# SOLA



# SCRIPTURA

## *The* PROTESTANT POSITION *on the* BIBLE

Joel R. Beeke • Sinclair B. Ferguson
W. Robert Godfrey • Ray Lanning • John MacArthur
R.C. Sproul • Derek W. H. Thomas • James White
Foreword by Michael Horton • Edited by Don Kistler

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*Bible teacher, conference speaker,*
*Author, The Pursuit of Holiness and other titles*

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*Executive director, Founders Ministries*

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*—R. SCOTT CLARK*
*Professor of church history and historical theology*
*Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, California*

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# FOREWORD

**I**t was a time of prosperity and ease, with peace on the often-troubled borders, as the surrounding nations that had built threatening empires fell into internal decay and lethargy. Attracted by the idols of the nations, God's people again fell into false worship, and this "truth decay" led to incredible depths of social injustice and immorality. Although the churches were full and, according to the reports, the worship was lively, God was not pleased.

Thus, nearly eight hundred years before Christ's birth, GodcalledAmos—a "jack of all trades" (shepherd, fig tree dresser, and livestock breeder)—to look after the spiritual flock whose self-satisfied condition had resulted in apostasy. Amos wrote: "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord GoD, 'that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it"' (Amos 8:11-12).

God's Word had been the center of Israel's life, as it had been since creation: "And God said, 'Let there be light"' (Gen. 1:3a). God's utterance created the universe and preserved it through history. His Word implicitly promised blessing to Adam and his posterity for obedience and warned of a curse for breaking the solemn covenant (Gen. 2:16—17). That same Word announced judgment for transgression and then justification by the Messiah who was to come (Gen. 3:14-19). Through faith in the One promised through this Word from above, the lost could be redeemed and reconciled to God. As the direct expression of His own character and will, God's Word was incapable of being distinguished—much less divorced—from God Himself. His people never conceived of such utterances as the mere reflections of humanity in its spiritual quest. God's Word, both in command and promise, was not only to have the last word, but the first word and every word in between, in all matters concerning doctrine and the Christian life.

However, we fallen sinners are creative folk. We do not appreciate being told from above what to believe and how to conduct ourselves in this life. The Frank Sinatra phrase "I did it my way" still expresses the sentiment of the rebellious human heart. Israel sought to worship God in its own way, in a manner that accommodated the felt needs of worshipers. Other "words" were added, leading the people away from the clear and simple teaching of Scripture, and even though this path always led to divine judgment in the form of earthly exiles, the people never seemed to learn their lessons about adding to Scripture (legalism)

or subtracting from it (antinomianism). But God's Word is what it is, whether we acknowledge it or not. If we do not accept it, God's Word judges us anyway. If we do, it announces its saving promise of eternal life in Christ.

Throughout the prophetic literature, we notice a common theme: the false prophets tell the people what they want to hear, baptize it with God's name, and serve it up as God's latest word to His people. As it was in the days of the judges, the kings, and the prophets, so it is in our day: there is a famine in the land for God's Word. False prophets abound, promising peace when there is no peace, as the pastor is replaced with the manager-therapist-coach-entertainer.

Like Israel, wanting to experience God on her own terms, the medieval church preferred idolatry to true worship and relied on visual forms created by the human imagination when she should have been sustained by the written and preached Word. In our own day, we also find ourselves immersed in a visual culture where words in general are both unimportant and viewed with a growing cynicism. Reflecting the contemporary attitude in both the academy and in popular culture, one pop group of the 1980s asked, "What are words for?"

But Christianity is a religion of words, a religion of the Book. Like the Reformers, we must not accommodate a visually or experientially oriented culture in the interest of marketing success, but must pour all of our energies into forming word-centered community, however out of step with contemporary society that may be. The Reformers insisted that Scripture not only has the final say, but that it is the *formal* principle of everything we believe about doctrine or conduct. That is, it shapes and forms our faith. It does not simply sign off on essentially secular definitions of reality borrowed from psychology, business, sociology, politics, and the like. Rather, it is more likely to overthrow our presuppositions. Here, the Reformers distinguished between "things heavenly" and "things earthly." In the latter realm, including science, art, and philosophy, unbelievers could contribute to the advance of knowledge and experience. After all, Scripture is not interested in telling us everything about everything, and God's world is open to the investigation of everyone. But the transcendent realities of God's character, His commands, and His saving work are not available to the philosopher, scientist, artist, or therapist. Secular wisdom may lead us to the truth about the revolution of planets, but it cannot explain the nature of God, man, sin and redemption. It cannot lead us to the truth about how we are to be saved from God's wrath, for it refuses to believe that divine wrath is a reality. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (Rom. 1:18a), said the apostle Paul, because it does not fit the questions—much less the answers—of secular wisdom.

But in our day, preaching cannot be foolish. It must be "relevant," which is the

word we have drafted into the service of market-driven approaches. However, the message of the cross assumes the terror of the law, divine wrath toward sinners (and not just their sins), and the need for a substitutionary sacrifice to assuage divine justice. It assumes that the greatest problem facing humanity is original and actual sin—personal rebellion against a holy God— not stress, low self-esteem, and a failure to realize one's full potential.

These challenges—a visually oriented and consumer-driven society—have given rise to another famine of the hearing of God's Word. His law, consisting of all the Bible's commands and threats for violating divine holiness, has been reduced to helpful principles for personal well being, so that one may feel unsatisfied but not condemned. His gospel, consisting of all the Bible's promises of salvation for sinners through Christ's perfect life, death, resurrection, and saving offices, has been similarly reduced to platitudes. In short, God's Word has been substituted with human words, not only in mainline churches, but within the mainstream evangelical movement. We have forgotten, it seems, that the Word creates life and that it is the source of the church's growth and maturity.

Not only must we recover an official commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture, it must be the only voice we hear from those who assume the momentous task of being God's spokesmen. God's spokesmen must ring the bells on this point. While this book has the Roman Catholic Church's view of Scripture in mind when it asserts Protestantism's position, it is *Protestantism* that this book is trying to reach as much as Rome. We contributors lament that Rome is so aggressive in its error, yes, but we equally lament that Protestantism is so passive in its capitulation. It is not just that the walls of the city are being assaulted, but that the Protestant church seems to have thrown the keys to the city out to the invaders.

But this book is not simply a lamentation; it is a way forward. It attempts to assess the present situation with a view to calling the shepherds of Israel to hear God's voice again and make it plain to a new generation. Fulfilled already in Christ, may the prophecy of Amos receive fresh relevance in our own day: "'On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,' says the LORD who does this thing" (Amos 9:11—12). Let us pray to the Lord of the harvest for relief from this famine and for spiritual plenty in the years to come!

*—Michael Horton*
December 1995

# PREFACE

**C**hristianity is based on revelation. If God in all His sovereign majesty did not choose to reveal Himself to mankind, there would be no true knowledge of Him or the possibility of a true relationship with Him. We are bound to Him by what He has chosen to reveal to us about Himself. All human efforts to get to know God by man-created means lead invariably to false religions or mysticisms. Consequently, the primary question governing our relationship with God is the question of submission—either to His revelation or to our imagination. The former requires that we rely upon a divine influence over our minds, which must be submissive to the truth of the Revealer. The latter depends upon the amassing of propositions, theses, and traditions: a mixture of philosophy, psychology, and theology—a man-made "philo-psycho-theology." In this atmosphere, the words of the revelation of God no longer have the meanings intended by the Holy Spirit, but rather affirm the mysteries of the religions or idolatries man has created.

The historical Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone—affirms that God has an eternal plan to make known the mysteries of the gospel. Thus, Protestant theology (doctrines about God) flows from the act of divine will by which He wishes to make known to us truth, which is accomplished by His words or His works as revealed in Christ. "No man has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (John 1:18). The picture of the divine mind and will that we have in *sola Scripture* is dependent on revelation from God Himself. It is an example of God's merciful kindness to fallen humanity that He has willed that all of the knowledge we need for a relationship with Him, and for correct worship of Him, should be provided by Him. If it were not so, we would stumble in blindness. It is to the revelation of the divine mind expressed in *sola Scriptura* that all of our thoughts and doctrine, our worship of Him, and our obedience to Him must always be conformed.

It is for this reason that Reformation Trust has re-published this work, originally published by Soli Deo Gloria. The spirit of our age would have the church disregard this issue for the sake of unity. But biblical unity must be based on biblical truth, not human intentions. The example of unity we have in Scripture is the Trinity, which is in complete agreement on everything! Too often what passes for unity is really compromise. It is better to be divided by truth than united in error.

It was because of love for the church that this book was produced. Love, true love, cannot be divorced from truth. Scripture is quite clear that love rejoices in the truth! One cannot claim to love when one is not concerned about truth. The truth of Scripture must be the concern for one who truly loves. In an age where the absolute authority of Scripture has been jettisoned for the sake of agreement at the expense of doctrinal distinctives, we must be reminded that for real unity to exist among Christians, it must be based on the unadulterated truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ contained in the Scriptures alone.

A conscience that is bound by the Word of God is a force that no nation, system, or age can withstand. It is the desire of the contributors and the publisher of this book to call God's people back to a position of power—the power of *sola Scriptura.*

*—R. Bruce Bickel*

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# CHAPTER ONE

# WHAT DO WE MEAN BY *SOLA SCRIPTURA?*

## - *W. Robert Godfrey* -

"**P**rotestant Catholics" and Roman Catholics both claim to be catholic, that is, part of the apostolic, universal church of Jesus Christ. Roman Catholics believe we Protestants departed from that church in the sixteenth century. Protestant Catholics believe Roman Catholics departed from Christ's church even earlier.

The theme of this chapter is one of the two main issues that still divides us: the source of religious truth for the people of God (the other main issue is the question of how a man is made right with God, which Protestants answer with the doctrine of justification by faith alone). As Protestants, we maintain that Scripture alone is our authority. Roman Catholics maintain that Scripture by itself is insufficient as the authority of the people of God, and that tradition and the teaching authority of the church must be added to Scripture.

This is a solemn topic. 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 ("anathematized") for taking away the Word of God as found in tradition. We Protestants have declared that Rome is a false church for adding human traditions to the Word of God. Despite sincere debates by fine apologists over the course of nearly five hundred years, the differences remain basically as they were in the sixteenth century.

In spite of the difficulty of this undertaking, I am eager to join the historic train of Protestant apologists in defending the doctrine that Scripture alone is our ultimate religious authority. I believe that it can be shown that this position is the clear teaching of Scripture itself. 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.

# ALL THINGS NECESSARY FOR SALVATION, FAITH, AND LIFE

Let me begin with certain clarifications so as not to be misunderstood. 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 equally clear to every reader. Neither am I arguing that the church—both the people of God and the ministerial office—is not of great value and help in understanding the Scriptures. As William Whitaker stated in his noble 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]

The Protestant position, and my position, is that all things *necessary* for salvation and concerning faith and life are taught in the Bible with enough clarity that the ordinary believer can find them there and understand.

The position I am defending is that which is taught in the Bible itself. For example, Deuteronomy 31:9 states: "Moses wrote down this law...." Moses instructed the people by writing down the law and then ordering that it be read to them so they could "listen and learn to fear the LORD ... and follow carefully all the words of this law" (Deut. 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" (Deut. 32:46-47).

Notice the clear elements in these passages:

1. The Word of which Moses spoke was written.
2. The people could and must listen to it and learn it.
3. In this Word they could find life.

The people did not need any additional institution to interpret the Word. The priests, prophets, and scribes of Israel certainly functioned 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 shown you, O man, what is good” (Mic. 6:8a). The function of the prophets and priests was not to add to or even clarify the law; rather, they applied it to the people.

If this principle of the sufficiency and clarity of the Word was 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 plain that Scripture is sufficient and clear. One example of that is found in 2 Timothy 3—4. Here Paul writes to his younger brother in the faith, Timothy. He writes that Timothy—who was instructed in the faith by his mother and grandmother—has also learned all about Paul’s teaching (3:10). Timothy has been mightily helped by all sorts of oral teaching, some of it apostolic. Yet Paul writes to Timothy:

> Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths. But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. (2 Tim. 3:12-4:5, NASB)

You see, Paul reminds Timothy that the Scriptures are able to make him wise unto salvation in Christ Jesus (3:15). He teaches that the Scriptures are useful for teaching, reproof (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,

preferring teachers to suit their fancy, that is, teachers 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 are striking. In spite of the rich oral teaching Timothy has received, he is to preach the Scriptures because those Scriptures clearly give him all that he needs for wisdom and preparation to instruct the people of God in faith and all good works. Scripture makes him wise for salvation and equips him with everything he needs to do every good work required of the preacher of God. The sufficiency and clarity of the Word are repeatedly taught here. John Chrysostom paraphrased the meaning of Paul's words to Timothy this way: "You have Scripture for a master instead of me; from there you can learn whatever you would know"[2]

# FOCUSING ON 2 TIMOTHY 3

I have listened to several recorded debates on this topic. Protestant apologists often have cited 2 Timothy 3 against Roman Catholic opponents. The usual response of Roman Catholic apologists is to assert repeatedly that 2 Timothy 3 does not teach sufficiency. Sometimes they refer to James 1:4, Matthew 19:21, or Colossians 1:28 and 4:12 as parallel texts, claiming that the word *complete* in 2 Timothy 3:17 does not mean "sufficient." But such passages are not parallel; a completely different Greek word is used. Where 2 Timothy 3:17 uses *exartizo,* which has to do with being fitted for a task, these other passages use the Greek word *teleios,* which has reference to maturity or having reached a desired end.

Repeated assertions do not prove a point; that is only a propaganda technique. Our opponents need to answer in a responsible, 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."[3]

We should not be surprised that the apostle Paul, the Old Testament, and the greatest teacher of the ancient church held to the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture. That is also the position 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. 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 to the Scriptures. "It is written," He said. That was all He needed to say.

The Scriptures had made Him wise; they had equipped Him for every good work. They were clear, as He implied that even the Evil One knew. When the Devil quoted Scripture (intentionally misapplying it), 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 written Word, not away from it.

# ROMAN RESPONSES TO PASSAGES ADDRESSING CLARITY

Roman apologists attempt to convince us that these texts of Scripture do not mean what they clearly say. Let me rehearse some of their arguments and prepare you for some of the ways they tend to respond.

**1. The Word of God.** First, they say that the phrase "the Word of God" can mean more than just the Bible. I have already granted that. The question before us is whether anything *today*, other than the Scriptures, is necessary for knowing the truth of God for salvation. The Scripture 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—I grant that. They need to show that Paul taught that the oral teaching of the apostles was needed to supplement the Scriptures for the church *throughout the ages.* They cannot show that because Paul did not *teach* that, and *the Scriptures as a whole* do not teach that.

**2. Tradition**. Our Roman opponents, while making much of tradition, never really define tradition or tell you what its content is. *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 clearly disclosed in the Bible. It can refer to developing traditions in the history of the church that are more recent in their origin. Among the ancient church fathers, the word *tradition* typically referred to the standard interpretation of the Bible within their community, and we Protestants value such traditions.

But 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. For example, one has said that tradition does not add anything to Scripture. But almost all Roman apologists, for more than 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, while 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 fulness 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.”[5]

In fact, however, if you listen carefully, you will notice that the real authority for Rome is neither Scripture *nor* tradition, but the church. What is 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.”[6] As Pope Pius IX said at the time of the First Vatican Council in 1870, “I am tradition.”[7] The overwhelming arrogance of such a statement is staggering. But it confirms our claim that, for Rome, the only real authority is the church: *sola ecclesia.*

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 believed that the Bible and the tradition of the church taught the same, or at least complementary, doctrines. But as Martin 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 that, for example:

1. The Bible teaches that the offices 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 (Rom. 3:10—12 ;

Heb. 4:15), but tradition says that Mary was sinless.

3. The Bible teaches that Christ offered His sacrifice once for all (Heb. 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 (Ex. 20:4—5), but tradition says that we should bow to certain statues.
5. The Bible says that all Christians are saints and priests (Eph. 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 God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), but tradition says Mary is co-mediator with Christ.
7. The Bible says that all Christians can and 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 in their day: "You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matt. 15:6b).

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, a pope at the end of the ancient church period and eventually a saint, 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."[8]

More directly related to our discussion 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 the 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] So, does tradition believe that the Bible is dangerous or helpful? (The Bible did prove dangerous to Roman Catholicism in the sixteenth century; most who read it carefully became Protestants.)

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

**3. The church and the canon**. Roman Catholics use the word *church* repeatedly. We Protestants normally interpret their use of *church* as referring to the body of the faithful, but that is not typically the way they use the word. When they refer to the authority of the church, they mean the infallible teaching authority of councils and popes. They draw this view of the church from the Middle Ages and, in a romantic way, read back into the ancient church period. So it is important to note carefully how they use the word *church* and to remember that neither the Scriptures nor the great majority of the fathers from the ancient church period understand the authority of the church in the way Roman Catholics do.

Two statements of Augustine are quoted often against the Protestant position on the authority of the church. First, 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.” In that instance, 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.)

Second, Augustine said, “I would not have believed had not the authority of the catholic church moved me.” That seems very strong and persuasive. (However, 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 was not talking about some absolute, infallible authority in the church, but rather about the ministerial work of the church and

about teachers who helped students understand.)

Let us look at the church authority issue further by raising a related issue: the canon of Scripture. Romanists try to make much of the issue of the canon. They say that the Bible alone cannot be our authority because the Bible does not tell us what books are in the Bible. They argue that the church must tell us what books are in the Bible. When they say the church must tell us, they mean that 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 the people of God had the Bible before 1546 and before 382.

In the first place, the church always had Scripture. In their preaching and writing in the first century, the apostles repeatedly established their credibility by quoting from the Old Testament. Quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament abound in the New Testament. The New Testament does not reject the Old but fulfills it (Rom. 1:2; Luke 16:29; Eph. 2:19-20). The church always had a canonical foundation in the Old Testament.

Second, 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.[11] Peter testifies to this emerging canon when he includes the letters of Paul as part of the Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16).

Third, we must see that the canon of Scripture is, in a real sense, established by 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 of soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). The self-authenticating character of the canon was demonstrated by the remarkable unanimity reached by the people of God on the canon.

Fourth, we must see that the canon was formed historically not by popes and councils; their 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.) 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 says: "The canon, already implicitly present in the apostolic age, gradually became explicit through a number of providential factors forming and fixing it."[12]

We can also see this basic approach to the canon reflected in the words of Augustine in his important treatise titled 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 had 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 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 to be of equal value.[13]

This statement shows that Augustine did not look to popes or councils for the answer to 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 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.

**4. Unity**. Notice how Catholics use the word *unity*. They suggest that we Protestants disprove our claim of the clarity of the Scripture by our failure to agree about the meaning of various Scripture passages. 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 and sisters 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 Roman opponents want to compare Roman theory with Protestant practices. That is not fair. We must compare theory with theory or practice with practice. In practice, *neither* group has the agreement it 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 as to what the popes have taught and as to whether those teachings were 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. Every honest member of the Roman church has 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 effective. Such theological problems are certainly much greater today than in Turretin's time, 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 actually 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 Cor. 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 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.

# CONCLUSIONS

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

Roman apologists 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 its praise could include 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.

We must listen to the Scriptures so that we will live in accordance with God’s Word. Consider the story of Paul in Berea, Acts 17:10-12. Paul preached in the synagogue there and many Jews responded eagerly. We are told that after they listened to Paul each day they examined the Scriptures to see whether 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? 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? 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, Paul, and our Lord Jesus. We must not rest our confidence on the wisdom of men who claim

infallibility. Rather, we must stand with the apostle Paul, who wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:6, “Do not go beyond what is written.”

Notes

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

2 Cited in Whitaker, 637.

3 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W Robertson Jr. (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1958), II:ix.l4.

4 *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Herden and Herden, 1966), 116. See also *Dei Verbum* 8 (*Dei Verbum* is the official title of the English version of “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation,” one of the principal documents of Vatican II).

5 Ibid., 118.

6 John Eck, *Enchiridion of Commonplaces*, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 13.

7 Cited in Jesef Rupert Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1966), 16, note on 113-114.

8 Cited in *Cambridge Medieval History*, section written by W H. Hutton, ed. H. M. Gwatkin and J. P. Whitney (New York: MacMillan, 1967), II:247.

9 Cited in James Townley *Illustrations of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 2 (London: printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1821), 481.

10 *The Documents of Vatican II,* 125-126.

11 See Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1997).

12 Cited in a tape by William Webster titled “The Canon,” available from Christian Resources, 304 WestT Street, Battleground, WA 98604, www.christiantruth.com/web.swf. This tape is part 3 of a sixteen-tape series titled *Roman Catholic Tradition: Its Roots and Evolution.*

13 Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* II.viii.41.

# CHAPTER TWO

# *SOLA SCRIPTURA* AND THE EARLY CHURCH

## - *James White* -

> In regard to the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not the least part may be handed on without the Holy Scriptures. Do not be led astray by winning words and clever arguments. Even to me, who tell you these things, do not give ready belief, unless you receive from the Holy Scriptures the proof of the things which I announce. The salvation in which we believe is not proved from clever reasoning, but from the Holy Scriptures.[1]

**I**f we did not know the source of these words, we could easily hear them being spoken by any Christian minister as he instructed a class of new believers. Yet these words were written more than sixteen hundred years ago by Cyril of Jerusalem.

Was his view unusual? Are modern Roman Catholic apologists correct when they call the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* a “novelty”? Or do we find many witnesses to a belief in the sufficiency of Scripture in the writings of the early leaders of the faith?

# REMEMBER THE REAL ISSUE

Before we look to the writings of the early church, it is important to remember the central issues that separate Protestants from Roman Catholics with regard to the sufficiency of Scripture. While some modern Roman Catholic theologians no longer profess as strident a position as that defined in official Roman documents, we cannot define Roman theology on the basis of a minority of modern theologians any more than we can define Protestant theology by reference to a minority of liberal theologians.[2] The official documents of the Roman Catholic Church must define the issue at hand.

The plainest statement from Rome is found in the decrees of the sixteenth-century Council of Trent:

> [The council] also clearly perceives that these truths and rules are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions, which, received by the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand. Following, then, the examples of the orthodox Fathers, it receives and venerates with a feeling of piety and reverence all the books both of the Old and New Testaments, since one God is author of both; also the traditions, whether they relate to faith or to morals, as having been dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church in unbroken succession.[3]

Let's examine the meaning and significance of these remarks. The Roman claim is that we have both the "written books" *and* the "unwritten traditions." These unwritten traditions, we're told, were received by the apostles and preserved in the Roman Catholic Church in "unbroken succession." We are also told that the "orthodox Fathers" received and venerated *both* the written books *and* the unwritten traditions. Thus, Rome makes the claim, as part of a supposedly infallible declaration of dogma in the words of the Council of Trent, that the "orthodox Fathers" received and venerated *its idea* of "unwritten traditions"—revelation that is plainly divine in origin ("dictated ... by Christ or by the Holy Ghost") and therefore necessary for anyone to have the full counsel

of God. This fullness, we can readily see, can be found only in the bosom of Rome, the caretaker of this "other" part of God's revelation. When placed side by side, the two forms of tradition, written and oral, form one single "Sacred Tradition,"[4] according to Rome.

It is no surprise that modern defenders of Roman Catholicism have tried to avoid defending such strident claims. Just as modern Roman historians struggle to defend the pronunciations of Vatican I regarding papal infallibility, so the defenders of Trent are hard-pressed to provide meaningful substantiation of that synod's extravagant assertions. Specifically, demonstrating the existence of this inspired "oral tradition" that exists *outside of Scripture* and has been passed down directly from Christ and the apostles is a tall order. In fact, it is simply impossible, as no such thing exists. This is why some wish to view this "tradition" as merely interpretational in content and deny it an inspired status.[5]

What has been the result of Rome's doctrine of tradition? We need look only at such concepts as papal infallibility and the Marian doctrines (Immaculate Conception and Bodily Assumption) to see how Rome has been willing to define *de fide* doctrine on the basis of this alleged tradition.

With reference to Rome's view of the Bible, we take as an example the words of a popular writer, John O'Brien: "Great as is our reverence for the Bible, reason and experience compel us to say that it alone is not a competent nor a safe guide as to what we are to believe."[6] A similar statement is found in the popular book *Where We Got the Bible* by Henry Graham: "Venerable and inspired as Catholics regard the Bible, great as is their devotion to it for spiritual reading and support of doctrine, we yet do not pretend to lean upon it alone, as the Rule of faith and morals. Along with it we take that great Word that was never written, Tradition, and hold by both the one and the other interpreted by the living voice of the Catholic Church speaking through her Supreme Head, the infallible Vicar of Christ."[7]

The reader is encouraged to compare and contrast such statements with the following citations from the early fathers of the faith.

# PROOF-TEXTING THE FATHERS

The person who wishes to know whether the early fathers provide *real* support for the Roman concept of tradition as defined above will recognize that a very specific usage of the term is needed. Simply citing passages where the term *tradition* is found will hardly suffice, though this is, quite often, all that defenders of the Roman concept offer.[8] Aside from the obvious consideration that the term *tradition* can carry many meanings,[9] it is necessary for Catholic apologists to demonstrate that when an early father refers to "tradition" he means the same concept as enunciated by Trent: an *inspired* tradition, passed down *outside of Scripture*, without which we do not and *cannot* have all of God's revealed truth.

I shall provide only two examples of how the early fathers are often mistreated by Roman apologists in their quest to find support for their view of oral tradition. These examples are drawn from the works of Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon (ca. 130—ca. 200), and Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330-379), the great Cappadocian Father.

Irenaeus. A number of Irenaeus' statements are often used to substantiate the existence of an extrabiblical tradition that we are told lends support to Roman claims.

From his work *Against Heresies* we read: "On this account are we bound to avoid them, but to make choice of the things pertaining to the Church with the utmost diligence, and to lay hold of the tradition of the truth.... 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?"[10] Surely such a passage seems to speak of tradition as an extrabiblical thing, just as Trent does.

This is not the only place where Irenaeus spoke thus. In the first part of the same work, he wrote: "As I have already observed, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it.... For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and

the same."[11]

Citations such as these seem to carry great weight—until we look more closely at the contexts. In both instances, we discover a very important fact. Our author did not fail to define this tradition:

> These have all declared to us that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, announced by the law and the prophets; and one Christ, the Son of God. If any one does not agree to these truths, he despises the companions of the Lord; nay more, he despises Christ Himself the Lord; yea, he despises the Father also, and stands self-condemned, resisting and opposing his own salvation, as is the case with all heretics.[12]

Here is Irenaeus' "tradition," and we note immediately that it doesn't look anything like Rome's version. The important thing to see, aside from the fact that such items as papal infallibility and the Bodily Assumption of Mary are missing from Irenaeus' definition (items that Rome has defined on the basis of tradition), is that these truths *are derived from the Scriptures themselves*. Not a single item is listed by Irenaeus that cannot be demonstrated directly from the pages of Holy Writ. Hence, obviously, his idea of tradition provides Trent with no support at all, for Trent's definition does not assert a subscriptural, derivative summary of gospel truth, but an inspired revelation passed down orally through the episcopate. Irenaeus' view is not a Roman Catholic one.

Lest someone think that this is the only place where Irenaeus defined his concept of tradition, it is necessary to ready only these words, which follow *immediately* upon the heels of the citation provided above: "To which course many nations of those barbarians who believe in Christ do assent, having salvation written in their hearts by the Spirit, without paper or ink, and, carefully preserving the ancient tradition, believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God."[13]

**Basil of Caesarea.** Turning from Irenaeus to Basil of Caesarea, we find the following famous remarks in his treatise *On the Spirit.*

> Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us "in a mystery," by the tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force. And these no one will gainsay;—no one, at all events, who is even moderately versed in the institutions of the Church. For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground

> that the importance they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel in its very vitals; or, rather, should make our public definition a mere phrase and nothing more.[14]

Surely here we have the Roman position, do we not? Basil here posits an extrabiblical "tradition" that would fit quite nicely with Trent, would it not? We see again the importance of looking at all the data, for both the context and the greater scope of Basil's teaching contradict such a conclusion.

First, we note the continuation of his words, which are often not included in the citation:

> For instance, to take the first and most general example, who is there who has taught us in writing to sign with the sign of the cross those who have trusted in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ? What writing has taught us to turn to the East at the prayer? Which of the saints has left us in writing the words of the invocation at the displaying of the bread of the Eucharist and the cup of blessing? For we are not, as is well known, content with what the apostle or the Gospel has recorded, but both in preface and conclusion we add other words as being of great importance to the validity of the ministry, and these we derive from unwritten teaching. Moreover we bless the water of baptism and the oil of the chrism, and besides this the catechumen who is being baptized. On what written authority do we do this? Is not our authority silent and mystical tradition? Nay, by what written word is the anointing of oil itself taught? And whence comes the custom of baptizing thrice?[15]

No matter how we might view Basil's beliefs, one thing is certain: the matters that he lists as being addressed by tradition are not the matters that Rome would have us to believe comprise its "oral tradition." Basil is talking about traditions with reference to practices and piety. Ironically, Rome does not believe Basil is correct in his claims in this passage. Does Rome say we must face to the East at prayer? Does Rome insist upon triune baptism after the Eastern mode? Yet these are the *practices* that Basil defines as being derived from tradition.

What is more, other statements from this same father fly in the face of the Roman claims. For example, when addressing truly important doctrinal truths, such as the very nature of God, Basil did not appeal to some nebulous tradition. How could he, especially when he encountered others who claimed that their traditional beliefs should be held as sacred? Note his words to Eustathius the physician:

> Their complaint is that their custom does not accept this, and that Scripture does not agree. What is my reply? I do not consider it fair that the custom which obtains among them should be regarded as a law and rule of orthodoxy If custom is to be taken in proof of what is right, then it is certainly competent for me to put forward on my side the custom which obtains here. If they reject this, we are clearly not bound to follow them. Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth. [16]

This sentiment is hardly in line with Trent.

This same father also insisted, "Those hearers who are instructed in the Scriptures should examine what is said by the teachers, receiving what is in conformity with the Scriptures and rejecting what is opposed to them."[17] And in another place, "To delete anything that is written down or to interpolate anything not written amounts to open defection from the faith and makes the offender liable to a charge of contempt."[18] Just as plainly, then, Basil is not a friend of the Roman claims. [19]

Before moving on to other witnesses to the early belief in the sufficiency of Scripture without an additional oral tradition as defined by Rome, we need to note the problem posed by the patristic testimony. Protestants can greatly respect and learn from the early fathers without investing them with infallibility. We can take the good while recognizing that they had their problems and failures, too. Hence, when we do find an early father wandering from the path, we are not troubled or bothered by this. But for the Roman Catholic, the situation is different. Rome's claims are fundamentally different, and hence a problem is raised by the presence, from the earliest periods of the church, of beliefs in the fathers that are incompatible with what Rome alleges are in fact "apostolic" traditions and doctrines. While the Protestant can go "toe to toe" with the Roman Catholic in citing the early fathers, clearly the Roman position suffers, for the Roman church has to defend the idea that her traditions were "there" from the beginning, that hers is the "constant faith" of the church.[20]

# PATRISTIC TESTIMONIES

Space does not permit me to present more than a smattering of the testimony available to the person who wishes to allow the early fathers to speak for themselves. First, let us hear some of the words of the great bishop of Hippo, Augustine, and then we'll end by looking at some comments by the great defender of the Nicene faith, the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius.

Augustine of Hippo. We begin with samples of Augustine's view of Scripture and tradition:

> What more shall I teach you than what we read in the apostle? For holy Scripture fixes the rule for our doctrine, lest we dare to be wiser than we ought.... Therefore, I should not teach you anything else except to expound to you the words of the Teacher.[21]

> I must not press the authority of Nicea against you, nor you that of Ariminum against me; I do not acknowledge the one, as you do not the other; but let us come to ground that is common to both, the testimony of the Holy Scriptures.[22]

> Let us not hear: This I say, this you say; but, thus says the Lord. Surely it is the books of the Lord on whose authority we both agree and which we both believe. There let us seek the church, there let us discuss our case.[23]

> Let those things be removed from our midst which we quote against each other not from divine canonical books but from elsewhere. Someone may perhaps ask: Why do you want to remove these things from the midst? Because I do not want the holy church proved by human documents but by divine oracles.[24]

> Whatever they may adduce, and wherever they may quote from, let us rather, if we are His sheep, hear the voice of our Shepherd. Therefore let us

> search for the church in the sacred canonical Scriptures.[25]
>
> Neither dare one agree with catholic bishops if by chance they err in anything, with the result that their opinion is against the canonical Scriptures of God.[26]
>
> If anyone preaches either concerning Christ or concerning His church or concerning any other matter which pertains to our faith and life; I will not say, if we, but what Paul adds, if an angel from heaven should preach to you anything besides what you have received in the Scriptures of the Law and of the Gospels, let him be anathema.[27]
>
> You ought to notice particularly and store in your memory that God wanted to lay a firm foundation in the Scriptures against treacherous errors, a foundation against which no one dares to speak who would in any way be considered a Christian. For when He offered Himself to them to touch, this did not suffice Him unless He also confirmed the heart of the believers from the Scriptures, for He foresaw that the time would come when we would not have anything to touch but would have something to read.[28]

Are we to believe that Augustine *meant* to say, in the immediately preceding quotation, "He foresaw that the time would come when we would not have anything to touch but would have something to read *and another thing passed on orally"?* Did not Augustine make reference to tradition? Yes, he did, but he did so in the same context as Basil did above.[29]

Conflict is often a great and rich source of information regarding the beliefs of the early fathers. When faced with opposition, the fathers "showed their true colors," so to speak. How did they handle the claims of their gainsayers? Did they do as modern Roman Catholics and refer to "tradition" as the basis of their doctrinal beliefs? Or do we find them presenting the Scriptures as their final and full authority?

**Athanasius of Alexandria**. No early father answers this question more clearly and with more power than Athanasius. For years he stood against the combined might of the Roman Empire and the church, firmly clinging to the Nicene faith in the full deity of Jesus Christ. For a time, he even stood against Liberius, the bishop of Rome, who gave in to the pressures placed upon him.[30] Truly it was said of him, *Athanasius contra mundum*, "Athanasius against the world." What an amazingly Protestant attitude was displayed by this bishop of Alexandria! Against the weight of the combined church he clung to the

testimony of Scripture, refuting his enemies not by reference to some mythical oral "tradition," but by logical, insightful exegesis of God-inspired Scripture.

We will begin by taking the opposition's strongest assertions and demonstrating that Athanasius fails to help them. Then we will provide a small subset of the numerous testimonies this rich source provides to our defense of *sola Scriptura.* We begin by examining a passage that has been cited as evidence that Athanasius denied *sola Scriptura:* "But what is also to the point, let us note that the very tradition, teaching, and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, was preached by the Apostles, and was preserved by the Fathers. On this was the Church founded; and if anyone departs from this, he neither is nor any longer ought to be called a Christian."[31]

This section is quoted because it is liable to be read with modern eyes and understandings, is it not? "Aha!" comes the cry. "See! Athanasius speaks of tradition!" But what does Athanasius *mean* by "tradition"? I will simply allow the quotation to continue so that he may speak for himself. What is this "tradition" to which he refers?

> There is a Trinity, holy and perfect, acknowledged as God, in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, having nothing foreign or external mixed with it, not composed of a fashioner and an originated, but entirely creative and fashioning ... and thus there is preached in the Church one God, "who is over all, and through all, and in all...." And because this is the faith of the Church, let them somehow understand that the Lord sent out the Apostles and commanded them to make this the foundation of the Church, when He said: "Go out and instruct every people, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."[32]

This is very important, for it is beyond dispute that Athanasius develops, and *defends,* the Trinity on the basis of Scripture. He does not appeal for this truth to some unwritten revelation that exists *outside* of Scripture, that somehow contains revelation not found in Scripture. This must be taken into consideration when defining his view of the term *tradition* and what it includes. This "tradition" to which Athanasius refers, we see then, is secondary to and subordinate to the Scriptures.[33]

Another passage that is often urged against the many plain testimonies we will present from Athanasius is as follows: "That of what they now allege from the Gospels they certainly give unsound interpretation, we may easily see, if we now consider the scope of that faith which we Christians hold, and using it as a rule, apply ourselves, as the Apostle teaches, to the reading of the inspired Scripture.

For Christ's enemies, being ignorant of this scope, have wandered from the way of truth."[34]

Roman apologists point to the term *scope*[35] and say, "Here is a rule that Athanasius refers to that violates any concept of *sola Scripture."* Again, taken alone, one can see how such a conclusion could be drawn. But this passage does not exist alone. It is in the third discourse of four written by Athanasius against the Arians. Prior to getting to this point Athanasius has addressed a wide range of topics. Indeed, in the first discourse, he came to a point that would have provided him the perfect opportunity of singing the praises of "oral tradition." He wrote: "If such bewilderment and empty speaking be from ignorance, Scripture will teach them, that the devil, the author of heresies, because of the ill savour which attaches to evil, borrows Scripture language, as a cloak wherewith to sow the ground with his own poison also, and to seduce the simple."[36]

How do modern Roman apologists handle statements by heretics claiming scriptural backing? Do they not quickly refer to the need of something *more* than Scripture? Do we not often see the cults and "isms" used as examples of why *sola Scriptura* doesn't work? Yet we don't find any such song of praise to "oral tradition" here in Athanasius. Instead, we find Athanasius saying, "For, behold, we take divine Scripture and thence discourse with freedom of the religious Faith...."[37] And at the beginning of the next paragraph he writes, "Which of the two theologies sets forth our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Son of the Father, this which you vomited forth, or that which we have spoken and maintain from the Scriptures?"[38] This, in turn, is followed closely by these words: "For if they speak, a condemnation will follow; and if they be suspected, proofs from Scripture will be cast at them from every side."[39]

Scripture proofs? Why not just throw the weight of oral tradition at them and be done with it? That is surely how one must handle such doctrines as papal infallibility and the Bodily Assumption. But this was not Athanasius' way. Instead, he showed the consistency of his own belief with Scripture, and the inconsistency of the heretics' beliefs, all in accord with the same standard: "Nor does Scripture afford them any pretext; for it has been often shown, and it shall be shown now, that their doctrine is alien to the divine oracles."[40]

What follows this is yet another lengthy discussion of the Son's eternality, all taken, without exception, from Scripture itself, so that he concludes, "It is plain then from the above that the Scriptures declare the Son's eternity."[41]

The rest of the first discourse is taken up with providing an orthodox interpretation of various passages put forth by the heretics. Here again we have an opportunity of seeing Athanasius' view of authority, for this section begins

thus: “But since they allege the divine oracles and force on them a misinterpretation, according to their private sense, it becomes necessary to meet them just so far as to vindicate these passages, and to show that they bear an orthodox sense, and that our opponents are in error.”[42]

And how did Athanasius do this? Did he appeal to unwritten tradition to prove that the interpretation of the heretics was in error? No, he exegeted the passages themselves and showed the inconsistencies of the Arian interpretations. Just as I would reply to a Jehovah’s Witness who would use the same passages, Athanasius did fifteen hundred years ago.

We press on to the above-cited section of this discourse. As we have already seen, context is vital in citing the fathers. In this instance, the meaning of the term *scope* is defined further in the very next paragraph:

> Now the scope and character of Holy Scripture, as we have often said, is this—it contains a double account of the Saviour; that He was ever God, and is the Son, being the Father’s Word and Radiance and Wisdom; and that afterwards for us He took flesh of a Virgin, Mary Bearer of God, and was made man. And this scope is to be found throughout inspired Scripture, as the Lord Himself has said, “Search the Scriptures, for they are they which testify of Me.”[43]

This “scope,” we are told, “is to be found throughout inspired Scripture.” Obviously, therefore, it is not something that exists *separately* from Scripture. Just as I might say, “The concept of the sovereignty of God is a belief that is to be found throughout Scripture,” Athanasius refers to the truth of the nature of Christ in the same way. Therefore, this “scope” does not qualify for the Roman concept of oral tradition, and Athanasius is not found to be violating the doctrine of *sola Scriptura.*

What then of the positive testimony from Athanasius? We note first and foremost the plain words from his work *Against the Heathen:* “For indeed the holy and God-breathed Scriptures are self-sufficient for the preaching of the truth.”[44]

In this passage, Athanasius begins with a fundamental tenet of his faith: the full sufficiency of Scripture for the proclamation of the truth. He immediately goes on to note that God uses other sources to teach truth as well, including godly men with an insight into Scripture. But he begins where Protestants and Roman Catholics part company: with the sufficiency of Scripture. He had learned such things from those who came before him. He even mentions the words of Antony: “The Scriptures are enough for instruction, but it is a good

thing to encourage one another in the faith, and to stir up with words."[45]

Likewise, when writing to the Egyptian bishops he asserted: "But since holy Scripture is of all things most sufficient for us, therefore recommending to those who desire to know more of these matters, to read the Divine word, I now hasten to set before you that which most claims attention, and for the sake of which principally I have written these things."[46]

This high view of Scripture continues in this passage from Athanasius' work on the Incarnation of the Word of God:

> Let this, then, Christ-loving man, be our offering to you, just for a rudimentary sketch and outline, in a short compass, of the faith of Christ and of His Divine appearing usward. But you, taking occasion by this, if you light upon the text of the Scriptures, by genuinely applying your mind to them, will learn from them more completely and clearly the exact detail of what we have said. For they were spoken and written by God, through men who spoke for God.[47]

One will search in vain for a reference in which this father describes "oral tradition" in this way, and yet Trent did not fear to speak so of "tradition." Rather than finding O'Brien's idea that Scripture is not a "safe guide" as to what we are to believe, Athanasius said, "The tokens of truth are more exact as drawn from Scripture, than from other sources."[48] These "other sources" included church councils, such as that of Nicea, which Athanasius defended so strongly. Yet he realized that his sufficiency was not based on the alleged authority of a council, but that the power of that council came from its fidelity to Scripture. Note his words with reference to the Arians:

> Vainly then do they run about with the pretext that they have demanded Councils for the faith's sake; for divine Scripture is sufficient above all things; but if a Council be needed on the point, there are the proceedings of the Fathers, for the Nicene Bishops did not neglect this matter, but stated the doctrines so exactly, that persons reading their words honestly, cannot but be reminded by them of the religion towards Christ announced in divine Scripture.[49]

By now the phrase "for divine Scripture is sufficient above all things" should be familiar, as it is a constant thread in Athanasius' writings. And it is crucial to note that the weight of the Nicene Council is described in terms of the consistency of the council's teachings with the "religion towards Christ

announced in divine Scripture.”

# CONCLUSIONS

What can we conclude from our brief review of just some of the available patristic material? We first note that the traditional Roman Catholic position regarding a separate "oral tradition" is not the unanimous, the ancient, or the constant faith of the church. The idea that the Scriptures are insufficient, lacking an important counterbalance in the oral tradition, and are incompetent to function as a sole guide as to what we are to believe, is obviously the "theological novum," the later development, the departure from the ancient faith. Yet we find Roman Catholic apologists trying to make it sound as if *sola Scriptura* is the innovation.

In the process of attacking *sola Scripture*, Roman apologists are forced to misrepresent the patristic materials badly and to engage in what I call "anachronistic interpretation," the reading back into ancient sources concepts and ideas that were not in the original contexts at all. Rome does this with almost every one of her unique—and false—doctrines (the papacy, the Marian doctrines, etc.). Sadly, however, many Protestants are taken in by these arguments. Most Protestants are ahistorical in their view of the church and have little, if any, knowledge of church history. Even those with some training often fail to take the time to examine the original sources from which Roman apologists derive their out-of-context citations. But if we do take the time to clearly recognize exactly what Rome is claiming, and then look to the patristic sources, we find a glaring inconsistency. Rome's claims to a historical foundation are missing, not only with reference to *sola Scriptura*, but for all her unique, later-developing dogmas that she lays on men under pain of the anathema.

As with all elements of Christian truth, full examination will always support, uphold, and verify that *sola Scriptura* has long been the rule of believing Christian people, even before it became necessary to use the specific terminology against later innovators who would usurp the Scriptures' supremacy in the church. It is the teaching of the Scriptures *about themselves* (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Matt. 15:1-9, etc.), and we find a broad and deep witness to it in the early church fathers. Let us be thankful to God for the gracious gift of His sufficient

and life-giving Word, the Holy Scriptures.

Notes

1 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures,* 4:17. An alternate translation can be found in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (hereafter *NPNF),* Series II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), VII:23.

2 The reader is encouraged to see Robert Strimple's essay, "The Relationship Between Scripture and Tradition in Contemporary Roman Catholic Theology" *(Wesininster Theological journal,* Fall 1977, 40:22-38), for an excellent summary of the positions of many of these modern Roman Catholics who deny the more traditional Roman view of *partim-partim,* that is, "partly-partly" partly in Scripture, partly in tradition. Strimple points out that many of the Roman Catholic theologians who are referred to as being "progressive" in the sense of denying *the partim-partim* concept are, in point of fact,*farther* away from a conservative Protestant position due to their post-Enlightenment view of revelation as a whole.

3 Translation by Rev. H. J. Schroeder in *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, I11.: TAN Books, 1978), 17. For the Latin of the text, see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), II:80.

4 Roman Catholic writings are filled with ambiguities regarding the exact nature of "tradition." Even the difference of capitalization can be significant. For example, while many Roman writers use "Sacred Tradition" to represent both the oral and written combined, Vatican II used the uncapitalized form, "sacred tradition," to refer to the oral in distinction from the written: "Consequently, it is not from sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence" *(Dei Verbum* 9). And: "Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit or the word of God, which is committed to the Church ... She has always regarded the Scriptures together with sacred tradition as the supreme rule of faith, and will ever do so" *(Dei Verbum* 10, 21).

5 Just how empty the claim of “material sufficiency” on the part of Roman apologists really is can be seen readily in these words from John Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 161, in which he describes the source of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary: “Pope Pius defined Mary’s Assumption as a truth divinely revealed. Of the two sources of revelation, theologians commonly say the Assumption was implicit in Tradition, in spite of the practical absence of documentary evidence before A.D. 300. Yet the Pope finally declared that the doctrine was in revelation. How do we know? On the answer to this question rests a new insight into Christian Tradition that has been gaining momentum since the eighteenth century. Briefly stated, Tradition is coming to be identified more with the Church’s magisterium or teaching office and less exclusively as the source along with Scripture of the truths of salvation ... ‘Together with the sources of revelation (Scripture and Tradition) God has given to his Church a living magisterium to elucidate and explain what is contained in the deposit of faith only obscurely, and, as it were, by implication.’ The degree of obscurity, we may add, is unimportant. Given this faculty by her founder, whose Spirit of truth abides with her at all times, the Church can infallibly discern what belongs to revelation no matter how cryptic the contents may be.”

What is gained by taking such a view? The Roman apologist does not have to defend the idea of an inspired oral tradition, but he now has to defend the idea that the Roman magisterium itself is so divinely guided that it can “infallibly discern” what is and is not revelation, and that no matter what the “degree of obscurity” with which such a divine truth may be cloaked! On the practical level, what this means is really worse than the traditional view: Rome can “find” whatever she wishes to find in “revelation” and impose this alleged “truth” upon all believers, and that with the pain of the anathema. She did just that with the Assumption of Mary, a doctrine utterly absent from Scripture *and* early church history. Yet it is a belief that must be embraced *de fide*, and, in the words of Pope Pius IX, “if some should think in their hearts otherwise than we have defined (which God forbid), they shall know and thoroughly understand that they are by their own judgment condemned, have made shipwreck concerning the faith, and fallen away from the unity of the Church; and, moreover, that they, by this very act, subject themselves to the penalties ordained by law, if, by word or writing, or any other external means, they dare to signify what they think in their hearts.” Roman apologists who take this view are not arguing for “Scripture and tradition.” In reality, they are arguing for “Scripture and Church.”

6 John O'Brien, *Finding Christ's Church* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1950), 18.

7 Henry G. Graham, *Where We Got the Bible* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN Books, 1977), 152.

8 For example, see the article "Traditions of God, not men" in *This Rock*, the magazine of the Roman Catholic apologetics organization Catholic Answers, October 1990, 21-22.

9 Martin Chemnitz identified and illustrated at least eight different uses of the term *tradition* in patristic sources in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), I:219-307.

10 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3, 4:1. See Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:416--417. This passage is cited in the article "Traditions of God, not men" in *This Rock.*

11 Ibid., 1, 10:2.

12 Ibid., 3, 1:1. It is important to point out why Irenaeus was so concerned about the "tradition" teaching that there is one God who created all things by Jesus Christ. He was struggling against Gnosticism, a system that denied that the one true God created all things. Instead, the Gnostics posited intermediate beings between the one true God and the creation.

13 Ibid., 3, 4:2. The same is true of the citation from *Against Heresies*, 1, 10:2- this tradition is clearly laid out in full in 1, 10:1, and this text is replete with numerous direct citations of Scripture!

14 Basil, *On the Spirit*, 66 in *NPNF,* Series II, VIII:40-41. This same passage is cited in the *This* Rock article "Traditions of God, not men," beginning and

ending at the same point.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., Series II, VIII:229. See also Basil's defense of the Trinity and his reliance fully upon "God-inspired Scripture," not "oral tradition," in such places as his letter to Gregory found in the same volume, 137-141, particularly section 4.

17 *Fathers of the Church, Vol. 9, Saint Basil: Ascetical Works,* trans. M. Monica Wagner (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1950), 185-186.

18 Ibid., 59.

19 We might note in passing the fact that both fathers thus far reviewed are also problems for Roman claims regarding papal supremacy, Irenaeus in his rebuke of Victor and Basil in his rejection of Rome's interference in the matter of Meletius of Antioch. For the text of Irenaeus' rebuke of Victor, see *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* 1:569 and for Basil's siding with Meletius against Rome, see *NPNF* Series II, VIII:253.

20 Phrases like "the constant faith of the Church" and the "unanimous consent of the Fathers" are drawn directly from the claims of Trent and Vatican I.

21 Augustine, *De bono viduitatis,* 2. *See NPNF* Series 1, III:442 for an alternative translation. J. P. Migne provides the text: "Quam id quod apud Apostolum legimus ? Sancta enim Scriptura nostræ docrtinæregulum figit, ne audeamus *sapereplus yuam oportet sapere;* ... Non sit ergo mihi aliud te docere, nisi verba tibi doctoris exponere" *(Patrologia Latina,* 40:431; hereafter *PL*). Note especially the use of the phrase, "Scriptura nostrædoctrinæregulam figit," for *sola Scriptura* is the doctrine that teaches that Scripture is the sole infallible and supreme *regula fidei,* the "rule of faith," for the church.

22 Augustine, *To Maximin the Arian,* as cited by George Salmon, *The Infallibility of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), 295. Salmon renders the text as, “Sed nun nec ego Nicaenum, nec tu debes Ariminense, tanquam praejudicaturus, proferre concilium. Nec ego hujus auctoritate, ne tu illius detineris. Scripturarum auctoritatibus, non quorumque propriis, sed utrique communibus testibus, res cum re, causa cum causa, ratio cum ratione concertet” (Augustine, *Cont. Maximin. Arian.* II 14, vol. VIII:704).

23 Augustine, *De unitate ecclesiae*, 3, as cited by Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent,* I:157.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 10, cited by Chemnitz, 159.

27 Augustine, *Contra litteras Petiliani*, Book 3, Chap. 6. Migne provides the text: “Proinde sive de Christo, sive de ejus Ecclesia, sive de quacumque alia re quæpertinet ad fidem vitamque vestram, non dicam nos, nequaquam comparandi ei qui dixit, Licet si *nos;* sed omnino quod secutus adjecit, *Si angelus de cælovobis annuntiaverit præter quam quod* in Scripturis legalibus et evangelicis *accepistis, anathema sit”* (PL 43:351).

28 Augustine, *In Epistolam johannis* tractus, 2. See NPNF, Series I, VII:469. The final phrase in Latin is, “in quo quod palpemus nos non habemus, sed quod legamus habemus” (Migne, PL 35:1989).

29 See especially Augustine’s letter to Januarius for a full discussion of his view on this point *(NPNF,* Series I, 1:300-303). Note especially the fact that Augustine himself differentiates between those practices based on Scripture and those based on “tradition” (chap. 6).

30 See the discussion of Liberius and the entire concept of papal infallibility in Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* 1: 134-188, and his *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), III:635-636, especially footnote 2.

31 Athanasius, *To Serapion*, 1, 28, as cited in Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 1:336. Text in Migne, *Patrologix Cursus Completus, Series Græca* (1857), 26:593-596 (hereafter, *PG).*

32 Ibid.

33 Compare the use of the phrase "subordinate standards" with reference to various Protestant confessions as an example of the modern use of this concept.

34 Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, III:28 in *NPNF* Series II, IV:409. Text in Migne, *PG*, 26:384-385.

35 Greek is σκοπός

36 *NPNF* IV:310; Migne, PG, 26:25.

37 Ibid., IV:311; Migne, PG, 26:28.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., IV:312; Migne; PG, 26:33.

41 Ibid., IV:313, Migne; PG, 26:37.

42 Ibid., IV:327-328; Migne, PG, 26:88.

43 Ibid., IV:409; Migne, PG, 26:385.

44 Translation by the author. Greek text found in Robert Thomson, ed., *Athanasius: Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 2, or Migne, PG, 25:4. The Greek reads, αὐτάρκεις μὲν γάρ εἰσιν αἱ ἁγιαὶ καὶ θεόπνευστοι γραφαὶ πρὸς τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας ἀπαγγελίαν. With reference to the term αὐτάρκεις we note the definition provided by Bauer, "self-sufficiency," "sufficiency, a competence," and "contentment, self-sufficiency." See Walter Bauer, William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, A Greek-English *Lexicon* of the New *Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 152. The most helpful work of Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains (*United Bible Societies: 1988), 680, says of the term, "a state of adequacy or sufficiency—' what is adequate, what is sufficient, what is needed, adequacy.' ... In a number of languages the equivalent of this expression in 2 Cor. 9:8 may be 'always having all that you need' or, stated negatively, 'not lacking in anything."' Lampe's *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 266, gives "self sufficiency" as a meaning as well.

45 Athanasius, *Vita* S. *Antoni*, 16, *NPNF* Series II, IV:200. The Greek text reads, τὰς μὲν γρανὰς ἱκανὰς εἶναι πρὸς διδασκαλίν by E. P. Meijering, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 10; Migne, PG, 26:868). One cannot help but notice the close parallel to Paul's words at 2 Timothy 3:16, where he writes that the God-breathed Scriptures are ὠφέλιμος πρὸς διδασκίαν. Roman apologists try to weaken the term ὠφέλιμος as much as possible, asserting that Scripture is *merely* profitable. It is interesting to note how Athanasius obviously understands the meaning of ὠφέλιμος to be parallel with ἱκανὰς, a term that plainly speaks of sufficiency (see next note).

46 Athanasius, *Ad Episcopos Ægyptiæ, NPNF,* Series II, IV:225. The Greek text is found in Migne, PG, 25:548. It reads, Ἐπειδή δέ ἡ θεία Γραφὴπάντων ἐστιν ἱκανωτέρα τούτου χάριν τοῖς βουλεμένοις τὰ πολλὰ περὶ τούτων γινώσκειν συμβουλεύσας ἐντυγχάνειν τοῖς θείοις λόγοις, αὐτὸς νῦν τὸ κατεπεῖγον

ἐσπούδασα δηλῶσαι, διὸ μάλιστα καί οὕτως ἔγραψα. The term Athanasius uses here to describe the sufficiency of Scripture is ἱκνωτέρα. The comparative form used here is translated as “of all things most sufficient” or “is more sufficient than all things.” The substantival form is defined as “fitness, capability, qualification” by Bauer; the adjectival form, “sufficient, adequate, large enough,”; the verbal form, “make sufficient, qualify,”; and the adverbial form, “sufficiently” (Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon,* 472-473). So common is Athanasius’ usage of both ἱκανα and αύτάρεις with reference to Scripture that he combines them in his letter to Serapion (1:19; Migne, *PG*, 26:573) as follows: μόνον τὰ ἐν ταῖς Γραφαῖς μανθανέτω. Αύτάρκη γὰρ καὶ ἱκανὰ τὰ ἐν ταύταις κείμενα (“Let us learn only the things that are in Scripture. For sufficient and adequate are the things therein”). Roman apologists must utterly reject Athanasius’ obvious understanding of the term *profitable* at 2 Timothy 3:16 as referring to sufficiency and adequacy.

47 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi* Dei, 56, *NPNF,* Series II, IV:66. The final phrase is ἐκεῖαι μὲν γὰρ διὰ θελόγων ώνδρῶν παρὰ θεοῦ ἐλαλήθησαν καὶ ἐγράφησαν. Text in Meijering, *Athanasius: Contra Gentes*, 10, and Migne, *PG*, 25:196.

48 Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 32, *NPNF,* Series II, IV:172; Migne, *PG*, 25:476.

49 Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 6, *NPNF,* Series II, IV:453; Migne, *PG*, 26:689. The text regarding the sufficiency of Scripture is familiar by now: ”Εστι μὲν γὰρ ἱκανωτερ[α] πάντων ἠ θεία Γραφή.

# CHAPTER THREE

# THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SCRIPTURE

*— R C. Sproul —*

**N**orm of norms and without norm." With these words, the historic church confessed her faith in the authority of sacred Scripture. The phrase "norm of norms" was designed to indicate the superlative degree in a manner similar to the New Testament expression for Christ, that He is "King of kings and Lord of lords." To be King of kings is to be the supreme King who rules over all lesser kings. To be Lord of lords is to be exalted above all other lords. Likewise, the phrase "norm of norms" indicates a norm that is over lesser norms. The additional phrase, "without norm," indicates that the normative character of Scripture is a norm in a class by itself. It does not function as a *primus inter pares,* a first among equals. It is simply first.

When we speak of the canon of Scripture, we are speaking of a norm or rule. The term *canon* is derived by transliteration from the Greek word *kanon,* which means "a measuring rod," "rule," or "norm." In popular usage, the term *canon* refers to the collection of individual books that together comprise the Old and New Testaments. It is the complete list of books that was received by the church and codified into what we call the Bible. The word *Bible* comes from the Greek word for "book." Strictly speaking, the Bible is not a book, but a collection of sixty-six books. At least the classical Protestant Bible contains sixty-six books. The Roman Catholic Bible includes the Apocrypha and therefore contains more than sixty-six books. This difference illustrates the ongoing debate as to the precise nature of the canon. Rome and historic Protestantism disagree about the proper makeup of the biblical canon. Protestant creeds exclude the Apocrypha from the canon.

This disagreement about the Apocrypha points to the larger issue that surrounds the question of canon. How was the canon established? By whose authority? Is the canon closed to further additions? These and other questions attend the broader issue of the nature of the biblical canon.

# THE COMPILATION OF THE CANON

One of the most important questions regarding the canon concerns its historical compilation. Did the canon come into being by the fiat of the church? Was it already in existence in the primitive Christian community? Was the canon established by a special Providence? Is it possible that certain books that made their way into the present canon should not have been included? Is it possible that books that were excluded should have been included?

We know that, at least for a while, Martin Luther raised questions about the inclusion of the epistle of James in the New Testament canon. That Luther once referred to James as an "epistle of straw" or a "right strawy epistle" is a matter of historical record. Critics of biblical inspiration have not grown weary of pointing to these comments to argue that Luther did not believe in the inspiration or infallibility of Scripture. This argument not only fails to do justice to Luther's repeated assertions of the divine authority of Scripture and its freedom from error, but more seriously it fails to make the proper distinction between the question of the nature of Scripture and the extent of Scripture. Luther was unambiguous in his conviction that all of Scripture is inspired and infallible. His question about James was not a question of the inspiration of Scripture but a question of whether James was in fact Scripture.

Though Luther did not challenge the infallibility of Scripture, he most emphatically challenged the infallibility of the church. He allowed for the possibility that the church could err, even when the church ruled on the question of what books properly belonged in the canon. To see this issue more clearly, we can refer to a distinction often made by the late Dr. John Gerstner. Gerstner distinguished between the Roman Catholic view of the canon and the Protestant view of the canon in this manner:

> **Roman Catholic view:** The Bible is an infallible collection of infallible books.
> **Protestant view:** The Bible is a fallible collection of infallible books.

The distinction in view here has to do with the Catholic Church's conviction

that the canon of Scripture was declared infallibly by the church. The Protestant view is that the church's decision regarding what books make up the canon was a fallible decision. This means that the church could have erred in its compilation of the books found in the present canon of Scripture.

When Gerstner made this distinction, he was neither asserting nor implying that the church indeed *did* err in its judgment of what properly belongs to the canon. His view was not designed to cast doubt on the canon but simply to guard against the idea of an infallible church. It is one thing to say that the church *could* have erred; it is another thing to say that the church *did* err.

Gerstner's formula has often been met with both consternation and sharp criticism in evangelical circles. It seems to suggest that he and those who agree with his assessment are undermining the authority of the Bible. But nothing could be further from the truth. Like Luther and John Calvin before him, Gerstner was an ardent defender of the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. His formula was merely designed to acknowledge that there was a historical selection process by which the church determined which books were Scripture and which books were not. The point is that in this sifting or selection process, the church sought to identify those books that actually were to be regarded as Scripture. In this selection process, the church (being fallible) *could* have erred.

It may be said that Rome has a certain "advantage" with respect to infallibility. Rome believes that the church is infallible as well as Scripture. The infallibility of the church extends not only to the question of canon formation but also to the question of biblical interpretation. To summarize, we can say that according to Rome we have an infallible Bible whose extent is decreed infallibly by the church and whose content is interpreted infallibly by the church. However, the individual Christian is still left in his own fallibility as he seeks to understand the infallible Bible as interpreted by the infallible church. No one is extending infallibility to the individual believer.

For the classic Protestant, though the individual believer has the right to the private interpretation of Scripture, he is capable of misinterpreting the Bible. But while he has the ability to misinterpret Scripture, he does not have the right to do it. That is, with the right of private interpretation comes the responsibility of making an *accurate* interpretation. We never have the right to distort the teaching of Scripture. Both sides agree that the individual is fallible when seeking to understand Scripture, but historic Protestantism limits the scope of infallibility to the Scriptures themselves. Church tradition and church creeds can err. Individual interpreters of Scripture can err. It is the Scriptures alone that are without error.

Though it is clear that the church went through a selection or sorting process

in establishing a formal list of the canonical books, this does not mean that there was no canon or rule prior to the decisions of church councils. The Old Testament writings served as a functional canon from the beginning. B. B. Warfield remarks:

> The church did not grow up by natural law: it was founded. And the authoritative teachers sent forth by Christ to found His church carried with them, as their most precious possession, a body of divine Scriptures, which they imposed on the church that they founded as its code of law. No reader of the New Testament can need proof of this; on every page of that book is spread the evidence that from the very beginning the Old Testament was as cordially recognized as law by the Christian as by the Jew. The Christian church thus was never without a "Bible" or a "canon."[1]

Warfield's point that the church was founded calls attention to the fact that the church had a Founder and a foundation. The Founder was Christ. The foundation was the writings of the prophets and the apostles. In the metaphor of the church as a building, Christ is the Chief Cornerstone. He is not the foundation of the church. He is the Founder. The foundation of the church was laid by Christ and in Christ., but again, the prophets and the apostles formed the foundation through their teaching, and that teaching was collected in their writings. For this reason, Warfield continues:

> The Old Testament books were not the only ones which the apostles ... imposed upon the infant churches, as their authoritative rule of faith and practice. No more authority dwelt in the prophets of the old covenant than in themselves, the apostles, who had been "made sufficient as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6).... Accordingly not only was the gospel they delivered, in their own estimation, itself a divine revelation, but it was also preached "in the Holy Ghost" (1 Peter 1:12); not merely the matter of it, but the very words in which it was clothed were "of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:13). Their own commands were, therefore, of divine authority (1 Thess. 4:2), and their writings were the depository of these commands (2 Thess. 2:15).... Inevitably, such writings, making so awful a claim on their acceptance, were received by the infant churches as of a quality equal to that of the old "Bible"; placed alongside of its older books as an additional part of the one law of God; and read as such in their meetings for worship —a practice which moreover was required by the apostles (1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3).[2]

The canon of the New Testament rests upon a “tradition.” The term *tradition* is often viewed with a jaundiced eye by evangelicals. It suffers from the problem of guilt by association. In order to distance themselves from the role played by tradition in Rome, zealous evangelicals face the danger of throwing the baby out with the bath water. The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* emphatically rejects the dual-source theory of Rome with respect to special revelation, as Dr. James White demonstrated in the previous chapter. At the Fourth Session of the Council of Trent, Rome declared that the truth of God is found both in the Scriptures and in the tradition of the church. The Reformers rejected this dual-source theory and refused to elevate church tradition to such a high level. Likewise, Christ rebuked the Pharisees for supplanting the word of God with the traditions of men.

This negative judgment of human tradition coupled with the aversion to the Roman Catholic view of tradition has inclined some evangelicals to reject tradition altogether. The danger in this is to miss the important role tradition plays within the scope of Scripture itself. Scripture does not reject all tradition. It repudiates the traditions of men, but affirms another tradition—the divine tradition. Paul, for example, frequently speaks of tradition in a positive sense. He speaks of that body of truth that was given over to the church by Christ and the apostles. This is the *paradosis*, the “giving over” of the truth of God.

# THE CHURCH RECEIVED THE CANON

The positive tradition of which Scripture speaks may be referred to as the apostolic tradition, which had a large role in the formation of the canon. The church did not create a new tradition by establishing the canon. Indeed, it is not really proper to speak of the canon being established by the church. The church did not establish the canon; the canon established the church. The church simply recognized the canon and submitted to its rule.

At the heart of the canon question is the issue of apostolic authority. In the New Testament, an apostle (*apostolos*) is "one who is sent." The office of the apostle carries the delegated authority of the One who sends or authorizes the apostle to speak on His behalf. The apostolic tradition begins with God the Father. The Father is the One who first commissioned an apostle. The first apostle in the New Testament was Christ Himself, for He was sent by the Father and spoke with the Father's delegated authority. It was to Christ that the Father gave "all authority ... in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18b). The second apostle is the Holy Spirit, who was sent by both the Father and the Son. Next in line of delegated authority were the New Testament apostles such as Peter and Paul (and the rest).

In the patristic period of church history, Irenaeus of Lyon understood this linkage. In defending the apostles against heretics, Irenaeus argued that to reject the apostles was to reject the One who sent them, namely Christ. Likewise, to reject Christ is to reject the One who sent Him, namely, God the Father. Thus, for Irenaeus, to reject the apostolic teaching was to reject God. At this point, Irenaeus was merely echoing the words of Jesus when He told His apostles that whoever received them received Him and whoever rejected them rejected Him (Matt. 10:40).

It was the apostolic tradition that was codified in the New Testament canon. The apostolic tradition was not limited to the writings of the apostles exclusively. Rather, the canon of Scripture contains the writings of the apostles and their *companions.* Again Warfield comments:

> Let it, however, be clearly understood that it was not exactly apostolic

> authorship which, in the estimation of the earliest churches, constituted a book or portion of the "canon." Apostolic authorship was, indeed, early confounded with canonicity. It was doubt as to the apostolic authorship of Hebrews, in the West, and of James and Jude, apparently, which underlies the slowness of the inclusion of these books in the "canon" of certain churches. But from the beginning it was not so. The principle of canonicity was not apostolic authorship, but imposition by the apostles *as "law."* Hence Tertullian's name for the "canon" is *instrumentum;* and he speaks of the Old and New *Instrument* as we would of the Old and New Testament.[3]

That the church had a "functional canon" from the beginning is seen from the writings of the New Testament itself. Peter, writing in AD 68, refers to Paul's writings as standing alongside the "rest of the Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16). Also, Paul quotes from Luke's Gospel in 1 Timothy 5:18. From the earliest period of the post-apostolic age, the church fathers treated the New Testament writings as Scripture. Though the early fathers did not customarily use the word *Scripture,* they treated the apostolic writings as having scriptural authority. Quotations taken from the writings of the New Testament and cited as authoritative may be found in the writings of Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp, Papias, Justin Martyr, and others.

Toward the end of the second century, Tatian's *Diatessaron* contained a harmony of the Gospels. The Muratorian Canon (probably of the late second century) contained a list of New Testament books that perhaps was intended to counter the false canon created by the heretic Marcion. Marcion's canon was a deliberate attempt to create an expurgated version of the New Testament to accommodate his negative view of the Old Testament God. Marcion's "New Testament" included the Gospel of Luke and ten of Paul's epistles.

From the earliest period of the church, it is clear that the vast majority of the books that are now contained in the New Testament canon were functioning as "canon." Some doubts were raised concerning a few of these books, including Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. For a time, these books lacked universal endorsement. It was not until the fourth century that the disputes were ended and the formal sanction of the entire New Testament canon was completed. In 363, the Council of Laodicea listed all of the present books except Revelation. Athanasius of Alexandria cited all twenty-seven books in 367. The Third Council of Carthage in 397 included all of the present books in the canon.

During the debates in the early centuries, certain criteria emerged by which books were determined to be canonical. These *notae canonicitatis* included (1)

apostolic origin, (2) reception by the original churches, and (3) consistency with the undisputed core of canonical books. Apostolic origin included not only the books that were written by the apostles themselves but also those books that were authorized by the apostles. For example, the Gospel of Mark was seen as carrying the imprimatur of Peter and the Gospel of Luke the sanction of Paul.

The reception of books by the original churches referred to the use of these writings in the worship and teaching of the churches. The Latin word *recipere* was used in the Muratorian Canon to indicate that the church "received" the New Testament books.[4] Books that were excluded from the canon included such writings as the Didache, the Shepherd of Hermas, the epistle of Barnabas and 1 Clement. A study of these books quickly reveals their sub-canonical status. There is a clear recognition, for example, in the writings of Clement that a line exists between apostolic and sub-apostolic authority.

E. F. Harrison writes concerning these sub-canonical books:

> A book might be widely received and appreciated and yet turn out to be unapostolic. Such was the case with the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which had to be excluded from use in public worship, but which was countenanced for purposes of private edification. This helps to explain the origin of a class of early Christian literature known as ecclesiastical, distinguished alike from canonical and from spurious writings, containing such works as the Epistle of Clement and the *Epistle of Barnabas,* as well as the *Shepherd of Hermas*.[5]

In addition to these works, the church rejected a rash of spurious books known as apocryphal writings that appeared as early as the second century. These books were often linked with the writings of the Gnostic heretics who sought to usurp the authority that was vested in the New Testament apostles. The Gnostics claimed to have a special elite knowledge (*gnosis*) that transcended the knowledge imparted by the apostles. At the same time, they tried to gain apostolic credibility for their books by claiming they were written by the apostles themselves. These books were propaganda literature that sought to undermine the apostolic tradition. Origen said of these writings:

> The church receives only four gospels; heretics have many, such as the gospel of the Egyptians, the Gospel of Thomas, etc. These we read, that we may not seem to be ignorant to those who think they know something extraordinary, if they are acquainted with those things which are recorded in these books. Ambrose is credited with saying, "we read these that they may

> not seem ignorant; we read them, not that we receive them, but that we may reject them; and may know what those things are, of which they make such a boast."[6]

The so-called apocryphal gospels abound with fanciful stories and heretical teaching. Some attempt to fill in details of the childhood years of Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, contains an account of frivolous miracles performed by the boy Jesus, such as fashioning birds out of clay and then making them fly away.

# THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON

The chief difference between the Roman Catholic canon and the Protestant canon is found with respect to the inclusion of the Old Testament Apocrypha. The Apocrypha (not to be confused with New Testament apocryphal writings) refers to a series of books composed during the intertestamental period. The Roman Catholic Church includes the Apocrypha and historic Protestantism excludes it. This disagreement focuses on the historical question of the extent of the Old Testament canon. Did the Jewish canon include the Apocrypha?

Frequent reference is made to the difference between the Palestinian canon and the Alexandrian canon. History indicates that the canon of Hellenized Jews of Alexandria included the Apocrypha but that the Hebrew Bible of the Palestinian Jews excluded it. R. K. Harrison writes:

> In any discussion of the Old Testament canon it is of importance to distinguish between that of the Hebrew Bible and its counterpart in other versions of Scripture. The degree of difference in the idea of a canon of sacred writings can be seen by reference on the one hand to the Samaritan version, in which only the Pentateuch was accorded canonicity, and on the other to the LXX, which included the writings known as the Apocrypha.[7]

The debate over the question of the Apocrypha is complex and ongoing. Some have argued that even in the Alexandrian canon the Apocrypha was accorded secondary status and was regarded as "Deutero-canonical." This view is disputed by Roman Catholic scholars, who argue that the Apocrypha belonged to the original Jewish canon.

The Reformers excluded the Apocrypha because they were persuaded that it did not belong to the Hebrew canon recognized in Jesus' day. Francis Turretin remarks:

> The Jewish church, to which the oracles of God were committed (Rom. 3:2), never considered them as canonical, but held the same canon with us (as admitted by Josephus, *Against Apion*).... They are never quoted as

canonical by Christ and the apostles like the others. And Christ, by dividing all the books of the Old Testament into three classes (the law, the Psalms and the prophets), clearly approves of the canon of the Jews and excludes from it those books which are not embraced in these classes. The Christian church for four hundred years recognized with us the same and no other canonical books.... The authors were neither prophets and inspired men, since they wrote after Malachi (the last of the prophets); nor were their books written in the Hebrew language (as those of the Old Testament), but in Greek. Hence Josephus acknowledges that those things which were written by his people after the time of Artaxerxes were not equally credible and authoritative with those which preceded “on account of there not being an indisputable succession of prophets.”[8]

# CHURCH AND CANON

The relative authority of Scripture and the church was one of the great controversies of the Reformation. It is often said that though *sola fide* was the material cause of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura* was its formal cause. Luther insisted that both popes and church councils could err. He rested his case for justification by faith alone on the Scriptures alone. Rome countered by arguing that in a real sense Scripture owed its authority to the authority of the church because the church had "created" the canon. This view was sharply criticized by Calvin:

> Nothing, therefore, can be more absurd than the fiction, that the power of judging Scripture is in the church, and that on her nod its certainty depends. When the church receives it, and gives it the stamp of her authority, she does not make that authentic which was otherwise doubtful or controverted, but acknowledging it as the truth of God, she as in duty bound, shows her reverence by an unhesitating assent. As to the question, How shall we be persuaded that it came from God without recurring to a decree of the Church? It is just the same as if it were asked, How shall we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Scripture bears upon the face of it as clear evidence of its truth, as white and black do of their color, sweet and bitter of their taste.[9]

For Calvin, the Bible is objectively the Word of God and derives its authority from Him and not from the church. The church does not create Scripture but receives it (*recipimus*), submitting to an authority that is already there. Calvin knew nothing of a Bible that "becomes" the Word of God only after a church declaration or even after the Holy Spirit illumines it to God's people as they read it or hear it preached and explained (Heb. 4:12).

For the Reformers, the Bible was "canon" as soon as it was written. The Word of God has inherent authority. The church is obliged to acknowledge that authority and to submit to it.

# THE PROBLEM OF CANON REDUCTION

The problem of canon reduction may manifest itself either in crude and blatant terms or in refined and subtle ways. The ancient heretic Marcion represented the crude form of such reduction by rejecting those portions of the New Testament that referred to the God of the Old Testament in a positive light. Marcion's antipathy to Yahweh controlled his selection of books to be included in his abridged version of the New Testament.

Modern forms of canon reduction are more refined and sometimes subtle. Nevertheless, they achieve a similar purpose in that they result in a canon within a canon. Since Albert Schweitzer's epic work *The Quest for the Historical Jesus,* many subsequent attempts have been made to get to the "real" history of Jesus that underlies the work of the New Testament. The present form of the New Testament is viewed as the creation of the early church, with redactions by editors who embellished the narrative history of Jesus.

Perhaps the most important work of canon reduction in the twentieth century was that undertaken by Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann's program of "demythologizing" was an attempt to rid the New Testament of its mythological husk to penetrate to the kernel of truth that is concealed within. It was an attempt to reconstruct the original history as extrapolated from the *kerygma*, or "message." Bultmann declared:

> The origin of the various themes can be easily traced in the contemporary mythology of Jewish Apocalyptic and in the redemption myths of Gnosticism. To this extent *the kerygma is incredible* to *modern man, for he is convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete*. We are therefore bound to ask whether, when we preach the Gospel today, we expect our converts to accept not only the Gospel message, but also the mythical view of the world in which it is set. If not, does the New Testament embody a truth which is quite independent of its mythical setting? If it does, theology must undertake the task of stripping the Kerygma from its mythical framework, of "demythologizing" it.[10]

Bultmann set out to free the timeless gospel from a time-bound mythical framework. He sought a theology of timelessness, a theology that would be relevant to the *hic et nunc.* He offered a "here and now" canon, one that reduced the original canon by the radical critical method of scissors and paste. For the gospel to be relevant for modern man, Bultmann said, the interpreter must come to the text with a "prior understanding," a certain *Vorverstandnis*, which Bultmann conveniently discovered in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger.

To put it another way, for modern people to discover anything meaningful for faith, they must come to the text of Scripture asking the right questions. These questions are formed by the insights grasped via existential philosophy. For Bultmann, salvation is not tied to the strata of history but rather is *punctiliar.* It occurs not on the horizontal plane of time and space but comes to us from above in a moment of decision.

In this schema, the gospel must be rescued from the three-storied universe of the biblical worldview, which features an earth that is situated beneath heaven above and hell below. He writes:

> *Mans knowledge and mastery of the world* have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the New Testament view of the world—in fact, there is no one who does. What meaning, for instance, can we attach to such phrases in the creed as "descended into hell" or "ascended into heaven"? ... It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles. We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world.[11]

Here we find canon reduction with a vengeance. G. C. Berkouwer once remarked about Bultmann's view that theology could sink no lower. This sanguine view of the matter reveals that Berkouwer was reading history through rose-colored glasses. He made this remark before the Death of God movement in theology and the more recent Jesus Seminar, wherein biblical criticism degenerated into biblical vandalism.

Bultmann's writings manifest a shift in attention from the authenticity of specific books in the biblical canon to the question of the authenticity of material within certain books that have been accorded canonical status. Bultmann's program attacked the *formal* nature of the canon by attacking various forms of literature found within the historic canon.

Normally, the issues raised by higher criticism are seen as being chiefly issues of hermeneutics, not questions about canonicity. But the new hermeneutics are rife with implications for the canon. The canon is effectively reduced not by subtracting books of the Bible from a designated list but by excising the content of Scripture by a stroke of the hermeneutical pen. The hermeneutics of the Reformation featured the normative principle of grammatico-historical exegesis. But once the content of Scripture was wrenched out of its historical framework, this norm was devastated.

The Reformed hermeneutic represented a commitment to seeking the "objective" meaning of the historical text. Bultmann eschewed this methodology, arguing that objective interpretation of the Bible was not only not possible, but more important, not even desirable. From his vantage point, all an objective reading of Scripture would gain us would be a gospel tied to an irrelevant mythological worldview.

The crisis of canon today is a crisis of worldview. It is the result of an ongoing struggle between naturalism and supernaturalism. The modern hermeneutic is an attempt to recover a naturalistic canon from the super-naturally conceived message of Scripture. All that smacks of anything supernatural is ruled out from the start. The new "canon" is the rigid canon of naturalism. Emil Brunner was correct when he observed early on that the real issue we face in this debate is a crisis of unbelief. Bultmannianism and post-Bultmannian theology are a monument to such unbelief in which the "Christ of faith" has little to do with the Christ of history or the Christ of the New Testament.

Evangelical circles have not escaped modern forms of reductionism. The inerrancy controversy of the twentieth century was not merely a war between modernism and fundamentalism or between liberalism and orthodoxy. It cut to the core of evangelicalism itself, as professing evangelicals were sharply divided on the question.

A form of canon reduction arose within the ranks of evangelicals in sometimes-subtle ways. Concepts of "limited inerrancy" and the "organic view of Scripture" effected a reduction in the normative function of Scripture. For example, the historic claim that the sacred Scriptures are the "only infallible rule of faith and practice" underwent a subtle change in some quarters. The new expression was articulated by this formula: "The Bible is infallible only in matters of faith and practice." These formulae sound very much the same, but they mean two quite different things. To discriminate between them, let us examine them more closely:

**Premise A:** The Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

**Premise B:** The Bible is infallible only in matters of faith and practice.

In Premise A, the term *only* is restrictive with respect to norms. It declares that there is only one norm or rule that is infallible, namely the Bible. This indicates that the Bible as a whole and in all of its parts is an infallible rule or norm.

In Premise B, the term *only* is restrictive in quite a different sense. That which is restricted here is the scope of infallibility within the Bible. That is, only part of the Bible is infallible, namely, that part of the Bible that speaks of matters regarding faith and practice. Here we have a canon that is reduced to that content of Scripture that deals with matters of doctrine and ethics. When the Bible speaks of other matters, such as history, for example, it may be fallible. This, of course, has a huge impact on the doctrines themselves, but that is often overlooked.

The second critical difference in these two formulae may be seen in their use of the phrase "faith and practice." In Premise A, the phrase "faith and practice" defines and delineates the life of the Christian and the life of the church. What else does the Christian or the church have besides faith and practice? Here faith and practice refer to the sum of Christian living. Premise A then means that we have a single infallible rule that governs all of life.

The function of the phrase "faith and practice" is quite different in Premise B. Here faith and life are limits of the scope of biblical rule. They restrict biblical infallibility to certain portions of Scripture that speak to faith and practice, thereby reducing the scope of canonical rule.

The true canon of Scripture is the rule of God that contains the whole counsel of God, nothing less and nothing more. When we subtract from that counsel, we are guilty of canon reductionism. Perhaps the most common practical subtraction in our time within the evangelical community is the subtraction of the Old Testament in general and the law of God in particular. The Reformation union of law and gospel has all but been destroyed in modern evangelicalism. Luther and Calvin were not Neonomians who sought to construct a novel form of legalism. They were fierce opponents of both legalism and antinomianism. They believed firmly, however, that all of Scripture is revelatory. In one sense, the Reformation witnessed a rediscovery of the Old Testament. The Old Testament reveals the character of God. Though Calvin, for example, argued that certain portions of the Old Testament have been abrogated by their perfect fulfillment in Christ, the law nevertheless still has a salutary role to play in the Christian's life. Calvin's famous threefold use of the law defended this thesis.

Perhaps we are living in the most antinomian period in church history. It is a time when attention to the law of God is not considered all that important. This

represents a pernicious form of canon reductionism. The very rule of God Himself is removed from our consideration as a result.

# CANON ADDITION

The canon of Scripture is capable not only of being reduced but also of being augmented. A crass form of that would be accomplished simply by adding books to the list of canonical Scriptures. Few if any people are lobbying to add contemporary writings to the New Testament. Nevertheless, we are living in a time in which countless claims of new revelations are being made. Neo-Pentecostal theology often views messages delivered in tongues or the utterance of "prophecy" as new forms of revelation. Sometimes these revelations are described as true revelations but not necessarily normative for the church (despite the fact that they often contain information that might benefit the entire church). If indeed these are new revelations that have value to the church, we ask, why wouldn't they be added to the canon?

The claims of private revelations are many. Pat Robertson has routinely received a "word of knowledge" on national television. He says God reveals specific illnesses of people who live in various parts of the nation as he prays. I have seen him say things like, "Someone in Topeka, Kansas, is being healed of a goiter right this moment." This is an astonishing thing. Here is a man hundreds of miles from the scene who is getting supernatural revelation of the healing of a specific disease in a specific city. But what puzzles me is the restricted specificity of these revelations. The disease and the city are named, but never the name and address of the person being healed. Consequently, the prophecy can be neither verified nor disproved.

Oral Roberts once told the nation that God had revealed to him that his life would be taken if he didn't raise a large amount of money in donations. Robert Tilton promised his constituents that he would mail them a special message from God if they sent in their donations. These, of course, are crude forms of modern claims to added revelation. How these claims can be entertained by the credulous is a matter of consternation for me.

But it gets more subtle. We hear respected Christian leaders claiming that God has "spoken to them" and given specific guidance and instructions they are duty-bound to obey. They are careful to note that this divine speech was not in audible form and there is a disclaimer that this is not new "revelation." Yet the message

that is “laid on the heart” is so clear and powerful that to disobey it is to disobey the voice of God. I am not speaking here of the work of the Holy Spirit, by which He illumines the text of Scripture in such a sharp manner as to bring us under conviction or direct our paths; in such times, the Spirit works *in* the Word and *through* the Word. I am speaking of the voice of the Spirit that men claim is working *apart from* the Word and *in addition to* the Word.

Though such claims are more often than not attended by the disclaimer that they are not revelation, the way they *function* is as revelation, so that the distinction between them and bona fide revelation is, in actuality, a distinction without a difference.

# CONCLUSIONS

Though these are perilous times for the church with regard to the normative function of the Bible in our lives, we remain optimistic about the future. That optimism is grounded in our conviction of the providence of God. It was by His singular providence that the Bible was given under His superintendence and by His inspiration. It was also by His providence that the original books of the Bible were preserved and accorded the status of canon. It is in Providence that we trust for the future of the church. The Westminster Confession of Faith declares: "As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures; so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof."[12]

That the canon was originally established by a historical selection process, and undertaken by fallible human beings and fallible institutions, is no reason to exclude from our consideration the role of the providence of God in these affairs. Some in the Reformed tradition have pointed to a *providentia specialissima* (special providence) in this regard. Abraham Kuyper particularly referred to our ability to trace the course of providence in the establishment of the canon.[13] It is the invisible hand of Providence in the history of the church along with the explicit promises of Scripture regarding the church and God's own Word that give comfort to our souls as we rest in the abiding work of that same Providence.

Notes

1 Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1927), 451.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 455.

4 G. C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift I* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966), 89.

5 Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 112.

6 Cited in ibid., 122.

7 R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 262.

8 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* Vol. 1, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1992), 102.

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 69.

10 Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 3.

11 Ibid., 4-5.

12 Westminster Confession of Faith, V.7.

13 Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift* I, 93.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

*— Derek W. H. Thomas —*

**A**ccording to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1645), "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."[1] More recently, the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, in its "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" (1978), stated as Article 1, "We affirm that the Holy Scriptures are to be received as the authoritative word of God."[2] The same council, in a later statement titled "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics" (1982), added: "We affirm that the normative authority of Holy Scripture is the authority of God himself, and is attested by Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church. We deny the legitimacy of separating the authority of Christ from the authority of Scripture, or of opposing the one to the other."[3] Clearly, the claim that the Bible is authoritative is a central feature of Reformed and evangelical doctrine. It may be summarized by the Reformation slogan, *"sola Scriptura."*

Even if the Bible made no claim as to its inspiration and consequent infallibility /inerrancy,[4] Scripture could still be said to possess a certain authority by virtue of both its (unique) witness to the events of redemptive history *and* the tradition of several thousand years, by which it has been regarded as authoritative for matters of doctrine and practice within the community of the church. Even moderate liberals, who do not affirm a view of the plenary (verbal) inspiration of Scripture[5], concede that the Bible has a unique role in the life of the church.

However, the Bible's claim to be the Word of God adds a dimension of authority that goes beyond mere sentiment or tradition. By this assertion, the Bible claims for itself the authority of God. Additionally, since Scripture is given by "inspiration of God," or more accurately, is the product of God's "out-breathing" (2 Tim. 3:16, *theopneustos*), the Bible's authority is comprehensive

and total, down to the very words themselves. This is the view the Bible claims of itself. To cite John Calvin in the final edition of his Institutes (1559), "Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their own color, or sweet or bitter things do of their taste.... [T]hose whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self authenticated [*autopiston*]."[6] It is for this reason that the Westminster Confession states, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."[7]

The fact that the Bible claims for itself plenary divine inspiration and the consequent authority does not mean that the nature of this authority is self-evident. Postmodernity, with its aversion to truth claims, has led both the modern world and (sadly) the church to view the authority of the Bible differently; while lip service may still be given to the idea of authority and Scripture, many no longer view the Bible's authority as "beyond refute or criticism."[8] Even within the more conservative network of agreed ascription to the Bible's infallibility/inerrancy, there can be differences of opinion as to what the term *authority* means. In recent times, for example, it has been suggested that agnosticism as to the historicity of the person called Job or the fish-swallowing story of Jonah is "acceptable" within a confession of the Bible's inerrancy. Furthermore, a postmodern hermeneutic has arisen within evangelicalism itself suggesting that the very concepts of *truth* and *error* are inappropriate for addressing the complex genres of the ancient texts and their writers.[9]

# THE NATURE OF THE BIBLE'S AUTHORITY

Establishing the fact of the Bible's authority is one thing; asking precisely how this authority functions is another. Clearly, it is insufficient merely to pronounce that "I believe the Bible is authoritative for me" without specifying what that statement means. Several things need to be said at this point.

First, the Bible's authority must be maintained within an adequate sense of the distinguishing features of the various epochs of redemptive history. For example, as a member of the new covenant community, I am not obligated by the prohibition against boiling a young goat in its mother's milk, disinclined as I may be to do so (Ex. 23:19; cf. Mark 7:19; Rom. 14:14). This prohibition belongs to a specific period or context of redemptive history. However, though this precise law has been abrogated by the dawning of the new covenant, its authority is not lessened by the fact that it has been surpassed by historical events within the Bible's own timeline. Similarly, I hold to the cessation of certain supernatural gifts with the passing of the apostles, but I am obligated by the strictures that Paul laid down to the church of Corinth with regard to speaking in tongues and exercising the gift of prophecy (1 Cor. 12, 14).[10] The passages in 1 Corinthians are no less authoritative for the fact that the phenomena they describe are no longer with us today.

Second, the Bible's authority must be maintained within sound hermeneutical principles. For example, there must be a clear appreciation of the difference between the descriptive and the prescriptive. Although members of the post-Pentecost church in Jerusalem sold all their goods and relinquished their rights to private ownership, I am not obligated to follow their example (Acts 2:44-45). The Bible accurately and inerrantly *describes* these actions of the early church for our edification, but it nowhere *prescribes* that these things be done by all churches at all times. Likewise, Jesus' command to the rich young ruler to sell all of his goods and give them to the poor is not a universal requirement for all His followers (Mark 10:21). Similarly, as tempting as it may be to make a universal commandment of Paul's words to the Corinthians, "On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper," the context clearly refers to Paul's collection for the famine relief in

Jerusalem, as the rest of the passage makes clear: “so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Cor. 16:2). The text may contain a universal guideline to the effect of weekly offerings, but there is no specific command given here that has import for all churches at every time and place.[11]

Third, total authority in all that the Bible teaches assumes a valid and consistent hermeneutic in interpreting the variety of genres contained in Scripture (history, poetry, parable, proverb, apocalypse, Gospel, prophecy. etc.). Only to the extent that Scripture is properly interpreted can it be said to be authoritative. A minister living in Mississippi, for example, may claim the Bible’s authority to move and take up a pastorate in Maine on the basis of the words of Jeremiah 3:12 (“Go, and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, ‘Return, faithless Israel, declares the LORD. I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, declares the LORD; I will not be angry forever.”’). Clearly, however, even if such a move were part of God’s purposes for him, he could not claim this text as the basis of his authority for doing so. “Scripture erroneously interpreted is no longer God’s word—as Jesus’ confrontation with Satan in the wilderness underlines (Matt. 4:1ff.; John 10:34).”[12]

Reference should be made at this point to the Bible’s account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2. Calvin’s famous, oft-cited statement that “he that would learn astronomy, and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere,” seems apropos here.[13] These chapters are not meant to be a guide for physics, chemistry, or even biology. It is one thing to argue, for example, that the word *day* (Hebrew, *yom)* in Genesis is referring to the solar, twenty-four-hour day; it is another to suggest that the account provides scientific information as to why a spider is different from a snake or reveals details of genetic linkages between various creatures. Written as these chapters were to help a group of nomadic shepherds in the Sinai desert celebrate the goodness of the Creator, they are (in Calvin’s terminology) in “accommodated” form so as to appeal to the finite, even childish, forms of our thinking and understanding.[14] This means that when Genesis 1 and 2 speak, they do not employ technical language that we would find in a college textbook on nuclear physics or organic chemistry. This in no way diminishes their authority, but highlights for us a need to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). The fact that the Bible has nothing to say specifically about making widgets in a modern industrialized factory does not mean that a widget-maker need despair of utilizing the Bible as an authority in his chosen vocation. On the contrary, the Bible has many general things to say about work, not least that all widget-makers everywhere must do their work in an ethical and God-honoring fashion. All that such a person does should be

influenced by what the Bible teaches about the nature of living for the glory of God.

Fourth, the Bible is authoritative on all matters of faith and practice. This is self-evidently the Bible's own view of itself "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Bible's nature as the inerrant Word of God is a corollary of its God-breathed origin. Additionally, the Bible views itself as both adequate and sufficient in supplying the materials from which we discern doctrine and ethics.

All truth necessary for salvation in its fullest sense is to be found in Scripture. Equally, all truth contained in Scripture is to be believed without hesitation as a mark of our discipleship. Some truths are contained in a single verse of Scripture. For example, the deity of Christ is given in clear terms in the opening sentence of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Other truths are perceived through a systematic formulation from many Scripture passages. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is viewed as true because the Bible asserts that there is only one true God (Deut. 6:4) but that more than one person is God: the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God (respectively, Gal. 1:1; Heb. 1:1-12; Acts 5:3-4). Whatever the Bible teaches is to be believed on the basis that it is the revealed truth of God. It binds the conscience with epistemic certainty.[15]

But the Bible also provides a basis for ethical authority: it is profitable "for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:17). Wherever the Bible issues commands and prohibitions, we are under moral obligation to obey them because they come from God Himself. The Bible applies to all contemporary ethical situations, and authoritative standards may be formulated on issues not specifically found in the Bible (e.g. stem-cell research, cloning, or euthanasia). Wayne Grudem writes:

> When there is no exact modern equivalent to some aspect of a command (such as, "honor the emperor" in 1 Peter 2:17), then we are still obligated to obey the command, but we do so by applying it to situations that are essentially similar to the one found in the NT. Therefore, "honor the emperor" is applied to honoring the president or the prime minister. In fact, in several such cases the immediate context contains pointers to broader applications (such as 1 Peter 2:13—14, which mentions being subject to "every human institution" including the "emperor" and "governors" as

specific examples).[16]

In fact, the work of understanding the meaning of Scripture is not finished until there is a “transferring [of] what has been learned from the text over to the waiting Church,”[17] resulting in “dynamic application of the text to one’s current needs.”[18]

# THE NEW TESTAMENT VIEW OF SCRIPTURAL AUTHORITY

What do we mean when we speak of the authority of the Bible? Nothing is more characteristic of the New Testament's appeal to the Old Testament as "Scripture" than the statement "it is written" (*gegraptai*).[19] Additionally, the New Testament views itself as on a par with the Old Testament "writings" (2 Peter 3:15-16; Rev. 1:3), nowhere more shockingly put than Paul's words to the Corinthians: "the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37). That such writings must be deemed to have a distinctive authority is self-evident. This is more than the naive appeal to "I have read it somewhere and therefore it must be true." The phrase "it is written" means that the words come from a source that claims for itself divine authorship and that the church accepts as canonical.[20] There can be no greater authority than this. It settles all discussion and silences every counter-argument. It is not the authority of genius or charisma that is in view here.

The authority of the Bible rests on its own claim to be the Word of God. But it also rests on Jesus' view of Scripture. Taking just one line of thought—the reference in John 10:35 to the effect that "Scripture cannot be broken"—we see Jesus' view of the authority of Scripture (in this case, the Old Testament) in an almost casual, off-handed way. Challenged by the fact that He had been making the most astonishing claims about Himself, the Jews accused Him of blasphemy. In response, He cited Psalm 82:6, saying in effect, "It cannot always be wrong to attribute the term *god* to a man because the Bible itself does this about ancient Jewish rulers." Jesus asked, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods?'" adding, "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:34-35). His argument was about a single word in the Old Testament (*gods*), and He made the point that the Old Testament cannot be torn apart or dismissed in any way. What is equally interesting is that none of His detractors suggested anything to the contrary. The authority of a single word in the Old Testament was held as inviolable.

A clue as to the role of the New Testament in completing the canon of "what is written" is given to us in Jesus' embryonic words in the Great Commission in

Matthew 28:18—20. The apostles learned from Jesus Himself an unquestioning submission to the Bible. They understood that when Jesus charged them to go into all the world and proclaim a message, they were to teach and demand compliance with “all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). They were to teach what He had taught them. They were conscious, therefore, that what they wrote was Scripture—in the same sense and with the same authority as the Old Testament Scriptures—and that it was meant not only for that generation but for the entire church that was to come.

Nowhere is the apostolic understanding of the nature of the New Testament seen with greater force than in Peter’s words about Paul’s writings. In a context in which Peter admits that his colleague sometimes could write in a manner that was “hard to understand,” he adds the observation that “the ignorant and unstable twist [Paul’s words] to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:16). One might have expected Peter to say the very opposite at that point: that when Paul gets a little obtuse, he is no longer writing under the inspiration of the Spirit. Instead, and somewhat counter-intuitively, he makes what is almost a casual, throwaway statement that Paul’s writings are to be viewed in the same manner and with the same reverence as “the other Scriptures” (the Old Testament).

# CONCLUSIONS

The doctrine of Scripture's absolute and unchallengeable authority is, in the end, a christological issue. The question we have to ask ourselves is this: Am I willing to hold to a different view of Scripture than the one Jesus held to? To give an affirmative answer is to suggest that Jesus was in some way mistaken in His view of the Bible's authority. It is to hold to a *kenotic* view of Jesus, one that suggests His assessments were governed either by the frailty of human insight or that He was so submerged within the first-century Jewish culture that He was simply "a man of his time."[21] Either way, we are not to rely upon His judgments as in any way absolutely true for all times. The massive problem with this formulation is that it leaves us uncertain that *anything* Jesus said was true in the ultimate sense—even about His mission as the Savior of sinners. If Jesus is mistaken about one issue (the doctrine of the absolute authority of the Old Testament), He may well be mistaken about every other thing He said, including such statements as, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9), "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15), or "No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Such a view is disastrous in every way. Ultimately, since our salvation is dependent on our view of who Jesus is, His view of Scripture must be our own.

In addition to Jesus' assertion as to the unbreakable nature of what is written in Scripture, He also provided for us an understanding of the nature of the Bible's authority by His use of it in His own life as the Servant of the Lord. When, subsequent to His baptism in the Jordan, He encountered the full force of Satanic temptation in the wilderness, in a weakened physical and mental state following a forty-day fast, He responded to all three temptations by citing Scripture, adding the customary formula, "It is written" (Matt. 4:4, 6, 7). He did not meet Satan in the wilderness in the power of His exalted status as the Son of Man, but in the lowly condition of His humanity. He did not use divine powers to quench "the fiery darts of the evil one" (Eph. 6:16), but the Bible. Faced with the epitome of evil in Satan's assault, Jesus met it in the weakness of His incarnate state with the weapon of Scripture. Jesus' confidence lay entirely in Scripture's power: "One little word shall fell him "[22] Our confidence should rest

there, too.

Notes

1 Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10.

2 See Stephen Nichols and Eric T. Brandt, *Ancient Word, Changing Worlds: The Doctrine of Scripture in a Modern Age* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2009), 162.

3 Ibid., 166.

4 I use the terms *infallibility* and *inerrancy* here as synonyms, though strictly speaking they are not. The former relates to Scripture's trustworthiness and the latter to its truthfulness. See Carl F. H. Henry, "The Authority of the Bible," in *The Origin of the Bible*, ed. Philip Wesley Comfort (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1992), 22. Harold O. J. Brown defines the terms this way: "[Infallibility] defines the Scripture as reliable and trustworthy to those who turn to it in search of God's truth.... 'Inerrancy' is a closely related concept.... It connotes that the Bible contains neither errors of fact (material errors) nor internal contradictions (formal errors). The concept of infallibility addresses itself to one's personal knowledge of God and assurance of salvation. Inerrancy is concerned more specifically with the accurate transmission of the details of revelation." (Harold O. J. Brown, "The Inerrancy and Infallibility of the Bible," in *The Origin of the Bible*, 38.) The synonymous nature of the overall intent of the concepts of infallibility and inerrancy has been challenged in favor of adopting the former and rejecting the latter. See A. T B. McGowan, *The Divine Authenticity of Scripture: Retrieving an Evangelical Heritage* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2007). In his concluding statement, McGowan makes the following point: "The notion of infallibility ... argues that Scripture is as God intended it to be but that he chose to use human authors with all the implications of that decision. In other words, to argue that the only kind of Bible God was able to give us was one with inerrant *autographa* is untenable. Rather, we must take seriously the Bible that God did, in fact, give us and allow the empirical data rather than theological assertion to determine our doctrine of Scripture" (209). This view has radical implications for the concept of authority. McGowan expresses with concern, "if one name in one genealogy in 2 Chronicles is demonstrably mistaken, the entire inerrantist doctrine of Scripture collapses,

despite protests to the contrary, skilful footwork and unpersuasive arguments" (209). His concern, of course, is justified: the inerrantist view requires total lack of error, either small or great. But retreating from the inerrancy position is not the answer, for the biblical *autographa* are shown, upon any degree of scrutiny, to be without error.

5 The plenary verbal inspiration of Scripture affirms that the totality (Latin *plenus*, meaning "full") of Scripture (and all of its words) is inspired.

6 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T McNeill, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1960), 1:76, 80.

7 Westminster Confession of Faith, I.4.

8 See David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 25, 192-193, 212; *The Courage to* be Protestant (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 75-76). Since Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, the way the text of Scripture is viewed "*as* text" has forever been changed. Words and sentences are deemed no longer to possess rigidly definable meaning. What a passage means for one may differ from what it means to another. Any concept of authority within these parameters is bound to be fluidic. See Nichols and Brandt, *Ancient Word, Changing Worlds: the Doctrine of Scripture in a Modern Age*, 13-16.

9 See, for example, Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005). Enns, among other things, adopts an "incarnational model" of Scripture, arguing that just as Jesus embraced "the cultural trappings of the world in which he lived," so, too, must the Bible. What appears to us as factual and conceptual errors are, in fact, cultural forms belonging (in the case of much of the Old Testament) to the Ancient Near East. For an insightful (and critical) analysis of Enns' book, see G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008).

10 Of course, I am under obligation to maintain the orderliness that underlines the specific statements Paul makes in accord with what seems a regulative principle of worship.

11 This is not to suggest that the Bible makes no such command to Christians to provide for the church's needs on a weekly basis or that such *descriptive* passages as 1 Corin-thians 16:1—2 cannot be used to provide guidelines for the church's abiding use.

12 Sinclair Ferguson, "How Does the Bible Look at Itself?" in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate,* ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1988), 59.

13 John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis,* trans. and ed. John King, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:79.

14 For an assessment of Calvin's use of the idea of "accommodation," see Ford Lewis Battles, "God Was Accommodating Himself to Human Capacity," in *Interpretation* 31 (1977), 19-38; David E Wright, "Calvin's Accommodation' Revisited," ed. Peter De Klerk, *Calvin as Exegete. Papers ... Ninth Colloquium on Calvin and Calvin Studies ... Princeton Theological Seminary ... May 20, 21 and 22, 1993* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Calvin Studies Society, 1995), 171-190.

15 Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, I.6: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or *by good and necessary consequence may be deduced* from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men" (emphasis added).

16 Wayne Grudem, "Review Article: Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, 2 (June 2004), 302-303.

17 Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd Ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 410.

18 Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981), 149.

19 Herman Ridderbos, *Studies in Scripture and its Authority* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 21. The passages are too numerous to cite here, but they range from Matthew 2:5 to 1 Peter 1:16.

20 Scholarly challenges to the concept of canon from Bart Ehrman and others have significantly influenced ongoing discussion of the Bible's authority. See, for example, Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2005); *Jesus Interrupted* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2009). See Ben Witherington's response at http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2009/04/bart-interrupted-detailed-analysis-of.html (accessed April 13, 2009). Though written before Ehrman's challenges, see N. B. Stonehouse, "The Authority of the New Testament," in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary*, eds. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1967 [1946]), 92-140.

21 Donald MacLeod, *A Faith to Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1998), 9-36;

22 From the hymn, "A Might Fortress Is Our God," by Martin Luther (1529).

# CHAPTER FIVE

# THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE WRITTEN WORD

*— John Mac Arthur —*

**T**he tendency to venerate tradition is very strong in religion. The world is filled with religions that have been following set traditions for hundreds—even thousands—of years. Cultures come and go, but religious tradition shows an amazing continuity.

In fact, many ancient religions—including Druidism, Native American religions, and several of the oriental cults—eschewed written records of their faith, preferring to pass down their legends, rituals, and dogmas via word of mouth. Such religions usually treat their body of traditions as a *de facto* authority equal to other religions' sacred writings.

Even among the world's religions that revere sacred writings, however, tradition and scripture are often blended. This is true in Hinduism, for example: the ancient Vedas are the scriptures, but traditions handed down by gurus round out the faith of most followers.

Tradition in effect becomes a lens through which the written word is interpreted. Tradition therefore stands as the highest of all authorities, because it renders the only authoritative interpretation of the sacred writings.

This tendency to view tradition as the supreme authority is not unique to pagan religions. Traditional Judaism, for example, follows the scripture-plus-tradition paradigm. The familiar books of the Old Testament alone are viewed as Scripture, but true orthodoxy is actually defined by a collection of ancient rabbinical traditions known as the Talmud. In effect, the traditions of the Talmud carry an authority equal to or greater than that of the inspired Scriptures.

This is no recent development within Judaism. The Jews of Jesus' day also placed tradition on an equal footing with Scripture. But in actuality they made tradition superior to Scripture, because Scripture was interpreted by tradition and therefore made subject to it.

# TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN

Whenever tradition is elevated to such a high level of authority, it inevitably becomes detrimental to the authority of Scripture. Jesus made this very point when He confronted the Jewish leaders. He showed that in many cases their traditions actually nullified Scripture. He therefore rebuked them in the harshest terms:

> "Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'
>
> "Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death'; but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that." (Mark 7:6-13)

It was inexcusable that tradition was elevated to the level of Scripture in Judaism, because when God gave the law to Moses, it was in written form for a reason: to make it permanent and inviolable. The Lord made very plain that the truth He was revealing was not to be tampered with, augmented, or diminished in any way. His Word was the final authority in all matters: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you" (Deut. 4:2). They were to observe His commandments assiduously, and neither supplement nor abrogate them by any other kind of "authority": "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it" (Deut. 12:32).

So the revealed Word of God, and nothing else, was the supreme and sole authority in Judaism. This alone was the standard of truth delivered to them by God Himself. Moses was instructed to write down the very words God gave him (Ex. 34:27), and that *written record* of God's Word became the basis for God's covenant with the nation (Ex. 24:4, 7). The written Word was placed in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:9), symbolizing its supreme authority in the lives and the worship of the Jews forever. God even told Moses' successor, Joshua: "Be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it" (Josh. 1:7—8a).

Of course, other books of inspired Scripture beside those written by Moses were later added to the Jewish canon—but this was a prerogative reserved for God alone. *Sola Scriptura* was therefore established in principle with the giving of the law. No tradition passed down by word of mouth, no rabbinical opinion, and no priestly innovation was to be accorded authority equal to the revealed Word of God as recorded in Scripture.

Agur understood this principle: "Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar" (Prov. 30:5—6).

The Scriptures therefore were to be the one standard by which everyone who claimed to speak for God was tested: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isa. 8:20, KJV).

In short, tradition had no legitimate place of authority in the worship of Jehovah. Everything was to be tested by the Word of God as recorded in the Scriptures. That's why Jesus' rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees was so harsh. Their very faith in rabbinical tradition was in and of itself a serious transgression of the covenant and commandments of God (cf. Matt. 15:3).

# THE RISE AND RUIN OF CATHOLIC TRADITION

Unfortunately, Christianity has often followed the same tragic road as paganism and Judaism in its tendency to elevate tradition to a position of authority equal to or greater than Scripture. The Catholic Church in particular has its own body of tradition that functions exactly like the Jewish Talmud: it is the standard by which Scripture is to be interpreted. In effect, tradition supplants the voice of Scripture itself.

How did this happen? As James White has demonstrated in his chapter, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," the earliest church fathers placed a strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture over verbal tradition. Fierce debates raged in the early church over such crucial matters as the deity of Christ, His two natures, the Trinity, and the doctrine of original sin. Early church councils settled those questions by appealing to Scripture as the highest of all authorities. The councils themselves did not merely issue ex *cathedra* decrees, they reasoned things out by Scripture and made their rulings accordingly. The authority was in the appeal to Scripture, not in the councils per se.

Unfortunately, the question of scriptural authority itself was not always clearly delineated in the early church, and as the church grew in power and influence, church leaders began to assert an authority that had no basis in Scripture. The church as an institution became, in many people's eyes, the fountain of authority and the arbiter on all matters of truth. Appeals began to be made more often to tradition than to Scripture. As a result, extrabiblical doctrines were canonized and a body of opinion that found no support in Scripture began to be asserted as infallibly true.

Roman Catholic doctrine is shot through with legends, dogmas, and superstitions that have no biblical basis whatsoever. The stations of the cross, the veneration of saints and angels, the Marian doctrines such as the Immaculate Conception, the Bodily Assumption, and the notion that Mary is co-mediator with Christ—none of those doctrines can be substantiated by Scripture. They are the product of Roman Catholic tradition.

Officially, the Catholic Church is very straightforward about her blending of Scripture and tradition. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*[1] (henceforth

CCC, citations referring to paragraph numbers rather than page numbers) acknowledges that the Roman Catholic Church "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"* (CCC 82, emphasis added).

Tradition, according to Roman Catholicism, is therefore as much "the Word of God" as Scripture. According to the *Catechism*, tradition and Scripture "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" (CCC 80). The "sacred deposit of faith"—this admixture of Scripture and tradition—was supposedly entrusted by the apostles to their successors (CCC 84), and "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.... This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome" (CCC 85).

The *Catechism* is quick to deny that this makes the church's teaching authority (called the Magisterium) in any way superior to the Word of God itself (CCC 86). But it then goes on to warn the faithful that they must "read the Scripture within 'the living tradition of the whole Church'" (CCC 113). The *Catechism* at this point says, "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" (CCC 113).

So in effect, tradition is not only made equal to Scripture, but it becomes the true Scripture, written not in documents but mystically within the church herself. And when the church speaks, her voice is heard as if it were the voice of God, giving the only true meaning to the words of the "documents and records." Thus tradition utterly supplants and supersedes Scripture.

# MODERN CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS AND *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

In other words, the official Catholic position on Scripture is that Scripture does not and cannot speak for itself. It must be interpreted by the church's teaching authority and in light of "living tradition." *De facto* this says that Scripture has no inherent authority, but like all spiritual truth, it derives its authority from the church. Only what the church says is deemed the *true* Word of God, the "Sacred Scripture ... written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records."

This position obviously emasculates Scripture. That is why the Catholic stance against *sola Scriptura* has always posed a major problem for Roman Catholic apologists. On one hand faced with the task of defending Catholic doctrine and on the other hand desiring to affirm what Scripture says about itself, they find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. They cannot affirm the authority of Scripture apart from the caveat that tradition is necessary to explain the Bible's true meaning. Quite plainly, that makes tradition a superior authority. Moreover, in effect it renders Scripture superfluous, for if Catholic tradition inerrantly encompasses and explains all the truth of Scripture, then the Bible is simply redundant. Understandably, therefore, *sola Scriptura* always has been a highly effective argument for defenders of the Reformation.

So it is not hard to understand why Catholic apologists have attacked *sola Scripture* with a vengeance in recent years. If they can topple this one doctrine, all the Reformers' other points fall with it. For under the Catholic system, whatever the church says must be the standard by which to interpret all Scripture. The church—not Scripture written in "documents and records"—defines the truth about justification by faith, veneration of saints, transubstantiation, and a host of other issues that divided the Reformers from Rome.

To put it another way, if we accept the voice of the church as infallibly correct, then what Scripture says about these questions is ultimately irrelevant. In practice, this is precisely what happens. To cite but one example, Scripture very

plainly says, “There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Nonetheless, the Catholic Church insists that Mary is her Son’s “co-mediatrix.”[2]

In the eyes of millions of Catholics, what the church says is seen as the final and authoritative Word of God. First Timothy 2:5 is thus nullified by church tradition.

As noted above, if Rome can prove her case against *sola Scripture*, she overturns all the arguments for the Reformation in one fell swoop. If she can establish her tradition as an infallible authority, no mere biblical argument would have any effect against the dictates of the church.

Modern Roman Catholic apologists have therefore mounted a carefully focused attack against *sola Scripture.* Hoping to turn the Reformation’s greatest strength into an argument against the Reformation, they have begun to argue that it is actually possible to debunk *sola Scriptura* by using Scripture alone! This line of argument is now being employed by Catholics against evangelicalism in practically every conceivable forum.

For example, here are a few excerpts from articles posted on the Internet:

> The Protestant teaching that the Bible is the sole spiritual authority—*sola Scriptura*—is nowhere to be found in the Bible. St. Paul wrote to Timothy that Scripture is “useful” (which is an understatement), but neither he nor anyone else in the early Church taught *sola Scriptura.* And, in fact, nobody believed it until the Reformation.[3]

> The Bible nowhere teaches that it is the sole authority in matters of belief In fact, the Bible teaches that Tradition—the oral teachings given by Jesus to the apostles and their successors, the bishops—is a parallel source of authentic belief. [Quotations from 2 Thess. 2:15 and 1 Cor. 11:2 follow].[4]

Here are additional examples from books by Catholic apologists:

> Nowhere does [the Bible] reduce God’s Word down to Scripture alone. Instead, the Bible tells us in many places that God’s authoritative Word is to be found in the church: her tradition (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6) as well as her preaching and teaching (1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 1:20-21; Matt. 18:17).

> That’s why I think the Bible supports the Catholic principle of *sola verbum* Dei, “the Word of God alone” [with “Word of God” encompassing both

> tradition and Scripture], rather than the Protestant slogan, *sola Scriptura*, "Scripture alone."[5]
>
> The Bible actually denies that it is the complete rule of faith. John tells us that not everything concerning Christ's work is in Scripture (John 21:25), and Paul says that much Christian teaching is to be found in the tradition that is handed down by word of mouth (2 Tim. 2:2). He instructs us to "stand fast, and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by our epistle" (2 Thess. 2:15). We are told that the first Christians "were persevering in the doctrine of the apostles" (Acts 2:42), which was the oral teaching given long before the New Testament was written—and centuries before the canon of the New Testament was settled.[6]

Finally, here are examples from a public debate on the question of *sola Scriptura*:

> *Sola Scriptura* itself must be proved from Scripture alone. And if it can't be done, *sola Scriptura* is a self-refuting proposition, and therefore it is false.[7]
>
> [In] 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Paul commands the Church to stand firm and hold fast in the traditions that they had been given, whether orally, spoken, or through an epistle of theirs. So in other words, tradition is one major category, and there are two subsets in the one category: oral tradition, written tradition. That's what the Word of God says.[8]

Many of these claims will be refuted elsewhere in this book. My main focus will be on explaining the biblical passages cited in support of the Catholic veneration of tradition. But first allow me to make a brief summary response to the thrust of all these arguments.

# THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

It is necessary to understand what *sola Scriptura* does and does not assert. The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* has to do with the sufficiency of Scripture as our supreme authority in all spiritual matters. *Sola Scriptura* simply means that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture.

It is not a claim that all truth of every kind is found in Scripture. The most ardent defender of *sola Scriptura* will concede, for example, that Scripture has little or nothing to say about DNA structures, microbiology, the rules of Chinese grammar, or rocket science. This or that "scientific truth," for example, may or may not be actually true, whether or not it can be supported by Scripture—but Scripture is a "more sure Word," standing above all other truth in its authority and certainty. It is "more sure," according to the apostle Peter, than the data we gather firsthand through our senses (2 Peter 1:19). Therefore, Scripture is the highest and supreme authority on any matter on which it speaks.

But there are many important questions on which Scripture is silent. *Sola Scriptura* makes no claim to the contrary. Nor does *sola Scriptura* claim that everything Jesus or the apostles ever taught is preserved in Scripture. It only means that everything necessary, everything binding on our consciences, and everything God requires of us is given to us in Scripture (2 Peter 1:3).

Furthermore, we are forbidden to add to or take away from Scripture (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19). To add to it is to lay on people a burden that God Himself does not intend for them to bear (cf. Matt. 23:4).

Scripture is therefore the perfect and only standard of spiritual truth, revealing infallibly all that we must believe in order to be saved and all that we must do in order to glorify God. That—no more, no less—is what *sola Scriptura* means.

The Westminster Confession of Faith defines the sufficiency of Scripture in this way: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men."[9]

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church include this statement on *sola Scriptura*: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”[10]

So *sola Scriptura* simply means that Scripture is sufficient. The fact that Jesus did and taught many things not recorded in Scripture (John 20:30; 21:25) is wholly irrelevant to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. The fact that most of the apostles’ actual sermons in the early churches were not written down and preserved for us does not diminish the truth of biblical sufficiency one bit. What is certain is that all that is *necessary* is in Scripture—and we are forbidden “to exceed what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6).

As other chapters in this volume demonstrate, Scripture clearly claims for itself this sufficiency—and nowhere more clearly than in 2 Timothy 3:15-17. A brief summary of that passage is perhaps appropriate here. In short, verse 15 affirms that Scripture is sufficient for salvation: “The sacred writings ... are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” Verse 16 affirms the absolute authority of Scripture, which is “God-breathed” (Greek, *theopneustos*) and profitable for our instruction. Verse 17 states that Scripture is able to equip the man of God “for every good work.” So the assertion that the Bible itself does not teach *sola Scriptura* is simply wrong.

# HOW DO WE KNOW THE DOCTRINE OF THE APOSTLES?

Now let's examine the key Scriptures Rome cites to try to justify the existence of extrabiblical tradition. Since many of these passages are similar, it will suffice to reply to the main ones. First we'll examine the key verses that speak of how apostolic doctrine was transmitted, then we'll explore what the apostle Paul meant when he spoke of "tradition."

**2 Timothy 2:2:** "The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." Here the apostle Paul instructs Timothy, a young pastor, to train other faithful men for the task of leadership in the church. There is no hint of apostolic succession in this verse, nor is there any suggestion that in training these men Timothy would be passing on to them an infallible tradition with authority equal to the Word of God.

On the contrary, what this verse describes is simply the process of discipleship. Far from imparting to these men some apostolic authority that would guarantee their infallibility, Timothy was to choose men who had proved themselves faithful, teach them the gospel, and equip them in the principles of church leadership he had learned from Paul. What Timothy was to entrust to them was the essential truth Paul himself had preached "in the presence of many witnesses."

What was this truth? It was not some undisclosed tradition, such as the Assumption of Mary, which would be either unheard of or disputed for centuries until a pope declared *ex cathedra* that it was truth. What Timothy was to hand on to other men was the same doctrine Paul had preached before "many witnesses." Paul was speaking of the gospel itself. It was the same message Paul commanded Timothy to preach, and it is the same message that is preserved in Scripture and sufficient to equip every man of God (2 Tim. 3:16-4:2).

In short, this verse is wholly irrelevant to the Catholic claim that tradition received from the apostles is preserved infallibly by her bishops. Nothing in this verse suggests that the truth Timothy would teach other faithful men would be

preserved without error from generation to generation. That is indeed what Scripture says of itself: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching” (2 Tim. 3:16), but no such assertion is *ever* made for tradition handed down orally.

Like Timothy, we are to guard the truth that has been entrusted to us. But the only reliable canon, the only infallible doctrine, the only binding principles, and the only saving message is the God-breathed truth of Scripture.

**Acts 2:42:** “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” This verse simply states that the early church followed the apostles’ teaching as their rule of faith. Once again, this passage says nothing about apostolic succession and contains no hint of a guarantee that “the apostles’ teaching” would be infallibly preserved through any means other than Scripture.

Note also that this verse describes the attitude of the earliest *converts* to Christianity. The “they” at the beginning of the verse refers back to verse 41 and the three thousand souls who were converted at Pentecost. For the most part, these were rank-and-file laypeople. Their one source of Christian doctrine (this was before any of the New Testament had been penned) was the oral teaching of the apostles.

This verse is even more irrelevant to the question of infallible tradition than 2 Timothy 2:2. The only point it asserts that is remotely germane to the issue is that the source of authority for the early church was apostolic teaching. No one who holds to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* would dispute that point. Let it be stated as clearly as possible: Protestants do not deny that the oral teaching of the apostles was authoritative, inerrant truth, binding as a rule of faith *on those who heard it.* Moreover, if there were any promises in Scripture that the *exact words* or *full sense* of the apostolic message would be infallibly preserved through word of mouth by an unbroken succession of bishops, we would be bound to obey that tradition as a rule of faith.

God-breathed Scripture, however, never speaks of any other God-breathed authority; it never authorizes us to view tradition on an equal or superior plane of authority; and while it makes the claim of inerrancy for itself, it never acknowledges any other infallible source of authority. Word-of-mouth tradition is never said to be *theopneustos,* God-breathed, or infallible.

# WHAT TRADITION DID PAUL COMMAND ADHERENCE TO?

We have already noted, however, that Catholic apologists claim they do see verses in Scripture that accord authority to tradition. Even non-Catholic versions of Scripture speak of a certain "tradition" that is to be received and obeyed with unquestioning reverence.

What of these verses? Protestants often find them difficult to explain, but in reality they make better arguments against the Catholic position than they do against *sola Scriptura.* Let's examine the main ones:

**1 Corinthians 11:2:** "Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you." These words of Paul to the Corinthians speak of tradition, do they not?

This verse certainly *mentions* tradition. Yet, as is often true, the meaning becomes plain when we look at the context. Examining the context, we discover this verse offers no support whatsoever for the Roman Catholic notion of infallible tradition.

First of all, the apostle is not speaking of tradition passed down to the Corinthians by someone else through word of mouth. This "tradition" is nothing other than doctrine the Corinthians had heard directly from Paul's own lips during his ministry in their church. The Greek word translated "traditions" is *paradosis,* translated "ordinances" in the King James Version. The Greek root contains the idea of *transmission,* and the idea is doctrine that was transmitted by oral means. In this case, however, it refers only to Paul's own preaching—not to someone else's report of what Paul taught.

The Corinthians had had the privilege of sitting under the apostle Paul's ministry for a year and a half (Acts 18:11), so it is ironic that of all the churches described in the New Testament, Corinth was one of the most problematic. Paul's first epistle to this church deals with a series of profound problems related to church discipline and practice, including serious sin in their midst, disunity among the brethren, disorder in church meetings, Christians who were taking one another to court, abuse of spiritual gifts, and so on. Second Corinthians is an

extended defense of Paul's ministry in the face of opposition and hostility. Someone in the church—possibly even someone whom Paul had entrusted with a position of leadership—had evidently fomented a rebellion against Paul during his long absence.

The Corinthians knew Paul. He had been their pastor. Yet they were obviously slipping away from the moorings he had so carefully established during his pastorate there. Far from being instruments through which Paul's tradition was being infallibly preserved and handed down, the Corinthians were rebelling against his apostleship! That is why Paul encouraged them to remember what they had heard from him and follow it to the letter. What did he teach during that year and a half in their midst? We have no way of knowing precisely, but we have every reason to believe that the substance of his teaching was the same truth that is recorded throughout his epistles and elsewhere in the New Testament. Once again, we do know for certain that everything essential for thoroughly equipping Christians for life and godliness was preserved in Scripture (2 Tim. 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:3). The rest is not recorded for us, and nothing anywhere in Scripture indicates that it was handed down through oral tradition—especially not through any means that guaranteed it would be inspired and infallible.

1 Corinthians 11:2 in particular teaches no such thing. It is nothing but Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians that they remember and obey his apostolic teaching. It reflects Paul's own personal struggle to protect and preserve the doctrinal tradition he had carefully established in Corinth. But again, there is no implication whatsoever that Paul expected this tradition to be infallibly preserved through any inspired means other than Scripture. On the contrary, Paul was concerned lest his ministry among the Corinthians prove to have been in vain (cf. 2 Cor. 6:1).

**2 Thessalonians 2:15:** "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." This is perhaps the favorite verse of Catholic apologists when they want to support the Catholic appeal to tradition, because the verse plainly delineates between the written word and oral "traditions."

Again, the Greek word is *paradosis.* Clearly, the apostle is speaking of doctrine, and it is not to be disputed that the doctrine he has in mind is authoritative, inspired truth.

So what is this inspired tradition that the Thessalonians received "by word of mouth"? Doesn't this verse rather clearly support the Catholic position?

No, it does not. Again, the context is essential to a clear understanding of what Paul was saying. The Thessalonians had evidently been misled by a forged letter,

supposedly from the apostle Paul, telling them that the day of the Lord had already come (2 Thess. 2:2). The entire church had apparently been upset by this, and the apostle Paul was eager to encourage them.

For one thing, he wanted to warn them not to be taken in by phony "inspired truth." So he told them clearly how to recognize a genuine epistle from him—it would be signed in his own handwriting: "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write" (3:17). He wanted to ensure that they would not be fooled again by forged epistles.

But even more important, he wanted them to stand fast in the teaching they had already received from him. He had already told them, for example, that the day of the Lord would be preceded by a falling away and the unveiling of the man of lawlessness. "Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things?" (2:5). There was no excuse for them to be troubled by a phony letter, for they had heard the actual truth from his own mouth already.

Now, no one—even the most impassioned champion of *sola Scriptura*—would deny that Paul had taught the Thessalonians many things by word of mouth. No one would deny that the teaching of an apostle carried absolute authority. The point of debate between Catholics and Protestants is whether that teaching has been infallibly preserved by word of mouth. So the mere reference to truth received firsthand from Paul himself is, again, irrelevant as support for the Catholic position.

Certainly nothing here suggests that the tradition Paul delivered to the Thessalonians has been infallibly preserved for us anywhere except in Scripture itself. In fact, the real thrust of what Paul is writing here is antithetical to the spirit of Roman Catholic tradition. Paul is not encouraging the Thessalonians to receive some tradition that had been delivered to them via secondhand or thirdhand reports. On the contrary, *he was ordering them to receive as infallible truth only what they had heared directly from his own lips.*

Paul was very concerned to correct the Thessalonians' tendency to be led astray by false epistles and spurious tradition. From the very beginning, the Thessalonians had not responded to the gospel message as nobly as the Bereans, who "received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

It is highly significant that the Bereans are explicitly *commended* for examining the apostolic message in light of Scripture. They had the priority right: Scripture is the supreme rule of faith, by which everything else is to be tested. Unsure of whether they could trust the apostolic message—which, by the way, was as inspired and infallible and true as Scripture itself—the Bereans

erased all their doubt by double-checking the message against Scripture. Yet Roman Catholics are forbidden by their church to take such an approach! They are told that the church through her bishops dispenses the only true and infallible understanding of Scripture.

Therefore, it is pointless to test the Catholic Church's message by Scripture; for if there appears to be a conflict—and make no mistake, there are many—Rome says her traditions carry more weight than her critics' interpretation of Scripture.

What the apostle was telling the Thessalonians was nothing like what Rome tells faithful Catholics. Paul was urging the Thessalonians to test all truth-claims by Scripture and by the words they had heard personally from his own lips. Since the only words of the apostles that are infallibly preserved for us are found in Scripture, that means that we, like the Bereans, must compare everything with Scripture to see whether it is valid.

Roman Catholic apologists protest that only a fraction of Paul's messages to the Thessalonians are preserved in the two brief epistles Paul wrote to that church. True, but may not we assume that he taught the Thessalonians the very truths that are found in generous measure throughout all his epistles—justification by faith alone, the true gospel of grace, the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ, and a host of other teachings? The New Testament gives us a full-orbed Christian theology. Who can prove that anything essential is omitted? On the contrary, we are assured that Scripture is sufficient for salvation and spiritual life (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Where does Scripture ever suggest that there are unwritten truths that are necessary for our spiritual well being? One thing is certain—the words in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 imply no such thing.

**2 Thessalonians 3:6:** "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us." This is the only other verse in all the New Testament where Paul uses the words *tradition* or *traditions* to speak of apostolic truth that is to be obeyed.

By now, Paul's use of this term should be well established. This *cannot* be a reference to truth passed down from generation to generation. Again, Paul is speaking of a "tradition" received firsthand from him.

This is the closing section of the epistle. Paul is summing up. And he once again underscores the importance of the teaching the Thessalonians had received directly from his mouth. The "tradition" he speaks of here is doctrine so crucial that anyone who refuses to heed it and live by it should be rejected from the fellowship.

What is this "tradition"? Is it Marian theology, dogma about the efficacy of

relics, or other teachings unique to Roman Catholicism? Not at all—it is simple, practical apostolic doctrine, taught and lived out by example while Paul was among the Thessalonians. Paul goes on to define specifically what "tradition" he has in mind:

> We did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we kept working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right to this, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. But as for you, brethren, do not grow weary of doing good. (3:7b-13)

In other words, Paul was speaking of simple, practical doctrine about stewardship of one's time, a man's responsibility to work and provide for his family, and personal discipline in daily life. These truths are now part of Holy Scripture, by virtue of Paul's including them in this epistle. Put them together with everything else the New Testament teaches and you have every part of the apostolic message that was infallibly preserved for us.

Is the sum of Scriptural truth a sufficient rule of faith for the Christian? We have the Bible's own assurance that it is. Scripture alone is sufficient to lead us to salvation and fully equip us for life and eternity (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Therefore, we may know with certainty that every *essential* aspect of the apostolic message is included in Scripture.

Note that Paul clearly regarded his epistles as inspired, authoritative Scripture. He charged the Thessalonians with these instructions: "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame" (2 Thess. 3:14).

# CONCLUSIONS

So the written words of Scripture are binding. Apostolic preaching was equally binding *for those who heard it from the apostles' own mouths.* Beyond that, Scripture lays no burden on anyone's shoulders. But, thank God, His own Word assures us that Scripture is fully sufficient to bring us to salvation and to equip us spiritually for all that God demands of us.

No man, no church, no religious authority has any warrant from God to augment the inspired Word of Scripture with additional traditions or to alter the plain sense of it by subjecting it to the rigors of a "traditional" meaning not found in the Word itself. To do so is clearly to invalidate the Word of God—and we know what our Lord thinks of that (Matt. 15:6-9).

Notes

1 Liguori, Mo.: Liguori Publications, 1994.

2 From the Vatican II documents, *Lumen Gentium*, 62.

3 From an article by George Sim Johnston posted on the Catholic Information Network.

4 From a tract issued by Catholic Answers.

5 Scott Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 74.

6 Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 136.

7 Patrick Madrid, in a debate with James White. A transcript of this debate can be accessed at http://vintage.aomin.org/SANTRAN.html. Information on ordering a recording of this debate can be obtained by writing Alpha and Omega Ministries, P.O. Box 37106, Phoenix, *AZ* 85069.

8 Ibid.

9 Westminster Confession of Faith, I.6.

10 The Thirty-nine Articles, Article 6.

# CHAPTER SIX

# SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

## - *Sinclair B. Ferguson* -

**M**artin Luther's famous Ninety-five Theses sparked a religious fire in Europe that the Roman Catholic Church was unable to extinguish. The theological conflict that ensued has often been characterized as focusing on the four "alones" of the Reformation: *sola gratia, solo Christo, sola fide, sola Scriptura* —salvation is by grace alone, in Christ alone, by faith alone, and all that is necessary for salvation is taught in Scripture alone. Each of these principles, and certainly all four together, served as a canon by which the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church was assessed and found lacking.

In these great slogans, the nouns—grace, Christ, faith, Scripture—were and are of great importance. But in each case the qualifying *sola* (alone) was and is in some ways even more significant. Rome had always taught that salvation was by grace through faith in Christ, and had always held that the Bible was the Word of God—but never *alone.* To speak of *sola Scriptura* has almost always been viewed in Rome as a prescription for spiritual anarchy in which everyone would create for himself a personalized message of the Bible. The only safeguard against this was the living tradition of the church, which was viewed as a separate channel of divine revelation.

Literacy levels were low in the Middle Ages (prior to the printing press, a Renaissance development that brought about widespread access to the Bible). But this alone does not account for the Reformation horror stories about the large-scale biblical ignorance among both priests and people. Nevertheless, it would be uncharitable to extrapolate from those dark days to the present day as though no counter-reformations within Catholicism had taken place in the interim. And Protestants also must recognize that a widespread interest in the Bible has developed within the Roman Catholic Church in the past century.

Can it be, then, that we now face a new situation in Roman Catholicism? After all, "common" Bibles are being published for the first time since the Reformation. Moreover, not only within the World Council of Churches (largely dominated by liberal theology) but also within evangelicalism, substantial

rapprochement has been viewed as possible in our own time. So it is timely to ask: Has something unprecedented happened within Roman Catholicism's interpretation of the Bible so that the old differences can, at last, be laid to rest?

Between the First Vatican Council (1870) and the publication of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's important work *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), the Roman Magisterium published a series of significant statements on the nature, interpretation, and role of the Bible in the church. These began in the nineteenth century in the widespread crisis for faith created by the effect of Enlightenment thought and thereafter by the onslaught of scientific humanism that found its impetus in naturalistic evolutionism. Pronouncements have continued to appear up to the present day, when the Vatican has sought to wed contemporary historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation with the ancient dogmas of the church. Each of these statements is of interest on its own account; together they mark a development that has been significant for the work of large numbers of Roman Catholic biblical scholars.

The story of this development is not well known among Protestants. Indeed, probably most Roman Catholics are relatively unfamiliar with it. It is worth narrating, at least in broad outline.

# DEVELOPMENTS IN ROME

In 1893, Pope Leo XIII issued the Encyclical Letter *Providentissimus Deus*. It was the first wide-ranging attempt of the Roman Church to deal specifically with the impact of the critical methodologies that had come to characterize theological scholarship in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These methodologies treated the Bible as an ancient Near Eastern text and assessed it from the standpoint of critical historical investigation and linguistic and religious development. In sophisticated theological terms, Scripture's "humanity" was explored (and, in fact, its divinity was increasingly ignored and denied).

Against this background, in which the idea of human evolution played a major role, *Providentissimus Deus* insisted on a long-standing principle of Christian orthodoxy: if God is Author of both nature and Scripture, these two "books" of divine revelation must be in harmony with each other. The encyclical emphasized that there could therefore be no ultimate conflict between the Bible and either the natural sciences or historical investigation. It urged both theologians and scientists to respect the limits of their own spheres. In addition, biblical exegetes who employed the fruits of secular scientific and historical studies were counseled to remember the importance of the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith): the Scriptures should always be interpreted in keeping with the apostolic rule of faith to which the church subscribed. Thus, the last word on what the Bible taught lay with the Roman Magisterium.

*Providentissimus Deus* was thus characterized by a conservative (some would have said "reactionary") character, expressed particularly in its negative criticisms of the way in which historical-critical principles were being used. The underlying anxiety of the encyclical was that critical methodologies would prove injurious to the faith of which the church was called to be the guardian, not the destroyer.

Fifty years later, the face of Europe had changed dramatically. The Great War had been fought from 1914-18 and the Second World War of 1939-45 was in full course. The misplaced and anthropocentric optimism of nineteenth-century liberal theology had collapsed, shattered before the enormity of human need; the notion that humanity was evolving from a lower to a higher moral condition had

been dealt an embarrassing blow. The “gospel” of the universal fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man stood exposed in all of its inherent poverty. There arose a new sense of need for some powerful word from God. In Protestantism, the “theology of crisis” emerged and what came to be known as “Biblical Theology” began to stir.

Significant developments also had taken place within the world of Roman Catholic biblical scholarship. In the wake of *Providentissimus Deus*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission was created by Leo XIII in 1902. Its earliest responses *(responsa)* to questions of biblical interpretation were characterized by negative reaction to higher criticism. But in due season (it was completely reorganized in 1971 following the Second Vatican Council) it would prove to be a spearhead of the new way of reading the Bible.

In 1943, Pius XII issued his Encyclical Letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. It was promulgated during the Second World War, but not until the turn of the decade did its full impact begin to be felt. This time a more positive note was struck. For one thing, Roman Catholic biblical scholars were largely set free from the burden the church had carried for centuries: the use of the Vulgate (Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible). It had been regarded as the authoritative text for ecclesiastical use since the time of the Council of Trent (and even in 1943 it was declared to be “free from all error in matters of faith and morals”).

In a manner reminiscent of the humanists of the Renaissance, with the motto *ad fontes* (“back to the original sources”), Roman Catholic scholars now enjoyed a new freedom and fresh impetus to gain and employ expertise in the biblical languages to enable a true understanding of the text of Scripture. A new value was recognized in the use of such tools as textual, literary, and form criticism. The importance of history, ethnology, archaeology, “and other sciences” was affirmed. The “true meaning,” indeed the so-called “literal sense” of Scripture, was to be sought, as well as the “spiritual significance.” Pre-critical ways of reading the Bible were widely (but not entirely) replaced with the new approach. A clear distinction was made between the “meaning” of the original text and the contemporary application (“significance”) of it. Principles of interpretation that had long been familiar to Protestants were now increasingly recognized as essential to proper biblical exegesis. The historical-critical method had come to stay.

All this was encouraged (it could scarcely have been prevented, but the genius of Rome, unlike Wittenberg and Geneva, has always been its ability to hold opposite tendencies together). The underlying principle was that the Scriptures cannot be charged with error. Supposed errors in Scripture, it was held, could be resolved by a right reading of the text. Any tensions between Scripture and

“reality” could always be resolved in favor of biblical integrity. Harmonization was an essential key to reading the Bible as a modern Catholic.

Times change, and we change with them. The second half of the twentieth century saw continued movement in Roman Catholic biblical scholarship. This was not without ecclesiastical bloodletting (at one point, professors at the Pontifical Biblical Institute were banned from teaching). But the overall result has been that some of the most erudite biblical studies published during this period carry the imprimatur *nihil obstat*, which identify them as the work of Roman Catholic scholars that has been declared “free of doctrinal or moral error.”

The most recent succinct expression of this development can be seen in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s statement on biblical interpretation, published in 1993. Here the fruits of critical scholarship set within the context of the church’s tradition were warmly welcomed. Indeed, strikingly—in view of the importance of the principle of harmonization at all costs that marked earlier Roman Catholic pronouncements—it was of a Protestant-style fundamentalist approach to Scripture that the church seemed to have become most critical, and perhaps most fearful.

But why should this development since 1870 be of interest to Protestant Christians? The reason lies on the surface of much of the very best Catholic biblical scholarship. There is, in our day, a clear recognition in Roman Catholic biblical scholarship that there is a gulf—or at least a distance—between what the text of sacred Scripture states and the teaching of the sacred tradition of the church. There is also recognition that the words of Jesus recorded in John 16:12-15, often taken as a specific promise guaranteeing the truth and infallibility of sacred tradition, do not refer to such a tradition at all.[1] By necessity, therefore, some Roman Catholic interpreters of Scripture have had to develop a novel view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition in order to hold them together: tradition adds to Scripture, but Scripture is “open” to tradition.

Can this contention be readily illustrated from Roman Catholic biblical scholarship?

In critical discussion, it is always a great temptation to treat the most extreme examples of the opposition’s viewpoint as though they were representative. That is an unworthy tactic, one that often merely hardens prejudices on both sides. In this context, however, the point can readily be illustrated not from the worst historical examples of Roman Catholic biblical interpretation, but—albeit from a necessarily limited sample—by what is widely regarded as its best.

# A ROMAN CATHOLIC SCHOLAR ON THE BOOK OF ROMANS

It would be hard to find a better illustration of the new approach to the Bible in Roman Catholicism than the recent widely acclaimed commentary on Romans by Joseph A. Fitzmyer. Professor Fitzmyer is a leading Roman Catholic scholar whose outstanding academic gifts pervade his almost 800-page commentary. While it is often true in the matter of commentaries that "one man's meat is another man's poison," it is impossible to imagine any student of Scripture failing to find considerable profit from the erudition and stimulus of Fitzmyer's work. Raymond E. Brown, the outstanding American Catholic Johannine scholar, describes Fitzmyer as "the most learned N[ew] T[estament] scholar on the American Catholic scene."[2] Elsewhere he says of Fitzmyer's work on Romans that "It can lay fair claim to being the best commentary on Romans in English."[3] Even those who might award the palm to someone other than Fitzmyer recognize the value of the commendation.

But it is precisely *because* of the quality of this commentary that its contents are so significant. A desire for careful exegesis coupled with faithfulness to the Magisterium of the church leads Fitzmyer (a Jesuit) to state, albeit with appropriate sensitivity and discretion, that the teaching of the Scriptures cannot *simpliciter* ("directly") be identified with the teachings of the sacred tradition. The following illustrations will underline this.

In an extensive introductory chapter on Pauline theology, Fitzmyer includes an essay on faith. In the developed theology of the medieval period, theologians had spoken and written much of *fides caritate formata*, justifying faith that was "faith formed by love." This, not "faith alone," justifies, they said. This view was confirmed at the Council of Trent.

Many of the statements from Trent reveal misunderstandings of the teaching of Luther and the other Reformers; nevertheless, its teaching in this regard is clearly intended as a rejection of the principles the Reformers regarded as central to the gospel. Trent's *Decree on Justification* reads as follows: "If anyone says that people are justified either by the sole imputation of the righteousness

*(justitia)* of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and charity which is poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit and inheres in them; or even that the grace by which we are justified is only the favour of God, let him be anathema."[4]

Rome's great fear has always been that *sola fide* would breed antinomianism and moral license. Christians, it was held, were preserved from this by the fact that justification takes place through faith that is formed by love; i.e., justification involves personal transformation.

But, comments Fitzmyer, Paul's notion of faith that "blossoms" in love is to be distinguished from this *fides caritate formata:*

> That is a philosophical transposition of the Pauline teaching—acceptable or not depending on whether one agrees with the philosophy involved—but the genuine Pauline idea of "faith working itself out through love" is implicit in Romans ... he does not equate faith with love; nor does he ascribe to love what he does to faith (viz., justification, salvation), even though he recognizes the necessity of the two working in tandem.[5]

Here is an important recognition of the fact that we must distinguish between what the tradition has said and what the Scriptures actually affirm. The idea of faith and love being instrumental in justification cannot be read out of the text as such. It is no part of the exegesis of Paul's words.

Note, however, that Fitzmyer is careful to suggest only that there is distance between what is affirmed by Paul and what is stated in the tradition. He does not affirm that there is any necessary contradiction between Scripture and tradition.

More is to follow. Commenting on a central passage regarding the justification controversy, Romans 3:21-26, Fitzmyer states that Paul formulates "three, or possibly four, effects of the Christ-event [i.e., the work of Christ] ... : justification, redemption, expiation, and possibly pardon," and adds, "It is important to recognize that such effects of the Christ-event are appropriated through faith in Christ Jesus, and only through faith. It is the means whereby human beings experience what Christ has done."[6]

Here again the Pauline text is to be read on its own terms without recourse to post-Pauline developments in the church. Fitzmyer knows that within the church there have always been those who have read Paul's words as implying the principle of *sola fide.*

It would be quite wrong, however (indeed naive), to read this distancing of the church's pronouncements from the statements of the biblical text as a capitulation to the Protestant exposition. Indeed, Fitzmyer gives equal care to

articulating the difference between the text and the way in which it has been interpreted within Protestant circles.

Within a page of the previous citation we find Professor Fitzmyer rejecting the interpretation of a Protestant scholar on the grounds that "that reading would introduce an Anselmian distinction into the Pauline text, which does not warrant it."[7] But even here the concern is to allow Paul to speak for himself in distinction from reading him through the eyes of the construction of a postbiblical tradition (in this case, one that also appealed to Protestantism). Whether or not Fitzmyer's critique is accurate, what is at first sight remarkable is the way in which his recognition of Paul's emphasis on the unique role of faith might easily be mistaken for the comment of a Protestant exegete.

There are other noteworthy illustrations of an exegesis that self-consciously seeks to let the Scriptures speak for themselves apart from the dominance of theological tradition. In this sense, the Roman Catholic scholar is approaching the text in a manner similar to the Protestant.

Commenting on the words "justified freely by His grace" in Romans 3:24, Fitzmyer notes: "It should be superfluous to stress ... that in using *dorean* and *te autou chariti,* Paul is not referring to the efficient cause of justification by the former and the formal cause by the latter (as if *charis* were 'sanctifying grace'). That is anachronistic exegesis, a distinction born of later medieval and Tridentine [Council of Trent] theology."[8]

Here again, without rejecting the teaching of Trent as such, a distinction is made between what the text itself states and the theology that has developed within the Catholic tradition.

The comments that may strike the Protestant mind as most unexpected are to be found in Professor Fitzmyer's exposition of Romans 3:27-31. It was in his translation of Romans 3:28 in 1522 that Luther's appeal to *sola fide* emerged as seminal for the Reformation understanding of the gospel. Fitzmyer recognizes that this language long predates Luther and can be found in the writings of the early fathers. He frankly states that "in this context" Paul means "by faith alone," although he contends that in the Lutheran sense its use is an extension of what Paul says. This inevitably prompts questions as to the nature of this "extension" and whether there is any Roman Catholic "sense" in which justification is genuinely "by faith alone." But the admission in and of itself is significant.

The same distance between Scripture and tradition is further indicated when Fitzmyer turns to the exposition of Romans 5:12. The traditional Roman Catholic view of this text is to see here a reference to "original" sin. This was

made explicit by the Council of Trent, which not only set its imprimatur to this exegesis of Paul's words, but also forbade any other understanding of his statement. Fitzmyer comments:

> This tradition found its formal conciliar expression in the Tridentine *Decretum de peccato originali*, Sess. V, 2-4.... This decree gave a definitive interpretation to the Pauline text in the sense that his words teach a form of the dogma of Original Sin, a rare text that enjoys such an interpretation.
>
> Care must be taken, however, to understand what Paul is saying and not to transform his mode of expression too facilely into the precision of later dogmatic development.... Paul's teaching is regarded as seminal and open to later dogmatic development, but it does not say all that the Tridentine decree says.[9]

Again we can hardly avoid noting the caution that emerges with respect to reading the church's tradition back into Scripture. The dogma as such is not rejected; what is made clear is that it is not to be identified *simpliciter* with the teaching contained in the New Testament.

Next, in commenting on Romans 6:12, Fitzmyer alludes to the teaching of the Council of Trent that what Paul sometimes calls "sin" (as, for example, in Rom. 6:12) is not described as such by the Roman Catholic Church, but rather is understood as the *fomes peccati.* The allusion here is to one of the most astonishing (and surely embarrassing) statements in the documents of Trent, in the Decree Concerning Original Sin: "This concupiscence, which the apostle sometimes calls sin, the holy Synod declares that the Catholic Church has never understood it to be called sin, as being truly and properly sin in those born again, but because it is of sin, and inclines to sin. And if anyone is of a contrary sentiment, let him be anathema."[10]

Again we must not make the mistake of thinking that Fitzmyer has ceased to be a faithful son of the Roman Church. For this, he notes (in agreement with the earlier biblical scholar M. J. Lagrange), "might be an exact theological transposition," but it is a precision not yet found in the Pauline text.

Our concern here is not to discuss the precision of the theology involved in this statement, but once more to underline the gap—although for Fitzmyer manifestly not an unbridgeable historical gulf—that is fixed between the revelation as it comes to us in Scripture and what the church has received as its authoritative tradition.

No doubt this whole approach causes anxiety in the hearts of Roman Catholics who are conservative and traditionalist (there are "fundamentalists" in both

Roman Catholicism and Protestantism). They may find some relief in the way Professor Fitzmyer's concurrence with the Roman tradition is given notable expression in his handling of Paul's teaching on justification. Professor Fitzmyer nuances the meaning of *dikaioo* in the direction of "being made upright." Here, at perhaps the most critical point, his exegesis harmonizes with the Vulgate's translation of the New Testament's *dikaioo by justum facere.*

Despite the presence of Lutheran sympathizers at Trent, the council committed the church irrevocably to a transformationist doctrine of justification: "Justification ... is not the removal of our sins alone, but also the sanctification and renovation of the inner man through the willing reception of the grace and the other gifts by which a man from being unjust (*ex injusto*) becomes just, and from being an enemy becomes a friend so that he may be an heir according to the hope of eternal life."[11]

Even Fitzmyer's further qualification—he notes that this justification takes place "gratuitously through God's powerful declaration of acquittal"—does not eliminate a distinctively Tridentine exegesis, as he makes clear: "The sinful human being is not only 'declared upright,' but is made upright' (as in 5:19), for the sinner's condition has changed."[12]

Much is at stake here. In many areas where sacred tradition is not already present and perspicuous in sacred Scripture, Fitzmyer and other Roman Catholic scholars reduce the gap between what is taught in the biblical text and the dogma of sacred tradition by an appeal to the "open" character of biblical teaching. In this way, they minimize the force of the Reformation criticism that tradition contradicts Scripture.

Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet and His exhortation to them to imitate Him (John 13:1-15) give an example of this "open" character of Scripture. Foot washing might well have developed into a sacrament, in a manner parallel to the development that took place in another "open" passage, James 5:14. Here, "under the Spirit-guided development of Tradition" the text became the basis for the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.[13]

No appeal to the theory of Scripture's "open" character can be of service, however, in relationship to the doctrine of justification. It would simply not be possible for Fitzmyer at this juncture to agree with the Reformation exegesis of justification as declaratory, imputed righteousness, yet appeal to the "open" character of Paul's teaching and to the Spirit's continuing work in the church as bringing out the fullness of meaning in justification as including infused righteousness. These two perspectives stand in direct contradiction with one another.

Nevertheless, Fitzmyer's interpretation is based on an exegetical appeal—to his own exegesis of Romans 5:19: "Just as through the disobedience of one man many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one many will be made upright."[14] He takes Paul's verb *kathistanai* ("made") in the sense of subjective condition, i.e., in a transformationist sense.

Two things should be said here. First, we believe Fitzmyer's interpretation of Romans 5:19 can be demonstrated to be mistaken.[15] But second, his logic is wrong. Even if *kathistanai* were understood in a subjective-transformationist sense, it does not necessarily follow that Paul's use of *dikaioo* is transformationist rather than forensic and declaratory. To consistently interpret "justify" in the light of this assumption is an exegetical procedure without justification!

But even here there is a formal recognition of the principle: sacred Scripture must be distinguished from sacred tradition; we should not assume that the latter is an exegesis of the former.

Naturally, Protestants view this distinction through Protestantized spectacles. Anyone convinced of the sole authority and sufficiency of Scripture is bound to ask how it is possible for a scholar of integrity to recognize this gap and yet to remain a faithful Roman Catholic.

It is too simple a construction, however, to conclude that there is manifest duplicity here. Rather, the general consistency and clarity with which Fitzmyer's exegesis illustrates the gap between Scripture and tradition highlights why it is that the Protestant appeal to Scripture alone to refute Roman Catholic dogma seems to cut little ice: for Rome, neither Scripture nor tradition can stand on its own. The rationale for this should now be clear: in the Roman *Catholic Church, sacred tradition stands beside sacred Scripture as a valid and authoritative source of divine revelation. In fact, both emerge within one and the same context: the Catholic Church.*

Understanding this principle helps us to see the mindset of the Roman Catholic Church's approach to interpreting the Bible at this juncture.

# SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION: AN OVERVIEW

For Rome, the Bible itself emerges from within the church. The church exists prior to the Bible; the Bible is itself an expression of the living voice of the church—in its own way, it is tradition. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the New Testament itself demonstrates the process of living Tradition."[16] The New Testament is tradition—the earliest tradition inscripturated in distinction from the living tradition that arises within the ongoing life of the church in the context of apostolic succession.

This perspective is well attested in the succession of Rome's authoritative doctrinal statements.

Appeal in this context is made to the Profession of Faith composed in connection with the Second Council of Constantinople (553), to the Council of Lateran (649), and to the Second Council of Nicea (787). However, it was in the context of the Counter-Reformation that the church's position was set in concrete by the Council of Trent:

> The holy ecumenical and general Council of Trent ... clearly perceives that this truth and rule are contained in the written books and unwritten traditions which have come down to us.... Following, then, the example of the orthodox Fathers, it receives and venerates with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testaments—for God alone is the author of both—together with all the traditions concerning faith and morals, as coming from the mouth of Christ or being inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church.[17]

The implication of this, specifically drawn out by the council itself, was that no one should dare to interpret Scripture in a way contrary to the unanimous consent of the fathers, even if such interpretations are not intended for publication:

> Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, it [the Council] decrees,

> that no one, relying on his own skill, shall—in matters of faith, and of morals, pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine—wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church—whose it is to judge the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures—hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never [intended] to be at any time published. Contraveners shall be made known by their Ordinaries, and be punished with the penalties by law established.[18]

Leaving to one side the doubtful concept of the unanimous consent of the fathers, it is clear here why the tradition becomes the master element in the Scripture-tradition liaison. Historically, it has always been the case that a "living" (in the sense of contemporaneous) word of revelation will become the rule for Christians *de facto* (whatever may be claimed to the contrary). That is virtually a psychological inevitability. In the case of Rome, what may have begun as a limiting concept (the *regulum fidei)* developed into the master concept.

This position, with appeal to these very citations, was later confirmed by the church at the First Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* (1870). A quarter of a century later, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) appealed to the principle of the analogy of faith understood as the *consensus fidelium* as an essential principle for Catholic exposition. Roman Catholic exegetes were summoned to use critical skills with the specific agenda of confirming the received interpretation.

This was stated within the context of Leo XIII's affirmation of the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. Such was the continuing impact of modernism, however, that within two decades the Decree *Lamentabili* (1907) was issued to stem the tide of theological corruption. It repudiated and condemned the view that "The Church's teaching office cannot, even by dogmatic definition, determine the genuine meaning of Sacred Scripture."[19]

As recently as the International Theological Commission's brief but seminal work *The Interpretation of Theological Truths* (1988), Rome has continued to affirm that any conflict between exegesis and dogma is provoked by unfaithful exegesis. Genuinely Catholic exegesis, by definition, will always seek to find the appropriate harmony between biblical text and ecclesiastical dogma. The Pontifical Biblical Commission comments: "False paths [i.e., in exegesis] will be avoided if actualization of the biblical message begins with a correct interpretation of the text and continues within the stream of the living Tradition,

under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium."[20] The circle of reasoning here appears to be "vicious."

In the nineteenth century, the Magisterium rightly recognized that the rise of higher criticism and of theological modernism would endanger the faith of Catholics (as it had already done among Protestants). But Rome faced an additional problem. The view that sacred tradition is also revelation implies that the tradition possesses the attributes of revelation, including infallibility and inerrancy. Consequently, the tradition had to be regarded as infallible. The inevitable correlate of this emerged in Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus*, in which papal infallibility was promulgated as a "divinely revealed dogma." The pope's *ex cathedra* definitions of faith were stated to be "irreformable of themselves and not from the consent of the Church" ("I am tradition," commented Pius IX). The *anathema sit* was pronounced on any who might "contradict this our definition."

The later pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council continued basically to affirm what was historically regarded as the Tridentine view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition reaffirmed in Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*. Tradition, declared Vatican II, "comes from the Apostles [and] develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit.... The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition.... Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known."[21]

Especially significant is the statement made on the relationship between tradition and Scripture. It employed the phraseology of Trent, apparently on papal insistence (presumably in view of the need to hold together the traditionalist and the progressive wings of the church):

> Hence there exists a close connection and communication between Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the Word of God, while Sacred Tradition takes the Word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence. Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God, committed to the Church....

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 men.[22]

# THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

We ought not to make the mistake of assuming that the Roman Catholic Church is thoroughly monolithic. As we have noted, it too has a conservative and liberal wing. Problems and disagreements arise in tracing and exegeting the tradition as much as in exegeting the Scriptures! Thus, for example, it has become characteristic of many Roman Catholic scholars to re-read the tradition in as ecumenical a fashion as possible.

One of the most interesting developments within this context has been the emergence of a school of thought especially stimulated by the work of the Tubingen theologian J. R. Geiselmann,. This school argues that the idea of Scripture and tradition being twin sources of revelation, complementing one another, is a misreading of the teaching of the Council ofTrent. Geiselmann appealed to what he held to be the significant change introduced into the final text of the decree through the influence of Bishop Pietro Bertano of Fano and Angelo Bonucci, the general of the Servites. The draft for the *Decree on Scripture and Tradition* had stated that revealed truth was to be found partly in the books of Scripture, partly in the traditions *("partim in libris ... partim in ... traditionibus").* But the final document spoke of this truth being in the scriptural books and in the unwritten traditions *("in libris scriptis et sine scripto traditionibus").* Geiselmann argued from this change that Trent did not deny that all saving truth is contained in the Scriptures. The truth of divine revelation is found not partly in Scripture while the remainder is found in the traditions (the draft formulation); it *is all* in Scripture. It is also *all* in the tradition. It could be argued therefore that the *sola Scriptura* principle, properly understood, is consistent with Trent.[23]

In response to Geiselmann's position, however, Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) has argued that "as a Catholic theologian, [Geiselmann] has to hold fast to Catholic dogmas as such, but none of them is to be had *sola Scriptura,* neither the great dogmas of Christian antiquity, of what was once the *consensus quinquesaecularis*, nor, even less, the new ones of 1854 and 1950. In

that case, however, what sense is there in talking about the sufficiency of scripture?"[24]

In a word, the deposit of the faith *(depositum fidei)* is contained in both Scripture and tradition, and the task of interpreting it is "entrusted to bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome."[25]

The recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, continues to affirm this position, if in a less polemical and dogmatic manner and in an ecumenically conscious fashion: "What characterizes Catholic exegesis is that it deliberately places itself within the living tradition of the Church."[26] In this context, however, the commission is careful to add: "All pre-understanding, however, brings dangers with it. As regards Catholic exegesis, the risk is that of attributing to biblical texts a meaning which they do not contain but which is the product of a later development within the tradition. The exegete must beware of such a danger."[27]

No hint of criticism is made of the fact that sacred tradition requires belief in dogma that is not contained in sacred Scripture. But there is present here a hint that exegetes in the past (and still today) may read the New Testament as though it had been written in the light of the tradition, and thus distort the teaching of sacred Scripture (and by implication perhaps also the function of the tradition). Implicit in this is the recognition of the substance-gap between sacred Scripture and sacred tradition.

The historic Protestant view is that this gap becomes a chasm at certain strategic points. There is an unbearable discrepancy, not merely a healthy tension, between sacred Scripture and sacred tradition in many areas.

A wide variety of factors contributed to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Among the chief was the discovery, fueled by the Renaissance spirit of *ad fontes*, that the gap between the clear teaching of Scripture and the teaching of the tradition was at points so great as to involve not merely development but contradiction.

# CONCLUSIONS

Roman Catholic scholars such as Professor Fitzmyer have been given the freedom to explore what Scripture teaches. They discover themselves looking over their shoulders at the Roman Catholic traditionalists who do not hide their anxiety that such open distancing between Scripture and tradition will be the downfall of the church. Consequently, their characteristic refrain is that the difference between the content of Scripture and the content of the tradition does not involve contradiction but only development.

What is becoming clearer than ever, however, is that the principle of *sola Scriptura* remains a watershed. As Cardinal Ratzinger as much as admitted in his reaction to Geiselmann, there are major Roman doctrines that simply cannot be found in the Scriptures. In this sense, Scripture alone cannot be regarded as sufficient for the life of the church.

But we must go further. There are important teachings in the tradition that are not only additional to, but different from and contradictory to, the teaching of sacred Scripture. These include the very doctrines that were the centerpiece of the Reformation struggle: the nature of justification; the importance of the principle of *sola fide;* the number of the sacraments; the sufficiency of the work of Christ; the effect of baptism; the presence of Christ at the Supper; the priesthood of all believers; the celibacy of the priesthood; the character and role of Mary; and much more. The more that Scripture is exegeted on *its own terms,* the more it will become clear that in these areas sacred tradition does not merely add to sacred Scripture, it contradicts it. That being the case, can tradition really be “sacred”?

A major development has taken place, then, in Roman Catholic interpretation of Scripture. For this we may be grateful. We should not grudgingly minimize the rediscovery of the Bible. Indeed, it might help us greatly if we recalled that responsibility for the confusion in Rome’s understanding of justification rests partly on the shoulders of the great Augustine himself, whom we often claim with Calvin as “wholly ours.”

Having said this, however, it is now clearer than ever (*pace* Geiselmann) that the Roman Catholic Church cannot and will not subscribe to *sola Scriptura.* It

must deny the sole sufficiency of the Bible. And, as the Reformers recognized, so long as Rome appeals to two sources, or even tributaries, of revelation, the contents of Scripture and the substance of its own tradition, it is inevitable that it will also withstand the message of Scripture and of the Reformation: *sola gratia, solo Christo, sola fide.*

Notes

1 See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John,* Vol. 2 (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1966), 714-717.

2 Raymond E. Brown, *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 9.

3 Cited on the dust jacket of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

4 Council of Trent's *Decree on Justification*, Canon XI. See Rev. H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN, 1978).

5 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 138.

6 Ibid., 342.

7 Ibid., 343.

8 Ibid., 348.

9 Ibid.

10 Council of Trent's *Decree Concerning Original Sin*, Session V in Schroeder.

11 Council of Trent's *Decree on Justification*, Session VII in Schroeder.

12 Fitzmyer, Romans, 347

13 J. A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, The Soul of Theology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1994), 78

14 The translation is Fitzmyer's.

15 See, e.g. Douglas Moo, *Romans,* Vol. 1 (Chicago.: Moody, 1991), 358-9; J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans,* Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 205-6, 336-362.

16 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori Publications, 1994), 26, #83.

17 *Decree on Sacred Books and on Traditions to be Received*, 1546.

18 *Decree Concerning the Edition, and the Use, of the Sacred Books*, in Phillip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom,* Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 83.

19 J. Neuner and J. Dupois, eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (Staten Island: Alba, 1982), 79.

20 *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston, 1993), 121.

21 *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, II:8. (For an English translation of the pronouncements of Vatican II, see Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Crossroad, 1966).

22 Ibid., II. [10].

23 The view Geiselmann rejects has been the view of the major Roman apologists since Trent. For a brief account, see J. R. Geiselmann, “Scripture, Tradition, and the Church: An Ecumenical Problem,” in D. J. Callahan, H. A. Obermann, and D. J. O‘Hanlon, eds., *Christianity Divided* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1962), 39-72.

24 J. Ratzinger in K. Rahner and J. Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, translated from the German, *Offenbarung und Überlieferung*, by W.J. O’Hara (New York, 1966), 33. The references to 1854 and 1950 are to the bull *Ineffabilis Deus*, promulgating the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (i.e., the perpetual sinlessness of the virgin Mary), and to the Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus*, which promulgated the Bodily Assumption into heaven of the virgin Mary. The term *consensus quinquesaecularis* refers to a theory that the church was marked by unity and doctrinal purity until the year 500.

25 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 27, #85.

26 *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 89.

27 Ibid.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

# THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF SCRIPTURE

- *Joel R. Beeke* and *Ray B. Lanning* -

**I**n recent decades, an endless stream of books and articles has affirmed the infallibility, inerrancy, and authority of the Holy Scriptures.[1] These doctrines are essential to the church's confession of the truth and authority of God's Word. It is both necessary and comforting for the Christian to know and believe that all Scripture is "God-breathed," that every word of every sentence is exhaled by the living God (2 Tim. 3:16). The believer would have no authority for declaring "Thus saith the Lord" in belief and practice if God had not superintended the entire process of the composition of Scripture down to every jot and tittle (Matt. 5:18). To be trusted wholly, Scripture must be wholly true.

Needful though such affirmations are, for many evangelicals *sola Scriptura* has become largely a polemical doctrine used to counter the threats of neoorthodoxy and liberalism. As a result, evangelicals have been preoccupied with defending their view of Scripture, frequently becoming more involved with articulating what the Word *is* than with what the Word *says* and *does*.

The bare affirmation of the infallibility, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture is not enough for the genuine believer. Scripture is God speaking to us, as a father speaks to his children. In Scripture, God gives us His Word as both a word of truth and a word of power. As a word of truth, we can trust in and rest our all on Scripture for time and eternity. We can also look to Scripture as the source of transforming power used by the Spirit of God to renew our minds.

As Protestants and evangelicals, we must complement the defense of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy with a positive demonstration of the transforming power of God's Word. That power must be manifested in our lives, our homes, our churches, and our communities. We need to show without pretense that though other books may inform or even reform us, only one Book can and does transform us, conforming us to the image of Christ. Only as "living epistles of Christ" (2 Cor. 3:3) can we hope to win "the battle for the Bible" in our day. If half the strength spent in attacking or defending the Bible would be devoted to knowing and living the Scriptures, how many more would fall under the sway of

their transforming power! Therefore, in this chapter, we will consider the call of God to His people to be transformed, the transforming operations of His Word, those perfections of God's Word that account for its transforming power, how the Word must be used as a means of transformation, and the fruits of transformation produced in believers by the Word.

# THE CALL TO TRANSFORMATION

It is the “good, acceptable, and perfect” will of God that His people be transformed. It is the high calling of God in Christ Jesus that believers be conformed to the image of His incarnate Son (Phil. 3:14; Rom. 8:28-29). This transformation or “metamorphosis” is to be accomplished by the renewing of their minds; so Paul writes in Romans 12:2: “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” What begins as a transformation of the mind is one day to be completed in the transformation or changing of our bodies “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:52-53).

The New Testament ascribes this transformation of God’s people to two great divine and supernatural agencies: the Spirit of God and the Word of God. On the one hand, the apostle Paul says plainly that believers are “changed ... from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.” But this happens when, under the preaching of the gospel, they are enabled to see God’s glory revealed in Christ. “We all, with open face beholding as in a glass [i.e., a mirror or looking glass] the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). Consequently, it is not simply by the Word, but by the working of the Spirit with the Word that the transformation of God’s people is accomplished.

On the other hand, care must be taken lest anyone be led to think that the Word by itself has no transforming power. It is a great blasphemy to exalt the Spirit at the expense of God’s Word, for God has magnified His Word above His name (Ps. 138:2). Rather, God transforms through a combination of these two great powers, each indispensable to the other, and both inseparably joined together, so as to accomplish all of God’s purposes for His people. Therefore, the Scriptures describe the Word as a well-formed tool for a master workman’s use, a weapon of war for the hand of one mighty in battle, and good seed to be sown in soil well prepared by a diligent husbandman. In each case, the one is fitted for

and indispensable to the other; so it is with the Word and the Spirit. Stephen Charnock put it this way:

> No sword can cut without a hand to manage it, no engine batter without a force to drive it. The word is ... instrumental in itself, efficacious by the Holy Ghost.... The word declares Christ, and the Spirit excites the heart to accept him; the word shews his excellency, and the Spirit stirs up strong cries after him; the word declares the promises, and the Spirit helps us to plead them; ... the word shews the way, and the Spirit enables to walk in it; the word is the seed of the Spirit, and the Spirit the quickener of the word; the word is the graft, and the Spirit the engrafter; the word is the pool of water, and the Spirit stirs it to make it healing.[2]

# THE TRANSFORMING OPERATIONS OF GOD'S WORD

The Word of God operates as a transforming power in various ways. In Scripture, these are described by the use of various similes or comparisons, such as a lamp, a hammer, a sword, and a seed.[3]

**First, God's Word is described as a lamp.** "The entrance of Thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (Ps. 119:130). And in a more personal vein, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). So the psalmist expresses the way in which God's Word acts as a source of spiritual illumination, understanding, and guidance. This light is important both in the regeneration of the sinner and in the daily life of the believer. On the one hand, the natural condition of fallen man is one of darkness, ignorance, and blindness (Eph. 4:18); on the other hand, even God's people must at times walk in a condition of spiritual darkness in which only the light of God's Word can afford them any comfort or hope (Ps. 130:5-6; Isa. 50:10).

"Unless God's Word illumine the way," wrote John Calvin, "the whole life of men is wrapped in darkness and mist, so that they cannot but miserably stray."[4]

**Second, God's Word is described as a hammer.** "Is not my word like a fire, saith the LORD? And like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29). There is no more ugly or dismaying aspect to the condition of fallen man than stiff-necked rebellion produced by persistent sin. Scripture speaks of men hardening their hearts, their minds, their necks, and their faces in a determined effort to present to God in body and soul the stoutest show of resistance to His will for their lives. Such is the weight and force inherent in the Word of God that one blow struck by the Spirit wielding the Word as a hammer is sufficient to break rock-like, hardened hearts in pieces. In this manner, the most resistant soul may be conquered and the strongholds of sin may be pulled down.

It must be added here that one of the most fearful of all mysteries connected with the preaching of the Word is the way in which stubborn sinners may actually be *increasingly* hardened.[5] This is the will of God for their destruction and their greater condemnation. So it was when Moses brought the Word of the

Lord to Pharaoh and when Paul preached to the Jews in the synagogue at Ephesus, with the result that "divers were hardened, and believed not" (Acts 19:9). How unsearchable are God's judgments, and His ways past finding out!

**Third, God's Word is described as a sword.** In his description of the whole armor of God given in Ephesians 6, the apostle Paul lists only two offensive weapons. The one is described as "all prayer" and the other is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:17-18). These are the weapons of Christian warfare, and Paul says they "are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4).

Hebrews 4:12 likewise describes God's Word as something like a sword, but even more effective as a weapon, because it is "sharper than any two-edged sword." The point of comparison here is the use of the sword to thrust at and to pierce a foe with deadly effect. So the Word of God can pierce and penetrate the heart of man. It pierces so deeply, and cuts with such sharpness and accuracy, it divides soul and spirit, and "joints and marrow" In so piercing and dividing, the Word of God exposes and brings under its righteous judgment "the thoughts and intents of the heart."

The experience here described is well known among Christians. It is by no means an uncommon experience among those who sit under faithful preaching of God's Word to hear from the pulpit words that speak so accurately and so poignantly of the condition of their hearts and lives that they are left feeling utterly exposed, shamed, and condemned.[6]

**Fourth, God's Word is described as a seed.** "The wages of sin is death," writes Paul in Romans 6:23. Man's spiritual condition, as a fallen creature in bondage to sin, is one of deadness in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). If he is to be delivered from such a state of death, he must be quickened or made alive. This quickening is described in Scripture as "being born again." This new birth or regeneration is the work of the Spirit (John 3:5) using the "incorruptible seed" of the Word of God (1 Peter 1:23). In a similar way, James declares that God is the Father of all Christians, saying, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures" (1:18).

In these passages, the Word is compared to a seed with its precious cargo of life, a great potential laid up in store, awaiting only the right conditions for germination, growth, and the bearing of much fruit. All of this is confirmed in detail in our Lord's parable of the sower. Luke records Him as saying explicitly, "The seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11). The Word is the means by which, in Henry Scougal's phrase, "the life of God" is planted "in the soul of man."[7] Miraculous is the result and many are the fruits when this precious seed is sown

in the “good soil” of the hearts of those “ordained to eternal life” (Acts 13:48).

Such is the depth and extent of the transformation effected by the Word of God in the lives of God’s people. They are called out of darkness into light. Their hardness of heart is broken and overcome. They are brought to see and know the depths of their own sin and misery. They are born again to eternal life. God’s Word is exalted as the lamp of His truth, the hammer of His righteous wrath, the sword of His Spirit, and the seed of life eternal.

# THE PERFECTIONS OF GOD'S TRANSFORMING WORD

What are the particular traits or characteristics of God's Word that render it so useful a tool and so powerful a weapon in the hand of the Holy Spirit? Hebrews 4:12 and Psalm 19:7-9 address this question directly. From Hebrews 4:12, we learn that God's Word is quick and powerful. From Psalm 19:7-9, we learn that God's Word is perfect and sure; right, pure, and clean; true and righteous altogether.

**First, God's Word is quick and powerful.** By *quick* is meant "living or imbued with life." This life of the Word is no less than the life of God Himself, for as God is, so must His Word be. This life is also *power* or *energy*, power harnessed for work. The life of God's Word is ordered and applied to the accomplishment of His purposes: "My word ... shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa. 55:11). As living seed, God's Word has power to bring forth fruit in the lives of believers, as described in the parable of the sower, where "the seed is the word of God" (Luke 8:11). Because the Word of God "liveth and abideth forever" (1 Peter 1:23), its vitality and potency remain both unexhausted and undiminished through time. Believers discover with Martin Luther that "the Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold on me. The Bible is not antique, or modern. It is eternal."[8]

**Second, God's Word is perfect and sure.** On the one hand, God's Word is *perfectly complete.* It is everything God intends it to be. This is the organic perfection of the rose and not the mechanical perfection of, say, the internal-combustion engine. The one is perfect and complete at every stage of its unfolding; the other is the result of much trial and error by way of inventive effort. The unfolding history of redemption is also the unfolding history of revelation. At every point, God's Word furnished believers with all they needed for faith and life.[9]

God's Word is also *free from any imperfection or blemish* introduced by the hand of man. Because it is perfect, God's Word is also *sure.* As a testimony or

witness, it is true and trustworthy. God's Word is sure as a revelation of what man is to believe concerning God and as a rule of what God requires of man.[10] As Jehovah "changeth not" (Mal. 3:6), so His Word stands forever sure as truth unchanging and unchangeable. "For ever, O LORD, thy word is settled in heaven" (Ps. 119:89).

**Third, God's Word is right, pure, and clean.** Here is the Old Testament statement of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. The Word is said to be *right* or *straight* because it does not deviate from perfect conformity to any just standard by which truth is measurable. The Word is *pure* as a pure light is clear and bright. Here is a lamp whose flame does not flicker and whose rays pierce to the depths of man's darkness. The Word is *clean* because it is free from all corruption and from anything that corrupts or defiles.

**Fourth, God's Word is true and righteous altogether.** More precisely, God's Word is *truth* (Ps. 19:9, marginal note; cf. John 17:17). It is a book of truth, with no admixture of falsehood or error. It is likewise a book of *righteousness*, through and through. It is righteous in what it demands from man as God's creature and servant, righteous in the judgment it pronounces against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, and righteous in the promise it holds forth of justification by faith and peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

# USING GOD'S WORD AS THE MEANS OF TRANSFORMATION

How does the believer experience the transforming power of the Word of God? The answer of the Reformation is by making use of the Word as a means of grace. First, by the *reading* of God's Word; second, by the *preaching* of God's Word; third, by the *hearing* of God's Word; and fourth, by *singing* God's Word, that is, by singing the Psalms.[11]

## *The Reading of God's Word*

The first means is the reading of God's Word. Scripture teaches us that the Word of God must not only be read publicly in worship (Acts 15:21; 1 Tim. 4:13), but also serves as a blessing when privately read, heard, and obeyed. "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein" (Rev. 1:3).

But how must we read? Many writers have provided us with ample direction. One of the most helpful early Puritan works on how to read the Scriptures was penned by Richard Greenham (c. 1535-1594) under the title *A Profitable Treatise, Containing a Direction for the reading and understanding of the holy Scriptures*.[12] After establishing that the preaching and reading of God's Word are inseparably joined together by God in the work of the believer's salvation, Greenham focuses on our duty to read the Scriptures regularly and privately, gleaning support from Deuteronomy 6:6, 11:18; Nehemiah 8:8; Psalm 1:2; Acts 15:21; and Peter 1:19.

Becoming more practical, Greenham asserts that men sin not only when they neglect to read the Scriptures, but also "in reading amiss: therefore the properties of reverent and faithful reading are to be set down, which are these that follow" He then lists (1) diligence, (2) wisdom, (3) preparation, (4) meditation, (5) conference, (6) faith, (7) practice, and (8) prayer.[13]

Numbers one through three ought to *precede* reading; numbers four through seven ought to *follow* reading; number eight must *precede*, *accompany*, and *follow* reading. Here is the gist of Greenham's advice:

1. **Diligence must be employed** in reading the Scriptures more than in doing anything secular. We ought to read our Bibles with more diligence than men dig for hidden treasure. As we read the Scriptures diligently, the Spirit makes rough places plain; makes the difficult easy; makes the unsavory tasty.
2. **Wisdom must be used** in the choice of matter, order, and time. In terms of matter, the believer must not try to move from the revealed to that which is not revealed, nor spend the bulk of his time on the most difficult portions of Scripture. If the minister must accommodate his preaching of

the Word to the level of his hearers, “then much more the hearers themselves must apply their own reading to their own capacities.”

In terms of order, the wise reader of Scripture will aim to be firmly grounded in all the major points of doctrine. Moreover, Scripture reading must follow some semblance of order rather than skipping around. Only a whole Bible will make a whole Christian.

Time must be used wisely. The whole of the Sabbath should be devoted to such exercises as the reading of the Scriptures, but as for other days, a portion of Scripture in the morning, at noon, and in the evening is a wise balance (Eccl. 3:11). In any event, no day should pass without some reading of the Scriptures.

3. **Proper preparation is critical.** Without it, Scripture reading is seldom blessed. Such preparation is threefold. First, we must approach Scripture with a reverential fear of God and His majesty. We must approach the Word “swift to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19), determined like Mary to lay up God’s Word in our hearts. Reverential fear is always blessed, either by having our understanding enlightened or by some other good affections being put into us.

   Second, we must approach Scripture with faith in Christ, looking on Him as the Messiah, who “is the lion of the tribe of Judah, to whom it is given to open the book of God.”[15] If we come to Scripture with reverence for God and faith in Christ, will Christ Himself not open our hearts as He did the hearts of the disciples traveling to Emmaus?

   Third, we must approach Scripture sincerely desirous to learn of God (Prov. 17:16). Those who bore fruit from thirty to a hundredfold were precisely those who received the word “in a good and honest heart” (Luke 8:15). We often do not profit from Bible-reading because we come “without a heart” for divine teaching.

4. **Meditation after reading Scripture** is as critical as preparation before reading Scripture. One can read diligently, but the reading will bear no fruit if meditation does not follow. Reading may give some breadth, but only meditation and study will give depth. The difference between reading and meditation is like the difference between drifting in a boat and rowing toward a destination. “Meditation without reading is erroneous, and reading without meditation is barren.... Meditation makes that which we have read to be our own. He is blessed which meditates in the law day and night” (Psalm 1).”

   Meditation involves our minds and understanding, as well as our hearts and affections. To reach a sound and settled judgment on various

truths, the mind must be brought to meditative understanding. Meditation, however, also "digests" this settled judgment and makes it work upon our affections. If our affections do not become involved, our sound meditative understanding will erode away. The Scriptures must be transfused through the entire texture of the soul.

5. **By conference, Greenham means godly conversation** with ministers or other believers. "As iron sharpeneth iron: so one friend another" (Prov. 2:7). The godly must share together what they are gleaning from the Scriptures, not in a proud manner speaking beyond what they know, but with humility, trusting that where two or three are gathered together for spiritual conversation, God will be among them. Such fellowship should not be carried on in "too great a multitude" or with a shut-door policy to others.[17]
6. **Our Scripture reading must be mixed with faith.** Faith is the key to profitable reception of the Word (Heb. 4:2); without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). To read without faith is to read in vain. Actually, all eight of these guidelines for reading Scripture should be followed in the exercise of true faith.

   Moreover, through reading the Word by faith, our faith will be refined. Our Scripture reading ought often to try our faith, not only in the generalities of our lives, but also in our particulars—especially in our afflictions. As gold is tried in the fire, so faith will endure the fire of affliction.
7. **The fruit of faith must be practice.** And practice will "bring forth increase of faith and repentance."[18] Practice is the best way to learn, and the more we put the Word into practice in the daily obedience of faith, the more God will increase our gifts for His service and for additional practice. When the Spirit sheds light on our consciences that we are "doing" the Word we read, we also receive the great benefit of being assured that we possess faith.
8. **Prayer is indispensable throughout our reading of Scripture**—preceding, accompanying, and following. In public reading of Scripture, it is not possible to pause and pray after each verse. In private reading, we would do well to salt Scripture constantly with short, pungent, applicable petitions suggested by the particular verses being considered. Luther wrote, "Pause at every verse of Scripture and shake, as it were, every bough of it, that if possible some fruit may drop down."[19]

If we pray for nourishment from our physical food for every meal, how much more ought we to pray for spiritual nourishment from every Bible reading! If we do not dare touch our food and drink before we pray, how do we dare touch God's holy Book—our spiritual food and drink—without prayer?

Prayer also necessarily involves thanksgiving: "If we be bound to praise God when he hath fed our bodies, how much more when he hath fed our souls?"[20] Let us not be fervent in asking and then cold in giving thanks. Rather, let us pray to read with godly fear and humble thanksgiving, remembering that the believer who is perfunctory in Bible reading will be perfunctory in Christian living.

If the Bible is to get into us, we must get into it. "The Bible that is falling apart," wrote Vance Havner, "usually belongs to someone who isn't."[21] To neglect the Word is to neglect the Lord, but those who read Scripture, in Thomas Watson's words, "as a love-letter sent to you from God,"[22] shall experience its warming and transforming power.[23]

## *The Preaching of God's Word*

The second means by which God's Word transforms us is preaching. If Scripture is such a powerful force for the transformation of the lives of God's people, with what great diligence and zeal ought preachers to expound the inscripturated Word of God! If, by God's own appointment, the faithful preaching of the Word is the first mark of a true church and the primary means of life-giving and life-transforming grace for the people of God, what a solemn responsibility rests upon those who are called to proclaim the "unsearchable riches of Christ" revealed in these "oracles of God."[24]

But this compels a searching question: If we agree that the Bible is a miraculous, powerful, living, inerrant, authoritative book and the very breath of Jehovah, why is there not greater evidence of its transforming power in our congregations? Why do many remain so "untransformed" and worldly in conversation and action? No doubt a large part of the answer lies in their lack of rightly reading and hearing the Word, together with the onslaughts of Satan, an enticing world, and their own sinful hearts and undisciplined lives. After all, when television is watched more than the Word of God is searched and Internet sites are read more seriously than the Scriptures, what can one expect?

The problem of a lack of transformation, however, lies not only in the pew. It resides also with we ministers who fail to respond to the Word "in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence,"[25] and consequently lack the power of Word and Spirit in our preaching. Ought we then be surprised when the people in our pews lack transformed lives?

For the Word of God to transform the lives of our people, we are, of course, always dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit. But this is not the whole answer. Church history makes clear that the Holy Spirit honors preaching that bears certain critical and scriptural marks. As preachers, we have the responsibility to examine our preaching in the light of several probing questions:

**First, am I truly preaching the Word?** Paul's command to Timothy is "Preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2). The command defines the task. Timothy is to open, explain, and apply the Holy Scriptures, which he has known from childhood (2 Tim. 3:15). He is to be a *minister* or *servant* of the Word. The

Scriptures must be to him what a master is to a slave: all-commanding, all-providing, all-determining.

This explains why the preaching of the Reformation was expository preaching. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones defined expository preaching in these words: "A sermon should always be expository. In a sermon the theme or doctrine is something that arises out of the text and its context. So a sermon should not start with the subject as such; it should start with the Scripture which has in it a doctrine or theme. That doctrine should then be dealt with in terms of this particular setting."[26]

The minister of the Word must hold himself to this task, and serve his biblical master with single-minded devotion and concentration.

Faithfulness to the example of the apostles and the Reformers requires the preacher to devote himself to prayer as well as to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). Not to preach the Word is not to preach at all. Not to pray for the Spirit to use the Word as a transforming power is to preach in vain.

**Second, am I preaching the whole counsel of God?** Every preacher must bear two things in mind at all times. First, he bears a personal responsibility for the eternal welfare of his hearers. Second, he must one day give an account of his stewardship of God's Word. When taking leave of the Ephesian elders, Paul could make two great claims (Acts 20:20, 27). First, "I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you." He had told his hearers everything needful for their salvation and eternal well being. Second, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." As a messenger, Paul had fully and faithfully delivered the message entrusted to him by God.

All this points to the need for system, balance, diligence, and pastoral focus in preaching. Two devices have been employed in the churches of the Reformation to secure these ends. The first is *lectio continua,* or serial exposition of the Scriptures. Verse by verse, chapter by chapter, book by book, the Scriptures are opened, explained, and applied. This method is as old as Ulrich Zwingli and Calvin, and has its precedent in the preaching of the synagogue, where preaching was tied to the systematic reading of the Law and the Prophets (Luke 4:16-21).

The other method is catechism preaching, particularly common in the Dutch Reformed tradition. Catechism preaching is the systematic exposition of a catechism, most commonly the Heidelberg Catechism, which was divided into fifty-two portions for the fifty-two Lord's Days of the year. The catechism is, on the one hand, a complete and balanced presentation of biblical doctrine, and, on the other, a heart-searching application of that doctrine to the needs of the Christian, both as sinner and as saint.

Either method has its strengths and weaknesses, but both go far toward

achieving the great ends of saying all that needs to be said, from the hearers' point of view, and saying all that God would have us say as His counsel, delivered unto men and sent forth into all the world.

In any case, this whole counsel necessitates preaching unabashedly the utterly devastating analysis of the human condition that Scripture presents (Gen. 6:5; Eph. 2:1). It necessitates preaching divine, sovereign grace as the all-sufficient, victorious answer to man's plight (Eph. 2:5; Rom. 9:16). It necessitates directing the sinner to this grace, calling him to faith and repentance, and offering hope exclusively in Jesus Christ for "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). It necessitates preaching that the Christian must present himself "a living sacrifice of thankfulness" unto Christ (Rom. 12:1).[27] It necessitates thrusting Scripture's unchangeable directives and broad-sweeping demands into every sphere of life, rather than following the kaleidoscopic agenda of men. As Luther said, rather than preaching against straw men, the faithful preacher will bring the Word of God to bear on every pertinent truth that he knows his congregation (with its peculiar temptations) needs to have addressed.

**Third, am I preaching the Word of God with clarity and passion?** Lloyd-Jones defined preaching as "Logic on fire!" He wrote:

> What is preaching? Logic on fire! Eloquent reason! Are these contradictions? Of course they are not. Reason concerning this Truth ought to be mightily eloquent, as you see it in the case of the Apostle Paul and others. It is theology on fire. And a theology which does not take fire, I maintain, is a defective theology; or at least the man's understanding of it is defective. Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire.[28]

Every preacher must struggle with the tendencies of his own personality. Some tend to be intellectually oriented, and their preaching is orderly, substantial, and yet quite dispassionate and cold. Others are emotionally oriented; they tend to "go for the gut." The aim of every preacher ought to be a thoroughgoing blend of order and passion, logic and fire.

It is the teaching of Scripture that we are saved "through sanctification of the Spirit and *belief of the truth"* (2 Thess. 2:13, emphasis added). The gospel is "word" (logos), "discourse" *(rhema),* "message" *(kerygma),* and "doctrine" *(didache).* To preach the gospel in a careless, disorderly, illogical way is to contradict its very character. At the same time, the preacher is dealing with matters of the greatest significance and consequence for himself and his hearers. He must know the terrors of the Lord, and preach with fear and trembling. He

must be constrained by the love of Christ, and preach with love and tears (2 Cor. 5:9-21).

Church history has borne out that the Spirit transforms lives most frequently under biblical preaching that is brought with compelling lucidity and heartfelt conviction. In the United States, this potent combination was the underlying secret of great, mightily used preachers like Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Davies.[29]

**Fourth, am I preaching the Word of God experimentally as well as doctrinally?** To preach experimentally (or experientially) is to address the vital matter of Christian experience, and in particular the way in which the Christian experiences the truth of Christian doctrine in his life. The term *experimental* comes from the Latin *experimentum,* meaning "trial," derived from the verb experior, meaning "try, test, prove, put to the test." The same verb can also mean "to experience, to find, or know by experience," and so gives rise to the word *experientia,* meaning "trial, experiment" and "the knowledge gained by experiment."[30] Calvin used *experiential (experientia)* and *experimental (experimentum)* interchangeably, since both words, from the perspective of biblical preaching, indicate the need of "examining" or "testing" experience-gained knowledge by the touchstone of Scripture.[31]

Experimental preaching stresses the need to "know by experience" the great truths of the Word of God. Experimental preaching seeks to explain, in terms of biblical truth, how matters *do go* and how they *ought to go* in the Christian life, and aims to apply divine truth to the whole range of the believer's experience both as an individual and in all his relationships in the family, the church, and the world around him. As Paul Helm writes:

> The situation [today] calls for preaching that will cover the full range of Christian experience, and a developed experimental theology. The preaching must give guidance and instruction to Christians in terms of their actual experience. It must not deal in unrealities or treat congregations as if they lived in a different century or in wholly different circumstances. This involves taking the full measure of our modern situation and entering with full sympathy into the actual experiences, the hopes and fears, of Christian people.[32]

Experimental preaching must be discriminatory preaching. Discriminatory preaching defines the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. Discriminatory preaching is the key by which the kingdom of heaven is opened

to believers and shut against unbelievers. Discriminatory preaching promises the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to all who by a true faith embrace Christ as Savior and Lord; it likewise proclaims the wrath of God and eternal condemnation as God's judgment on the unbelieving, unrepentant, and unconverted. Such preaching teaches us that unless our religion is experiential, we shall perish—not because experience itself saves, but because the Christ who saves sinners must be experienced personally as the rock upon which our lives are built (Matt. 7:22-27; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2:2).

Experimental preaching is applicatory as well. It applies the text to every aspect of the hearer's life and spiritual need. In this way, it seeks to promote a religion that is truly a power and not a mere form (2 Tim. 3:5). This kind of experimental religion was defined by Robert Burns as "Christianity brought home to 'men's business and bosoms.' ... In one word, the principle on which experimental religion rests is simply this, that Christianity should not only be known, and understood, and believed, but also felt, and enjoyed, and practically applied."[33]

How different this is from much of contemporary preaching! The Word of God is often preached today in a way that will never transform anyone because it never discriminates or applies. Preaching is then reduced to a lecture, a demonstration, a catering to the wishes and comforts of men, or a form of "experientialism" that is cut loose from the foundation of Scripture. Such preaching fails to expound from Scripture what the Reformers called *vital* religion: how a sinner is continually stripped of all his own righteousness; how he is driven to Christ alone for a full-orbed salvation; how he finds joy in simple reliance upon Christ and strives after obedience to Him; how he encounters the plague of indwelling sin, battles against backsliding, and gradually gains the victory by faith in Christ.

It is no wonder that when God's Word is preached experimentally, it shows itself to be a great force for the transformation of both individuals and nations —"the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). For such preaching proclaims from the gates of hell, as it were, that those who are not born again shall soon walk through these gates to eternally dwell in the homeless-ness of hell unless they repent (Luke 13:1-9). Such preaching proclaims from the gates of heaven that the regenerate, who persevere in holiness by God's preserving grace, shall soon walk through these gates into eternal glory and unceasing communion with the triune God. Such preaching is transforming because it corresponds to the vital experience of the children of God (cf. Rom. 5:1-11); it expounds clearly the marks and fruits of saving grace that should be characteristic of the believer (Matt. 5:3-12; Gal. 5:22-23); and it sets before the believer and unbeliever alike

their eternal futures (Rev. 21:1-9).[34]

**Fifth, does the manner of my preaching and my entire ministry confirm the message I proclaim?** One of the problems of the contemporary pulpit is the jarring contrast between the serious nature of the message proclaimed and the casual way in which it is delivered. Preachers whose manners convey the impression that they have nothing especially important to say should not be surprised if no one pays them any serious attention.

The manner of our preaching ought to confirm the seriousness of what we have to say. The Westminster Assembly divines understood this fundamental link between style and substance. They conclude their discussion on method in preaching in *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* (1645) by taking up the matter of style or manner, and charge all preachers that both their preaching and "whole ministry" must be performed in the spirit of these seven marks: (1) *painfully*, that is, painstakingly, not negligently; (2) *plainly,* so that the most uneducated may be able to grasp the teaching of Scripture; (3) *faithfully*, yearning for the honor of Christ, the salvation of the lost, and the edification of believers; (4) *wisely*, teaching and admonishing in a manner most apt to prevail with the parishioners; (5) *gravely,* as becomes the Word; (6) *lovingly*, with godly zeal and hearty desire for the welfare of souls; and (7) *earnestly*, being inwardly persuaded of the truth of Christ and walking before the flock in a godly manner, both privately and publicly.[35] If these seven qualities were exemplified more fully in today's preaching and ministry, would we not see more of the transforming power of the Word of God in our churches?

Ministers must seek grace to build the house of God with both hands—with their doctrine and their life. "Truth is in order to godliness," said the Old School Presbyterians. Doctrine must produce life, and life must adorn doctrine. Preachers must be what they preach and teach. They must not only apply themselves to their texts, they must apply their texts to themselves.[36] "He doth preach most," wrote John Boys, "that doth live best."[37] Perhaps Robert Murray M'Cheyne said it best: "A minister's life is the life of his ministry.... In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents that God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."[38]

## *The Hearing of God's Word*

A third means by which the Word of God transforms us is the hearing of it. Much of what Greenham said above about the reading of Scripture applies to the hearing of the Word as well. Thomas Watson offers specific help with regard to hearing the preaching of God's Word.[39] Here, then, are "ten commandments" for hearing the Word of God preached. As we read this list, we would do well to ask after each item: Am I really hearing the Word of God? Am I a good listener of the proclaimed gospel?

1. When you come to God's house to hear His Word, do not forget to prepare your soul with prayer.
2. Come with a holy appetite for the Word (1 Peter 2:2). A good appetite promotes good digestion.
3. Come with a tender, teachable heart (2 Chron. 13:7), asking, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). It is foolish to expect a blessing if you come with a hardened, worldly-minded heart.
4. Be attentive to the Word preached. In Luke 19:48, we are told that the people "were very attentive" to Christ. Literally translated, the text says, "they hung upon him, hearing." Lydia evidenced a heart opened by the Lord when she "attended" or "turned her mind" to the things spoken by Paul (Acts 16:14). Such attentiveness also involves banishing wandering thoughts, dullness of mind, and drowsiness (Matt. 13:25). Regard the sermon as it truly is—a matter of life and death (Deut. 32:47).
5. "Receive with meekness the engrafted word" (James 1:21). Meekness involves a submissive frame of heart—"a willingness to hear the counsels and reproofs of the word." Through meekness, the Word is "engrafted" into the soul and produces "the sweet fruit of righteousness."
6. Mingle the preached Word with faith: "The word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith" (Heb. 4:2). Roland H. Bainton, summing up Luther's view, wrote: "Faith is not an achievement, it is a gift. Yet it comes only through the hearing and study of the Word."[40] If the chief ingredient of a medicine is missing, the medicine will not be effective; so be sure not to leave out the chief ingredient, faith, as you

listen to a sermon. Believe and apply the Word. Put on Christ as He is preached (Rom. 13:14); apply the promises as they are spoken.

7. Strive to retain and pray over what you have heard. Don't let the sermon run through your mind like water through a sieve (Heb. 2:1). "Our memories should be like the chest of the ark, where the law was put."[41] As Joseph Alleine advised, "Come from your knees to the sermon, and come from the sermon to your knees."[42]
8. Practice what you have heard. "Live out" the sermons you hear. Hearing that does not reform your life will never save your soul. Doers of the Word are the best hearers. Of what value is a mind filled with knowledge when not matched with a fruitful life?
9. Beg God to accompany His Word with the effectual blessing of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44). Without the Spirit, the medicine of the Word may be swallowed, but it will not result in healing.
10. Familiarize yourself with what you have heard. When you come home, speak to your loved ones about the sermon in an edifying manner: "My tongue shall speak of thy word" (Ps. 119:172). Remember each sermon as if it will be the last you ever hear, for that may be the case.

Under the Spirit's blessing, if these "ten commandments" for hearing the Word are conscientiously obeyed, the preached Word will be a transforming power in our lives. If, on the other hand, these directions are ignored, and the preached Word is not effectual to our salvation, it will be effectual to our condemnation. Watson rightly concludes: "The word will be effectual one way or the other; if it does not make your hearts better, it will make your chains heavier.... Dreadful is their case who go loaded with sermons to hell."[43]

It should be evident from the foregoing discussion that to read, preach, and hear God's Word rightly, and so experience its transforming power, we need the help of the Holy Spirit. The Heidelberg Catechism states: "God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them."[44] *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662) offers for the second Sunday in Advent a model of such prayer for today's Christians:

> Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which

thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.[45]

## *The Singing of God's Word*

A fourth way in which believers experience the Word's transforming power is in the singing of the psalms. Here is a use of God's Word that is neglected in our day, both in public worship and in private devotion. By contrast, former generations of God's people used the psalms intensively. Not only were the psalms used in public worship, both in prose and in meter, but also in family worship and in private. Christians were encouraged to memorize the metrical versions of the psalms, so that they might praise God truly "from the heart."

This use of the psalms has an ancient history. Although their composition and use in worship are associated especially with King David, it is clear from Scripture that at least some parts of the Psalter are much older and were used as far back as the days of Moses. One of the best known and most widely used of the psalms bears the subtitle, "A Prayer of Moses the man of God" (see Ps. 90). The many citations from the book of psalms woven into the text of the New Testament remind us of the place they had in the worship and preaching of the apostolic church.

In the churches of the Reformation period, psalm singing flourished as never before. In Calvin's view, the singing of metrical psalms served as a form of corporate or common prayer. To sing the psalms in public worship, or at home, at work, and even on the battlefield, became the very mark of a Protestant. Though the use of other texts, both canonical and otherwise, found some place in many Reformed churches, the psalms achieved an early place of preeminence that was not surrendered for a long time.

The reason for this is not hard to find. As Dr. Henry Beets wrote in his "Historical and Explanatory Introduction" printed with the 1927 edition of the Psalter used in the Christian Reformed Church at that time: "The psalms meet the great requirements of praise, exalting God in His being and work and containing confessions of our unworthiness, our faith, our gratitude, our needs." Citing from an unidentified source, Beets adds, " 'In the psalms we hear the abiding, eternal, fundamental note of the pious heart resounding.' "

If someone should ask why the psalms should be used in distinction from or in preference to other hymns and songs known and used in Protestant churches today, two things must be said. First, the psalms are God's Word, given by

inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They possess an inherent life, power, and perfection that they have in common with all other parts of Holy Scripture. Second, it is the will of God and the command of God that His people praise Him with the psalms (see Ps. 95:2; 98:5; 105:2; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; James 5:13).[46]

Because the private, devotional use of the psalms is a form of meditating upon God's Word, it is well that they be "hidden in the heart" through memorization. The metrical versions of the psalms lend themselves especially well to this purpose. Mastery of the contents of the Psalter will equip the believer with a rich theology of Christian experience and a fully developed manual of praise and prayer. Christian parents are reminded of their biblical obligation to teach the psalms to their children as "the praises of the LORD" (Ps. 78:4) and "the songs of Zion" (Ps. 137:3). Clearly the use of God's Word in this way affords the godly family great spiritual delight and much needed strength and help.

It may fairly be said that the Reformation would not have been the powerfully transforming movement that it was had it not been for psalm singing, which not only enriched the public and corporate worship of the churches, but also carried the power of God's Word into the highways and public places of the nations, and into the homes and hearts of God's people. Should the Holy Spirit be pleased to revive the churches in our day, one evidence of such a revival will be a return to Spirit-filled singing of the psalms, both in public worship and in private devotion.[47]

Finally, we need to ask: How may we know whether the Word being read, heard, preached, and sung is really being applied to us by the Spirit of God? We may know by what precedes, accompanies, and follows that application. Prior to the Spirit's application, room is made in the soul for the Word. With the Spirit's application, there is a sense of suitability and power—be it the power of the still, small voice of the gospel (1 Kings 19:12) or the thunders of Sinai (Ex. 19:16)—that persuades us that we are receiving for the welfare of our souls precisely the word and instruction from God which we need to receive. And most important, when God applies His Word to our souls, "the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11), begin to appear. The old nature is mortified and the sinful cult of self begins to decrease; the new nature is quickened and Christ's manifest presence in our lives increases. Where such fruit and evidence of the Spirit's working with the Word is lacking, the Word is not being used aright. "For the tree is known by his fruit" (Matt. 12:33b).

# THE FRUITS OF TRANSFORMATION

What are some of the fruits or effects of the transforming power of the Word? We shall consider four: true conversion, wisdom, joy, and light for the dying.[48]

**First, true conversion is a fruit of the Word's transforming power.** "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul" (Ps. 19:7a). Here God's Word is described as "law" or "instruction" (or "doctrine"). Under the instruction of Jehovah given in His Word, the inner life of man is changed and redirected. God's Word evokes in the heart a sincere sorrow for having provoked God by our sins, inspires a holy hatred of those sins, and awakens an urge to flee from them. At the same time, God's Word fills the heart with joy in God through Christ, and imparts a new love and delight to live according to the will of God in the obedience of faith.[49]

This is what is meant by the conversion of the soul. The character and direction of the inner life of man are revolutionized. This new direction, however, is actually a return to the path in which God commanded Adam to walk at the beginning. The apostle Paul describes it in these terms: "Be ye renewed in the spirit of your mind; and ... put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:23-24). Such conversion is truly a restoration of the soul (Ps. 19:7a).

**Second, a new knowledge or spiritual wisdom concerning God is a fruit of the Word's transforming power.** Scripture identifies sin with folly or foolishness, and there is no greater foolishness than the folly of unbelief "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Ps. 14:1). This folly is reprehensible because it flies in the face of the evidence supplied in the "most elegant book"[50] of the creation itself. "The heaven declares the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood from the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20). Speaking of some of the greatest intellectuals and philosophers of mankind, people who have denied the existence of God despite their brilliance, Paul declares: "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:22).

Such folly can be conquered only by the testimony of Holy Scripture, confirmed by the witness of the Spirit in the heart. True wisdom, and life eternal, is to know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent (John 17:3). The folly of unbelief is banished when men receive and rest in the sure testimony of God's Word: "The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Ps. 19:7b).

**Third, joy is a fruit of the Word's transforming power.** Modern man is plagued with unhappiness, anxiety, depression, and despair. Our age of material abundance has become a dark age of the soul, an era of spiritual poverty and dearth. The emptiness, barrenness, and ugliness of modern art, music, literature, and philosophy all bear witness to the sad plight of modern (and postmodern) man. It is no mere coincidence that this era of cultural barrenness and degradation has been accompanied by a culture-wide abandonment of biblical Christianity and the overthrow of the standards of conduct taught in the Word of God.

How different things are for those who hold fast to God's Word! "The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart" (Ps. 19:8a). Statutes are standing laws, universal standards, abiding norms; God has provided His people with such laws, standards, and norms in His Word. By these we are "to regulate our life in all honesty to the glory of God, according to His will."[51]

Such obedience to God's law is far from burdensome to the Christian. "His commands are not grievous" (1 John 5:3b). On the contrary, they are a way of joy and rejoicing as spiritual poverty gives way to spiritual wealth. "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart" (Jer. 15:16). "I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches" (Ps. 119:14). Thankfully, there are at least some today who are turning from the lawlessness and confusion of the world of modern man and rediscovering the joy of living a life made orderly, productive, and satisfying by obedience to the Word of God.

**Fourth, light for the dying is a fruit of the Word's transforming power.** "The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes" (Ps. 19:8b). Here God's Word is characterized as commandment; the use of the singular reminds us of the divine origin, the organic unity, and the supreme authority of Holy Scripture: "the commandment of the LORD."

The words of the psalmist reveal their deepest meaning when viewed in the context of death and dying, the most fearful and universal of all the problems of human existence. As Joseph A. Alexander wrote: "Enlightening the eyes is understood by some of intellectual illumination with respect to spiritual things. But it is more agreeable to Hebrew usage to suppose an allusion to the dimness

of the eyes produced by extreme weakness and approaching death, recovery from which is figuratively represented as an enlightening of the eye."[52]

In the face of impending death, man's wisdom fails and human authority must retreat. A dying man is left without help or comfort as the light fades and the darkness deepens around him. Modern men and women can without shame discuss fully the most intimate details of human sexuality, but lapse into embarrassed silence when the subject of death and dying is raised. Because they reject the Scriptures, the unsaved have nothing to live by and consequently have nothing to die with.

Only God's Word sheds light on these dark matters. "This God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death" (Ps. 48:14). If as a standing law God's Word serves us well in living our lives from day to day, it serves even better as a guide when we enter the "valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4). For those who receive God's Word as their lamp of truth, this light shines with unfaltering and unfailing brightness, a pure light revealing the secrets of the invisible world.

On the one hand, we are warned of the everlasting burnings, the outer darkness, and the worm that dies not; such is the judgment prepared for the wicked. The torment of dying is to be prolonged into a perpetual death. On the other hand, we are told of the safety, blessedness, and rest bestowed on those who die in faith, holding fast the promises. Best of all, we learn that "to be absent from the body" is "to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). Only those who know and believe by grace what God's Word reveals can say with Paul that "to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

John Flavel summarized it well: "The Scriptures teach us the best way of living, the noblest way of suffering, and the most comfortable way of dying."[53]

# CONCLUSIONS

From the foregoing discussion, we can see why the Reformers chose to rely so exclusively on the Word of God as the sole rule of faith and life, and to focus so intensely on the work of preaching. In the first place, they wholeheartedly received and affirmed Scripture's own witness to itself, confirmed by the Spirit's witness in their hearts:

> We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without doubt all of the things contained in them, not so much because the Church received and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the very evidence in themselves.[54]

Note the sweeping claim made for the faith of the Reformers: *they believed without doubt all things contained in Scripture.* Part of the weakness of modern evangelicalism is that for all its protests in the name of biblical inerrancy, there are too many instances in which this or that scholar calls into question some particular statement or teaching of Scripture.

In the second place, the Reformers acted on the logic of their position. They abandoned all other callings and gave themselves to preaching as the supreme work of their lives. They put a great deal into their preaching, and they expected a great deal to result from the sound preaching of the Word. Here again, the modern evangelical is to be faulted, for he puts very little into his preaching by way of content or substance, on the pretext that modern man has some unique difficulties with hearing the Word. Perhaps this is why so many see only meager results.

Sadly, it seems that some modern evangelical preachers are unaware of having adopted a self-defeating view of preaching, just as they are unaware of how their "evangelicalism" falls far short of the richly biblical faith of the Reformation. As a result, many evangelical churches have for some time been engaged in a search for some substitute for preaching (high church liturgies, drama, videos, jazz

bands, “sacred” dance, etc.) that will win a hearing in our day. Many trials have been made of these substitutes, and though the results are uniformly unsuccessful, the desperate experiments continue, providing little more than the makings of feature articles on the religion pages of the nation’s newspapers.

We don’t know when this search for a substitute will cease, but the sooner it does, the better. The history of the Reformation confirms that the preaching of the Word of God is the most effective means of bringing its transforming power to bear upon the situations that confront us in the world. What is needed is not to replace the pulpit, but to restore it. Public worship services should be purged of all the dross added to compete with the sermon. The sermon must be purged of all the inappropriate humor, the endlessly retold and likely apocryphal stories, the pop psychology, and all the attention given to sports, politics, television, and various campaigns to reform society’s ills.

When all such dross has been purged, today’s preachers can return to their true calling to preach the Word in its fullness, richness, and power. They will discover that the biblical gospel still has power to conquer unbelief and convert the lost. They will discover that the Word of God has the power to reform and revive the church. They will discover that the Word is a mighty weapon in our warfare against the world, the flesh, and the Devil. In Luther’s words, “The world is conquered by the Word, and by the Word the church is served and rebuilt.”[55]

They will also discover that nothing is more pleasing and acceptable to God; nothing more honored by the Holy Spirit; nothing more sure to maintain, increase, and extend the church and kingdom of our Savior, Jesus Christ; and nothing better suited to bring God’s many prodigal sons and daughters back to the Father’s house.

Today’s Christians need to become intensely Word-centered in preaching, praying, worshiping, and living. In the words of Henry Smith: “We should set the Word of God alway before us like a rule, and believe nothing but that which it teacheth, love nothing but that which it prescribeth, hate nothing but that which it forbiddeth, do nothing but that which it commandeth.”[56]

Our times await a generation of readers, preachers, and hearers who have experienced the Word of God as a transforming power in their lives.

Notes

1 For an annotated bibliography of these works, see Joel R. Beeke’s series of articles in the *Christian Observer* from May 5 to July 7, 1995.

2 Stephen Charnock, “A Discourse of the Word, The Instrument of Regeneration,” in *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock,* B.D. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 3:316-17.

3 True believers are also transformed by experiencing that the Word of God is their food to nourish them (Job 23:12), their heritage to enrich them (Ps. 23:2), their water to cleanse them (Ps. 119:9), their counselor to resolve their doubts and multiply their joys (Ps. 119:24), their fire to cause their hearts to burn with affection (Luke 24:32), their rule to walk by (Gal. 6:16), and their mirror before which they dress as doers of the Word and not hearers only (James 1:23-25).

4 John Calvin, *A Commentary on the Psalms of David,* Vol. III (Oxford: Thomas Tegg, 1840), 265.

5 Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III, xxiv, 13-14.

6 The Westminster Assembly divines called for preaching that would produce precisely these results in the hearers (see “Directory for the Public Worship of God,” in *The Confession of Faith* [Inverness: Publications Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1970], 380, for their remarks on the necessity of application in preaching).

7 Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle, 1986).

8 Cited in Thomas S. Kepler, ed., *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover, 2005), 197.

9 Cf. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), 13-17.

10 Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 3.

11 Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, XXI. 5.

12 *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Jesus Christ,* M. Richard *Greenham,* ed. H[enry] H[olland] (London: Felix Kingston for Robert Dexter, 1599), 389-97. Some of the spelling in the following quotations has been updated.

13 Ibid., 390.

14 Ibid., 391.

15 Ibid., 392.

16 Ibid., 393.

17 Ibid., 394.

18 Ibid., 395.

19 http://www.tippfellowship.org/bibleq.htm

20 Greenham, *Works*, 397.

21 Cited in John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold* (Darlington, U.K.: Evangelical Press, 2006), 60.

22 Thomas Watson, *A Body of Practical Divinity* (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1838), 43.

23 Many Puritans have addressed the "how-to" of Bible reading. One of the best, recently reprinted, is Thomas Watson, "How We May Read the Scriptures with Most Spiritual Profit," in *Heaven Taken by Storm: Showing the Holy Violence a Christian Is to Put Forth in the Pursuit After Glory*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), Appendix 2: 113-129. For a practical, twentieth-century booklet written in a Puritan vein with a helpful section on how to develop a reading plan, see Geoffrey Thomas, *Reading the Bible* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980).

24 Cf. Belgic Confession, Article 29; Heidelberg Catechism, Question 65.

25 Westminster Confession of Faith, XXI.5.

26 Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1971), 71-72.

27 Heidelberg Catechism, Question 32.

28 Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 97.

29 *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974); *Sermons of the Rev. Samuel Davies*, 3 vols. (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993-96). Cf. lain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 3-31.

30 *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, rev. ed. J. R. V. Marchant and J. F. Charles (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, n.d.).

31 Willem Balke, "The Word of God and *Experientia* according to Calvin," in *Calvinus Ecclesiae Doctor*, ed. W H. Neuser (Kampen: Kok, 1978), 20-21; cf. Calvin's commentary on Zechariah 2:9.

32 Paul Helm, “Christian Experience,” *Banner of Truth*, 139 (April 1975): 6.

33 Robert Burns, “Introduction,” in *The Works of Thomas Halyburton* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1835), xiv-xv.

34 See the Heidelberg Catechism for a Reformed confessional statement that facilitates experimental preaching. This is evidenced by (1) the Catechism’s exposition of an outline (misery, deliverance, and gratitude) that is true to the experience of believers, (2) its application of most doctrines directly to the believer’s conscience and spiritual profit, and (3) its warm, personal character, in which the believer is regularly addressed in the second person.

35 *The Confession of Faith*, 381.

36 Cf. J. A. Bengel, “Te totum applica ad textum; rem totam applica ad te” (“Apply thyself wholly to the text, apply the matter of it wholly to thyself”), cited in the preface of Erwin Nestle, *Novum Testamentum Graece* (New York: American Bible Society, 1993).

37 John Boys, *Official Calendar of the Church* (Philadelphia: King & Baird, 1849), 29.

38 Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M’ Cheyne* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 282.

39 The list provided here merges, in summary form, Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, 16-18, and Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 377-79.

40 Roland H. Bainton, Here *I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Mentor, 1950), 49.

41 Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 378.

42 Joseph Alleine, *An Alarm to the Unconverted* (Evansville: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1959), 11.

43 Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 379.

44 Heidelberg Catechism, Question 116 (translation of 1934).

45 Collect for the second Sunday in Advent.

46 The New International Version inexplicably suppresses mention of the psalms in many of these texts (cf. the KJV and other English versions). Note too that the phrase "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, may likely refer to the various kinds of psalms as they are classified in the ancient Greek or Septuagint version of the Old Testament.

47 English-language Psalters are readily available. The Genevan Psalter of 1562 has at long last appeared in its entirety as an English version published in the *Book of Praise* used by the Canadian Reformed Churches. Various editions of the *Scottish Psalter* of 1650 are still in print, including the richly annotated edition produced by John Brown of Haddington (*The Psalms of David in Metre with Notes, Exhibiting the Connection, Explaining the Sense, and for Directing and Animating the Devotion* [Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1991]). The oldest and most widely used American version is the United Presbyterian Psalter published in 1912, and still reprinted today by the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregations, the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, and the Protestant Reformed Churches, with a substantial selection of English versions of the Genevan Psalms included. The Reformed Presbyterians ("Covenanters") have published a number of versions, the most recent of which is *The Book of Psalms for Singing.* The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church has for many years published its version of the Psalter titled *Bible Songs.* The most recent of American psalters is the *Trinity Psalter*, published for use in the Presbyterian Church in America and intended as a companion to the *Trinity Hymnal.*

48 Additional fruits include peace (Ps. 85:8), sweetness (Ps. 119:103), freedom (John 8:31-32), and praise (Ps. 119:171).

49 Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Questions 88-90.

50 Belgic Confession, Article 2.

51 Ibid., Article 25.

52 Joseph A. Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1975), 89-90.

53 Cited in Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold*, 49.

54 Belgic Confession, Article 5.

55 Cited in Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold*, 50.

56 Henry Smith, "Food for New-Born Babes," in *The Works of Henry Smith*, Vol. 1. (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1866), 494.

# AFTERWORD

## - *Don Kistler* -

**T**he battle for the Bible has been raging since the beginning of time. Satan, the great enemy of souls, began his assault with a question: “Hath God said ... ?” Eve, by stating that God had told her not to eat or *touch* the forbidden tree, added to what God had said; the first round went to Satan.

The slugfest goes on. Roman Catholics add tradition to what is written in Scripture and place it on an equal plane with Scripture. Some go even further. Cardinal Cajetan pronounced to Martin Luther that the pope was *above* Scripture.

Many charismatics and evangelicals place their personal experience on par with Scripture, thereby adding to God’s written revelation. We hear many tell us that “God said to me....” Surely anything that God has said is authoritative and binding, so we add to Scripture in that way.

Today, subjective experience and feelings are placed on par with Scripture. One of the venerable contributors to this volume has been accused of holding Scripture in too high an esteem. I have been accused of “bibliolatry” for taking a high view of Scripture. None of the contributors has come *close* to doing what God Himself did when He declared in Psalm 138:2, “Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.” God has magnified His Word above His very name; and, yes, that is indeed what the word *above* means in the Hebrew: “over” or “higher than.”

Scripture holds a position of absolute authority in the life of the believer. That is why Paul wrote to Titus and gave instructions in chapter 2 for men and women to follow with this as the motive: “that the word of God will not be dishonored” (v. 5, NASB). Scripture is complete. God has said everything necessary for us to live the holy life to which He calls us. Nothing further needs to be added to what God has revealed in His written Word.

Properly interpreted, Scripture itself discloses this truth. But even if there were no clear teaching in Scripture about the sufficiency of Scripture for all matters of faith and practice, the very character of God would bring us to the same conclusion. God is the all-sufficient God; everything about Him is completely adequate. Surely His written revelation of Himself would not be the one thing lacking in total sufficiency for His people!

When Christ was tempted, He quoted the written Word, not oral tradition. In

fact, most times the word *tradition* is used in Scripture, it is as a critique of its use. The usage Roman apologists normally build their case upon is in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, which John MacArthur has dealt with in his chapter on the sufficiency of the written text of Scripture.

The danger of adding to Scripture is evident, I trust. If we can add to what God has said, His Word, then why may we not add to what He has done, His redemptive work? But, then, that is exactly what Rome has done.

Sadly, modern evangelicalism is only slightly less culpable. While still professing that God's revelation in Scripture is sufficient for salvation, it has nearly, if not virtually, abandoned it in favor of modern psychological theories and techniques for sanctification. As one caller to a talk show in Pittsburgh stated, "Therapy saved my life; but God helped too!"

But the apostle Peter gave the final word, I believe, when he wrote that "His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness [*bios* as well as *zoe*], through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue" (2 Peter 1:3). Everything that pertains to life and godliness comes through the true knowledge of Him, which is given to us in Holy Writ. The heavens may declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1), but that knowledge can never deliver us; that knowledge is enough to damn, but not to save. The saving knowledge of Christ, who saves through faith alone, is given to us in the written Word of God.

Moses declared that the written revelation of God was not just idle words, but our life. May we fight for these words as we would our very lives, for indeed they are.