

The Continued Fracturing of Christianity

Jim Seghers

Non-Catholic Christians

Earlier this month I received the following news: “For the first time in its history, the United States does not have a Protestant majority, according to a new study.” The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life reports that the percentage of Protestant adults in the U.S. has reached a low of 48 percent. The traditional Protestant denominations are giving way to non-denominational churches. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* reported in 2001 that there were 33,820 Christian denominations. This tragic fragmentation is in large measure attributable to the principle of *sola scriptura* (by the Bible alone), which the Protestant apologist James White calls “the ‘formal’ principle of the Reformation, that which gave rise to the rest.”¹

Sola Scriptura has four key elements:

1. **The Bible is the only authentic, ultimate and infallible source** that enables one to know what God wants his children to believe and how he wants them to behave. Norman Geisler and Ralph MacKenzie state it this way: “By *Sola Scriptura* orthodox Protestants mean that Scripture alone is the primary and absolute source of authority, the final court of appeal, of all doctrine and practice (faith and morals).”²
2. **The Bible is self-interpretative**, so no church, council, creed, or confession of faith is authoritative or needed to interpret the Bible. Geisler and MacKenzie explain this point in the following manner: “Scripture interprets Scripture.” Therefore “clear texts should be used to interpret the unclear ones.”³ Apologist James White amplifies this idea when he writes, “The Scriptures are *self-consistent, self-interpreting, and self-authenticating*.”⁴
3. **The individual has the absolute right of interpretation**. At the heart of *sola scriptura* is the belief that the individual believer comes to the knowledge of the essential truths of the Christian faith by studying the Bible, basing his faith on these truths, as he alone understands them. Thus, R. C. Sproul affirms: “the individual believer has the right to the private interpretation of Scripture.”⁵
4. **The Bible is also said to have clarity or perspicuity**. This means that the essential truths that mankind needs for salvation are so clearly taught in the Bible, that even the uneducated can understand them. Thus Luther taught that everyone, even “the

¹ White, *Roman Catholic Controversy*, p. 56.

² Geisler and MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*, p. 178.

³ Geisler and MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*, p. 179.

⁴ White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy*, p. 60.

⁵ *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position On The Bible*, by Robert Godfrey, James White, R.C. Sproul, John Armstrong, John MacArthur, Sinclair Ferguson, Joel Beeke, and Ray Lanning; general editor Don Kistler, p. 68.

humble miller's maid, nay, a child of nine," could interpret the Bible. In the words of Robert Godfrey, "The Protestant position, and my position, is that all things necessary for salvation and concerning faith and life are taught in the Bible clearly enough for the ordinary believer to find it there and understand."⁶ Geisler and Mackenzie add the following clarification: "The perspicuity of Scripture does not mean that everything in the Bible is perfectly clear, but rather the essential teachings are."⁷

The Protestant scholar Keith A. Mathison recognized the endless ruptures that result from *sola scriptura*:

"Within evangelicalism, many professing Christians use *sola scriptura* as a battle cry to justify endless schism. Other professing evangelicals use the slogan *sola scriptura* to justify every manner of false doctrine imaginable. The numerous ways in which *sola scriptura* has been misused have provoked its critics with further evidence of the practical 'unworkability' of the doctrine ... Roman Catholic and Orthodox apologists have been effective in their criticisms in large part because of the fact that most Protestants have adopted a subjective and individualistic version of *sola scriptura* that bears little resemblance to the doctrine of the Reformers."⁸

Regarding *sola scriptura*, the lack of a biblical foundation is admitted by Herman Ridderbos:

"The authority of the Scriptures [*sola scriptura*] is the great *presupposition* of the whole of the biblical preaching and doctrine."⁹

In broaching this subject I recognize that there are many non-Catholic Christians who genuinely love the Lord. I learned this first hand several years when I was graciously received at the First Baptist Church in Covington while participating in a program called "Catholicism and the Bible". This summer I was edified by the faith filled reports from the Holy Land by the bright lady who moderated that program. Catholics need to remember that our Church does not view non-Catholics as competitors or enemies, but as separated brothers and sisters.

Catholics

My observations regarding the multiplicity of denominations are meant to be factual, but they are not a critique of *sola scriptura* from a Catholic perspective. History teaches us that Luther lit the conflagration called the Reformation, but the sinfulness of Catholics, many of whom held the highest positions of Church authority, created the conditions that made this initial splintering of the Christianity possible. Tragically, it is also true today that many Catholics contribute to the splintering of Christianity and the resulting moral and doctrinal confusion that infests our country, but with far less

⁶ *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position On The Bible*, p. 3.

⁷ Geisler and MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, p. 178.

⁸ Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, p. 14.

⁹ *Sola Scriptura: the Protestant Position on the Bible*, p. 96.

justification than is the case with those who believe in *sola scriptura*. Catholics also share with other Christians the heavy burden of 50 million abortions. Here the words of Edmund Burke apply: “*All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.*” We have not done enough; many of us have done nothing.

However, abortion is not the only issue. There are too many Catholics who practice a pick-and-choose approach to their faith as if the Ten Commandments and the teaching of Christ are multiple choice. Then, too, there is the scandal of prominent political figures who use their so-called adherence to Catholicism to undermine its teachings. They sometimes give a rationalization justifying evil that is so muddled it doesn’t even meet the standard of sophistry. Let’s consider an example.

During the recent debate between Vice President Joe Biden and Congressman Paul Ryan, the Vice President declared: “My religion defines who I am, and I’ve been a practicing Catholic my whole life.... With regard to abortion, I accept my Church’s judgment. I accept it in my personal life. But I refuse to impose it on equally devout Christians and Muslims and Jews. I do not believe that we have the right to tell other people that – women – they can’t control their body. It’s a decision between them and their doctor. In my view, and in the Supreme Court, I’m not going to interfere with that.”

Those non-Catholics who adhere to the principle of *sola scriptura* often make a concerted effort to be guided by the teaching of the Bible, but one’s doctor and the Supreme Court certainly lack the authority to establish a valid moral norm for any Christian, much less for one who boasts he is a “practicing Catholic.” I recall another terrible Supreme Court case, the Dred Scott decision in March 1857. It declared that all blacks – slaves as well as free – were not and could not become citizens of the United States. In short, the court decreed that the phrase, “all men are created equal,” in the Declaration of Independence did not include blacks. Essentially, Roe v. Wade in 1973 eliminated unborn babies. They no longer have the right to life!

But let’s return to Mr. Biden’s twisted reasoning. He claims to adhere to the teaching of the Catholic Church, which holds that abortion is murder. How can anyone claim he believes that and say, “I accept it in my personal life. But I refuse to impose it on equally devout Christians and Muslims and Jews?” Allow me to rephrase his response. Suppose Mr. Biden said, “I accept in my personal life the Catholic Church’s teaching on the great evil of child prostitution, but I refuse to impose my conviction on equally devout Christians and Muslims and Jews.” Who would accept such a ridiculous statement?

At the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore lamented the massive loss of human life through abortion, and denounced pro-abortion Catholic politicians “who say they are personally opposed to intrinsic evils like abortion while doing everything in their power to promote them.”

Governor Romney's position is somewhat better, but not much. During the same debate Congressman Paul Ryan stated, "The policy of a Romney administration is to oppose abortion with exceptions for rape, incest and life of the mother." Governor Romney is not a Catholic, but regardless I must take issue with this position because it is also flawed. Rape is a traumatic violation of a woman's dignity. I know this because I witnessed the ordeal my wife experienced after she was stabbed twice while successfully fighting off a rapist. But supposed this brute had succeeded and she became pregnant from that assault. Enduring the added trauma of the innocent baby being murdered in her womb would not diminish her suffering. It would add to it. This is not compassion, nor is it an acceptable moral principle. It is NEVER morally permissible to kill an innocent person. The right to life is the foundation of all the other human rights. When it is discarded, all human rights are in jeopardy.

However, the problem among many Catholics goes beyond the betrayal of some Catholic politicians. We are the problem. We elect them, which is symptomatic of a deep seated and wide spread lack of faith that chooses the values of this world over God. During his audience on October 17, 2012 Pope Benedict XVI lamented, "Christians today often do not even know the central core of their Catholic faith." It is difficult to love and follow principles we do not understand. No one commits his life to a question mark! The result is "22 million ex-Catholics in America."¹⁰ This is a sad reality that should generate some serious soul searching.

Before he became Pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger depicted the situation in the following stark terms:

"We are witnessing a sort of mass apostasy [the complete abandonment of the Christian faith]; the number of baptized persons is decreasing drastically.... And an undeniable advance of secularism, as we have already pointed out, is also ascertainable, with different features, in the United States. In short, in the Western world the almost complete identity that once existed between European and American culture and Christian culture is dissolving."¹¹

In a document intended to orient Catholics as we enter the third millennium, Pope John Paul II wrote:

Even in countries evangelized many centuries ago, the reality of a 'Christian society' which, amid all the frailties which have always marked human life, measured itself explicitly on Gospel values, is now gone."¹²

The causes of this lamentable condition are many. Theologians, priests, and even some bishops, have been among the major contributors. Then there is the tragedy of the in-name-only Catholic colleges and universities that undermine the faith of their students.

¹⁰ Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?* Chapter 1, footnote 16, p. 220.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *New Outpourings of the Holy Spirit*, Ignatius Press, p. 115.

¹² *Novo millennio ineunte* (At the Beginning of a New Millennium), January 6, 2001, #40.

In the current *Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College* only 28 Catholic colleges, universities and online programs were judged to be orthodox. Nevertheless, when we focus exclusively on others we can easily neglect John's admonition: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn 1:8).

Our challenge is to respond personally to Jesus' words, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt 4:17). Thus, John Paul II reminded Catholics: "The proclamation of the Word of God has *Christian conversion* as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith... Conversion means accepting, by a personal decision, the saving sovereignty of Christ and becoming his disciple"¹³ If Catholics and non-Catholics were united in their love for Jesus Christ as expressed in authentic Christian living, our country would be converted in a generation.

Sacred Scripture is the unique tool that bridges the gap between the head to the heart. The Bible is so important that the Second Vatican Council reminded Catholics that "the Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord."¹⁴ "Therefore," it affirmed, "the study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology."¹⁵ Without the integration of Scripture, theology becomes the study of a corpse, not the living Word of God. Finally, the Council made the words of St. Jerome its own: "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ."¹⁶

During the past twenty-three years I have repeatedly observed how the faith of Catholics comes alive when they learn their faith biblically. It's as if the Holy Spirit reaches out from the sacred text and grabs their hearts. The result is an amazing encounter with the Word who is God in the Word of God. Catholics who are not yet steeped in the Bible need resources. Let me recommend three:

1. *The Navarre Bible* was a project entrusted to the theology faculty of the University of Navarre in Spain by its first chancellor and founder St. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer. It uses the *Revised Standard Version (RSV)* followed by a brief but deeply spiritual commentary written in language that ordinary people can understand and appreciate. For those who know Latin, it also provides the official Latin text, the *New Vulgate*.
2. *The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible of the New Testament*, second edition. The format is similar to the *Navarre Bible* in that it uses the RSV followed below by an excellent pithy commentary which is work of Curtis Mitch and Scott Hahn. It does not provide the Latin text, but it has a very useful Concise Concordance for looking up passages when you can only remember key words, and it has a helpful topical index.

¹³ *Redemptoris missio*: Mission of the Redeemer, # 46

¹⁴ *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Henceforth cited as DV), # 21.

¹⁵ DV, # 24

¹⁶ DV, # 25.

3. *The Fullness of Truth: A Handbook for Understanding and Explaining the Catholic Faith Biblically*. The preview of this book is on line at <http://thefullnessoftruth.com>. I am the author of this work, which is the fruit of instructing children, teens, college students and adults during the past twenty-three years. This handbook has five major divisions: AUTHORITY, JUSTIFICATION, SACRAMENTS, MARY, and MISCELLANAEIOUS under which specific topics are examined. For example, under general heading of AUTHORITY the following topics are discussed: Authority, Apostolic Succession, Tradition, the Bible, Canon of the Bible, Infallibility, Objections to Infallibility, and the Bible Alone – *Sola Scriptura*.

Each topic is initially explained in a one page summary with the headings: WHAT, WHY, and WOW. I have used these summaries with children down to the fifth grade. Adults love them because they do not require a lot of reading and time to digest. Each summary is followed by a brief essay that develops the topic more fully. For example, the essay on Authority is less than three pages long. The workbook has more than a thousand biblical citations and it is fully integrated with the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#).

Finally, an ADDENDUM consisting of six short essays forms the sixth section. The topics covered are: Baptism by Immersion Only, Baptism of Infants, Celibacy, Divorce and Remarriage, Male Only Priesthood, and Relics. The book concludes with an extensive bibliography.

The complete *The Fullness of Truth* will soon be available online to all subscribers at <http://thefullnessoftruth.com>. Please check it out and sign in so you can be contacted when it is available. It will also soon be available on Kindle followed later on IOS devises (iPhone, iPad as an iBook).