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SCRIPTURE

In addition to basic differences over the extent of the authority of Scripture, Catholics and Protestants differ over the limits of infallible authority. The Protestant Reformation stressed two principles: a formal principle (*sola Scriptura*) and a material principle (*sola fide*):¹ The Bible alone and faith alone.² When properly defined, both of these are affirmed by Protestants and denied by Catholics, although there is some question about whether the differences are as great as once thought on the question of justification (see chaps. 5 and 12).

CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS FOR INFALLIBLE APOSTOLIC TRADITION

There is, however, no doubt about the irresolvable differences on whether the Bible alone is the infallible guide for faith and practice. This is certainly true in the formal sense in which Protestants mean it, though modern Catholics allow the belief that the content of

1 More properly, it is salvation by grace alone and faith alone (*sola gratia* and *sola fide*). Some Reformed theologians specify the material principle as “in Christ alone” and say that “faith alone” is the means of access.

2 Some strict Calvinists maintain that the phrase *sola fide* can be somewhat misleading in this context. They state that *sola Christos* would be more precise in that faith (like good works) is the *fruit* of God’s grace in our hearts; the Holy Spirit produces faith in us on the basis of the Father’s election and the Son’s atonement. See Stephen Charnock, *The Doctrine of Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1980), pp. 214–27; Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 97–104; Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1965). Berkhof states, “Strictly speaking, it is not the act of faith as such, but rather that which is received by faith, which justifies and therefore saves the sinner” (p. 506).

the Bible contains all the revelation God has given (at least implicitly). But even this more progressive view has tens to add that an infallible teaching magisterium is still necessary to formally interpret the Bible correctly.

THE PROTESTANT UNDERSTANDING OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

By *sola Scriptura* orthodox Protestants mean that Scripture alone is the primary and absolute source of authority, the final court of appeal, for all doctrine and practice (faith and morals). It is important to repeat that Catholics often misunderstand the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* to exclude any truth outside the Bible. This, of course, is untrue, as is revealed by Luther's famous quote about being "convinced by the testimonies of Scripture *or evident reason*" (emphasis added). Most Protestants accept the general revelation declared in the heavens (Ps. 19:1) and inscribed on the human heart (Rom. 2:12–15). However, classical Protestantism denies any salvific value of natural (general) revelation, believing one can only come to salvation through special revelation. What Protestants mean by *sola Scriptura* is that the Bible alone is the infallible written authority for faith and morals. Natural revelation as such is not a written revelation, nor does it cover all matters of faith and morals (it only overlaps with some). Good reason can and should be used apologetically (to defend against attacks on orthodoxy from without), polemically (to defend against attacks on orthodoxy from within), and theologically (to define orthodox doctrines within).

Sola Scriptura implies several things. First, the Bible is a direct revelation from God. As such, it has divine authority, for what the Bible says, God says.

Second, Scripture is the sufficient and final written authority of God. As to sufficiency, the Bible—nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else—is all that is necessary for faith and practice. In short, "the Bible alone" means "the Bible only" is the final authority for our faith. Further, the Scriptures not only have sufficiency but they also possess final authority. They are the final court of appeal on all doctrinal and moral matters. However good they may be in giving guidance, all the church fathers, popes, and councils are fallible (see chap. 11). Only the Bible is infallible.

Third, the Bible is clear (perspicuous). The perspicuity of Scripture does not mean that everything in the Bible is perfectly clear, but rather the essential teachings are. Popularly put, in the Bible the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things. This is not to say that Protestants obtain no help from the Fathers and early councils. Indeed, Protestants accept the pronouncements of the first four ecumenical councils (see chap. 1) as helpful but not infallible. What is more, most Protestants have high regard for the teachings of the early Fathers, though obviously they do not believe they are without error. So this is not to say that there is no usefulness to Christian tradition, but only that it is of secondary importance. As John Jefferson Davis notes, "

Sola Scriptura meant the primacy of Scripture as a theological norm over all tradition rather than the total rejection of tradition.”³

Calvin does not dismiss the role of authority in the church. That authority, however, must be subservient to the Scriptures. “Ours be the humility which . . . yields the highest honor and respect to the Church, in subordination, however, to

Christ the Church’s head.” The church “tests all obedience by the Word of God . . . whose supreme care it is humbly and religiously to venerate the Word of God, and submit to its authority.”⁴

Fourth, Scripture interprets Scripture. This is known as the analogy of faith principle.⁵ When we have difficulty in understanding an unclear text of Scripture, we turn to other biblical texts, since the Bible is the best interpreter of the Bible. In the Scriptures, clear texts should be used to interpret the unclear ones.⁶

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF VIEWS ON SOLA SCRIPTURA

A good bit of confusion exists between Catholics and Protestants on *sola Scriptura* due to a failure to distinguish two aspects of the doctrine: the formal and the material. *Sola Scriptura* in the material sense simply means that all the content of salvific revelation exists in Scripture. Many Catholics hold this in common with Protestants,⁷ including well-known theologians from John Henry Newman to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. French Catholic theologian Yves Congar states: “we can admit *sola Scriptura* in the sense of a material sufficiency of canonical Scripture. This means that Scripture contains, in one

3 John J. Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), p. 227. For a discussion of tradition from Irenaeus to *Humani Generis*, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Reprinted, 1992), pp. 269–96.

4 John C. Olin, ed., *A Reformation Debate* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), p. 75.

5 Catholics use this principle but do not limit it to Scripture interpreting Scripture; they include tradition as well. In view of this, perhaps it would be better for Protestants to call this the “analogy of Scripture” principle.

6 Reformed theologians also believe that the Spirit of God brings divine assurance that the Bible is the Word of God. This is known as the witness of the Spirit. Only the God of the Word can bring full assurance that the Bible is the Word of God. Further, Reformed theologians acknowledge the aid of the Holy Spirit in understanding and applying the Scriptures to our lives. But he does not do this contrary to the Bible or contrary to good rules of biblical interpretation.

7 Catholic scholar Louis Bouyer even goes so far as to claim: “It is none the less true that no Catholic theologian worthy of the name, today any more than in the Middle Ages, would place any doctrinal authority on the level of Scripture” (*Spirit and Forms of Protestantism*, p. 130).

way or another, all truths necessary for salvation.”⁸ What Protestants affirm and Catholics reject is *sola Scriptura* in the formal sense that the Bible alone is sufficiently clear that no infallible teaching magisterium of the church is necessary to interpret it.

The differences can be charted as follows:

Sola Scriptura: Two Views

<i>Material Sufficiency</i>	<i>Formal Sufficiency</i>
Content	Form
Revelation	Interpretation
Protestantism Affirms	Protestantism Affirms Catholicism Denies
Catholicism Allows	
Traditional Catholicism Denies	
Progressive Catholicism Affirms	

ARGUMENTS FOR THE BIBLE PLUS TRADITION

One of the basic differences between Catholics and Protestants is over whether the Bible alone or the Bible plus extra-biblical apostolic tradition⁹ is the sufficient and final authority for faith and practice. Roman Catholics affirm the latter and Protestants the former. For, while Catholics allow the Protestant teaching on the material sufficiency of Scripture, they deny its formal sufficiency. Catholics insist that there is a need for a teaching magisterium to rule on just what is and is not authentic apostolic tradition.

Catholics are not all agreed on their understanding of the relation of tradition to Scripture. Some understand it as two sources of revelation. Others understand apostolic tradition as a lesser form of revelation. Still others understand tradition in an almost Protestant way, namely, as merely an interpretation of revelation (albeit, an infallible one) that is found only in the Bible. Traditional Catholics, such as Ludwig Ott and Henry Denzinger, tend to be in the first category, and more modern Catholics, such as John Henry Newman and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in the latter.

The language of the Council of Trent seems to favor the traditional understanding. It claimed, for example, that “this truth and instruction are contained in the written books *and* in the unwritten traditions, which have been received by the apostles from the mouth

⁸ Cited by James Akin, “Material and Formal Sufficiency,” *This Rock* 4, no. 10 (October 1993): 15.

⁹ Protestants, of course, believe all apostolic tradition is inscriptured in the Bible.

of Christ Himself, or from the apostles themselves, *at the dictation* ¹⁰ *of the Holy Spirit*, have come down to us.” Consequently, Trent “receives and holds in veneration with an equal affection or piety and reverence all the books of the Old and of the New Testament, since one God is the author of both, *and also the traditions themselves*, those that appertain both to faith and to morals, *as having been dictated either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Spirit.*” ¹¹ Indeed, in Denzinger’s “Systematic Index” he speaks of “the Sources [plural] of Revelation”: “The written source of revelation is the canonical books of both Testaments. . . . Another source of revelation is ecclesiastical tradition.” ¹² The original draft of Trent left no doubt it intended two sources of revelation, speaking of the gospel being contained “partly in written books, partly in unwritten tradition.” This, however, was changed at the last minute, omitting the word “partly” in both cases. Many post-Vatican II Catholic scholars claim it is improper to speak of two sources of revelation, since the “De Verbum” [the Word] document speaks of “a single sacred deposit of the Word of God.” This is not an infallible pronouncement, however, and it leaves it undefined as to whether each may contain elements not found in the other. The debate continues as to whether the words “partly” were omitted from Trent’s declaration for theological or stylistic reasons.

David Wells provides a good summary of the new (more progressive) view: “1) There is only one source of revelation, not two; 2) Scripture and tradition both mediate this common revelation; 3) Scripture and tradition can never be in conflict since they arise from the same source of revelation; 4) Scripture is generically no different in nature from tradition since both contain and communicate the same revelation, but it is more important.” ¹³ Wells likens the Catholic belief in the relation of Scripture and tradition to that of two eyes. “The second eye adds no new knowledge of the outside world to that brought by the first eye, but with the two eyes the world is perceived with greater clarity than with one.” ¹⁴

Whether or not extra-biblical apostolic tradition is considered a second source of revelation, there is no question that both sides agree that the Roman Catholic Church believes apostolic tradition is both authoritative and infallible. The Council of Trent was emphatic in proclaiming that the Bible alone is not sufficient for faith and morals; God has ordained tradition in addition to the Bible to faithfully guide the church. The basic arguments in favor of the Bible plus tradition fall into several categories.

10 The use of this term does not imply that Catholics believe in the “dictation theory” of inspiration, but only that the Scriptures come by the dictates of the Holy Spirit, utilizing of course the personalities, vocabularies, and literary styles of the human writers of Scripture.

11 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, p. 244, emphasis added. From the Council of Trent, Session 4 (1546).

12 Ibid., pp. 11–12.

13 David F. Wells, “Tradition: A Meeting Place for Catholic and Evangelical Theology?” *The Christian Scholar’s Review* 5, no. 1 (1975): 60.

14 Ibid.

Infallible guidance in interpreting the Bible comes from the church. One of the criteria used to determine this is the “unanimous consent of the Fathers.”¹⁵ In accordance with “The Profession of Faith of the Council of Trent,” the faithful Catholic must be able to state: “I shall never accept nor interpret it [“Holy Scripture”] otherwise than in accordance with the unanimous consent of the Fathers.”¹⁶ The same council declared (1546) that no one should dare to interpret “Sacred Scripture . . . contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.”¹⁷ Vatican I (1870) repeated this same decree that “no one is permitted to interpret Sacred Scriptures . . . contrary to the unanimous agreement of the Fathers.”¹⁸

Catholic scholars advance several arguments in favor of the Bible and tradition, as opposed to the Bible as the only final authority. One of their primary arguments is that even the Bible does not teach that the Bible is our final and only authority for faith and morals.

Nowhere does the Bible teach sola Scriptura. A common Catholic claim is that nowhere in Scripture does it teach that the Bible alone is sufficient for faith and morals. Thus they conclude that even on Protestant grounds there is no reason to accept *sola Scriptura*. Indeed, they believe it is inconsistent or self-refuting, since the Bible does not teach that the Bible alone is the basis of faith and morals.

The Bible teaches that traditions should be followed. In point of fact, argue Catholic theologians, the Bible teaches that the “traditions” as well as the written words of the apostles should be followed. Paul exhorted the Thessalonian Christians to “stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or epistle” (2 Thess. 2:15 ; cf. 3:6).

The Bible states a preference for oral tradition. One Catholic apologist even went so far as to argue that one apostle, John, even stated his preference for oral tradition: “I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink. Instead, I hope to see you soon when we can talk face to face” (3 John 13). This Catholic writer adds, “why would the apostle emphasize his preference for oral Tradition over written Tradition . . . if, as proponents of *sola Scriptura* assert, Scripture is superior to oral Tradition?”¹⁹

The Bible cannot be properly understood without tradition. Another argument offered by Catholic apologists is that it is insufficient to have an infallible Bible unless we have an infallible interpretation of it. No chain is stronger than its weakest link. And if we have only a fallible interpretation of the Bible what good does it do us to believe the Bible is

15 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, “Systematic Index,” p. 11.

16 Ibid., 995, p. 303.

17 Ibid., 786, p. 245.

18 Ibid., 1788, p. 444. Pope Leo XIII (1893) agreed: “Now, the authority of the Fathers . . . is the highest authority, as often they all in one and the same way interpret a Biblical text, as pertaining to the doctrine of faith and morals” (ibid., 1944, p. 489).

19 See *This Rock* (August 1992), p. 23.

infallible? Hence, God preserved apostolic traditions (teachings) as defined by the teaching magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church to serve as an infallible guide to understanding the Bible.

Tradition and Scripture are inseparable. Roman Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft lists several arguments against *sola Scriptura* which in turn are arguments for tradition: “First, it separates Church and Scripture. But they are one. They are not two rival horses in the authority race, but one rider (the Church) on one horse (Scripture).” He adds, “We are not taught by a teacher without a book or by a book without a teacher, but by one teacher, the Church, with one book, Scripture.”²⁰

Excluding tradition is self-contradictory. Kreeft insists that to exclude the need for tradition “is self-contradictory, for it says we should believe only Scripture, but Scripture never says this! If we believe only what the Scripture teaches, we will not believe *sola Scriptura*, for Scripture does not teach *sola Scriptura*.”²¹

Excluding tradition violates the principle of causality. Kreeft also argues that “*sola Scriptura* violates the principle of causality; that an effect cannot be greater than its cause,” for “the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church, decided on the canon, the list of books to be declared scriptural and infallible. . . . If the Scripture is infallible, then its cause, the Church, must also be infallible.”²²

Rejecting tradition leads to denominationalism. According to Kreeft, “denominationalism is an intolerable scandal by scriptural standards—see John 17:20–23 and I Corinthians 1:10–17.” But “let five hundred people interpret the bible without Church authority and there will soon be five hundred denominations.”²³ So rejection of authoritative apostolic tradition leads to the unbiblical scandal of denominationalism.

Rejecting tradition is unhistorical. Kreeft argues that “the first generation of Christians did not have the New Testament, only the Church to teach them.”²⁴ This being the case, using the Bible alone without apostolic tradition was not possible.

PROTESTANT ARGUMENTS FOR SOLA SCRIPTURA

As convincing as these arguments may seem to be to a devout Catholic, they fail to refute the Protestant view of *sola Scriptura*. As we will see, they fail to provide any substantial basis for the Catholic dogma of an infallible teaching magisterium.

20 Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, pp. 274–75.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

RESPONSE TO THE CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS FOR TRADITION

We will argue here that each of the Roman Catholic arguments attempting to invalidate the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* fails. The responses will be taken in the same order that the arguments were given.

The Bible teaches sola Scriptura. Two points must be made here. First, as Catholic scholars themselves recognize, it is not necessary that the Bible explicitly and formally teach *sola Scriptura* in order for this doctrine to be true. Many Christian teachings are a necessary logical deduction of what is clearly taught in the Bible. For example, nowhere does the Bible formally and explicitly state the doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible does, however, clearly teach two truths from which the necessary logical deduction is the doctrine of the Trinity: (1) There is only one God, not many (Exod. 20:1–2 ; Deut. 6:4 ; Mark 12:29); (2) There are three distinct persons who are God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:16–17 ; 28:18–20 ; Acts 5:3–4 ; 2 Cor. 13:14). The only possible valid conclusion from this is (3) God is a trinity of three persons in one essence. This is not to say that philosophy and theology play no role in *expressing* and *defending* this truth. It is only to observe that the doctrine of the Trinity is validly *based* in Scripture alone. Likewise, it is possible that *sola Scriptura* could be a necessary logical deduction from what is taught in Scripture.

Second, the Bible does teach implicitly and logically, if not formally and explicitly, that the Bible alone is the only infallible basis for faith and practice. This it does in a number of ways. Scripture states that it is “inspired” and “competent” for a believer to be “equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). If the Bible alone is sufficient to do this, then nothing else is needed. Also, this text teaches that the Bible alone is inspired and capable of saving, edifying, and equipping believers. This is evident from several things stated in the text. First, only the Scriptures are “inspired” or God-breathed. Second, while the reference here is only to the Old Testament (v. 15), other passages show that the New Testament Gospels (1 Tim. 5:18 ; cf. Luke 10:7) and Epistles were considered “Scripture” too (2 Pet. 3:15–16). Third, the use of the word “competent” or “thoroughly” (KJV , NKJV), in connection with the ability to save (v. 15) and sanctify (vv. 16–17), implies the sufficiency of Scripture for faith and practice. Fourth, the total absence of reference to any other instrument or source of authority than the written Word (Gk. *graphem*) reveals that the locus of this sufficient authority is in the written Word (= Scripture). Fifth, Paul repeatedly stresses the need to cling to the Scriptures (1:13 ; 2:15 ; 3:15–16 ; 4:2). Finally, given that this was his last book (4:6–8), if there was some other apostolic authority other than the written Word of God the apostle surely would have mentioned it.

The fact that Scripture, without tradition, is said to be “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*) and thus by it believers are “*competent, equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16–17 , emphasis added) supports the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. This flies in the face of the

Catholic claim that the Bible is formally insufficient²⁵ without the aid of tradition. Paul declares that the God-breathed writings are sufficient.²⁶ And contrary to some Catholic apologists, limiting this to only the Old Testament is wrong, since the New Testament is also called “Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:15–16 ; 1 Tim. 5:18 ; cf. Luke 10:7); thus, it is inconsistent to argue that God-breathed writings in the Old Testament were sufficient, but the inspired writings of the New Testament are not.

Third, Jesus and the apostles constantly appealed to the Bible as the final court of appeal. This they often did by the introductory phrase “It is written,” which is repeated some ninety times in the New Testament. Jesus used this phrase three times when appealing to Scripture as the final authority in his dispute with Satan (Matt. 4:4 , 7 , 10). Of course, Jesus (Matt. 5:22 , 28 , 31 ; 28:18) and the apostles (1 Cor. 5:3 ; 7:12) sometimes referred to their own God-given authority, but it begs the question for Roman Catholics to claim that this supports their belief that the Roman church still has infallible authority today outside the Bible since even they admit that no new revelation is being given today. In other words, the only reason Jesus and the apostles could appeal to an authority outside the Bible was that God was still giving normative revelation for the faith and moral of believers. But, as we will see, apostolic revelation ceased when apostolic miracles ceased—in the first century (see chap. 11). Therefore, it is not legitimate to appeal to any oral revelation in New Testament times as evidence that non-biblical infallible authority exists today.

What is more, Jesus made it clear that the Bible was in a class of its own, exalted above all tradition. He rebuked the Pharisees for negating the final authority of the Word of God with their religious traditions, saying, “why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? . . . You have nullified the word of God, for the sake of your tradition” (Matt. 15:3 , 6). It is important to note that Jesus did not limit his statement to mere *human* traditions but applied it specifically to the traditions of the religious authorities who used their tradition to misinterpret the Scriptures. Further, he is not negating the value of all tradition but simply not giving it authority equal to or greater than Scripture. Tradition (= teaching about Scripture) is not wrong as such, only tradition that “nullifies” Scripture. There is a direct parallel with the religious traditions of Judaism that grew up around (and obscured, even negated) the Scriptures and the Christian traditions which have grown up around (and obscured, even negated) the Scriptures since the first century. Indeed, since Catholic scholars make a comparison between the Old Testament religious authority (i.e., the high priesthood) and the Roman Catholic papacy, this seems to be a good analogy.

25 Catholicism allows, and some Catholics believe, that the Bible is materially sufficient (namely, it contains at least the seeds of all revelation), but Catholics insist that the Bible is not formally sufficient. They believe that the teaching magisterium is necessary to infallibly interpret doctrine and to enable us to understand doctrines that are not clear in Scripture.

26 While 2 Tim. 3:16–17 does not use the word “sufficient” it does use the equivalent in the phrase “competent, equipped for every good work.”

In addition, the Bible constantly warns us “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6).²⁷ This kind of exhortation is found throughout Scripture. Moses was told not to “add to what I command you nor subtract from it” (Deut. 4:2). Solomon reaffirmed this in Proverbs, saying, “Every word of God is tested. . . . Add nothing to his words, lest he reprove you, and you be exposed as a deceiver” (Prov. 30:5–6). Indeed, John closed what is widely held to be the last words of the Bible with the same exhortation: “I warn everyone who hears the prophetic words in this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words in this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life” (Rev. 22:18–19). As Jesus declared (Matt. 15:3–6), tradition sometimes adds to the words of Scripture teachings that make void what Scripture affirms. *Sola Scriptura* could hardly be stated more emphatically.

Of course, none of these are absolute prohibitions on all future revelations. God could speak anytime he chooses to do so. They do, however, apply to the point of difference between Protestants and Catholics, namely, whether there exists today any authoritative normative teachings outside those revealed to apostles and prophets and inscripturated in the Bible. And this is precisely what these texts affirm. Indeed, even the prophet himself was not to add to the revelation God gave him, for prophets were not infallible whenever they spoke but only when giving God’s revelation. Now, since both Catholics and Protestants agree that there is no new revelation beyond the first century, and since even what the apostles said apart from these revelations could not make them void, it would follow that these texts support the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. For if there is no normative revelation after the time of the apostles and even the prophets themselves were not to add their teachings to the revelations God gave them in the Scriptures, then it follows that the Scriptures are the only infallible source of divine revelation.

Further, the Bible teaches *sola Scriptura* by stressing that it is a revelation from God (Gal. 1:12 ; cf. 1 Cor. 2:11–13) as opposed to the words of men. A revelation from God is a divine unveiling or disclosure. Paul’s contrast vividly illustrates the difference: “Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not of human origin. For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:1–2). It is important to note here that “human being” includes the other apostles, of whom Paul adds, “nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me” (2:17). So even the preaching of an apostle is not on the same level as the “revelation” (disclosure) from God; neither are the words of an angel (Gal. 1:8). This is argument for *sola Scriptura*. True, the New Testament speaks about “receiving” revealed teaching of apostles or prophets in an oral manner (cf. 2 Thess. 2:2), but these were *revelations*, not mere teachings about revelations.

27 There is some debate even among Protestant scholars as to whether Paul is referring here to his own previous statements or to Scripture as a whole. Since the phrase used here is reserved only for sacred Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15–16) it is not inappropriate to imply the latter.

Finally, although written revelation was progressive, both Catholics and Protestants agree that normative revelation ended by the time of the completion of the New Testament. Indeed, Jesus told the apostles he would “lead *them* [not their successors] into ‘all truth’ ” (John 14:26 ; 16:13 , emphasis added), and to be an apostle one had to have been an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (cf. Acts 1:22 ; 1 Cor. 9:1 ; 15:4–8).²⁸ But, as we will see shortly, the only infallible record we have of apostolic teaching is in the New Testament. Therefore, it follows that Jesus predicted that the Bible alone would be the summation of “all truth” that he desired for his followers. This being the case, then, since canonical revelation ceased at the end of the first century, *sola Scriptura* means that the Bible—nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else”—has infallible authority.

Roman Catholics admit that the New Testament is the only infallible record of apostolic teaching we have from the first century. They do not seem to appreciate, however, the significance of this fact for the Protestant argument for *sola Scriptura*. Even many early Fathers testified to the fact that all apostolic teaching was put in the New Testament. While acknowledging the existence of apostolic tradition, J. D. N. Kelly concluded: “Admittedly there is no evidence for beliefs or practices current in the period which were not vouched for in the books later known as the New Testament.”²⁹ Indeed, church history shows that many early Fathers, including Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, and Augustine, believed that the New Testament was the only infallible basis for all Christian doctrine (see “Conclusion” below). Further, if the New Testament is the only infallible record of apostolic teaching, then every other record from the first century is not infallible (i.e., is fallible). The fact that the teaching magisterium has pronounced some extra-biblical tradition (such as the bodily assumption of Mary) as infallibly true is immaterial because it does not have an infallible record from the first century on which to base such a decision. And if the New Testament is the only infallible record we have for apostolic teaching, then it follows that the Bible alone teaches that the Bible alone is the infallible Word of God.

All apostolic “traditions” are in the Bible. It is true that the New Testament speaks of following the “traditions” (= teachings) of the apostles, whether oral or written. This is because the apostles were living authorities set up by Christ (Matt. 18:18 ; Acts 2:42 ; Eph. 2:20). However, when they died there was no longer a living apostolic authority since, as already noted, only those who were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ could have apostolic authority (Acts 1:22 ; 1 Cor. 9:1). There is no more evidence for derived or indirect apostolic authority (i.e., apostolic succession) than there is that the “signs of an apostle” were possessed by non-apostles. That is, even non-apostles in the New Testament could not give the gifts of an apostle (1 Tim. 1:6) or pass on the special gifts of healing all kinds of sickness and even raising the dead (Matt. 10:8). For to have apostolic authority one must be able to perform apostolic signs (2 Cor. 12:12 ; Heb. 2:3–4). But since these special apostolic signs have ceased, there is no longer apostolic authority, except in the inspired writings of the apostles. And since the New Testament is the only inspired (infallible) record of what the apostles taught, it follows that, since the

28 For differences between “public” and “private” revelations, see chap. 1 .

29 Even the *Didache* was not considered on a par with Scripture.

death of the apostles, the only apostolic authority we have today is the inspired record of their teaching in the New Testament. That is, all apostolic tradition (teaching) on faith and practice is in the New Testament. This does not necessarily mean that everything the apostles ever taught is in the New Testament, any more than everything Jesus said is there (cf. John 20:30 ; 21:25). Jesus did promise that “all the truth” he had taught them would be brought to their remembrance (John 14:26 ; 16:13), but he no doubt said the same truth in different ways at different times. Further, the understood context of Jesus’ statement probably means all truth necessary for faith and morals (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15–17). So all apostolic teaching which God deemed necessary for the faith and practice (morals) of the church was preserved. It is only reasonable to infer that God would preserve what he inspired.

The fact that the apostles sometimes referred to “traditions” they gave orally as authoritative in no way diminishes the Protestant argument for *sola Scriptura*. First, it is not necessary to claim that all these oral teachings were inspired or infallible, only that they were authoritative. The believers were asked to “maintain” them (1 Cor. 11:2) and “stand fast in them” (2 Thess. 2:15). But oral teachings *about* Christ (not the words *of* Christ) and the apostles’ affirmations were not called inspired or unbreakable or the equivalent unless they were inscripturated in the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16). The apostles were living authorities, but not everything they said was infallible. Catholics understand the difference between authoritative and infallible, since they make the same distinction with regard to non-infallible and [infallible (*ex cathedra*)] statements made by the pope.

Second, the traditions (teachings) of the apostles that were revelations were written down and are inspired and infallible. They comprise the New Testament. What the Catholic must prove (and cannot) is that the God who deemed it so important for the faith and morals of the faithful to inspire the inscripturation of twenty-seven books of apostolic teaching would have left out some important revelation in this book. So, however authoritative the apostles were by their office, only their inscripturated words are inspired and infallible (2 Tim. 3:16–17 ; cf. John 10:35). There is no evidence that all the revelation God gave them to express was not inscripturated in the twenty-seven books of the New Testament.

Further, the Bible makes it clear that God from the very beginning desired that his normative revelations be written down and preserved for succeeding generations. “Moses then wrote down all the words of the Lord” (Exod. 24:4). Indeed, Moses wrote in Deuteronomy, “these are the words of the covenant which the Lord ordered Moses to make with the Israelites” (Deut. 28:69), and Moses’ book was preserved in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:26). “So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them . . . which he recorded in the book of the law of God” (Josh. 24:25–26) along with Moses’ (cf. Josh. 1:7). Likewise, “Samuel next explained to the people the law of royalty and wrote it in a book, which he placed in the presence of the Lord” (1 Sam. 10:25). Isaiah was commanded by the Lord to “take a large cylinder-seal, and inscribe on it in ordinary letters” (Isa. 8:1) and to “inscribe it in a record; That it may be in future days an eternal witness” (30:8). Daniel had a collection of “the books” of Moses and the prophets right down to his contemporary,

Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2). Jesus and the New Testament writers used the phrase “Scripture has it” (cf. Matt. 4:4 , 7 , 10) over ninety times, stressing the importance of the written Word of God. When Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders it was not because they did not follow the traditions but because they did not “understand the Scriptures” (Matt. 22:29). The apostles were told by Jesus that the Holy Spirit would “guide . . . [them] to all truth” (John 16:13). But Jesus said in the very next chapter “Your word is truth” (John 17:17) and the apostles claimed their writings to the churches were “Scripture . . . inspired of God” (2 Tim. 3:16 ; cf. 2 Pet. 3:15–16). Clearly God intended from the very beginning that his revelation be preserved in Scripture, not in extra-biblical tradition. To claim that all God’s revelation was not written down is to claim that the prophets were not obedient to their commission not to subtract a word from what God revealed to them.

The Bible does not state a preference for oral tradition. The Catholic use of 3 John to prove the superiority of oral tradition is a classic example of taking a text out of context. John is not comparing oral and written tradition about the past but a written (as opposed to a personal) communication in the present. Notice carefully what John says: “I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink. Instead, I hope to see you soon when we can talk face to face” (3 John 13). Who would not prefer a face-to-face talk with a living apostle over a letter from him? But that is not what oral tradition gives. Rather, it provides a mere oral tradition (which is known to be unreliable [see below]) as opposed to an infallible written one. *Sola Scriptura* contends that the latter is preferable.

The Bible has perspicuity apart from traditions. The Bible is clear without the aid of traditions to help us understand it. This is known as the Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture. Contrary to a misunderstanding by many Catholics, perspicuity does not mean that everything in the Bible is absolutely clear but that the main message of salvation is clear; that is, that all doctrines essential for salvation are sufficiently clear.³⁰ Nor does perspicuity mean that those who are unwilling to “receive” or “welcome” (Gk. *dekomai*) the message will not become blinded (1 Cor. 2:14 ; cf. Rom. 1:21 ; 2 Cor. 4:3–4). For one can *perceive* the truth even if he does not *receive* it (cf. Rom. 1:18), know it in the mind (i.e., understand it) but not know it by experience (1 Cor. 2:14 ; Gk. *ginosko*). Jesus said that only the one who “chooses to do his will shall know whether my teaching is from God” (John 7:17). Indeed, to assume that oral traditions of the apostles not recorded in the Bible are necessary to interpret what is recorded under inspiration is to argue in effect that the uninspired is more clear than the inspired.³¹ It is utterly presumptuous to assert that what fallible human beings write is

30 Roman Catholics, by contrast, believe that the Bible, apart from any outside information or authority, is not sufficient to explain all essential points of doctrine. That is why they believe an infallible teaching magisterium is necessary.

31 On the surface, creeds and commentaries may seem more clear than the Bible, but this is misleading for several reasons. First, they are only summaries of what the Bible teaches, and good summaries are often clearer than the whole text. Second, when the Bible summarizes a truth it is as clear, if not clearer, than any statement someone can make about the Bible (cf. Matt. 7:12 ; 1 John 5:12). Third, the comparison is false, since

clearer than what the infallible Word of God declares! Further, it insists that words of the apostles that were not written down are more clear than the ones they did write! We all know from experience that this is not so.

One final comment is in order. Catholic apologists sometimes make the assertion that “Protestants must prove . . . that Scripture is so clear that no outside information or authority is needed in order to interpret it.”³² They insist this is so since Catholics can, and many do (e.g., John Henry Newman and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger), claim that the content of revelation is in the Scriptures alone (i.e., material sufficiency). But Protestants affirm (and Catholics deny) the formal sufficiency of Scripture, namely, that one needs nothing else to interpret Scripture. However, this argument is misleading for several reasons.

First, even the translation of Scripture involves interpretation, and Protestants do not deny the need for good linguistic scholarship to make good translations of Scripture. Indeed, Catholic Bible translators use this kind of “outside information” to translate their Bibles without depending on the authority of the church to do so, at least with regard to all the truths essential to our salvation.

Second, Protestants do not hold, as Catholic scholars sometimes assert, that the Bible is formally sufficient without any outside help on everything taught. Perspicuity only covers the main (essential) truths of salvation, not everything.

Third, when orthodox Protestants utilize outside “information” to properly interpret Scripture they ought to do so with two very important restrictions in mind: (1) no information should be used to conflict with any clearly taught doctrine of Scripture, and (2) the outside information should only be used as a material cause, not a formal cause, of the interpretation.³³ The form of meaning must come from the text itself, as placed there by the author, not from outside the text. One may get material on the meaning of words, archaeology, culture, and so on from outside the text, but this is only data to help understand the text; the determination of its meaning must come from the text itself. In a piece of literature, any interpretive framework (formal cause) taken from outside the text and alien to the meaning of the text that is used to interpret the text is illegitimate and will invariably lead to error. This, of course, is not necessarily true in oral communication, where gestures and tones can give context for meaning. One may use whatever information is available from linguistics, history, and culture, but the structure of meaning must be found in the text itself.

the Bible does not systematize most doctrines, as do human creeds and theologies. Hence, they cannot be clearer systematic statements than the non-systematic ones in the Bible for the simple reason that no fair comparison can be made between systematic and non-systematic statements. Finally, unless the Bible were clear enough to begin with, no one would be able to summarize or systematize it.

32 See Akin, “Material and Formal Sufficiency,” p. 15.

33 When Protestants violate this principle, they go astray from one of their own basic principles (*sola Scriptura*) and often err as a result.

Of course, all of this is not to say that Protestant interpreters cannot utilize traditional commentaries, confessions, and creeds as aids in understanding the text. They can use scholarly sources in their interpretation, but in order to remain true to the principle of *sola Scriptura* they must not use them in a magisterial way. Otherwise, they are just replacing the Roman Catholic teaching magisterium with a magisterium of Protestant scholarship, an unfortunate error into which more than one Protestant scholar has fallen.

The restriction on the use of outside “authorities” flows from the principle of *sola Scriptura* itself. First, no outside authorities, however trustworthy, should be afforded infallible status. Further, their teaching should never be used if they contradict the clear teaching of Scripture. Finally, scholars should use them as the occasional cause, not the formal cause, of the real meaning of a text. These authorities may be used only to help us *discover* the meaning of the text of Scripture, not *determine* its meaning. The determiner (efficient cause) of the meaning of all Scripture is its primary author (God), who used its secondary author (prophets and apostles) to write it. The formal cause of the meaning of Scripture is in the text itself, as expressed by its author(s).³⁴ To take any meaning structure from beyond the text, rather than that which is expressed in the text, is inconsistent with the principle of *sola Scriptura*. It is not difficult to understand Scripture without a teaching magisterium, at least not with regard to the essential salvific (salvation) teachings of Scripture. Normal people do it all the time in normal discourse. The difference between legitimate and illegitimate use of extra-biblical sources can be outlined as follows.

*Tradition and Scripture are not inseparable.*³⁵ First of all, even Kreeft’s illustration of the horse (Scripture) and the rider (tradition) suggests that Scripture and tradition are separable. Further, even if it is granted that tradition is necessary, the Catholic inference that it has to be infallible tradition, indeed, the infallible tradition of the church of Rome is unfounded (see chap. 11). Protestants who believe in *sola Scriptura* accept tradition; they simply do not believe it is infallible. Finally, Kreeft’s argument wrongly assumes that the Bible was produced by the Roman Catholic Church. The next point shows that this is not the case.

The principle of causality is not violated. Kreeft’s argument that *sola Scriptura* violates the principle of causality (an effect cannot be greater than its cause) is invalid for one fundamental reason: it is based on a false assumption. He wrongly assumes, on the basis of what Vatican II says about the canon,³⁶ that the church determined the canon. This is not the case. God *determined* the canon by inspiring these books and no others. The church merely *discovered* which books God had determined (inspired) to be in the canon. Vatican I appears to agree, declaring these “books to be sacred and canonical, not

34 For further elaboration, see Norman L. Geisler, “Purpose and Meaning: The Cart and the Horse,” *Grace Theological Journal* 5 (1984): 229–45.

35 For this section criticizing Kreeft’s arguments I am indebted to Kenneth Samples’ excellent unpublished paper, “Does the Bible Teach the Principle of *Sola Scriptura*?” (1993).

36 See *The Documents of Vatican II*, “De Verbum.”

because, having been carefully composed by mere human industry, they were afterward approved by her authority . . . but because, having been written by inspiration of the Holy Ghost, they have God for their author, and have been delivered as such to the Church herself.”³⁷ If this is the case, then Kreeft’s argument that the cause must be equal to its effect (or greater) fails. For even Catholic dogma admits that the church only received and recognized the canon but did not actually cause or produce it.

As F. F. Bruce correctly noted, “One thing must be emphatically stated. The New Testament books did not become authoritative for the Church because they were formally included in a canonical list; on the contrary, the Church included them in her canon because she already regarded them as divinely inspired.”³⁸ Thus, the correct view of the canon is that the church is only a witness, not a judge of the canon, that is, all books which the apostles and prophets wrote (see chap. 9).

Rejection of tradition does not necessitate scandal. Kreeft’s argument that the rejection of the Roman Catholic view on infallible tradition leads to denominationalism does not follow for many reasons. First, this implies that all denominationalism is scandalous, which is not necessarily so. As long as the denomination does not deny the essential doctrines of the Christian church and true spiritual unity with other believers in contrast to mere external organizational uniformity, it is not scandalous. It also implies that unbelievers are not able to see spiritual unity. Jesus declared: “This is how all [people] will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35), not if we belong to the same ecclesiastical organization.

Second, as orthodox Catholics know well, the scandal of liberalism is as great inside the Catholic church as it is outside of it. One author had a Catholic teacher at a Catholic university who claimed to be an atheist. When Catholic apologists claim there is significantly more doctrinal agreement among Catholics than Protestants they must mean between *orthodox Catholics* and *all* Protestants (orthodox and unorthodox), which clearly is not a fair comparison. Only when one chooses to compare things like the mode and candidate for baptism, church government, and other doctrines are there greater differences among orthodox Protestants. When, however, we compare the differences with orthodox Catholics and orthodox Protestants or all Catholics and all Protestants on the classical creedal doctrines, Catholicism enjoys no significant edge. This fact negates the value of an infallible teaching magisterium for the Roman Catholic Church. In point of fact, Protestants seem to do about as well as Catholics on unanimity of essential doctrines with only an infallible Bible and no infallible interpreters of it! In fact, Protestants do much better at not deviating from biblical truth, as is evident in the Catholic belief in the Apocrypha, infallibility of the church, meritorious works for salvation, the exaltation and veneration of Mary, purgatory, and other extrabiblical doctrines (see chaps. 9–16).

37 See Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 1787, p. 444.

38 F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1960), p. 27.

Third, orthodox Protestant “denominations,” though there be many, do not differ much more significantly than do the various “orders” (such as Dominicans,

Franciscans, and Jesuits) and factions of the Roman Catholic Church. Orthodox Protestants differ largely over secondary issues, not primary (fundamental) doctrines, so this Catholic argument against Protestantism is rather self-condemning.

Fourth, as J. I. Packer noted, “the real deep divisions have been caused not by those who maintained *sola Scriptura*, but by those, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, who reject it.” Further, “when adherents of *sola Scriptura* have split from each other the cause has been sin rather than Protestant biblicism.”³⁹ This is certainly often the case. A bad hermeneutic is more crucial to deviation from orthodoxy than is the rejection of infallible tradition from the Roman Catholic Church.

Rejecting tradition is not unhistorical. Kreeft’s argument that the first generation of Christians did not have the New Testament but only the church to teach them forgets several basic facts. First, the early first-century Christians did have a Bible; it was the Old Testament, as the New Testament itself declares (cf. Rom. 15:4 ; 1 Cor. 10:6 ; 2 Tim. 3:15–17). Second, as for the further revelation through the apostles, early first-century believers did not need it in written form for one very simple reason— *they still had the apostles to teach them!* As soon as the apostles died, however, it became imperative that the written record of their infallible teaching be available. And it was—in the apostolic writings known as the New Testament. Third, Kreeft’s argument assumes wrongly that there was apostolic succession (see below). The only infallible authority that succeeded the apostles was their infallible apostolic writings, that is, the New Testament.

PROTESTANT ARGUMENTS AGAINST INFALLIBLE TRADITION

There are many reasons why Protestants reject the Roman Catholic claim that they possess an infallible teaching magisterium that can unerringly interpret Scripture. The following are some of the more significant ones.

Oral traditions are unreliable. In point of fact, oral traditions are notoriously unreliable.⁴⁰ They are the stuff of which legends and myths are made. What is written is

39 J. I. Packer, “*Sola Scriptura: Crucial to Evangelicalism*,” in *The Foundations of Biblical Authority*, ed. James Boice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), p. 103.

40 As a written record traceable to the very apostles themselves who were confirmed by miracles (Heb. 2:3–4), the New Testament is not unreliable, as are oral traditions. Hence, the attempt by Catholic apologists to compare the New Testament Scriptures to those of other religions to show that one needs a teaching magisterium to guide them in determining which Scriptures are from God fails. All that is necessary is the historical evidence we have to show that the New Testament was produced by apostles and prophets who were miraculously confirmed by God.

more easily preserved in its original form. Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper notes four advantages of a written revelation: (1) it has durability whereby errors of memory or accidental corruptions, deliberate or not, are minimized; (2) it can be universally disseminated through translation and reproduction; (3) it has the attribute of fixedness and purity; (4) it is given a finality and normativeness that other forms of communication cannot attain.⁴¹ By contrast, what is not written is more easily polluted, as the New Testament illustrates. John 21:22–23 records how an unwritten “apostolic tradition” (i.e., one coming from the apostles) was based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus said. The disciples wrongly assumed that Jesus said that John would not die. John, however, debunked this false tradition in his authoritative written record.

If traditions are so reliable it is strange that Jesus spent so much time debunking the false traditions of the Jews that had grown up around the Old Testament Scriptures. On one occasion Jesus said, “You do err, not knowing the Scriptures . . .” (Matt. 22:29). In his sermon on the Mount Jesus rebuked what the Jewish leaders had “said” (Matt. 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43), in contrast to what was “written” (cf. Matt. 4:4, 7, 10).⁴² On another occasion Jesus declared, “why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your traditions? . . . You have nullified the word of God for the sake of your traditions” (Matt. 15:3). These words apply with equal force to many of the teachings of the church of Rome, such as the infallibility of the pope, the need for meritorious works, the addition of the Apocrypha, and the veneration of Mary.

Common sense and historical experience inform us that the generation alive when an alleged revelation was given is in a much better position to know if it is a true revelation than are succeeding generations—especially those hundreds of years later. They can apply the tests for propheticity (Deut. 13, 18) or apostolicity (Matt. 10:1; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3–4) which no succeeding generation can do directly. But many traditions proclaimed to be divine revelation by the Roman Catholic magisterium were done centuries, even a millennium or so, after they were allegedly given by God; in the case of some of these, there is no incontrovertible evidence that the tradition was believed by any significant number of orthodox Christians until centuries after they occurred. Those removed in time are greatly handicapped as compared to contemporaries, such as those who wrote the New Testament, to know what was truly a revelation from God. To affirm otherwise is like arguing that historians of a trial generations earlier are in a better position than the eyewitnesses who saw who committed the crime.

41 Cited by Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1982), p. 28.

42 It is clear that Jesus is not contrasting his view with that of the Old Testament but with the Jewish leaders’ misinterpretation of it. First, Jesus had just said he came to fulfill, not destroy, the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17–18). Second, it was what the Jewish leaders “said,” not what was “written” in the Old Testament with which Jesus disagreed. Third, at least some of what they “said” is found nowhere in the Old Testament, such as “hate your enemy” (5:43). Indeed, the Old Testament taught that one should love everyone (Lev. 19:18), including one’s enemies (Ps. 109:4–5).

Protestant conviction is built on the kind of view Luther expressed at the Council of Worms (A.D. 1521): “Unless I am convinced by the testimonies of Scripture or evident reason—for I believe neither the Pope nor Councils alone, since it is established that they have often erred and contradicted themselves—I am the prisoner of the Scriptures.” Here we stand; we can do no other. The Catholic response that Luther was 1500 years after the New Testament and sometimes erred himself misses the point. Of course, interpreters often err. This is why we should trust only the Scriptures, which do not err, as our final authority.

There are contradictory traditions. It is acknowledged by all, even by Catholic scholars, that there are contradictory Christian traditions.⁴³ In fact, Abelard noted hundreds of differences. For example, some church fathers (like Augustine) supported the Apocrypha, while others (like Jerome) opposed it (see chap. 9). Some great teachers (like Aquinas) opposed the immaculate conception of Mary, while others (like Scotus) favored it. Indeed, some church fathers opposed *sola Scriptura*,⁴⁴ but others favored it.⁴⁵ This very fact makes it impossible to trust tradition, certainly in any ultimately authoritative sense, for the question always arises: *Which of the contradictory traditions should be accepted?* To say, “The one pronounced authoritative by the church” begs the question, since tradition is a necessary link in the argument for the very doctrine of the infallible authority of the church.

The fact is that there are so many contradictory traditions that tradition, as such, is rendered unreliable as an authoritative source of dogma. Nor does it suffice to argue that while particular scholars cannot be trusted, nonetheless, their “unanimous consent” can be. For, as we have shown elsewhere (in chaps. 9 and 15), *there is no unanimous consent among the church fathers on many doctrines which are proclaimed to be infallibly true by the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, in some case there is not even a majority consent!* Thus, to appeal to the teaching magisterium of the Catholic church to settle the issue begs the question.⁴⁶

43 By contrast, there are no contradictions in Scripture, as even Catholics acknowledge. Hence, the Catholic argument that a teaching magisterium is needed to judge which traditions are from God and which are not, just like which Scriptures are and are not from God, is a false analogy. We have strong historical evidence that the New Testament documents come from the apostles and their associates. We do not have this same kind of evidence for extra-biblical traditions.

44 At least in the material sense, if not the formal.

45 Some Catholic theologians favor *sola Scriptura* in the material sense (that all revelation is found at least in seminal form in Scripture) but reject it in the formal sense (that no infallible teaching magisterium is necessary). However, it can be argued that some Catholic scholars (like Augustine and Aquinas) favored *sola Scriptura* in both senses. See quotations under “Conclusion.”

46 Ironically, while Catholics do not measure up to their own principle of “unanimous consent” of the Fathers, even Catholic scholar Louis Bouyer notes that “Protestants, in

One Catholic response is to claim that the early church fathers were closer to the apostles. Hence, when they agreed generally (or unanimously?), that should be considered to be apostolic truth. But there are several serious problems with this reasoning. First, it does not help the Roman Catholic position, since they have sometimes proclaimed as infallibly true a less than unanimous position (e.g., the bodily assumption of Mary). Further, as is well known, truth is not determined by majority (or even unanimous) vote. What is more, when we add to this the knowledge that many heresies existed even in apostolic times (see Col. 2 ; 1 Tim. 4 ;

2 Tim. 2 ; 1 John 4), then simply because a tradition is earlier does not make it true. Heresy was very early, even in apostolic times.

Another Catholic response to this is that, just as the bride recognizes her husband's voice in a crowd, even so the church recognizes the voice of her Husband in deciding which traditions are authentic. The analogy, however, is flawed. It assumes (without proof) that there is some divinely appointed post-apostolic way to decide which teachings were from God. During the period of divine revelation ending with the apostles the God-ordained way to do this was by special miraculous confirmation (Acts 2:22 ; 2 Cor. 12:12 ; Heb. 2:3–4). Admittedly these apostolic sign-gifts do not exist today.⁴⁷

Also, the Catholic attempt to provide non-miraculous objective evidence to support its view fails. Protestants use historical evidence (miracles) to support the New Testament and thereby the deity of Christ, and then use Christ to verify the divine authority of the New Testament. The historical evidence that supports the reliability of the New Testament is not the same as the religious tradition used by Roman Catholics. The former is objective and verifiable; the latter is not. There is, for example, no good evidence supporting first-century eyewitnesses (who were confirmed by miracles) that affirms the traditions pronounced infallible by the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, many of them are based on traditions that only emerge several centuries later and which are disputed by both other traditions and the Bible (e.g., the bodily assumption of Mary).

Finally, the whole argument seems to be reduced to a subjective mystical experience which is given plausibility only because the analogy is false. Neither the Catholic church as such, nor any of its leaders, has experienced down through the centuries anything like a continual hearing of God's audible voice, so that it can recognize it again whenever he speaks. Thus it would appear that the alleged recognition of her Husband's voice is nothing more than mystical faith in the teaching magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Catholic use of tradition is not consistent. Not only are there contradictory traditions, but the Roman Catholic Church is arbitrary and inconsistent in its choice of which traditions to pronounce infallible. This is evident in a number of areas. First, as

the positive statements [on Scripture] we refer to, say no more than the unanimous ecclesiastical tradition" (p. 129).

47 See Norman L. Geisler, *Signs and Wonders* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1988).

discussed earlier in this chapter, the Council of Trent chose to follow the tradition that has less support in pronouncing the apocryphal books inspired. The earliest and best authorities, including the translator of the Roman Catholic Latin Vulgate Bible, Jerome, opposed the Apocrypha (see chap. 9).

Second, support from tradition for the dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary is late and weak. Yet in spite of the lack of any real evidence from Scripture (see chap. 15) or any substantial evidence from the teachings of early church fathers, Rome chose to pronounce this an infallible truth of the Catholic faith. In short, Roman Catholic dogmas are not the product of rationally weighing the evidence of tradition but rather of arbitrarily choosing which of the many conflicting traditions they wish to pronounce infallible. The so-called unanimous consent of the Fathers to which Trent commanded allegiance is a fiction; no such consent actually exists since the Fathers often held diametrically opposing views.⁴⁸ In fact, not even a majority, to say nothing of unanimous consent, can be found among the early fathers on some traditions that were later pronounced infallibly true.

Third, apostolic tradition is nebulous. As has often been pointed out, “Never has the Roman Catholic Church given a complete and exhaustive list of the contents of oral tradition. It has not dared to do so because this oral tradition is such a nebulous entity.”⁴⁹ That is to say, even if all extra-biblical revelation definitely exists somewhere in some tradition (as Catholics claim), which ones these are has nowhere been declared.⁵⁰

Finally, if the method by which Catholics chose which tradition to canonize were followed in the practice of textual criticism, one could never arrive at a sound reconstruction of the original manuscripts, for it involves weighing the evidence as to

48 Some Catholic apologists vainly attempt to avoid the clear language of Trent by reducing “unanimous consent” to “moral unanimity.” First, anything less than unanimous consent is not really unanimous, whatever it is called. Second, “moral” unanimity is never definitively spelled out, certainly not in an infallible pronouncement. Finally, it does not even mean “majority” in some cases, since a majority of the Fathers, at least the early ones, did not even hold some doctrines later pronounced as infallibly true (e.g., the bodily assumption of Mary).

49 Ramm, *Pattern of Authority*, p. 68.

50 The Catholic claim that this is the same as the Protestant idea of doctrinal development is misdirected for several reasons. First, doctrinal development is in the *understanding* of revealed doctrines that are already there in the inspired text, not in the *creation* of new ones (like papal infallibility, Mary’s bodily assumption, and the veneration of images) which are not, as even many Catholic scholars admit. Second, the discovery of “new” truths in the Bible do not involve any fundamentals of the faith, whereas the new proclamations by Roman Catholicism involve what they believe to be *de fide*, infallible dogma. Third, for Protestants the newness is in the formulization of the fundamental truth, not in its fact. For example, the fact of the Trinity was always in Scripture; the *terms* used to describe it and credal *formulization* of the doctrine were progressively unfolded.

what the original actually said, not reading back into it what subsequent generations would like it to have said. Indeed, even most contemporary Catholic biblical scholars do not follow such an arbitrary procedure when determining the original text of Scripture to be translated (as in the *New American Bible*).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The question of authority is crucial to the difference between Catholics and Protestants. One of these is whether the Bible alone has infallible authority. We have examined carefully the Catholic arguments in favor of an infallible tradition and found them all wanting. Further, we have advanced many reasons for rejecting any claim to an infallible tradition in favor of the Bible alone as the sufficient authority for all matters of faith and morals. These are supported by Scripture and sound reason. Indeed, the words of early church fathers and some of the greatest Catholic theologians seem to support the Protestant view that the Bible alone has infallible authority.⁵¹ As J. N. D. Kelly noted:

“the holy and inspired Scriptures,” wrote Athanasius “are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth”; while his contemporary, Cyril of Jerusalem, laid it down that “with regard to the divine and saving mysteries of faith no doctrine, however trivial, may be taught without the backing of the divine Scriptures. . . . for our saving faith derives its force, not from capricious reasoning, but from what may be proved out of the Bible.” Later in the same century John Chrysostom bade his congregation seek no other teacher than the oracles of God; everything was straightforward and clear in the Bible, and the sum of necessary knowledge could be extracted from it.⁵²

What is more, Augustine declared that “it is to *the canonical Scriptures alone* that I am bound to yield such implicit subjection as to follow their teaching, without admitting the slightest suspicion that in them any mistake or any statement intended to mislead could find a place.”⁵³ This is not an isolated statement, taken out of context, where Augustine gives supreme authority to Scripture alone. In *The City of God* Augustine declared that “He [God] also inspired the Scripture, which is regarded as canonical and of *supreme authority* and to which we give credence concerning all the truths we ought to know and yet, of ourselves, are unable to learn” (11.3). In his *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* Augustine insisted that “Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself. . . . But in consequence of the sacred writing, we are bound to receive as true whatever the canon shows to have been said by even one prophet, or apostle, or evangelist” (11.5). This is not true of any tradition. Speaking in contrast to “the succession of bishops” after the time of the apostles, Augustine said that “there is a distinct boundary line separating all

51 See Leonard R. Kline, “Lutherans in Sexual Commotion,” *First Things*, no. 43 (May 1994): 35, for a Lutheran confirmation of this point.

52 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, pp. 42–43.

53 Augustine, *Letters* 82.3, in Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, emphasis added.

productions subsequent to apostolic times from the authoritative canonical books of the Old and New Testaments,” for “the authority of these books has come down to us from the apostles . . . and, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind.” Hence, “*in the innumerable books that have been written latterly we may sometimes find the same truth as in Scripture, but there is not the same authority. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself.*”⁵⁴

This is not to say that Augustine did not believe in tradition; he did,⁵⁵ as do most Protestants. It is only to note that he did not place tradition on the same level of authority as the Bible. As one scholar notes, “Tradition has only a derivative authority (based on its faithfulness to the prior authority of the Scriptures rather than an intrinsic authority equal to Scripture in its own right).” Further, “while the church is a witness to, and a guardian of, the inspired Word of God, the declaration of canonicity by the church is only a pronouncement about an already existing state of affairs.”⁵⁶ Even Augustine’s famous statement that he “should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church”⁵⁷ should be understood historically, not magisterially, for several reasons. First, the overall context is a rational defense of historic Christianity against the attack of Manichaeism, not a defense of the authority of the church (as against the Donatists). Second, the immediate context speaks of having “no clear proof” or “incontrovertible testimony to the apostleship of Manichaeus,” such as he had for the apostles of Christ who wrote the Gospels. Third, he speaks of that which was “inaugurated by miracles,” which can only refer to the teachings of the apostles as recorded in the New Testament, since he refers to it being “inaugurated” and believed that these miracles ceased with the apostles. In brief, Augustine argues that, were it not for the historic apostolic truths preserved by the Catholic church, which contain the revelation given to the apostles and confirmed by miracles, he would not have known the gospel. In this sense the church which has preserved apostolic testimony for us in the New Testament which Augustine considered infallible, has thereby unerringly mediated the gospel to us. So, the “authority” of the church is meant historically, not magisterially. Thus, this kind of authority is not infallible but only reliable.

For Augustine, the Bible alone is an infallible and inerrant authority. Of course, like Protestants who followed him, Augustine did not exclude “arguments addressed to . . . reason,” for he accepted the truths of reason or general revelation. However, there is no infallible or written revelation of these. In this connection it is important to repeat that Catholics often misunderstand the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* to exclude any truth outside the Bible. This, of course, is untrue, as is revealed by both Augustine’s quote here and Luther’s famous quote earlier about being “convinced by the testimonies of Scripture *or evident reason.*” What Protestants mean by *sola Scriptura* is that the

54 Augustine, *Reply to Faustus* 11.5.

55 See Augustine, *On Baptism* 2.7.12; 4.24.31; *Letters* 54.1.1

56 Kim Riddlebarger, “No Place Like Rome: Why Are Evangelicals Joining the Catholic Church?” in John Armstrong, ed., *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), pp. 238–39.

57 Augustine, *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus* 4.5.

Bible alone is the infallible written authority for faith and morals. Natural revelation as such is not infallible, written, nor does it cover all matters of faith and morals (it only overlaps with many).

Following Augustine, Aquinas declared that “we believe the successors of the apostles and prophets *only in so far as they tell us those things which the apostles and prophets have left in their writings,*”⁵⁸ and “it is heretical to say that any falsehood whatsoever is contained either in the gospels or in any canonical Scripture.”⁵⁹ From these statements and from his use of the Fathers only to help understand the Scriptures and not to supplement them, it is clear that Aquinas believed in the material, if not formal, sufficiency of Scripture—something many conservative Catholics believe is contrary to the Council of Trent. If so, the greatest theologian of the Catholic church stands against what was later proclaimed to be an infallible dogma of that church.

58 Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* XIV, 10, ad 11, emphasis added.

59 Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Job* 13, lect. 1.