

A DIALOGUE: SOLA SCRIPTURA

by Christopher J. Aubert

The following is Chris Aubert's response to a question from a friend regarding the protestant position that the Bible alone, *sola scriptura*, is the ultimate infallible authority in matters of faith and practice.

Dear Brother in Christ,

You have been very important to me in my faith walk, and I will be forever grateful for your friendship. I know that this letter is quite long, and it will mean a lot to me if you will take time out from your busy schedule to read it, contemplate it, and then discuss it with me. I hope that you will also accept this letter with the love and friendship with which it is intended.

As you know, I converted from Jewish to Catholic at Easter 1997. Since then, I have done a lot of research, reading, praying, and studying about the Bible, God's plan for me, how we are saved, etc. I do this, in part, in the spirit of ecumenism and to understand more fully how my non-Catholic brothers and sisters, like you, think and what they believe.

There are two very basic questions that I think many Christians gloss over without thinking about: "Why does faith matter?" and "Why do we go to Church on Sunday?" I know why faith is important to me and why I go to Church, but I am not sure I understand why you do. The answers to the questions for me are that I think my role on earth as a husband and father is to get my family to heaven. I believe that I do that through Jesus Christ's truth, and I am always seeking His truth. When I stand before God on Judgment Day, I want as much truth on my side as possible. I am a Catholic because I believe that only the Catholic Church has the fullness of truth, and that all other Christian denominations have only partial truth.

So, I guess the real question for everyone is, "what is the truth"?

I have learned about some rather sharp differences between Catholic teaching (orthodox Catholic teaching, not what many people —Catholics and non-Catholics— mistakenly *think* is Catholic teaching) and non-Catholic teaching. These differences are important because truth cannot contradict truth. If one of us has the fullness of truth on their side, the other, by definition, does not.

I have slung Bible verses back and forth with you about what the Bible says and means, and we have asked each other many questions, all to help us discern truth in the spirit of brotherhood and love. Very frankly, I feel like you answer most of my questions with more questions, rather than answers. For example, we may be discussing the perpetual virginity of Mary, and right in the middle you will say, "Oh, yeah, well what about Purgatory"? This frustrates me because I feel like the victim of a bait and switch, and this is what I meant when I accused you (again, with love!) of doing the "doctrinal dance." As a result partly of our talks and partly my own study and prayer, I have come to a very significant observation, which leads to one very simple question I have for you.

The observation is: After much prayer and discernment, I find that I simply do not understand your position on God's truth, and it is my sincere desire to do so. The question I would therefore like to ask you, if I may, is: "Why do you believe what you believe?"

I have been struggling for some time to reconcile my Catholic beliefs with those of my Protestant brothers and sisters, particularly including you. Primarily, my dilemma is with one of the two basic tenets of Protestantism: *sola scriptura* - the Bible alone is the sole source authority of faith and morals¹. Since, again, truth cannot contradict truth, *sola scriptura* cannot be true if the Catholic teaching of scripture *and* apostolic Tradition as authorities is true. I think you will agree that, with our different beliefs, we cannot both know the truth.

I imagine that you, as a non-Catholic, find it almost incomprehensible that a Bible-believing Christian man could be a proud Catholic. I assure you, I am a Bible-believing Christian man. I can also assure you that I accept every word of the New Testament as the inerrant and infallible Word of God, just as you do. We are in complete agreement on this issue. I partly have you to thank for this because of the very good influence you have had on my faith.

One cannot spend five minutes with you without realizing that you regard the Scriptures as the Word of God. More than that, you regard them as the only revelation from God to man, outside of which there is only human tradition. It seems to me, respectfully, that you have painted yourself into a theological corner. You want to reject all tradition, and limit God's revelation to the Bible alone, but if you do then you are stuck with the obvious fact that the Bible alone does not tell us what books belong between its covers.

The Bible knows nothing of a "canon of Scripture"; it was the Catholic Church that decided, in the late fourth century, which books belong in the Bible. I would think that this fact alone would cause you to reject the New Testament canon as being a "man-conceived tradition," yet you accept it as an infallible rule of faith. This is what I do not understand. Does not the existence of an extra-biblical revelation that is an infallible rule of faith deal a fatal blow to the theory that God's revelation is found only in the Bible? I confess that I am unable to reconcile this theory with the fact that God revealed the canon of Scripture through the Church, not through the Bible alone, and that is why I wanted to ask you how you reconciled these things.

You are obviously very adamant about the Bible's status, and in fact that belief forms the basis for your whole theology. And yet, it seems to me that if you believe that God's revelation is confined to the Bible alone, it actually undermines the objective basis for your belief that the Bible is the Word of God.

I will explain my basic point by expanding on, and simplifying, the question above: Why do you believe the New Testament is the Word of God? Since that belief is one of your core doctrines, it should be very easy to explain *why* you believe it. But, unfortunately, as I see it, it is really not such an easy question to answer, is it?

¹ The other tenet, of course, is *sola fide* (faith alone leads to salvation).

If we limit ourselves to Scripture alone, let us consider what we know about the New Testament. To begin with, we know that the New Testament is not just one book; it is actually a compilation of 27 different books, written by a host of different authors. One of the first things we might notice about these books is that not one of them claims to be inspired.² For example, the beginning of the third gospel simply says, “Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you . . .” That’s hardly a “thus saith the Lord.” So why do we claim for these books what they do not claim for themselves?

Next we might observe that we do not even know who wrote many of these books. All four of the gospels, the book of Acts, the book of Hebrews, and three of the general epistles are anonymous. From Scripture alone we have no idea who wrote them. The identification of specific authors for these books comes from second and third century Catholic tradition, and is therefore inadmissible from a Protestant perspective. (And even if we accept that tradition, we still don’t know who wrote Hebrews.) Further, how do we know that those New Testament letters that do bear the name of their authors were actually written by those people? How do we know, for example, that 2 Peter was written by Peter? Because it says so? The *Protoevangelium of James and the Gospel of Thomas* claim to have been written by those apostles, so why aren’t *they* in the New Testament?

To make matters worse, the very idea that there should even *be* a New Testament is not found in Scripture. Nowhere in the gospels do we find any indication that there would someday be a set of new Scriptures that would supplement the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus himself never wrote anything, and as far as we know he never instructed his disciples to write anything either. Of the 12, nine never wrote a word that is considered a part of Scripture. Instead, they spread the word of God by preaching it. When you read the phrase “word of God” in the New Testament, I’ll bet you automatically think, “Bible.” But if you check it out, you’ll see that the phrase “word of God” in the New Testament almost always refers to the oral proclamation of the gospel, not to any written document. When you read the New Testament with that in mind, it’s an eye-opening experience!

Further, Paul commanded Timothy to retain his oral instruction as the “pattern of sound teaching” (2 Tim 1:13) and to propagate it through the ages (2 Tim 2:2), but he did not mention his writings. So we find, ironically, that the very idea of a “New Testament” is foreign to the books of the New Testament. On what authority, then, can we claim that *any* of these books is inspired? On what basis can we assume (indeed, *insist*) that God intended for Matthew, John, Paul, Peter, and some of their protégés (Mark, Luke, James, and Jude) to write a collection of inspired books and letters that would (centuries later) be compiled into a “New Testament”? Where do we find any evidence *in the Scripture alone* that they all did so at the command of

² The book of Revelation claims to have been written at the command of God, but that does not necessarily mean it was inspired. Just because God tells someone to write down what they see, that does not, in and of itself, prove that He planned to inspire them while they wrote.

God, and under His inspiration? In short, how do we know that the New Testament was God's idea, and not man's?

Even if we conclude (apparently from human tradition) that there is supposed to be a New Testament, we still have the problem of determining which books belong in it. Unfortunately, God did not reveal that information anywhere in the New Testament itself. There is no inspired Table of Contents. Therefore, *from Scripture alone*, how do we know which books belong in Scripture? How did we get our list of the 27 books that we say belong in the New Testament? Did God reveal this list, or is it merely a human tradition? If God revealed it, where can we find this revelation?

It seems to me that the "Bible only" doctrine is built entirely on sand. It destroys the basis for our faith in the very Scriptures it seeks to exalt. Unless one is willing to accept extra-Biblical, apostolic Tradition, and the authority of the Church, one cannot know whether God wanted there to be a New Testament in the first place, nor can one know what books belong in it, nor can one know who wrote those books, nor can one know that those books are in fact inspired by God. All that information was supplied via the Church, and without it all one has is a series of very large, completely unsubstantiated assumptions (i.e., that God wanted certain people to write a New Testament, that the books that are in it actually belong there and others don't, and that those books are inspired). Unless one can show where God specifically revealed all these things, it seems to me that one should not say, "This is the Word of God," but rather, "I *hope* this is the Word of God, but I really have no way of knowing."

On the other hand, I have a solid basis for my confidence in the Bible because I accept as a part of God's general revelation the unwritten apostolic Tradition, which has been preserved in the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I have confidence that God intended the composition of the New Testament because the apostolic Tradition tells me so. I have confidence that the Biblical books were written by the authors whose names they bear because the apostolic Tradition affirms that, too. I have confidence that the fourth-century Catholic bishops who drew up the list of books that belong in the Bible did so under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, because the apostolic Tradition (and Acts 15) affirms that this is the way God planned to guide the Church into all truth throughout the ages. And finally, I have confidence that "God chose certain men who... consigned to writing whatever he wanted written and no more" and that "the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures"³ because the apostolic Tradition, as expressed by the teaching authority of the Catholic Church, affirms that too.

I don't think that non-Catholics realize it, but they inherited their belief in the Bible from the Catholic Church and its apostolic Tradition. After all, the Reformers didn't start with nothing and deduce the inspiration of Scripture. They started with the authority of both Church and Scripture already firmly established, and they simply rejected the authority of the Church. Even

³ Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 11.

Martin Luther admitted that, “We are compelled to concede to the Papists that they have the Word of God, that we received it from them, and that without them we should have no knowledge of it at all.”⁴

The “Bible only” doctrine, then, is a branch without a tree, suspended in mid-air and firmly anchored to nothing. It is belief without evidence, conviction without reason, and faith without revelation. In contrast, my own belief in the Bible is firmly anchored to the “Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the Truth” (1 Tim 3:15).

My dear friend, you and I believe exactly the same things about the Bible’s inspiration and authority, a belief we inherited from Catholicism, but the difference is that by accepting apostolic Tradition as a part of God’s general revelation, I can point out where, when, and how this information was revealed by God, and thus I can show that it is not merely a tradition of men. Limiting God’s revelation to Scripture alone, can you do the same?

I have no formal training in theology, so perhaps I am missing something obvious here. Can you help me understand your reasoning?

Your loving brother in Christ,

P.S. If this letter seems argumentative as opposed to inquisitive, that is just my writing style, as you probably already know. I agree with Mother Angelica, who said, “Arguments are the exchange of emotions, while discussions are the exchange of ideas.” Please trust me, I wish only discussion of ideas, and no disrespect nor argument in anything here. God bless you.

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⁴ Martin Luther, *Commentary on St. John*.