



Sola Scriptura

We will look at two of the issues that divide Protestant Catholics from Roman Catholics. Both sides claim to be Catholic, that is, part of the apostolic, universal church of Jesus Christ. Roman Catholics believe we departed from that church in the sixteenth century. We Protestant Catholics believe that they departed earlier.

The issue that still divides us is *the source of religious truth for the people of God*. As Protestants we maintain that the Scripture alone is our authority. Our distinguished Roman opponents will maintain that the Scripture is insufficient as the authority of the people of God and that *tradition and the teaching authority of the church must be added to the Scripture*.

This is no time for games or for fancy debating tricks. We must be searching for the truth. God has declared that whoever adds to or takes away from His Word is subject to His curse. The Roman church has declared that we Protestants are accursed for taking away the Word of God as found in tradition. We as Protestants have declared that the Roman church is a false church for adding human traditions to the Word of God. Despite sincere debates by fine apologists over the course of almost 500 years, the differences remain basically as they were in the sixteenth century. Not much new will be said. But we must continue to pursue the truth.

In spite of the difficulty of the undertaking, I am eager to join that historic train of Protestant apologists to defend the doctrine that the *Scripture alone* is our ultimate religious authority. I believe that I can show that this position is the clear position of the Scripture itself. And I hope that, by the grace of God, those committed to the Roman doctrine of tradition will come to see the tragic error of denigrating the *sufficiency and perspicuity* of God's own inspired Word.

The Protestant position

Let me begin with certain clarifications. I am not arguing that all truth is to be found in the Bible or that the Bible is the only form in which the truth of God has come to His people. I am not arguing that every verse in the Bible is clear to every reader. I am not arguing that the church both as the people of God and as ministerial office is not a great value and help in understanding the Scripture. As William Whitaker stated in his notable work: *"For we also say that the church is the interpreter of Scripture and that the gift of interpretation resides only in the church: but we deny that it pertains to particular persons, or is tied to any particular see or succession of men."*¹

I will argue the Protestant doctrine that all things necessary for salvation concerning faith and life are taught in the Bible clearly enough for the ordinary believer to find it there.

The teaching of Scripture - Old Testament

The position I am defending certainly is what is taught in the Bible itself. For example, at Deuteronomy 31 and 32. Deuteronomy 31:9 states, *"Moses wrote down this law..."* Then Moses instructed the people by writing down the law and then ordering that it be read to them *"so they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law"* (Deuteronomy 31:9, 12). Moses declared to all Israel, *"Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you they are your life"* (Deuteronomy 32:46, 47).

Notice the dear elements in these passages:

1. The Word Moses is talking about is written;
2. The people can and must listen to it and learn it;
3. In this Word they can find life.

The people do not need any additional traditions to guide them to life. They do not need any infallible institution to interpret the Word. The priests, prophets and scribes of Israel certainly function to help the people ministerially. But the Word alone was sufficient for salvation. The prophets, who were indeed inspired, came very much in the spirit of Micah who said, "*He has showed you, O man, what is good*" (6:8). The function of the prophets and priests was not to add to or even clarify the law; rather they applied it to the people who were sinfully indifferent.

The teaching of Scripture - New Testament

If this sufficiency and clarity of the Word is true in the Old Testament, we can assume that it is all the more true in the New. The New Testament gloriously fulfills what the Old Testament promises. But we do not have to assume it. Rather the New Testament makes clear that the character of Scripture is to be sufficient and clear. One example of that is found in 2 Timothy 3. There Paul is writing to his younger brother in the faith, Timothy. He writes that Timothy, who was instructed in the faith by his grandmother and mother, has also learned all about Paul's teaching (3:10). Timothy had been mightily helped by all sorts of oral teaching, some of it apostolic. Yet Paul writes these words to Timothy: (read 2 Timothy 3:12-4:5). You see, Paul reminds Timothy that the Scriptures are able to make him wise for salvation in Christ Jesus (3:15). He teaches that the Scriptures are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (3:16). Because the Scriptures have this character, they thoroughly equip the man of God for every good work (3:17). So Paul tells Timothy that he must preach this Word even though the time is coming when people will not want to hear it, but rather will want teachers to suit their fancy who will instruct them in myths rather than the truth of the Word (4:1-4). The force and clarity of the apostle's teaching here is striking. In spite of the rich oral teaching Timothy had, he is to *preach the Scriptures* because those Scriptures give him clearly all that he needs for wisdom and preparation to instruct the people of God in faith and all good works. The Scripture makes him wise for salvation and equips him with everything he needs for doing every good work required of the preacher of God. The *sufficiency* and *clarity* of the Word are taught in this one section of Scripture over and over again. John Chrysostom paraphrased the meaning of Paul's words to Timothy in this way: "*You have Scripture for a master instead of me; from there you can learn whatever you would know.*"¹²

Now I have listened to several tapes of our opponents in debates on this topic. Often Protestant apologists have cited 2 Timothy 3 against them. Their usual response seems to be repeated assertions that 2 Timothy 3 does not teach sufficiency. Sometimes they refer to James 1:4, Matthew 19:21 and Colossians 1:28, 4:12 as parallel texts claiming that these texts show that the word "complete" in 2 Timothy 3:17 does not mean sufficiency. But such passages are not parallel. A completely different Greek word is used in them. I hope that they will not just assert that 2 Timothy 3 does not say what we claim that it does. *Repeated assertions do not prove a point.* That is only a propaganda technique. We need to hear our texts and explanations answered in a responsible and thorough way.

The confidence that Paul had in the Scriptures and which he taught Timothy was clearly understood by the great church father, Augustine. In his treatise to prepare leaders of the church in an understanding of the Bible (*On Christian Doctrine*), Augustine wrote, "*Among those things which are said openly in Scripture are to be found all those teachings which involve faith, the mores of living, and that hope and charity which we have discussed...*"¹³

We should not be surprised that the Apostle Paul, the Old Testament and the greatest teacher of the ancient church held the *sufficiency* and *perspicuity* of Scripture. It is the position that Jesus took in one of the most important moments of His life. At the beginning of His public ministry Jesus faced the focused temptation of the devil in the wilderness. He faced the temptation as the Son of God, but also as the second Adam and the true Israel. And how did he face that temptation? He

did not appeal to the oral tradition of Israel. He did not appeal to the authority of the rabbis or Sanhedrin. He did not even appeal to His own divinity or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Our Savior in the face of temptation turned again and again and again to the Scriptures. *"It is written,"* He said. The Scriptures made Him wise for salvation. They equipped Him for every good work.

They were clear as He implied; even the evil one knew. When the devil quoted the Scripture, Jesus did not turn to some other authority. Rather Jesus said, "It is also written." When the evil one or his representatives misuse the Bible or imply that it is unclear, Jesus teaches us that we must look more deeply *into* the Word, not *away* from it.

Characteristic Roman confusion

Now my distinguished opponents will soon have an opportunity to try to convince you that these texts of Scripture do not mean what they clearly say. Let me anticipate some of their arguments and prepare you for some of the ways they tend to respond.

The Word of God

First, they will try to say that the phrase "Word of God" can mean more than just the Bible. I have already granted that. The question before us is whether *today* anything other than the Scriptures is necessary to know the truth of God for salvation. The Scriptural texts I have cited show that nothing else is needed. Our opponents need to show not that Paul referred to his preaching as well as his writing as the Word of God. We grant that. They need to show that Paul taught that the oral teaching of the apostles would be needed to *supplement* the Scriptures for the church *through the ages*. They cannot show that because Paul did not teach it and the Scriptures as a whole do not.

Tradition

Second, notice that our opponents, while making much of tradition, will never really define tradition or tell you what its content is. Now, tradition is a word that can be used in a variety of ways. It can refer to a certain school of understanding the Scriptures, such as the Lutheran tradition. It can refer to traditions supposedly from the apostles that are not in the Bible. It can refer to developing traditions in the history of the church that are clearly not ancient in origin. Usually in the ancient fathers of the church, the word tradition refers to the standard interpretation of the Bible among them. And we as Protestants value such tradition.

Now what do Roman apologists mean when they assert the authority of tradition? Historically they have not agreed among themselves about the nature and content of tradition. Mr. Madrid, for example, has said that tradition does not add anything to Scripture. But almost all Roman apologists for over three hundred years after the Council of Trent argued that tradition does add to the Scriptures. Some Roman apologists believe that all binding tradition was taught by the apostles, but others believe that tradition evolves and develops through the centuries of the church so that there are traditions necessary for salvation that were never known to the apostles. It is impossible to know what the real Roman position is on this matter. The second Vatican Council expressed itself with deliberate ambiguity:

"This tradition which comes from the apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down... For, as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her."⁴

What does that mean?

It certainly does not give us any clear understanding of the character or content of tradition.

Rome usually tries to clarify its position by saying that its authority is Scripture, tradition and church together. Vatican II declared,

"It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that

*one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.*¹⁶

In fact, however, if you listen carefully you will notice that the real authority for our Roman opponents is neither Scripture nor tradition, but the church. What is the Scripture and what does it teach? Only the church can tell you. What is tradition and what does it teach? Only the church can tell you. As the Roman theologian John Eck said, *"The Scriptures are not authentic, except by the authority of the church."*¹⁶ As Pope Pius IX said at the time of the First Vatican Council in 1870, *"I am tradition."*¹⁷ The overweening arrogance of such a statement is staggering. But it confirms our claim that for Rome the only real authority is the church: *sola ecclesia*.

Now Protestantism arose in the sixteenth century in reaction to such claims and teachings of the Roman church. In the Middle Ages most within the church had believed that the Bible and the tradition of the church taught the same or at least complementary doctrines. But as Luther and others studied the Bible with a greater care and depth than the church had done in centuries, they began to discover that tradition actually contradicted the Bible. They discovered, for example, that:

1. the Bible teaches that the office of bishop and presbyter are the same office (Titus 1:5-7), but tradition says they are different offices;
2. the Bible teaches that all have sinned except Jesus (Romans 3:10-12, Hebrews 4:15), but tradition says that Mary was sinless;
3. the Bible teaches that Christ offered His sacrifice once for all (Hebrews 7:27, 9:28, 10:10), but tradition says that the priest sacrifices Christ on the altar at mass;
4. the Bible says that we are not to bow down to statues (Exodus 20:4,5), but tradition says that we should bow down to statues;
5. the Bible says that all Christians are saints and priests (Ephesians 1:1, 1 Peter 2:9), but tradition says that saints and priests are special castes within the Christian community;
6. the Bible says that Jesus is the only mediator between man and God (1 Timothy 2:5), but tradition says Mary is co-mediator with Christ;
7. the Bible says that all Christians should know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13), but tradition says that all Christians cannot and should not know that they have eternal life.

The Reformers saw that the words of Jesus to the Pharisees applied equally to their day: *"You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition"* (Matthew. 15:6).

The Reformers also discovered that tradition contradicted tradition. For example, the tradition of the Roman church teaches that the pope is the head of the church, a bishop over all bishops. But Gregory the Great, pope and saint at the end of the ancient church period said that such a teaching came from the spirit of Antichrist. (*"I confidently affirm that whosoever calls himself sacerdos universalis, or desires to be so called by others is in his pride a forerunner of Antichrist."*¹⁸)

More directly related to our debate is the evident tension in tradition about the value of reading the Bible. *The Index of Forbidden Books* of Pope Pius IV in 1559 said,

*Since experience teaches that, if the reading of the Holy Bible in the vernacular is permitted generally without discrimination, more damage than advantage will result because of the boldness of men; the judgment of bishops and inquisitors is to serve as guide in this regard. Bishops and inquisitors may, in accord with the counsel of the local priest and confessor, allow Catholic translations of the Bible to be read by those of whom they realize that such reading will not lead to the detriment but to the increase of faith and piety. The permission is to be given in writing. Whoever reads or has such a translation in his possession without this permission cannot be absolved from his sins until he has turned in these Bibles...*⁹

In marked contrast Vatican II stated: *"Easy access to sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful ... since the word of God should be available at all times, the Church with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books."*¹⁰

Does tradition believe that the Bible is dangerous or helpful? The Bible did prove dangerous in the sixteenth century. Most who read it carefully became Protestants!

Such discoveries led the Reformers back to the Bible. There they learned that the Scriptures must stand as judge of all teaching. The Scripture teaches that it is the revelation of God and therefore true in all that it teaches. But nowhere does the Scripture say that the church is true in all that it says. Rather, although the church as a whole will be preserved in the faith, wolves will arise in the church (Acts 20:29, 30) and even the man of lawlessness will sit in the heart of the church teaching lies (2 Thessalonians 2:4.)

Church and Canon

This point brings us to our third concern. Our distinguished opponents will use the word "church" repeatedly. Especially those of us who are Protestants will usually be inclined to interpret their use of the word "church" as referring to the body of the faithful. But that is not the way they characteristically use the word. When they refer to the authority of the church they mean the infallible teaching authority of councils and popes. That view of the church they take from the Middle Ages and in a romantic way read back into the ancient church period. So notice very carefully how they use the word "church." And remember that neither the Scriptures nor the great majority of the fathers of the ancient church period understand the authority of the church in the way they do.

Let me offer as an illustration two examples from the work of Augustine often quoted against us on the question of the authority of the church. At one point in his debate with the Pelagians, a bishop of Rome sided with Augustine, and Augustine declared, "*Rome has spoken, the matter is settled.*" Later, however, another pope opposed Augustine on this subject and Augustine responded by saying "*Christ has spoken, the matter is settled.*" Augustine did not bow to the authority of the bishop of Rome, but turned to the word of Christ to evaluate the teaching of Rome. Another statement of Augustine often cited by Roman apologists reads, "*I would not have believed had not the authority of the Catholic church moved me.*" That seems very strong and clear. But in another place Augustine wrote, "*I would never have understood Plotinus had not the authority of my neo-Platonic teachers moved me.*" This parallel shows that Augustine is not talking about some absolute, infallible authority in the church, but is talking about the ministerial work of the church and about teachers who help students understand.

Let us look at the church further by raising a related issue: the canon of Scripture. Our opponents will probably try to make much of the issue of the canon. They will tell you that the Bible alone cannot be our authority because the Bible does not tell us what books are in the Bible. They will argue that the church must tell us what books are in the Bible. When they say the church tells us, they mean popes and councils must tell us. This implies that we did not have a Bible until Pope Damasus offered a list of the canon in 382, or perhaps until 1546 when the Council of Trent became the first "ecumenical" council to define the canon. But of course the people of God had the Bible before 1546 and before 382.

- In the *first* place the church always had Scripture. The apostolic preaching and writing of the first century repeatedly verified its teaching by quoting the Old Testament. The quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament abound in the New Testament. The New Testament does not reject the Old, but fulfills it (Romans 1:2; Luke 16:29, Ephesians 2:19, 20). The church always had a canonical foundation in the Old Testament.
- In the *second* place we can see that the apostles sensed that the new covenant inaugurated by our Lord Jesus would have a new or augmented canon. Canon and covenant are interrelated and interdependent in the Bible. (See Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*.) Peter testifies to this emerging canon when he includes the letters of Paul as part of the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).
- In the *third* place we must see that the canon of Scripture is in a real sense established by the Scripture itself because the canonical books are self-authenticating. As God's revelation they are recognized by the people of God as God's own Word. As Jesus said, "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me... They ... will listen to my voice...*" (John

10:14, 16). In the deepest sense we cannot judge the Word, but the Word judges us: *"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart"* (Hebrews 4:12). The self-authenticating character of the canon is demonstrated by the remarkable unanimity reached by the people of God on the canon.

- In the *fourth* place we must see that historically the canon was formed not by the actions of popes and councils. These actions simply recognized the emerging consensus of the people of God as they recognized the authentic Scriptures. Indeed whatever criteria were used by popes and councils to recognize the canon (authorship, style, content, witness of the Spirit, etc.), these same criteria were available to the people of God as a whole.

We can see this basic understanding of the formation of the canon stated in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* which states: *"The canon, already implicitly present in the apostolic age, gradually became explicit through a number of providential factors forming and fixing it."*¹¹

We can also see this basic approach to the canon reflected in the words of Augustine, writing in his important treatise *On Christian Doctrine*. This treatise was written between 396 and 427 - after the supposedly authoritative decision of Pope Damasus on the canon and after a council held in Hippo that discussed the canon. Augustine wrote:

*In the matter of canonical Scriptures he should follow the authority of the greater number of catholic Churches, among which are those which have deserved to have apostolic seats and to receive epistles. He will observe this rule concerning canonical Scriptures, that he will prefer those accepted by all catholic Churches to those which some do not accept; among those which are not accepted by all, he should prefer those which are accepted by the largest number of important Churches to those held by a few minor Churches of less authority. If he discovers that some are maintained by the larger number of Churches, others by the Churches of weightiest authority, although this condition is not likely, he should hold them of equal value.*¹²

This statement shows that Augustine did not look to popes or councils for the solution of the question of the canon. He recognized the variety among churches and the appropriateness of a plurality of churches. He urged all students of Scripture to examine the question and to look for the emerging consensus among the people of God. Like Augustine we do not disparage the value of the witness of the people of God to the canon. We value the ministry of the church in this as in all things. But we deny that the Church in its offices or councils authoritatively establishes the Scripture on the basis of some knowledge or power not available to Christians generally. The character of the canonical books draws the people of God to them.

Unity

Fourthly, notice how they use the word unity. They will suggest that we Protestants disprove our claim of the clarity of the Scripture by our failure to agree about the meaning of the Scripture. We recognize that Protestants are divided into various denominations. But all Protestants who are heirs of the Reformation are united in understanding the gospel and in respecting one another as brothers in Christ. We have all found the same gospel clearly in the Bible.

When we discuss unity and authority, let us be certain that we are making fair and accurate comparisons. Our opponents will want to compare Roman theory with Protestant practice. That is not fair. We must compare theory with theory, or practice with practice. In practice neither group has the agreement we should have.

Remember that while Rome is united organizationally, it is just as divided theologically as is Protestantism broadly understood. The institution of an infallible pope has not created theological unity in the Roman church. Rather Roman theologians are constantly disagreeing with each other as to what the popes have taught and as to whether those teachings are in fact proclaimed *ex cathedra* and are therefore infallible. The modern state of the Roman church really has shown that the institution of the papacy has not made clear the necessary content of Christian truth. I suspect that every honest member of the Roman church here in our audience tonight will have to

acknowledge that. As early as the seventeenth century, the Reformed theologian Francis Turretin noted the serious theological divisions in the Roman church and asked why the Pope did not settle these disputes if his office was so effective¹³ (p. 213). Such theological problems are certainly much greater today than in Turretin's day and the question remains unanswered as to why the Pope is so ineffective.

We should not be surprised that there are divisions in the church. Christ and His apostles predicted that there would be. The Apostle Paul told us that such divisions are useful. He wrote: *"No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval"* (1 Corinthians 11:19). Differences should humble us and drive us back to the Scriptures to test all claims to truth. If we do not accept the Scriptures as our standard and judge, there is indeed no hope for unity.

The church must have a standard by which to judge all claims to truth. The church must have a standard of truth by which to reform and purify itself when divisions arise. The church cannot claim that it is that standard and defend that claim by appealing to itself. Such circular reasoning is not only unconvincing. It is self-defeating. Rome's argument boils down to this: we must believe Rome because Rome says so.

The Bible tells us that the Word of God is the light that enables us to walk in the ways of God. Listen to the words of Psalm 119:99, 100, 105, 130:

"I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts... Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path... The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple."

(Our opponents usually object to an appeal to Psalm 119 on the grounds that it speaks of the Word of God, not of the Bible, and therefore could include its praise tradition as well as Scripture. But their argument is irrelevant to our use of Psalm 119, because we are using it to prove the clarity, not the sufficiency of Scripture!) The Psalmist is saying here that the light of the Word shines so brightly and clearly that if I meditate on it and obey it I am wiser than any teacher or elder. The simple can understand it. The Word is like a strong flashlight in a dark forest. It enables me to walk on the path without tripping.

Conclusion

As I come to the conclusion of these remarks we must listen again to the Scriptures so that we will act as God's Word teaches us to act. Consider the story of Paul in Berea (Acts 17:10-12). Paul preached there in the synagogue and many Jews responded to his preaching with eagerness. We are told that after they listened to Paul, each day they *examined the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was true*. How did Paul react? Did he say that the Scriptures were not clear and that only he as an apostle or the rabbis or the Sanhedrin could tell them what the Scriptures really meant? Or did he say that they should not expect to find the truth in the Scriptures because they were incomplete and needed to be supplemented by tradition? Or did he say that they were insulting his apostolic authority and that they should simply submit to him as the infallible interpreter of the Bible? Or did Paul say that they should defer to Peter as the only one who could interpret the Bible? No! He did not say any of these things. The practice of the Bereans is praised in the Bible. They are called noble because they evaluated everything on the basis of the written Word of God.

If we would be faithful children of God, if we would be noble, we must proceed as the Bereans did. We must follow the example of Moses, and Paul and our Lord Jesus. Do not rest your confidence on the wisdom of men who claim infallibility. Stand rather with the Apostle Paul who wrote (1 Corinthians 4:6), *"Do not go beyond what is written."*

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¹ William Witaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture*, Cambridge (University Press), 1849, p. 411.

² Cited in Whitaker, p. 637.

³ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 11, 9.

⁴ *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Watler M. Abbott, S.J., America Press, 1966, p.116

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶ Cited by Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. J.T. Dennison, Jr., Phillipsburg, New Jersey (P & R Publishing), 1992, Vol. 1, p. 86.

⁷ Cited in Robert Strimple, "The Relationship between Scripture and Tradition in Contemporary Roman Catholic Theology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (Fall 1977), p. 29.

⁸ Cited in *Cambridge Medieval History*, Cambridge, 1967, vol. 2, p. 247.

⁹ Cited in Hans Hillerbrand, *The Reformation*, New York (Harper and Row), 1964, p. 475.

¹⁰ *Documents on Vatican II*, pp. 125f.

¹¹ Cited in an audio tape by William Webster entitled, "Cannon."

¹² *On Christian Doctrine*, II, 8.

¹³ Turretin, vol. 1, p. 156.