience, and when they couldn’t get their priest to understand or offer a sympathetic ear, they started looking for somewhere else to worship. They tried almost every church in town before they ended up here at First Congregational at the Wednesday night Bible study. They immediately knew they had found their new spiritual home, and have been two of the most active members ever since. Their enthusiasm has never waned, and they have also remained two of the most well liked members of the church. Sue continues to spend most of her free time at the tennis center, but now talks to everyone about her new found faith.

Fighting through guffaws all around, Larry quipped, “All right, all right, back off.” The peanut gallery quieted down to

hear what sticky question Larry would pose to the pastor this time.

“As you know we used to be Catholics, and thank God we’re here now.” Larry gave an exaggerated sigh of relief, which he was sure everyone would fully understand. “Ever since our conversion, Sue and I have both become rabid Bible readers. We’re not Bible scholars by any means, so don’t get me wrong, but let’s just say I’ve read the Bible more times in the last ten years than in the entire first forty years of my life. And I know that one of the main tenants that separates us as Reformation Protestants from Roman Catholics is that we believe in the Bible alone as the sole foundation for what we believe. Isn’t that true?”

“Yes,” Stephen responded hoping this wouldn’t take too long, “that’s what Protestants generally believe. As you all know, different Protestant groups hold to this truth in different ways and interpret the Bible differently. You also realize that not all Congregationalists today hold this truth as strongly as we once did. But yes, that is at least what we believe here at First Congregational. It has traditionally been called the doctrine of *sola scriptura*—Scripture alone.”

“Fine, so if I get this straight, this book,” holding up the leather covered Bible Larry almost always carried whenever he came to church, “inspired by God, is to be the sole foundation for all that we must believe and practice, especially for

our salvation?”

“Yes, basically.” Stephen wasn’t sure where this was going, but also didn’t anticipate a question he couldn’t answer.

“Then two things, which as I said have bothered me for quite a while. First, if the Bible is the sole source of what we must believe, then where does it specifically say this? I mean, for something so important and foundational you’d think it would be stated very clearly?”

“Well,” Stephen knew immediately where to turn, for invariably he had to explain this foundational Protestant belief to every New Member’s class. “It says this most clearly in Second Timothy 3.16 and 17. Here pass me your Bible, I forgot mine tonight.” This brought some snickers from the group because they knew Stephen was making a joke on himself—he who was such an avid advocate of the Bible yet now was found bare without one.

“Second Timothy reads, *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*’ Another translation for the Greek word which is translated here as *profitable* is the word *sufficient*. All Scripture is therefore inspired and sufficient for teaching, et cetera. There are other verses, especially where Jesus quotes Old Testament Scriptures and where New Testament authors discourage believers from relying on the traditions of men, that solidify our belief

in the Bible's sufficiency. In Hebrews 4:12, for example, we read, "and as he read he gesticulated with the Bible to emphasize that it was this book to which the author was referring, *'For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.'*" From this and other passages we hold that the Bible is God's gift to His people, able under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead them into all truth.

"Often in the Bible we are encouraged to look to the Bible as the source for our faith. In John 5:39 we are called to *'search the Scriptures,'* and in the end of John, chapter 20 verse 31, we are told," Stephen said paraphrasing in his own words, "that the Scriptures were written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing we might have life in his name."

"Then you would, therefore, say that the Bible is the pillar and bulwark of the truth."

"Yes, that is a good way to put it," Stephen quickly responded, pleased with the creativity of this avid believing church member.

"Then, secondly, why does the Bible itself claim something different? Please turn to almost the same verse in the First letter of Paul to Timothy, chapter 3, verse 15, and please read it if you would."

Stephen turned back wondering what specifically Larry was referring to. He of course had read the New Testament through many times, both during and after seminary, and therefore wasn't anticipating anything strange. When he found the page in Larry's Bible he thumbed down until he found this verse, which had been heavily underlined. A question mark followed by an exclamation mark had been written in the margin. He quickly read the verse to himself, and then began reading it out loud, when it finally struck him what Larry was getting at.

As he finished reading, he realized that his reading had slowed down, with each word being pronounced with a more quiet and cautious emphasis. He paused for another moment, as he realized that for some

reason he had never noticed that passage before. He hadn't underlined it in his own Bible. He had underlined several passages above it about the duties of bishops and deacons, and he had underlined the next passage in which Paul recites one of the oldest Christian creeds: *'Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.'* But it was as if he had always skimmed past what was written in verse fifteen, and right at this moment, he didn't know what to say to Larry and the rest of the board.

And the board, especially Larry and Bill, noticed Stephen's hesitation.

Stephen gathered his wits and presented his answer. "The problem with interpreting texts like this, especially when we compare a text from one New Testament book with a text from another New Testament book, is that it's hard to always understand what these first century writers meant by their terms, especially now nearly two thousand years later. When Paul wrote to Timothy that *'the church of the living God is the pillar and bulwark of the truth,'* he had no inkling what the word 'church' would come to mean over the succeeding centuries. How certain leaders in the churches of major cities would eventually fight with each other for control until during the time of Constantine the Church of Rome was declared by his authority as Caesar the official religion of the Roman people, and the bishop of Rome the head of the Church. He also didn't anticipate that this term would be equated with the growing and powerful hierarchy of Pope and bishops, and he of course also didn't anticipate the eventual Reformation and the now hundreds of groups that call themselves 'churches.' What he surely meant at that time and what we believe today," he said, as a voice inside asked him who he meant by *we*, "is that the 'church' is not made up of physical structures and hierarchies of bishops and leaders, nor even a specific list of member's names on a myriad of church membership roles. No, the church is the invisible body of believers all around the world, both now, in the past

and in the future, in whom the Holy Spirit dwells and therefore where God's Word and God's truth are rightly interpreted, taught and believed.

"Larry, I hope this quick response answers your questions. If you want we can talk more about this another time." With Larry's nod, Stephen handed back his Bible, and for a very brief moment they played a little tug of war with it as Stephen had an uncanny desire to look at that verse again.

Stephen then turned his attention back to Bill, the board president, "That's really all I've got to say about the New Member's class. Please let me know if you have questions about any of the resources on the table."

Stephen sat down feeling fairly satisfied with his answer to Larry's query, which was essentially his pat answer about what the New Testament authors meant when they used the term 'church.' Yet he was still troubled by that verse. It jumped out at him too much, it even startled him. He really felt like he had never seen that verse before, and couldn't wait to have time to study it more carefully, especially in the original Greek.

Bill stood for a moment looking at their new pastor, feeling a tinge of that unidentifiable uncomfortableness he had sensed with Reverend LaPointe during the interview process. And besides, both Larry's question and Reverend LaPointe's answer troubled him, but he would need to wait until later to figure this out. Regaining his composure, Bill addressed the board: "Let's get on now to the sticky wicket of our agenda: are we as a church going to take part in this year's ecumenical Good Friday service which is scheduled to take place at Holy Name Catholic Parish."

† † †

Larry Barker sat up fairly late in his living room, in the dark, holding his now cold coffee mug with both hands, staring into the traditional Catholic painting of Jesus hung over the mantel. It had been a gift from his mother who died last winter. She had been devastated by his conversion to Protestantism, and though he and Sue had removed every other sign of their ex-

Catholicism from their house, they had left this picture, more in honor of his mother than anything.

As he gazed at this portrayal of Jesus pointing to a representation of his heart on his chest, Larry could not shake how disturbed he was at Reverend LaPointe's obviously weak and patronizing response to his very important question. *Why didn't Reverend LaPointe see what he saw?* There before him was a strange Catholic artifact which he had rejected by asking "OK, where in the Bible does it say we are to give devotion to Jesus' Sacred Heart?" And since he could find no references to Jesus' heart let alone devotion to his Sacred heart, Larry concluded this was another Catholic idolatrous invention and therefore to be rejected.

But then he had been drawn to ask a very simple and sincere question, which should have a very simple, sincere answer: where in the Bible does it say I have to find it in the Bible? Where does the Bible teach *sola scriptura*? He searched, and searched, but could find it clearly stated no where. On the contrary he came across that statement in 1 Timothy which claimed the *Church* was the pillar and bulwark of truth. The Church? Which church?

He also came across a verse in Second Thessalonians where Paul commanded the Christians to *'stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, EITHER BY WORD OF MOUTH OR BY LETTER.'* Traditions? By word of mouth as well as letter? How does this translate into what we now call the Bible? And for these first century Christians—in fact for the first three centuries of Christians who lived their faith before the canon of Scriptures was finally decided—how did "*sola scriptura*" define and guide their beliefs?

Larry sat there alone, not really doubting his escape from the Catholic Church, yet wondering whether the grounds for doing so were as solid as he once thought.

† † †

[Later the next evening...] Bill Walker turned on the brass desk light in his private attic study. The dinner dishes had been washed, dried and stowed, and Maddie had retreated to their bedroom to escape

back into the thirteenth century world of one of her favorite mystery novels, built around the detective prowess of a Carthusian monk named Caedfel. Ever since the board meeting last night, Bill had wanted to get back into the Scriptures to reexamine the question Larry had posed to Reverend LaPointe—which he felt had not been answered well. It seemed that Pastor Stephen hesitated too much at first, and then his answer didn't really make clear sense out of the text.

For a self-trained layman, Bill had become quite an astute biblical scholar. This had certainly not come from his Catholic upbringing. It instead had begun under the tutelage of their former pastor, Reverend Tom Dunam. After his dramatic conversion, Bill's faith had been rejuvenated through Reverend Tom's preaching and teaching. He learned how to study the Bible for the first time in his life, and in answer to his enthusiasm, Reverend Tom taught Bill the basic Bible study techniques he had learned in seminary. Though he couldn't actually read the original biblical languages, Bill had taught himself how to parse, breakdown and interpret the text of the Greek New Testament through the use of numerous guides, dictionaries, concordances and grammars.

Placed before him were several English translations of the Bible, the Nestle-Aland Greek-English New Testament, a Greek-English dictionary, and a concordance. He was determined to spend as much time as was necessary, even if all night, to get to the bottom of that verse in First Timothy. Somehow he sensed that there was something very significant in Larry's question, that challenged the fact that he was now a Congregationalist, and no longer a Roman Catholic.

First he paused to pray silently, to ask for the Holy Spirit's guidance as he tackled this Scriptural conundrum. He turned to chapter three, verses 14 and 15 in his favorite black leather bound Revised Standard Version, and then compared it to the other versions before him—an old King James version, a modern paperbound New International Version, an extremely literal version called the New American Standard Bible which Reverend Tom had given him,

and a more loose paraphrase called the Living Bible. He also checked the reading in the old St. Joseph's New American Bible, which he had received when he was confirmed as a Catholic—just to see how the Catholic translators might have slanted their rendition. But there was little difference in the translations. They all basically said what his supposedly most literal New American Standard Bible stated:

I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

As he sat staring at the various translations, the first thing that struck him was that the apostle Paul had decided to write this letter to Timothy as a precautionary measure—not as his primary or preferred means of teaching Timothy. Paul was hoping and planning to visit Timothy in person, to teach him face to face. But just in case he couldn't make it, he penned this letter to pass along some guidance on how people ought to behave as Christians.

Bill stopped a moment to silently thank the Holy Spirit for the delay nearly two thousand years ago that led Paul to write this letter, otherwise the world would not have known a word of these instructions. As he meditated on this, he pictured Paul sitting hunched over a wooden table in a prison cell beside a dim oil lamp, writing these words with a sharpened feather quill on a rough roll of parchment held down by small stones at each corner. Then this picture faded into a picture of Paul sitting more casually beside this same table but now across from his young friend Timothy, the two of them laughing and sharing chalices of wine—for wasn't this Paul's advice near the end of this very letter? As Bill envisioned this encounter it came to him that Paul would probably have said a whole lot more to Timothy then he could have written on that small parchment. *Did Paul summarize everything that was necessary in this very short letter?*

Possibly. Or was this just a quick introduction to the more detailed list of things he hoped to deliver once he arrived?

Bill turned to the Second Letter that Paul wrote Timothy, and read the verse most commonly used to defend *sola scriptura*, chapter 3 verse 16.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

All Scripture, Bill thought, all Scripture? When Timothy received this letter from Paul what would he have understood the apostle Paul to mean by this? Would he have considered this letter from his father-in-the-faith Scripture, or just a casual, yet highly important letter? What would they have considered Scripture? Why, of course, it would have been the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which the New Testament called the Law and the prophets. They had no “New Testament” per se; this wasn’t collected until years later. So what they had couldn’t have been called the “Old Testament.” Rather they called it the Scriptures. So what Paul is referring to here is the Old Testament.

Bill continued to meditate on this, and then noticed written in his margin, along with his hand written notes from previous studies, another Bible reference, to Paul’s second letter to the Church in Thessalonica. It looked like his own handwriting, but the reference had been done with a red pen, not the color he normally used. He couldn’t remember what this verse was, so he casually flipped the pages back to 2 Thessalonians chapter 2 verse 15. He leaned back to stretch as he began reading, his mind primarily focused on his other thoughts, until what he read shot him forward in his chair.

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.

As he read this verse again, the two mental pictures of Paul writing and of

Paul teaching Timothy melded together to form a composite that represented in his mind how the truth of the Christian faith was passed on from Apostle to teacher to preacher to congregations—both by word of mouth and by writing. Bill continued to mull these thoughts over, thinking about all three verses at once, and he envisioned their interrelationship: *the faith of these early Christians was built on the sure foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures—the Law and the Prophets. But what was written in them needed to be applied to their new situation in Christ—their Prophetic references to the coming Messiah needed to be explained so that they could be understood to refer to Jesus. This was part of what was passed on through the apostle’s teachings, both orally and in writing. But since more was obviously communicated in sermons and public teachings than is recorded in the few short New Testament letters, is it accurate to conclude that only what is in Scripture is essential? Paul said hold to the traditions taught orally and written.*

Traditions? This word jumped out at Bill. When he had left Roman Catholicism, he thought that he had left the traditions of man behind. But here Paul was telling these early Christians to hold to traditions taught not just in his written letters—what would be called the New Testament—but also given orally. *What were these? How could they be known? Were they lost?*

Bill mulled these questions over in his mind as he turned back to the text in Second Timothy and began reading the verses that immediately preceded it:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it...

For Timothy this meant not what he read in some New Testament letters or gospels, Bill thought, but what he had heard from Paul or his parents or others.

...and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings...

That would be the Old Testament Scriptures, but had he actually read these? Again he wondered. Probably not. He was acquainted with these primarily through public readings, probably in the local syna-

gogue and church gatherings. In every way he was dependent upon oral teaching.

...which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

But the Old Testament is NOT that clear about how one is saved through faith in Jesus Christ. One needs the New Testament to fully understand this! So if Timothy and the other early Christians didn’t have a written New Testament yet, how could they know how to interpret the Old Testament correctly and adequately to lead them to Jesus?”

As Bill asked himself these questions, he turned back to the original text in First Timothy and began reading:

...the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

The church ... the pillar ... the bulwark ... the truth. Bill ran these words over and over in his mind, envisioning Timothy trying to convince his early Jewish and Greek pagan neighbors to believe in Jesus. And when they answered back, “Why should we believe this crazy stuff?!” Bill wondered what Timothy would have said. *If he said “Because the Bible says so,” he could only have meant the Old Testament, and we know from the experience of the Ethiopian Eunuch in the Book of Acts that just reading the Old Testament wasn’t enough. Timothy would have needed to point them to the testimony of those who had personally seen Jesus alive after his death on the cross, the apostolic witness. But where was this to be found? The church... the pillar... the bulwark... the truth.*

The complete novel, “How Firm A Foundation” by Marcus C. Grodi, is now available.



Oral Tradition in the New Testament

by David Palm

The Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*—that the Bible alone is a Christian’s authority in matters of faith and morals—was one of the central tenets on which the Reformers broke away from the Catholic Church. But in one of those strange quirks of history, *sola scriptura* lately has been one of the central tenets on which some Evangelical Protestants have returned to Rome.

Shortly after my wife and I announced our decision to be received into the Catholic Church, members of my family urged us to talk to my former seminary professors about our decision. We were glad to do this and made appointments with two of my favorite teachers, both professors of New Testament. In addition to fielding questions from them about the Catholic faith, I asked these men a question that had been instrumental in my own decision to become Catholic: “Where does Scripture teach that Scripture alone is our authority in matters of faith and morals?” If Scripture makes no such claim for itself, then the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is self-contradictory, and this undermines a central pillar of Protestantism. To me this question was critical.

I did not get a persuasive answer from either scholar, but one of them responded to my question with one of his own: “Does any New Testament author cite oral tradition as authoritative for doctrine?” His point was that if the apostles’ use of Scripture — for them the Old Testament — illustrates that they held to a doctrine of *sola scriptura*, then it seems reasonable that this pattern would hold for later Christians’ use of the New Testament. His argument is a good one, but only to a point.

One problem is that the question assumes the truth of the conclusion it is trying to establish. By asking “Where in the New Testament do you find such and such?” the questioner is limiting the discussion only to written revelation, but this is the very point we are trying to establish.

We must have some evidence that all of God’s revelation comes to us in written form; we cannot merely assume this. So we are back to the original question, “Where does Scripture teach that Scripture alone is our authority for matters of faith and morals?”

Another difficulty is that the doctrine of the apostles came to them in oral form from Jesus. In one sense the entire Christian message is based on oral tradition and is only augmented by using the written revelation of the Old Testament. From this perspective, perhaps 90 percent of the New Testament is based on authoritative oral tradition (from Jesus), and the remaining ten percent is from written sources.

But my professor was concentrating on the way the apostles treated Scripture. If we could find in the New Testament no case in which the authors drew on Jewish oral tradition as authoritative, one could make the case that *sola scriptura* is a doctrine taught by the apostles, if not explicitly in the pages of the New Testament, then at least implicitly by their example. While this is not as satisfying as being able to point to chapter and verse to support *sola scriptura*, it is a way out of the logical quandary that the doctrine generates.

New Testament Evidence

I could not address this question definitively at the time, but as I have read and studied Scripture since becoming Catholic and have found that the answer to my professor’s question is Yes. The authors of the New Testament do draw on oral Tradition in addition to Old Testament Scripture. In

several instances, they explicitly cite oral Tradition to support Christian doctrine. Not only does this observation undermine the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, but it lends positive support to the Catholic position of Scripture and Tradition as parallel conduits through which God brings us his revelation.

We can divide these examples into two categories.

First, we find passages in the New Testament in which oral Tradition is cited in support of doctrine. This evidence is particularly significant because it shows that, for the apostles, oral Tradition was trustworthy when formulating and developing elements of the Christian faith. This becomes an excellent biblical precedent for the Catholic Church’s practice of basing some Christian dogmas primarily on Tradition rather than on explicit biblical testimony.

In a second category of passages, the New Testament authors draw on oral tradition, but not so explicitly in support of doctrine. Although these examples are not as important for our Catholic apologetic, they are significant in that they show the extent to which the earliest Christians, including the apostles themselves, reckoned with the twin witnesses of Scripture and Tradition when they expounded the faith.

Doctrinal Examples

Matthew 2:23

Scripture says that Joseph and Mary

returned to Nazareth after their sojourn in Egypt, “that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’” (Matt. 2:23). All commentators admit that the phrase “He shall be called a Nazarene” is not found anywhere in the Old Testament. Yet Matthew tells us that the Holy Family fulfilled this prophecy, which had been passed on “by the prophets.”

The proposed solutions to explain this verse are legion. They range from trying to find some word-play on “Nazarene” in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, to viewing this text as loosely “fulfilling” a conglomeration of Old Testament passages that refer to a despised Messiah. The serious grappling by scholars with the text is admirable, but in the end their solutions seem farfetched.

It may be that we should seek resolution in simplicity. When read in Greek, the introduction to this prophecy differs from all the other “fulfillment” sayings in Matthew (for example Matt. 1:22, 2:15, 3:15, and others). Thus, the failed attempts to locate the Old Testament background to this prophecy, coupled with this unique introduction, suggest to me that the simplest solution is probably the correct one: Matthew is drawing on oral Tradition for this saying. If this is the case, it is significant that he places this prophecy on the same level as ones he attributes to specific authors of the Old Testament. This then would be an example of God’s own Word being passed on via oral Tradition and not through written Scripture.

Matthew 23:2

Just before launching into a blistering denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus delivers this command to the crowds: “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice” (Matt. 23:2-3).

Although Jesus strongly indicts his opponents of hypocrisy for not following their own teaching, he nevertheless insists that the scribes and Pharisees hold a position of legitimate authority, which he characterizes as sitting “on Moses’ seat.”

One searches in vain for any reference to this seat of Moses in the Old Testament. But it was commonly understood in ancient Israel that there was an authoritative teaching office, passed on by Moses to successors.

As the first verse of the Mishna tractate *Abôte* indicates, the Jews understood that God’s revelation, received by Moses, had been handed down from him in uninterrupted succession, through Joshua, the elders, the prophets, and the great Sanhedrin (Acts 15:21). The scribes and Pharisees participated in this authoritative line and as such their teaching deserved to be respected.

Jesus here draws on oral Tradition to uphold the legitimacy of this teaching office in Israel. The Catholic Church, in upholding the legitimacy of both Scripture and Tradition, follows the example of Jesus himself.

In addition, we see that the structure of the Catholic Church—with an authoritative teaching office comprised of bishops who are the direct successors of the apostles—follows the example of ancient Israel. While there are groups of Christians today that deny continuity between Israel and the Church, historic orthodox Christianity has always understood the Church to be a fulfillment of Israel. This verse about Moses’ chair illuminates why we say that the successor of Peter, when he gives a solemn teaching for the whole Church, is said to speak *ex cathedra* or “from the chair.”

Whereas under the Old Covenant the administration of God’s people came from the “chair of Moses,” Christians under the New Covenant look to the “chair of Peter” for direction on questions of faith and morals. But there is a notable difference between the magisterium under the Old Covenant and our teachers under the New Covenant. The successors of the apostles, and especially Peter’s successor, have the Holy Spirit to guide them into all truth, and they have Jesus’ promise that the “gates of hell will not prevail” against the Church (Matt. 16:17-19).

1 Corinthians 10:4

Paul shows how Christian sacraments—baptism and the Eucharist—were

prefigured in the Old Testament. He treats baptism first: “Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (vv. 1-2). Next he highlights the Eucharist, prefigured by the manna in the wilderness (v.3; cf. John 6:26-40), and the water that God provided for Israel: “All drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4).

The Old Testament says nothing about any movement of the rock that Moses struck to provide water for the Israelites (Ex. 17:1-7, Num. 20:2-13), but in rabbinic Tradition the rock actually followed them on their journey through the wilderness. In a further development, another Tradition, given by Philo, even equates this rock with preexistent Wisdom: “For the flinty rock is the Wisdom of God, which he marked off highest and chiefest from his powers, and from which he satisfies the thirsty souls that love God.”

It seems that Paul is drawing on this Tradition, but he elevates it to even a higher level. Christ himself was the Rock who provided for the people of Israel, which in turn makes their rebellion all the more heinous (1 Cor. 10:5ff.). Paul does not hesitate to draw on stock oral Tradition to illustrate and enhance his presentation of the gospel. The details provided in these Traditions preserved under the Old Covenant shed fresh light on the preparation that God made through Israel for the building of his Church and on the characteristics of the Christian sacraments.

1 Peter 3:19

In his first epistle Peter tells of Christ’s journey to the netherworld during which “he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah” (1 Pet. 3:19). There is a growing scholarly consensus that the interpretive key to this verse is found in Genesis 6:1-7, in which “the sons of God” cohabited with “the daughters of men” and produced ghastly offspring. According to ancient interpretation, these “sons of God” were actually

rebellious angels who sinned by mating with human women.

It appears likely that this is Peter's view as well. "For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until judgment...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial" (2 Pet. 2:4, 9). Note the close link to Noah and Genesis 6. Compare too Jude 6, which says that "the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day..." These references are evidence that Peter has this traditional interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4 in mind when he writes of Christ's preaching "to the spirits in prison."

Additional background is found in the extra-biblical book of 1 Enoch. In this work, which was popular both in ancient Jewish and early Christian circles, the righteous man Enoch (Gen. 5:22-24) goes at God's command to the place where these sinful angels are imprisoned and proclaims their impending judgment and punishment for their sin.

The parallel to Peter's epistle is too close to dismiss. It seems possible that Peter views Enoch as a "type" of Christ and that in 1 Peter 3:19 he portrays Christ as a "second Enoch," who goes to the spirit world and proclaims the final downfall of these evil spirits (compare Col. 2:15). Peter's source for this analogy is Tradition, not Scripture.

This example is significant because it highlights one of the important functions that Tradition still plays for us. As is all too clear from the divisions within Christendom, Scripture may be interpreted in many different ways. Sometimes the Traditions passed on in the Catholic Church provide the interpretive key to certain passages. This was important in the early Church, because heretics of all stripes appealed to the Bible in support of their doctrine.

It is simply false to suppose that the early Church relied on *sola scriptura* to defend Christian orthodoxy. "There is no reason to infer," says J.N.D. Kelly in *Early Christian Doctrines*, "that the

primitive Church regarded the apostolic testimony as confined to written documents emanating from, or attributed to, the apostles." Rather, the early Church Fathers argued that the interpretations of the heretics were not in line with the "rule of faith," that is, the deposit of Tradition passed on by the apostles to the bishops of the Catholic Church and preserved through an unbroken lineage.

A specific application of this is the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary. The data of the New Testament concerning the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus are ambiguous by themselves, although I would argue that the biblical evidence leans toward the Catholic interpretation. But we have additional help in the form of the Traditions preserved in the early Church which say that Mary remained a virgin and bore no other children besides Jesus. So Tradition can sometimes serve as arbiter and interpreter in cases where the meaning of Scripture is unclear.

Jude 9

Jude relates an altercation between Michael and Satan: "When the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" (Jude 9).

As H. Willmering says in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, "This incident is not mentioned in Scripture, but may have been a Jewish oral tradition, which is well known to the readers of this epistle." Some versions of the story circulating in ancient Judaism depict Satan trying to intervene as Michael buries the body. Several of the Church Fathers know of another version in which Moses' body is assumed into heaven after his death. Jude draws on this oral Tradition to highlight the incredible arrogance of the heretics he opposes; even Michael the archangel did not take it on himself to rebuke Satan, and yet these men have no scruples in reviling celestial beings.

This text provides another example of a New Testament author tapping oral Tradition to expound Christian doctrine—in this case an issue of behavior. In addition,

this text relates well to a Catholic dogma that troubles many non-Catholics—the bodily Assumption of Mary. There is no explicit biblical evidence for Mary's Assumption (although see Rev. 12:1-6), but Jude not only provides us with a third biblical example of the bodily assumption of one of God's special servants (see also Gen. 5:24, 2 Kgs. 2:11), he shows that oral Tradition can be the ground on which belief in such a dogma may be based.

Jude 14-15

This one's a real show-stopper, perhaps the best example of all. St. Jude speaks of the rebellious upstarts of his day, saying, "It was of these also that Enoch in the seventh generation from Adam prophesied, saying, 'Behold, the Lord came with his holy myriads, to execute judgment on all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness which they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.'"

This statement may also be found in the non-Scriptural book of 1 Enoch (1:9); but Jude's use of it does not really say anything about the inspiration of 1 Enoch. Rather, he asserts that the saying itself actually hales from the venerable Enoch, whose righteous life is mentioned in Genesis 4-5.

Here is a tradition, a prophetic revelation, which was passed on orally for *millennia* before being captured first in a non-inspired written document (1 Enoch) and then in an inspired document (Jude). Did the writers of the New Testament ever regard oral tradition as divine revelation? This example more than any other shows that the answer to that is a resounding, Yes!

Other Examples

There are a number of other examples in the New Testament in which the writer likely draws on oral tradition, but not so clearly in support of any doctrine. For instance, Paul dips into rabbinic tradition to supply the names, Jannes and Jambres, of the magicians who opposed Moses in Pharaoh's court (2 Tim. 3:8). In the Old Testament, these individuals are anonymous

(Ex. 7:8ff.). James tells us that because of Elijah's prayer there was no rain in Israel for three years (Jas. 5:17), but the Old Testament account of Elijah's altercation with King Ahab says nothing of him praying (1 Kgs. 17).

It is rabbinic tradition that characterizes Elijah as the quintessential man of prayer. And even the Golden Rule, "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12) was anticipated by Jewish oral Tradition. Rabbi Hillel taught, "What you do not like should be done to you, do not to your fellow; this is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary."

Conclusion

Likely there are many more examples of the use of oral Tradition in the New Testament. Reference works such as Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, John Lightfoot's *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, and Strack and Billerbeck's mag-

isterial *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Misrasch* contain a wealth of parallels between rabbinic tradition and the New Testament writings. One notoriously difficult impediment to such a study is determining which traditions pre-date the New Testament and which are exclusively post-apostolic; such decisions must be left to experts and range well beyond my own abilities. Nevertheless, I believe that the passages that I cited demonstrate that the New Testament authors drew on oral Tradition as they expounded the Christian faith. This fact spells real trouble for any Christian who asserts that we must find all of our doctrine in written Scripture. We know that the apostles did not teach the doctrine of *sola scriptura* explicitly in Scripture, and we know through their use of oral Tradition that they did not intend to teach it implicitly by their example either. The conclusion is that they simply did not hold to a principle of *sola scriptura*—and neither should we.

Catholics need not be shy about this issue. The Protestant reformers taught that

sola scriptura—Scripture alone—is our authority in matters of faith and morals. But this doctrine is unbiblical. The Catholic Church teaches that Christian doctrine is *sola Verbum Dei*—from the Word of God alone—and this is what the Bible actually says about itself. The teaching of the Bible and of the Church is that God's Word comes to us both through the writings of the prophets and apostles and through the oral Traditions that they handed on, and these are preserved by the Church through the leading of the Holy Spirit. The burden of proof is on any Christian who believes otherwise.



David Palm, a convert to Catholicism, freelances from Waukegan, Illinois. This article is reprinted with permission from the May 1995 issue of This Rock magazine, Catholic Answers, Inc.

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When Evangelicals Treat Catholic Tradition Like Revelation

By Mark P. Shea

In the following article, adapted with permission from his book, *By What Authority?: An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition* (Our Sunday Visitor Books), Mark recounts his thought processes when he was an Evangelical considering the role of tradition, which Evangelicals supposedly reject in belief and practice.

I wondered: Is it really true that we Evangelicals never treat extra-biblical tradition as authoritative revelation? Is it really the case that *all* Evangelical belief is derived from the clear and unambiguous teaching of the Bible alone? Do we *really* speak forth only what Scripture speaks, keep silent where Scripture is silent, and never bind the conscience of the believer on those questions in which Scripture permits different interpretations?

To find out, I decided to try an experiment. I would look at Evangelical—*not* Catholic—belief and practice to see if there were any evidence of tradition being treated like revelation. I would see if there were any rock-bottom, non-negotiable, can't-do-without-'em beliefs that were not attested (or very weakly attested) in the Bible, yet which we orthodox Evangelicals treated like revelation. If I found such things, and if they had an ancient pedigree, it seemed to me this would be very strong evidence that the apostolic tradition not only *was* larger than the Bible alone, but had—somehow—been handed down to the present.

So I started taking a good long look at non-negotiable Evangelical beliefs as they were actually lived out in my church and churches like it. To my surprise, I found several such weakly attested non-negotiables.

THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

Arguably the most pressing issue of

our time is the question of the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. While you are reading this, several thousand preborn babies, ranging in age from first trimester to full term, are going to be legally suctioned, burned, dismembered, or decapitated by skilled professionals. As this evil occurs, a bewildered modern society, long ago cut adrift from its Christian roots, will not recoil in horror but will instead flop its hands passively in its lap, register a befuddled shrug of discomfort, and continue lacking the capacity to tell whether or not this is bad.

Meanwhile, the culture of death will not sleep. Rather, emboldened by our more paralysis in the face of so obvious an evil, the purveyors of “choice” will ask ever more loudly, “If we can do these things when the tree is green, what can we get away with when it is dry? If the life of the helpless infant is cheap when the economy is strong, why not the life of the disabled, aged, and sick when medical costs skyrocket?”

It seems obvious to me that the question of the sanctity of human life is a bedrock of Christian morals. If the protection of life from conception to natural death isn't essential to Christian teaching, what is? Surely here we ought to find a sharp dichotomy between the church and the modern world. Right?

Wrong. The plain fact is, things don't break down that way. On one side of the cultural divide are not only secularists, but,

alas, many liberal Christians who, with trembling devotion to the spirit of the age, dutifully parrot the rhetoric that those who defend human life are “antichoice.”

On the other side of the divide are most Evangelicals, conservative members of the mainline Protestant churches, the Catholic and Orthodox churches, and conservative Jews.

Yet for 20 centuries absolutely all of Christianity stood staunchly behind the defenseless ones against the culture of death. Indeed, so recent is the minting of the “right to choose” that not even theological liberals were willing to call abortion anything other than a grave sin until the past few decades. That is why we can scarcely find a shred of Christian theology written in favor of abortion and euthanasia before the 1960s and '70s. From the first century to the present, a shoreless ocean of testimony from every sector of the church decries this terrible crime against God and humanity. And we Evangelicals, with very few exceptions, are of one voice with 20 centuries of Christian preaching concerning this most elementary of Christian moral truths.

I am proud to number myself among the ranks of prolife Christians and will never waver from this commitment. But as I began to argue my position with liberal Christians who supported the “right to choose,” I did begin to waver in something: my conviction that the irrefutable basis for our prolife conviction as Evan-

gelicals is Scripture alone.

I know the verses that are quoted. “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139: 13), “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:5), and so forth. I certainly agree that these verses bear oblique witness to a prolife position. Indeed, I emphatically agree that the prolife position is an obvious fact of Christian teaching throughout all ages. But in arguing the matter with other Christians who read the same Bible I do, I began to realize that I could not make opposition to abortion and devotion to the sanctity of preborn life an intrinsic, absolutely essential, utterly non-negotiable part of the Christian faith on the basis of Scripture alone. For the fact is, a modern apologist for the culture of death can and does argue that Scripture alone, apart from tradition, is as ambiguous about abortion as it is about the question of just war vs. pacifism — and therefore abortion is a matter of “Christian liberty.”

Consider: Neither testament gives a clear understanding of the status of unborn life. Is the fetus a human person possessing the same dignity as an infant after birth? Is the conceptus? Is the act of directly causing the death of such a one an act of murder or some lesser offense? Is it an offense at all? No direct answer is ever attempted to these questions anywhere in Scripture.

Worse, the indirect ways in which Scripture addresses these issues are very oblique and open to multiple interpretations—apart from tradition. Thus Exodus 21:22 reads: “If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

Far more questions are raised by this passage than are answered—if we are left to interpret it without reference to Jewish and Christian tradition, as prochoice Christians urge us to do. For instance, the Hebrew word which is here translated

“gives birth prematurely” is in fact much more flexible than this. It means “departs” and can be read as “gives birth prematurely” or as “spontaneously aborts.” So does the caveat about “serious injury” apply to the woman or to the miscarried child? Does the Law demand wound for wound for the mother’s injury or the unborn’s? If the mother is not seriously injured but the child dies, is this what is meant by “no serious injury”? The text does not say. Nor does the rest of Scripture help us.

Similarly, the New Testament does not tell us how to understand another difficult Old Testament passage: Numbers 5:20-27. This strange text prescribes an ordeal for suspected adulteresses, in which the suspected woman is placed under oath and made to drink “bitter water that brings a curse.” The purpose of the ordeal was to call down a divine curse on the adulteress that will cause her “belly to swell and her thighs [to] waste away” or as the footnotes to NIV Bible put it, to make her “be barren and have a miscarrying womb.”

If we do not have any larger tradition for understanding such a text—if we “let Scripture interpret Scripture” as we Evangelicals say—it seems that *some* induced miscarriages (i.e., those of adulteresses) ought to be countenanced by the people of God. In short, Scripture does not automatically give one the impression that the Bible lends itself to an irrefutable case for the sanctity of every human life from conception to natural death.

At this we Evangelicals may attempt to create a larger interpretive context by “letting Scripture interpret Scripture” again. We might raise the counter example of John the Baptist, moved by the Spirit in Elizabeth’s womb when Mary arrived (Lk. 1:41). Is not this a strong indication that even unborn children are persons responsive to the Spirit of God? Is it not a pretty good hint that unborn babies are people too?

Of course it is. That is, it’s a “strong indication”—a hint, a sign, a good possibility. It is not, however, incontrovertible *proof* that all children are similarly graced with supernatural gifts, including the supernatural gift of personhood, when they are as yet unformed in their mother’s

womb. Thus, I know Christians who have actually taken this text as license for first-trimester abortions since babies cannot be felt to kick in *utero* before the second trimester. Such Christians are living proof that the bare text of Scripture, apart from the interpretive tradition of Christendom, says nothing clear and definite about abortion or human development anywhere. Instead it gives *only* signs, clues, and hints which individual Christians, forsaking that tradition, can and do interpret in ways that directly contradict one another.

“OK,” the Evangelical says. “Maybe John the Baptist isn’t a biblical prolife proof, but what about our Lord himself? Surely the personhood of the Second Person of the Trinity at his conception lends his dignity to all human beings from conception onward so that ‘whatever you did for one of the least of these’ (Mt. 25:40) applies supremely here.”

Now I happen to agree with this argument. But I have spoken with other well-meaning, Bible-believing Christians (most of them strongly prolife) who don’t. They see no such extension of Christ’s dignity to us by the mere fact that Christ was born a human being. They note that Christ is speaking of the “least of these brothers of *mine*” and argue that we become his brothers and God’s children, not by being born but by being born again. They fear that to protect the unborn child on this basis is ultimately to mislead people into thinking we are holy when we are merely human.

Of course, I have counter-arguments to all this and they, of course, have counter-counter-arguments till between us you can’t count the counters. But this is hardly evidence of the undeniable clarity of Scripture alone on this crucial point of Christian ethics.

“Well then,” someone proposes, “maybe Scripture says so little because abortion was unheard of at the time? After all, you don’t pass laws against speeding if no one has yet invented the automobile.” The difficulty with this theory is that it simply isn’t true. Abortion predates Christianity by centuries and it flourished in pagan culture then as it flourishes in our quasi-pagan culture now. That is why the Didache, a

manual of Christian instruction composed around A.D. 80, during the lifetime of the gospel writers, commands: "You shall not procure an abortion. You shall not destroy a new born child." Nor was the *Didache* alone in this. The subsequent writings of the post-apostolic period are simply unanimous when it comes to the Christian teaching on this subject. The Epistle of Barnabas, the Letter to Diognetus, the writings of Athenagoras, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, Epiphanius, Jerome, and a vast army of the Fathers, indeed every last Christian theologian who addresses this question until late in this century says exactly the same thing: Abortion is a grave evil and the taking of human life.

Yet the odd thing is this: The old writers, the Fathers of the Church closest in time to the apostles, speak of their doctrine both in this area and in many others as definitely decided by the mind of the Church and the tradition of the apostles. For them abortion is contrary, not so much to the Bible, as to the Holy Faith they received from their predecessors. Thus Basil the Great writes (c. 374): "A woman who has deliberately destroyed a fetus must pay the penalty for murder," and, "Those also who give drugs causing abortions are murderers themselves, as well as those who receive the poison which kills the fetus." Yet, for Basil, as for the rest of the Fathers, this teaching, like many others, has been preserved, not only in Scripture, but "in the Church." As he himself says:

"Of the dogmas and kerygmas preserved in the Church, some we possess from written teaching and others we receive from the tradition of the Apostles, handed on to us in mystery. In respect to piety both are of the same force. No one will contradict any of these, no one, at any rate, who is even moderately versed in matters ecclesiastical. Indeed, were we to try to reject unwritten customs as having no great authority, we would unwittingly injure the Gospel in its vitals."

In short, the Faith of which the Fathers speak (including its prolife ethic) is revealed, not merely by Scripture alone, but by *Scripture rightly understood (and only rightly understood) in the context of a larger tradition which is just as much from*

God as the Scripture it interprets.

And no one, least of all we Evangelicals, questioned this prolife teaching until this century. Indeed, the overwhelming number of Evangelicals quite faithfully followed this tradition without it even occurring to us to question it. Why was this, if we were truly deriving our beliefs from the clear and unambiguous teaching of the Bible alone, speaking forth only what Scripture spoke, keeping silent where Scripture was silent, and not binding the conscience of the believer on those questions in which Scripture permits different interpretations?

The obvious answer seemed to be that I was looking at a facet of extrabiblical tradition which is so profoundly part of our bones that we Evangelicals never thought to distinguish it from (much less oppose it to) the Scriptures themselves. Indeed, as I looked at it, I began to realize that *the total prolife tradition was Scripture and tradition together*; distinct, yet an organic unity like the head and the heart, the right hand and the left. The Scripture gave light, but a very scattered light on this most crucial of issues. The *tradition* acted like a lens bringing that dancing light into focus. Tradition without Scripture was a darkened lens without a light; but likewise, Scripture without tradition was, on this vital issue, a blurry, unfocused light without a lens.

In realizing this, I realized we Evangelicals were no different from Catholics on this score. We were not treating this tradition—the Tradition of Prolife Interpretation—as a fallible human reading of Scripture. Rather we treated it as absolutely authoritative and therefore as *revealed*.

THE TRINITY

What could be more central to Evangelical belief than the deity of Christ? This is the great thundering truth proclaimed by every good preacher of the gospel. If that is not essential Christianity, then there is no such thing as Christianity. Yet as I began to read Scripture and look at church history, I began to realize there are ways of denying the deity of Christ which can easily slip in under the Evangelical radar screen, ways which reverence him and call loudly for trust in Scripture as the one and

only source of revelation, yet which firmly consign Christ to the status of mere creature just as surely as does the most ardent skeptic. Most famous among these ways is a third-century movement known as Arianism.

Arians were principally concerned to preserve the Oneness of God from pagan polytheism. They argued cogently from Scripture. They were well-trained theologians who could read Scripture in the original tongues. The only problem was that they had the idea that Jesus was not truly God but only a sort of godlet or superior created being.

In defense of this idea, the Arians rejected tradition and pointed to texts like "the Father is greater than I" (Jn. 14:28) and "Why do you call me good?... No one is good-except God alone" (Mk. 10:18). They could come up with plausible explanations for terms and expressions which we Evangelicals think could only point to Christ's divinity. For example, Arians said the statement, "I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30) refers to oneness of *purpose*, not oneness of being. They pointed out that Scripture refers to supernatural created beings as "sons of God" (Job 38:7 NAB) without intending they are one in being with the Father. They observed that even mere humans were called "gods" (Ps. 8:2-6; Jn. 10:34-36), without the implication that they are God. Therefore they inferred that the Son, supernatural though he may be (as angels, principalities, and powers are supernatural), is neither co-eternal with the Father nor one in being with him.

How would we Evangelicals argue against Arianism using Scripture alone? We'd say that John speaks of the "only begotten" and says of him that he "was God" and was "with God in the *beginning*" (Jn. 1:1-2, 18; 3:16). We would reply that, although the "Trinity" is not in Scripture, nonetheless the *concept* of Trinity is there.

But a good Arian would be quick to point out that God plainly says, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" (Heb. 1:5), which implies that there was a time *before* the Son was begotten. In other words, the Arian can argue that there was a time when the Son was not. But there

was never a time when the Father was not. He is without beginning. Therefore, according to the Arian, the Son does not share God's eternal, beginningless essence. This amounts to a denial of the deity of Christ. Great and supernatural as he may be compared to the rest of creation (and Paul implies he is a creature when he calls him the first-loom over all *creation* [Col. 1:15], doesn't he?), nonetheless he is *only* a creature, says the Arian.

How then, I wondered, can we even be sure of this foundation stone of the Faith if the ambiguity of Scripture made it too a "matter of liberty" according to our own Evangelical criteria?

I discovered the answer as I listened to one of those radio call-in shows where theologians tackle various questions about the Bible. The host of this show was a solid Evangelical who was always very careful to speak of Scripture alone as the bottom line of revelation. Yet the odd thing was, when a particularly articulate exponent of anti-trinitarianism called and pointed out the typical Arian readings of various Scriptures, the host had one final bottom line *below* the bottom line. After citing various counter-Scriptures (and receiving more Arian readings by the caller until yet another stalemate seemed imminent), the host finally said, in essence, "Your interpretation is simply not what historic Christianity has ever understood its own Bible to mean." He then asked the Arian caller if he was really prepared to insist that 20 centuries of Christians (including people who had heard the apostles with their own ears and who clearly regarded Jesus as God) had been utterly wrong about the central fact of their faith while he alone was right?

This made sense. It seemed plain to me that it was idle for the Arian caller to wrench Scripture away from 20 centuries of ordinary Christian interpretation of so crucial a matter and declare the entire Church, from those who knew the apostles down to the present, incapable of understanding what it meant in its own Scriptures concerning so fundamental an issue.

Is it even remotely likely that the entire early Church misunderstood the

apostles that badly? Is it not obvious that the churches preserved the plain apostolic meaning of the Scriptures by carrying in their bosom not only the text of Scripture, but the clear memory of the *way* the apostles intended these texts to be understood? Was it not obvious that this living memory was, in fact, essential to correctly reading Scripture?

But in seeing this, I couldn't help seeing something else: My Evangelical radio show host (like my Evangelical friends and I) was saying that a Tradition of Trinitarian Interpretation living in the church was just as essential and revealed as the Scripture being interpreted. When we spoke of the absolute union of the Father and the Son, we Evangelicals were in fact resting serenely, not on the Bible alone, but on the interpretative tradition of the Church, just as we rested serenely on its Tradition of the Sanctity of Human Life (and we could draw the same conclusions with the Tradition of Monogamy).

This meant that whatever we Evangelicals *said* about tradition being "useful but not essential" to Christian revelation, we *behaved* exactly as though we believed trinitarian tradition—a tradition both in union with and yet distinct from the Scripture it interprets—is the other leg upon which the revelation of Christ's deity stands.

It was then a plain mistake to think we Evangelicals spoke forth only what Scripture spoke, kept silent where Scripture was silent, and never bound the conscience of the believer on those questions in which Scripture permits different interpretations. On the contrary, we lived (and had to live) by tradition almost as deeply as Catholics. For us, as for Rome, tradition was the lens that focused the light of Scripture. For us, as for Rome, that tradition was not a pair of "useful but not necessary" disposable glasses; it was the lens of our living eye and the heart of vision. It was so much a part of us that we were oblivious to it. I realized we Evangelicals had been so focused on the light of Scripture that we had forgotten the lens through which we looked.

This article has been revised from that which appeared in the September 1996

issue of the "New Oxford Review".

Mark P. Shea is author of By What Authority? An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996), and the forthcoming book, Making Senses Out of Scripture; Reading the Bible as the First Christians Did, available through Basilica Press.



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What *Do* Catholics Believe About Scripture?

From the Catechism of the Catholic Church

As with other doctrine, too often non-Catholics never take the time to read what the Catholic Church truly teaches about the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. They have only too often accepted uncritically what her antagonists say she teaches. The following, therefore, is a selection from the most up-to-date reliable source—the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—on what the Catholic Church teaches on Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition, the Deposit of Faith and the authority behind how Scripture is to be interpreted.

I. THE APOSTOLIC TRADITION

75 “Christ the Lord, in whom the entire Revelation of the most high God is summed up, commanded the apostles to preach the Gospel, which had been promised beforehand by the prophets, and which he fulfilled in his own person and promulgated with his own lips. In preaching the Gospel, they were to communicate the gifts of God to all men. This Gospel was to be the source of all saving truth and moral discipline” (*Dei Verbum* (DV) 7; cf. Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15).

In the apostolic preaching

76 In keeping with the Lord’s command, the Gospel was handed on in two ways: **orally** “by the apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received—whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit” (DV 7); and **in writing** “by those apostles and other men associated with the apostles who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing” (DV 7).

Continued in apostolic succession

77 “In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching authority” (DV 7 # 2; St. Irenaeus, *Adv. haeres.* 3, 3, 1: *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 7/1, 848; Harvey, 2, 9). Indeed, “the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous

line of succession until the end of time” (DV 8 # 1).

78 This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, “the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes” (DV 8 # 1). “The sayings of the Holy Fathers are a witness to the life-giving presence of this Tradition, showing how its riches are poured out in the practice and life of the Church, in her belief and her prayer” (DV 8 # 3).

79 The Father’s self-communication made through his Word in the Holy Spirit, remains present and active in the Church: “God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the Spouse of his beloved Son. And the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church—and through her in the world—leads believers to the full truth, and makes the Word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness” (DV 8 # 3; cf. Col 3:16).

II. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRADITION AND SACRED SCRIPTURE

One common source

80 “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one

thing, and move towards the same goal” (DV 9). Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own “always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20).

Two distinct modes of transmission

81 “Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit” (DV 9). “And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching” (DV 9).

82 As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence” (DV 9).

Apostolic Tradition and ecclesial traditions

83 The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus’ teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit. The first generation of Christians did not yet have a written New Testament, and the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition. Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical or devotional traditions, born in the local

churches over time. These are the particular forms, adapted to different places and times, in which the great Tradition is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium.

III. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE HERITAGE OF FAITH

84 The apostles entrusted the "Sacred deposit" of the faith (the *depositum fidei*) (DV 10 # 1; cf. I Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:12-14 [Vulg.]), contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to the whole of the Church. "By adhering to [this heritage] the entire holy people, united to its pastors, remains always faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. So, in maintaining, practising and professing the faith that has been handed on, there should be a remarkable harmony between the bishops and the faithful" (DV 10 # 1; cf. Acts 2:42 [Greek]; Pius XII, Apost. Const. *Munificentissimus Deus*, 1 November 1950: AAS 42 [1950], 756, taken along with the words of St. Cyprian, Epist. 66, 8: CSEL 3/2, 733: "The Church is the people united to its Priests, the flock adhering to its Shepherd").

The Magisterium of the Church

85 "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ" (DV 10 # 2). This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.

86 "Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith" (DV 10 para 2).

87 Mindful of Christ's words to his apostles: "He who hears you, hears me" (Lk 10:16; cf. LG 20), the faithful receive with docility the teachings and directives that their pastors give them in different forms.

Growth in understanding the faith

95 "It is clear therefore that, in the supremely

wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls" (DV 10 # 3).

I. CHRIST — THE UNIQUE WORD OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

102 Through all the words of Sacred Scripture, God speaks only one single Word, his one Utterance in whom he expresses himself

103 For this reason, the Church has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord's Body. She never ceases to present to the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God's Word and Christ's Body (Cf. DV 21).

104 In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, "but as what it really is, the word of God" (Th 2:13; cf. DV 24). "In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them" (DV 21).

II. INSPIRATION AND TRUTH OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

105 God is the author of Sacred Scripture....

107 The inspired books teach the truth. "Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures" (DV 11).

108 Still, the Christian faith is not a "religion of the book". Christianity is the religion of the "Word" of God, "not a written and mute word, but incarnate and living" (St. Bernard, S. missus est hom. 4, 11: PL 183, 86). If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, "open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures" (Cf. Lk 24:45).

III. THE HOLY SPIRIT, INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURE

111 But since Sacred Scripture is inspired, there is another and no less important principle of correct interpretation, without which Scripture would remain a dead letter. "Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written" (DV 12 # 3)....

112 Be especially attentive "to the content and unity of the whole Scripture". Different as the books which compose it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God's plan, of which Christ Jesus is the center and heart, open since his Passover (Cf. Lk 24:25-27, 44-46). The phrase "heart of Christ" can refer to Sacred Scripture, which makes known his heart, closed before the Passion, as the Scripture was obscure. But the Scripture has been opened since the Passion; since those who from then on have understood it, consider and discern in what way the prophecies must be interpreted (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Expos. in Ps.* 21, 11; cf. Ps 22:14).

113 Read the Scripture within "the living Tradition of the whole Church". According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture ("... according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church" (Origen, *Hom. in Lev.* 5, 5; PG 12, 454D)....

IV. THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

120 It was by the apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of the sacred books (Cf. DV 8 # 3). This complete list is called the canon of Scripture. It includes 46 books for the Old Testament (45 if we count Jeremiah and Lamentations as one) and 27 for the New (Cf. DS 179; 1334-1336; 1501-1504)....

The New Testament

126 We can distinguish three stages in the formation of the Gospels:

1. The life and teaching of Jesus. The Church holds firmly that the four Gospels, "whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up" (DV 19; cf. Acts 1:1-2).

2. The oral tradition. "For, after the as-

cension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed" (DV 19).

3. The written Gospels. "The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form; others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus" (DV 19).

127 The fourfold Gospel holds a unique place in the Church, as is evident both in the veneration which the liturgy accords it and in the surpassing attraction it has exercised on the saints at all times:

"There is no doctrine which could be better, more precious and more splendid than the text of the Gospel. Behold and retain what our Lord and Master, Christ,

has taught by his words and accomplished by his deeds" (St. Caesaria the Younger to St. Richildis and St. Radegunde: SCH 345, 480).

"But above all it's the gospels that occupy my mind when I'm at prayer; my poor soul has so many needs, and yet this is the one thing needful. I'm always finding fresh lights there; hidden meanings which had meant nothing to me hitherto" (St. Therese of Lisieux, Autobiography of a Saint, tr. Ronald Knox (London: Collins, 1960), 175).

V. SACRED SCRIPTURE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

131 "And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life" (DV 21). Hence "access to Sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful" (DV 22).

133 The Church "forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful... to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ (DV 25; cf. Phil 3:8 and St. Jerome, *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri xviii prol.*: PL 24, 17B).



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Did the Church Fathers Believe in *Sola Scriptura*?

by Joseph Gallegos

William Webster in an essay titled “*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church” has attempted to transform the early Church Fathers into proponents of *sola scriptura*. In my contribution in *Not by Scripture Alone* (Santa Barbara: Queenship, 1997) Chapter 8 and the Appendix, I delineate three approaches used by Protestant apologists in defending *sola scriptura* in patristic thought. Mr. Webster has chosen the third approach; equating *sola scriptura* with the material sufficiency of Scripture.

Mr. Webster writes:

“The Reformation was responsible for restoring to the Church the principle of sola scriptura, a principle which had been operative within the Church from the very beginning of the post apostolic age. Initially the apostles taught orally but with the close of the apostolic age all special revelation that God wanted preserved for man was codified in the written Scriptures. sola scriptura is the teaching and belief that there is only one special revelation from God that man possesses today, the written Scriptures or the Bible, and that consequently the Scriptures are materially sufficient and are by their very nature as being inspired by God the ultimate authority for the Church.”

Two points are to be noted here. First, Mr. Webster equates *sola scriptura* with the material sufficiency of Scripture. Second, according to Mr. Webster, the Reformers were responsible for restoring this narrow understanding of *sola scriptura*. *Sola scriptura* consists of a material and a formal element. First, *sola scriptura* affirms that all doctrines of the Christian faith are contained within the corpus of the Old and New Testaments. Hence, Scripture is materially sufficient. Secondly, Scripture requires no other coordinate authority such as a teaching Church or Tradition in order to determine its meaning. *Sola scriptura* affirms the formal sufficiency of Scripture. Catholics are allowed to affirm Scripture’s material sufficiency, therefore Mr. Webster’s case directed

at proving the Fathers belief in Scripture’s material sufficiency is completely off target. In order for Mr. Webster to make his case for *sola scriptura* he must prove that the Fathers affirmed the formal sufficiency of Scripture. The Fathers affirmed both the material sufficiency and formal *insufficiency* of Scripture.

Mr. Webster states:

“And there is no appeal in the writings of these fathers to a Tradition that is oral in nature for a defense of what they call Apostolic Tradition. The Apostolic Tradition for Irenaeus and Tertullian is simply Scripture.”

Notice the sleight of hand by Mr. Webster. He equates St. Irenaeus’s and Tertullian’s understanding of Tradition to mean Scripture. Both of these Fathers clearly understood Tradition as a substantive and coordinate authority alongside Scripture. These same Fathers believed that the doctrines of the Catholic Church are found in Tradition as well as in Scripture. However, they do not make the misguided conclusion that Tradition is equated to Scripture since Tradition includes the same doctrines that Scripture contains. The primary difference between Scripture and Tradition is that they convey the same teaching but through different mediums. One transmits the doctrines via the written Scriptures while Tradition transmits these same doctrines through the life, faith and practice of the Church. If Scripture is equated with Tradition than the writings of St. Irenaeus and Tertullian are reduced to nonsense.

St. Irenaeus writes as if he was anticipating proto-Protestants:

“When, however, they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn round and accuse these same Scriptures, as if they were not correct, nor of authority, and [assert] that they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition...It comes to this, therefore, that these men do now consent neither to Scripture or tradition” (Against Heresies 3,2:1).

“Suppose there arise a dispute relative to some important question among us, should we not have recourse to the most ancient Churches with which the apostles held constant intercourse, and learn from them what is certain and clear in regard to the present question? For how should it be if the apostles themselves had not left us writings? Would it not be necessary, [in that case,] to follow the course of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they did commit the Churches?” (Against Heresies 3,4:1).

According to Irenaeus, Tradition is substantive in content, normative in authority and continues to live in the Apostolic churches. Likewise Tertullian writes:

“Error of doctrine in the churches must necessarily have produced various issues. When, however, that which is deposited among many is found to be one and the

same, it is not the result of error, but of tradition. Can any one, then, be reckless enough to say that they were in error who handed on the tradition" (Prescription against the Heretics,28).

Similarly, the words of Tertullian are reduced to nonsense if we apply Mr. Webster's understanding of Tradition.

Mr. Webster continues:

"Irenaeus and Tertullian had to contend with the Gnostics who were the very first to suggest and teach that they possessed an Apostolic oral Tradition that was independent from Scripture. These early fathers rejected such a notion and appealed to Scripture alone for the proclamation and defense of doctrine."

First, St. Irenaeus and Tertullian had no issue with the concept of an authoritative Tradition alongside Scripture. Their criticism of the Gnostics was with a tradition that was private and available to only the Gnostic elect in contrast to a Tradition that was public, above board, taught and preserved by the Catholic Church. This was the point that was foisted in the face of the Gnostics by St. Irenaeus and Tertullian:

"But, again, when we refer them to that tradition which originates from the apostles, [and] which is preserved by means of the successions of presbyters in the Churches, they object to tradition, saying they themselves are wiser..." (Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3,2:2).

"His testimony, therefore, is true, and the doctrine of the apostles is open and steadfast, holding nothing in reserve; nor did they teach one set of doctrines in private, and another in public" (Against Heresies 3,15:1).

"[The Apostles] next went forth into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations. They then in like manner rounded churches in every city, from which all the other churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith, and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic churches.

Every sort of thing must necessarily revert to its original for its classification. Therefore the churches, although they are so many and so great, comprise but the one primitive church, (founded) by the apostles, from which they all (spring). In this way all are primitive, and all are apostolic, whilst they are all proved to be one, in (unbroken) unity, by their peaceful communion and title of brotherhood, and bond of hospitality, — privileges which no other rule directs than the one tradition of the selfsame mystery" (Tertullian, On Prescription Against the Heretics 20).

Mr. Webster's understanding that the Fathers appealed to Scripture alone is simply a fantasy.

In support of Mr. Webster's novel idea that St. Irenaeus and Tertullian embraced *sola scriptura* he cites Ellen Flessman-Van Leer, a non-Catholic scholar. Unfortunately for Mr. Webster, Ellen Flessman-Van Leer has written in depth and without equivocation on St. Irenaeus' and Tertullian's understanding of Apostolic Tradition. Mr. Webster wants to leave us with the impression that Van Leer and the Fathers embraced *sola scriptura*. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"For Irenaeus, on the other hand, tradition and scripture are both quite unproblematic. They stand independently side by side, both absolutely authoritative, both unconditionally true, trustworthy, and convincing" (Van Leer, Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church, p139).

Elsewhere Van Leer comments on Tertullian:

"Tertullian says explicitly that the apostles delivered their teaching both orally and later on through epistles, and the whole body of this teaching he designates with the word traditio... This is tradition in the real sense of the word. It is used for the original message of the apostles, going back to revelation, and for the message proclaimed by the church, which has been received through the apostles" (ibid., pp. 146, 147, 168).

Van Leer concludes:

"Irenaeus and Tertullian point to the church tradition as the authoritative locus of the unadulterated teaching of

the apostles, they can no longer appeal to the immediate memory, as could the earliest writers. Instead they lay stress on the affirmation that this teaching has been transmitted faithfully from generation to generation. One could say that in their thinking, apostolic succession occupies the same place that is held by the living memory in the Apostolic Fathers" (ibid., p.188).

Clearly, Mr. Webster has not understood Van Leer, St. Irenaeus and Tertullian. Mr. Webster continues:

"The Bible was the ultimate authority for the fathers of the patristic age. It was materially sufficient and the final arbiter in all matters of doctrinal truth. As J.N.D. Kelly has pointed out: 'The clearest token of the prestige enjoyed by (Scripture) is the fact that almost the entire theological effort of the Fathers, whether their aims were polemical or constructive, was expended upon what amounted to the exposition of the Bible. Further, it was everywhere taken for granted that, for any doctrine to win acceptance, it had first to establish its Scriptural basis' (Early Christian Doctrines, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978, pp. 42,46)."

Here we have Mr. Webster misrepresenting the faith of J.N.D. Kelly, the Anglican patristic scholar. Interesting how Mr. Webster failed to cite the following from the same work:

"It should be unnecessary to accumulate further evidence. Throughout the whole period Scripture and tradition ranked as complementary authorities, media different in form but coincident in content. To inquire which counted as superior or more ultimate is to pose the question in misleading terms. If Scripture was abundantly sufficient in principle, tradition was recognized as the surest clue to its interpretation, for in tradition the Church retained, as a legacy from the apostles which was embedded in all the organs of her institutional life, an unerring grasp of the real purport and meaning of the revelation to which Scripture and tradition alike bore witness" (Early Christian Doctrines, pp. 47-48).

Mr. Webster then cites several paragraphs from St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Basil the Great in support of

sola scriptura. Mr. Webster summarizes his findings in the ancient Church:

“These fathers are simply representative of the fathers as a whole. Cyprian, Origen, Hippolytus, Athanasius, Firmilian, Augustine are just a few of the fathers that could be cited as proponents of the principle of sola scriptura, in addition to Tertullian, Irenaeus, Cyril and Gregory of Nyssa. The early Church operated on the basis of the principle of sola scriptura and it was this historical principle that the Reformers sought to restore to the Church.”

For a complete rebuttal to the above claim I refer to my contribution in Not by Scripture Alone (Santa Barbara: Queenship, 1997), Chapter 8 “What did the Church Fathers teach about Scripture, Tradition and Church” and Appendix: “A Dossier of Church Fathers on Scripture and Tradition.”

There are a couple of recurring themes throughout the writings of the Church Fathers on the rule of faith. First, the Fathers affirmed that the most perfect expression of the Apostolic faith is to be found in Sacred Scripture. The Fathers affirmed the material sufficiency of Scripture. According to the Fathers, all doctrines of the Catholic faith are to be found within its covers. Secondly, the Fathers affirmed in the same breath and with equal conviction that the Apostolic faith also has been transmitted to the Church through Tradition. According to the Fathers, the Scriptures can only be interpreted within the Catholic Church in light of her Sacred Tradition. The Fathers, particularly those who combated heresies, affirmed that the fatal flaw of heretics was interpreting Scripture according to their private understanding apart from mother Church and her Tradition. In sum, when the Fathers affirmed the sufficiency and authority of Scripture, they did so not in a vacuum, but within the framework of an authoritative Church and Tradition. Let me cite passages from the same Fathers Mr. Webster used.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (c.A.D 315-386), Doctor and Catholic bishop of Jerusalem between A.D.348-350 writes: “But in learning the Faith and in professing it, acquire and keep that only, which is now delivered to thee by the CHURCH, and which has been built up strongly out of all the SCRIPTURES” (*Catechetical Lectures*, 5:12).

Mr. Webster provided this passage but I add it here to draw attention to St. Cyril's Catholic understanding of the rule of faith.

Elsewhere, St. Cyril points to the Church not to Scripture for the definition of the canon: “Learn also diligently, and from the Church, what are the books of the Old Testaments, and what those of the New” (*Catechetical Lectures*, 4:33).

St. Gregory of Nyssa (c.A.D. 335-394), brother of St. Basil the Great, Doctor of the Catholic Church and bishop of Nyssa writes:

“[F]or it is enough for proof of our statement, that the TRADITION has come down to us from our fathers, handed on, like some inheritance, by succession from the apostles and the saints who came after them. They, on the other hand, who change their doctrines to this novelty, would need the support of arguments in abundance, if they were about to bring over to their views, not men light as dust, and unstable, but men of weight and steadiness: but so long as their statement is advanced without being established, and without being proved, who is so foolish and so brutish as to account the teaching of the evangelists and apostles, and of those who have successively shone like lights in the churches, of less force than this undemonstrated nonsense?” (Against Eunomius, 4:6).

St. Basil the Great (A.D. 329-379), Doctor of the Catholic Church, bishop of Caesarea, and brother St. Gregory of Nyssa's writes:

“Of the dogmas and kerygmas preserved in the Church, some we possess from written teaching and others we receive from the tradition of the Apostles, handed on to us in mystery. In respect to piety both are of the same force. No one will contradict any of these, no one, at any rate, who is even moderately versed in manners ecclesiastical. Indeed, were we to try to reject the unwritten customs as having no great authority, we would unwittingly injure the Gospel in its vitals; or rather, we would reduce kerygma to a mere term” (Holy Spirit 27:66).

Irenaeus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil are the only Fathers cited by Mr. Webster in support of *sola scriptura*. I have provided passages from these same Fathers to provide the necessary balance. It would be easy for anyone to cut and paste the Fathers to their liking, however to find the authentic faith of a Father we must look at their entire writings.

It is clear the early Church Fathers appealed to Tradition alongside Scripture. This Tradition was normative, substantive, available to all, and preserved by the Apostolic Churches, particularly the See of Rome.



Joseph A. Gallegos is a graduate of the University of California, Irvine and West Coast University, Los Angeles. He is very active in Catholic apologetics, having created *Corunum Apologetics BBS* in 1992, and an international website (<http://www.cin.org/users/jgallegos>) for his expertise on patristic thought regarding the Papacy and Tradition. He is the author of *What Did the Church Fathers Teach About Scripture, Tradition, and Church Authority in Not by Scripture Alone* (Queenship Publishing, 1997).

Before you object...

Sola Scriptura: A Stony Path by Marcus C. Grodi

Before you object to what has been said in the preceding articles, I would encourage you to consider carefully the implications of the following passage from Deuteronomy:

“Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it. If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him, and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and cleave to him. BUT THAT PROPHET OR THAT DREAMER OF DREAMS SHALL BE PUT TO DEATH, BECAUSE HE HAS TAUGHT REBELLION AGAINST THE LORD YOUR GOD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. SO YOU SHALL PURGE THE EVIL FROM THE MIDST OF YOU.”

Deuteronomy 12.32-13.5

As you contemplate the above passage, remember that when Jesus confounded the devil during his forty-days in the desert, he relied upon the authority and truth of this book (Deut 8.3; 6.16; and 6.13). And when he summarized the Law into the Greatest Commandment he again confirmed the authority of this and other books of Moses (Deut. 6.5 and Lev. 19.18). Also, remember that it is upon the fact that Jesus quoted from these books that most Protestant scholars, preachers and teachers begin building the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

Now considering this passage, how would you, or should you, interpret and apply this passage if you were the pastor of an independent Christian Bible Church, responsible to no one but Jesus through the Holy Spirit? What are you to do with those prophets and dreamers in your midst who claim private messages from God who then attempt to pull people from your congregation in directions different from where you believe God is calling you? Let’s say you have chosen to teach your people the Trinitarian and Christological formulas of the third and fourth century Ecumenical Councils, while these new leaders—confirmed by signs and wonders—are

teaching that God is found only in Jesus or in the Holy Spirit. What should you do with these teachers of rebellion?

Now I suppose having them stoned seems a bit violent in our modern civilized (?) society, but this was the prescribed punishment of choice, described in Scripture: “*You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the Lord your God... And all Israel shall hear, and fear, and never again do any such wickedness as this among you.*” (Deut. 13.10-11)

You can tell by the wording of this passage that there were still a few of the leaders flinging sheep* for this punishment, but more importantly you can see that there is great benefit to the future stability of your congregation if you heed these instructions from God’s Word.

Now you might say that as the New Testament Church you are not held by these Old Testament Jewish regulations. However, as emphatically as the apostle Paul may have exhorted his followers to cease being slaves to the Law, when push came to shove he confessed his unswerving loyalty to it: “*But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing*

everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets” (Acts 24.14).

What will you tell your elders and congregation they should do with the schismatics in your midst? And what about those of your congregation who follow them, for the Scriptures command that you stone them as well (Deut. 13.6-11)? And how will you handle any fights that may break out amongst your warring flock? The Scriptures are very strict about what must be done (you MUST read Deut. 25.11-12!!).

Now I’m not bringing these regulations to your attention because I think we should rethink how we deal with schismatics or family squabbles. Rather I’m pointing out how dangerous the doctrine of *sola scriptura* can be and has been ever since it was first coined by the fifteenth and sixteenth century Reformers. When the wisdom and guidance of Sacred Tradition and the Church Magisterium were thrown to the wind, Christendom fell victim to “every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4.14). In fact it was in this context that Paul begged the Ephesian believers to “maintain the unity of the Spirit...”, recognizing that Christ had gifted His Body with apostles, prophets,

evangelists, pastors and teachers to enable the Church to “attain to the unity of The Faith” (Eph. 4.1-16).

Now granted some of the men and women who have held these positions of Church leadership throughout Her history have done much to sever this unity. Some have made unity so downright uncomfortable that one could nearly justify breaking free to be all that Paul exhorted a Church to be. But then on what side of Deuteronomy 13 would one fall? And once you’ve successfully dodged all the stones, when might you need to start throwing stones of your own?

I’ve become recently more sensitized to these dangers of *sola scriptura* because I’ve been using the Coming Home Network’s new *Read The Bible and Catechism In a Year* brochure. For the first time since seminary 15-years ago I’m attempting to read the Bible straight through from cover-to-cover. In doing so my eyes are becoming newly opened to the vast number of scripture passages that can pose grave difficulties for modern interpreters. As I ruminate on my years as a Protestant pastor, I’m now

much more aware of how I unconsciously categorized Bible passages into those that were easily interpreted and preached (such as John 3.16, Romans 8.28, or Galatians 2.20) from those that needed quick explanations (such as those referenced above, as well as Matthew 16.16-19, John 6.51ff, Hebrews 6.4-6, and James 2.24). I have come to realize that we Protestant clergy had an unspoken way of dealing with difficult, uncomfortable verses like the later list. We’d essentially let them sit until we heard or read someone we highly respected give a plausible, believable, repeatable answer—that also passed the litmus tests of our other accepted dogma. This we then memorized and added to our list of quick knee-jerk responses.

I strongly encourage all of you, Catholic or Protestant, to do the same--read carefully through the entire Bible, even those passages that are a bit tedious. As you do so, be sure to note the many, many verses that are not so easy to explain at first glance. When you do—if you do—I strongly encourage you to recognize with great thanksgiving how gracious and lov-

ing Christ our Savior was when He gave us the Church guided by His Spirit. Obedience to Her might keep us all from becoming rightful candidates for stoning!

* (Why else would Moses need to be redundant about emphasizing that stoning is to be done with stones?)



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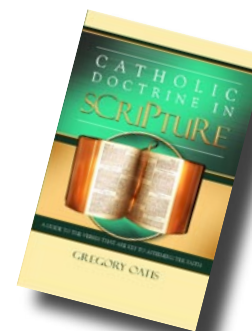
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Are you a Protestant pastor or layman with interest in the Catholic Church?

The purpose of *The Coming Home Network International (CHNNetwork)* is to provide fellowship, encouragement and support for Protestant pastors and laymen who are somewhere along the journey or have already been received into the Catholic Church. The *CHNetwork* is committed to assisting and standing beside all inquirers, serving as a friend and an advocate.

Are you on the Journey? Are you a convert who remembers what it was like? Are you a cradle Catholic? If you fit into any of these categories or if you would just like to be part of this truly awesome group, you can [Join the Coming Home Network by e-mailing us](#) or contacting us by mail or phone at the address listed at the bottom of the page.

Would you like to assist others on the journey home? Your help is needed especially if you have faced the same journey. There are others from your previous denomination who could use an encouraging word or someone to discuss specific issues with by email, phone, mail or even in person.

For more information please contact our office at 800-664-5110 or helpers@chnetwork.org. Please include your postal address in your message as well as your email.

Join our discussion group! www.chnetwork.org/cgi-bin/dcforum/dcboard.cgi

The Coming Home Network International

The CHN Forum

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Forums in Friendly Chat Conference		Last Updated Date/Time	Topics	Messages
General Chat Protected forum: Only registered users can post Moderators: Jim, Steve, rob		04-23-03 09:27 AM	215	1595
Forums in Mary Conference		Last Updated Date/Time	Topics	Messages
Mary Protected forum: Only registered users can post Moderators: Jim, Steve, rob		03-26-03 09:20 AM	21	189
Forums in Sole Scriptura Conference		Last Updated Date/Time	Topics	Messages
The Bible Alone? Protected forum: Only registered users can post Moderators: Jim, Steve, rob		03-06-03 08:20 PM	16	68
Forums in Authority Conference		Last Updated Date/Time	Topics	Messages
By what Authority? Protected forum: Only registered users can post Moderators: Jim, Steve, rob		02-07-03 03:49 PM	11	54
Forums in Church History Conference		Last Updated Date/Time	Topics	Messages
The Early Church Fathers St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Ignatius of Antioch, St. Polycarp of Smyrna, Tertullian, ect.... Protected forum: Only registered users can post Moderators: Jim, Steve, rob		03-12-02 09:12 PM	5	25