

Is Sola Scriptura a Protestant Concoction?

A Biblical Defense of Sola Scriptura

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(Transcribed from a taped lecture by David T. King and edited for the WWW by James Anderson)

The issue of Scripture and Scripture Alone (or what Protestants have come to call the principle of *sola Scriptura*) is a matter that divides professing Christians as to the foundation of their faith and what defines their faith. Back in the days of the Reformation when there were men who felt that the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ had been not only corrupted by the Roman Catholic Church, but had virtually disappeared under the mask of human traditions and rituals and things that kept people from actually hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, in order to reform the Church, in order to have the grace of God more clearly proclaimed to people, Protestants realized they had to take a stand not only for ‘Sola Gratia’ (i.e., in Latin, ‘By Grace Alone’ for our salvation), but that had to be proclaimed on the basis of *sola Scriptura* (‘Scripture Alone’) because the Roman Catholic Church used its appeal to human tradition in the Church (or what they considered divine tradition in the Church) as a basis for its most distinctive doctrines.

When Martin Luther was called before the ‘Diet of Worms’ and there told that he had to recant his teaching about ‘Justification by Faith Alone’ (you may know the story very well), Luther (which was the better part of valor) asked for a night to think it over before he gave his answer to the Council. And then on the next day in appearing before that tribunal which was demanding that he recant of this teaching which really amounted to the

purity of the Gospel, Luther responded with those famous words: “Here I stand, I can do no other!” Now what do we make of that? Is that just the stuff of which dramatic movies can be made? Or is there something about what Luther said that is crucial to what it is to be a Christian, crucial to the purity of the Gospel and the truth of the Scriptures themselves?

The response of Roman Catholics to Luther’s dramatic stand that he would not recant unless he could be shown to be wrong from the Bible...the response of Roman Catholics (for years) has been, “Well, Protestants simply have their ‘paper’ pope (the Bible)!” Back when I was a seminary student, I had a student in my class who was very antagonistic to the conservatism and theology of the school where I was studying. And he used to make that point over and over again in debates with other students that “You Protestants simply have your paper pope; we have our ‘living’ pope; you have your ‘paper’ pope!”

Of course in saying that, it seemed to me that he was really demonstrating why it is Protestants have to hold out for *sola Scriptura*, because when he pits the ‘paper’ pope of the Bible against the ‘living’ pope who sits in Rome, what he is telling us is that finally that person who sits on the papal chair in Rome is more authoritative than the Bible itself! And that’s exactly what Luther was concerned about. That’s what the Protestant Reformers were concerned about. And frankly, that’s what I’m concerned about tonight! Because we have in our day and age something of a mini-movement (it’s not big enough to be considered even a trickle), but a mini-movement of former Protestants going into the Roman Catholic communion. And they are being convinced that it’s an appropriate thing for them to do, and they are being told that the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* (the formative principle of theology presented in the Reformation, namely that the Bible alone is sufficient) is not itself authoritative, and in fact is not even itself taught in the Bible! “If *sola Scriptura* is so important,” they tell us, “then why isn’t it taught in the Bible alone? Why do Presbyterians prove their doctrine of *sola Scriptura* by going to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, rather than to the Bible?” And so with rhetoric like this, they convince the minds (I think) of weak and unstable people that really Roman Catholicism is not that big a threat. After all, everybody has

their traditions; we have to live with traditions as well as Scripture!

Well, there was a humorous P.S. (it seems to me) to all of this in that a number of other people who had formerly been in the Reformed Churches (not a whole lot of people, but some... some with reputations, and therefore a great deal of media attention is given to them), they have left the Protestant fold and have gone into the Eastern Orthodox Church. And one of these people that I've had some contact with has written a paper on *sola Scriptura* in which he lays out all the reasons why *sola Scriptura* is not an acceptable principle of theology, and it's illogical and unhistorical and on and on and on. And throughout the paper he uses exactly the same rhetoric, exactly the same polemic as do Roman Catholics against Protestants with respect to Sola Scriptura, and throughout the paper promotes the idea of Scripture plus holy tradition.

Well, as I started reading his paper, I started laughing out loud, not in disrespect of the person himself, but in what I saw as the irony of the situation! Roman Catholics present these very same arguments to argue in favor of Roman tradition, papal tradition! And then you turn around and find out that Eastern Orthodox polemicists use exactly the same arguments in favor of what they call their 'Holy Tradition' which is contrary to papal tradition. And so here you have two august Christian bodies (professedly Christian bodies) claiming the authority of tradition, and yet their authorities conflict with each other; their traditions conflict with each other. And yet, they laugh at Protestants for their 'paper' pope.

Well, what I'd like to do in our short time this evening is offer a defense of the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. I'm not embarrassed by that doctrine. I believe it is absolutely necessary to the health of the Church, and I am convinced (as Luther was convinced) that if we give up *sola Scriptura*, we will inevitably give up *sola Gratia* as well. Because the giving up of the Protestant authority (the principle of *sola Scriptura*) simply opens the door for other ways of pleasing God to enter in that are not based upon His own revelation. And it's a very short step from thinking that I can follow a religious tradition that cannot be verified objectively by the Word of God to the idea that I can please God by something that He has not provided. It is a very short step from the denial

of *sola Scriptura* to the denial of *sola Gratia* when it comes to salvation.

So I will try to keep you up to date on where I am in presenting this case, and I am going to begin by asking: What does the Bible itself tell us about the authority for our doctrinal convictions? When two people who profess to be Christians disagree with each other over some premise or dogma, how does the Bible tell us these disagreements should be adjudicated?

I. And the first step, which I hope is an obvious one but becomes crucial as we move ahead, the first step is for us to recognize that the Bible teaches that our convictions are not to be based upon human wisdom! Human wisdom isn't always wrong; sometimes people used their intellect and their independent ability to research, and find facts and come to truths which are very valuable. The problem is not that human wisdom is always wrong. The problem is that human wisdom is (1) fallible, and (2) not a sufficient foundation for believing anything about God. Because only God is adequate to witness to Himself!

Therefore our doctrinal convictions are not (should not) based upon human wisdom. The Christian faith is rather based upon God's own self-revelation rather than the conflicting opinions of men or the untrustworthy speculations of men. If you have your Bibles with you tonight, turn to I Corinthians 2:5, and notice the burden of the Apostle Paul as to how to control the beliefs of the Christians there in Corinth. I Corinthians 2:5, in verse 4 he says, "And my speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power..." Why?... Why is Paul making that point? Why is this necessary to emphasize? Verse 5: "...that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." (ASV)

Think about Paul's conceptual scheme here as you read this verse. Notice how he puts the power of God over here on one side, and the wisdom of men on the other. And not only is the power of God and the wisdom of men in two different categories, he said, "Your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men." In I Corinthians 2, verses 10 and 13 (you'll notice while you're right there) that Paul draws a sharp contrast between the words which man's wisdom teaches and those which God reveals unto us

through the Spirit. On the one hand, you have words taught by the wisdom of men, and on the other hand you have words revealed through the Spirit. Those are contrasted in Paul's theology. And he makes the point in verse 4 of chapter 2 that the apostolic message did not originate in words of human wisdom or insight; but rather the apostolic message rests in the power of God and comes through the wisdom of God's own Spirit!

Paul thanked God in I Thessalonians 2:13... Paul thanked God that the Thessalonians received his message (and now I'm using his words) "Not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God." All I'm trying to get across at this fundamental level in tonight's lecture is that Paul contrasts the words of God to the words of men, the wisdom of God to the wisdom of men. These are set apart from each other. He says, "I praise God that you received my preaching not as the words of men!" (Of course, he is a man; he did use words... They were human words.) But Paul says that you received it rather as the Word of God Himself!

In II Timothy 3, verses 15 to 17, Paul spoke of the 'sacred writings' which make us 'wise unto Salvation!' And he said that "every one of them is God-breathed," is inspired by God. The Bible would have us beware of the uninspired words of men. God's people must not submit to the uninspired words of men. Jeremiah 23:16, the prophet says, "Thus saith Jehovah of hosts, Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they teach you vanity; they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of Jehovah." (ASV) There again we see in the Old Testament this contrast between a message that comes out of the heart of a man and that which comes from the mouth of Jehovah!

It's not as though the heart of man can't ever speak the truth; it's not as though human wisdom never gets anything right, but God's people cannot rest secure in anything that does not come from the mouth of Jehovah Himself.

In the New Testament, in Colossians 2 and verse 8, Paul warns God's people not to allow their faith to be compromised by any philosophy which he says is "after the tradition of men... and not after Christ!" There you have it again, the contrast between man's authority and Christ's

authority, the tradition of men on the one hand, and the authority of Christ on the other. Not this but that, your faith stands in the power of God, in the 'breathed-out' Word of God, in a philosophy that is after Christ and not after human tradition. Not after the wisdom of men; not after the tradition of men! Indeed, in the 15th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, verse 6, our Lord Jesus condemned those who, He says, "make void the Word of God" because of their "tradition." (ASV)

One other thing about human wisdom. We read in the Bible that God forbids us to subtract anything from His Word, and as well forbids us to add anything to His Word. Look at Deuteronomy 4, verse 2: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the commandments of Jehovah your God which I command you." (ASV) It's a very serious thing to violate this principle. It's a very serious thing for any human (in his or her wisdom) to subtract from the Word of God, or (in his or her wisdom) to add anything to the Word of God.

I'll tell you how serious it is. In Revelation 22, verses 18 and 19, John says of this Revelation that he is giving that if any man dares to add to it, God will add to that person the curses ("plagues") of the Book! And if any man dares to take away from that Revelation that God will take away the blessings of that Book from the individual. This is not some kind of minor, trivial point of theological dispute! God, over and over again, says that your faith is not to rest in human wisdom. You are not to use human wisdom to tamper with My Word! You are not to add your own thought: "Hearken not to the Prophets who don't speak from the mouth of Jehovah"! You are not in your wisdom to correct or subtract from My thoughts. And if you dare do so, then I will punish you with the curses of the covenant! I will withdraw the blessing; I will impose the curses if you tamper with My Word!

Well, I trust at this point we can see that this dispute between Roman Catholics and Protestants (whoever happens to be right) is not some meaningless point of idle theological debate! Are we under the curse of God? Have we violated His Word? Have we presumed (in our own human wisdom) to add to His own Word?

II. Let's take our discussion a step further now by talking about the Apostles and the issue of tradition. The reason it's necessary to do this is that many of the contemporary polemicists for returning to Rome, I think, have confused the people of God by appealing to passages in the New Testament that speak about tradition, and then just letting it be assumed (or wanting people to take for granted) that when the New Testament speaks of tradition, it means tradition in the sense of the Roman Catholic (or Eastern Orthodox, whichever you want to pick) way of understanding tradition. There will be found in your English translations of the New Testament verses that talk about tradition as authoritative. And I'd like to now to take a look at that so you understand it properly, and especially if you see it in light of our first premise that we are not in our Christian faith to follow the dogmas that are rooted in human wisdom. The New Testament approach to tradition is not the approach to tradition of the Roman Catholic Church!

So where should we begin? How about with Hebrews 1, verses 1-2, for the author of that epistle tells us that in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways — but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son! The author of Hebrews makes it clear that the epitome of God's revelation is found in the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He has spoken to us in these last days by His Son! That is the high point, the apex of all of God's revelatory manners and means. Jesus Christ is the highest revelation, the clearest revelation of God because obviously Jesus is God Himself. The grandest expression of God's Word is found in the very person of Jesus, who John the Apostle, in John 1:1 and in Revelation 19 calls "the Word of God." Jesus is "the Word of God," he is the highest expression, the clearest, fullest expression of Who God is to us as men!

And how do we know about Jesus? Jesus isn't on earth now, revealing Himself to men in the way that He did to Matthew, John, and the others. How do we know about Jesus today? Well, what we know about Christ is dependent upon the written word of the Gospels, the Gospels that were written by men like Matthew and Luke and Mark and John. Jesus commissioned certain men to act as His authorized representatives, i.e.,

Jesus delegated to certain men the right to speak for Him. They had His ‘power of attorney’ (if I can use the legal expression). In fact, that is very close to what the word ‘apostle’ meant in the days of the New Testament. The apostle of a man was considered the man himself in a court of law. The apostle could speak for that man, and the words spoken by the apostle was legally accounted to be the word of the one that commissioned him!

Now in John 14:26 we see that Jesus inspired the Apostles with His Word. John 14:26, “But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you.” (ASV) Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would be given so that the Apostles will have brought to their remembrance all that Jesus taught, i.e., Jesus wants to pass on to the world through the Apostles not their wisdom, not their insight, but His own Word! Jesus, remember, is the high point of God’s revelation. Jesus turns to the Apostles and says, “The Spirit will bring to your mind everything that I have taught.”

In Matthew 10:40, Jesus explains the concept of an apostle known well in that day when He said, “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.” (NKJV) Jesus was sent by the Father, and Jesus turns and sends the Apostles into the world. And He says “the person who receives you (as My apostle) in fact receives Me; and in so doing, receives the Father Who sent Me!” So you see that the Apostles were spokesmen for Christ, authorized to speak His Word, not their own, but to have brought to their remembrance what He had taught. The Bible tells us that what the Apostles spoke they did not speak by flesh and blood. They did not speak according to human instruction. But rather they spoke by the revelation of the Father and the Son!

Think of Peter’s magnificent testimony to Jesus in Matthew 16:17. Jesus says, “Who do you say that I am?” — he’s heard the Gallup Poll results of what people in the culture are saying, but He wants to know about His most intimate followers — “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter, speaking for the Apostles, says, “You are the Christ; You’re the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” To which Jesus responds with the commendation, “Peter, flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My

Father Who is in heaven.” “You know this, not by human wisdom, not by human reasoning; you know this by the revelation of God the Father!”

Or if you look at Galatians 1:11-12 you will see that Paul himself is jealous for the truth of the gospel and what he has taught precisely because it is not his word, but the Word of Jesus Christ! Galatians 1:11-12, “For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man. For neither did I receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came to me through revelation of Jesus Christ.”

(ASV) Boy, we just see this everywhere in the New Testament, not man but God — not man but God! Paul says this is not a revelation that came to me from man, but it came to me from Jesus Christ Himself.

The Father and Jesus Christ revealed the Word to Apostles — and they are taught by the Holy Spirit (as John 14:26 tells us) that Jesus would give the Spirit to lead them into all truth and remind them what He had taught. And the Bible tells us it’s in virtue of this revelatory work of the Apostles — as they reveal the Father and the Son in the power of the Spirit — it’s in virtue of this revelatory work that Christ builds His Church upon the foundation of the Apostles. When Peter makes his grand confession that Jesus is the Messiah, He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus then names him ‘Peter’ — and He says, “Upon this Rock, I will build My Church!” Upon the Rock? What Rock? Well, I know that it is popular among some Protestants to teach that Jesus was referring to Himself. And there’s some reason to think that because God is considered “the Rock,” and in the Bible Jesus has taught that the wise man builds his house upon “the Rock,” which are the very Words of Jesus — there would be some New Testament support for that kind of imagery! But there is not much support for that in the text itself. If Jesus says, “You are Peter (masculine form of ‘Rock’) and upon this Rock I will build My Church,” where ‘this Rock’ refers to Jesus, you almost have to be there to understand it! Because there you have Jesus saying, “And you are Peter, you are Rock, and upon this Rock (now pointing back to Himself) I will build My Church,” and that’s just too much exegetical gymnastics, I think, to be a satisfactory interpretation.

Jesus does build the Church upon — well, should we say Peter because that sounds personal! It can't be Peter as a person — and how do you know that? Because if you read on in just a few verses Jesus calls Peter 'Satan'! He says, "Get thee behind Me Satan!" So if Roman Catholics want to interpret that passage as referring Peter personally, and they're going to take the whole paragraph into account where Jesus later calls Peter 'Satan', then I guess we're left with the conclusion that the Church is built upon the foundation of Satan! Now that isn't going to work either.

Well then, what is 'the Rock' upon which the Church is built? Well, I think it's (1) important that you realize that Peter was speaking for all of the Apostles. This wasn't just one man's opinion! Jesus said, "But who do you (plural) say that I am? Not, "Who do you (singular, Peter) say that I am?" And Peter now speaks for the you plural and gives the answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!" As Peter represents the confessing Apostles, Jesus builds His Church upon Peter and the others. But Peter, as a person, can just as much be Satan when he departs from the Word of God, and later receives the rebuke from Jesus! And so Jesus builds His Church upon the confessing Apostles. I think that support for that interpretation will be found in Ephesians 2:20 where Paul says (speaking of the household of God) that it's built upon "the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone." (ASV) There's a sense in which the Church then is built upon the foundation of the Apostles as they confess Christ truly and faithfully... as they bring the Word of God... as they are the authorized spokesmen for Jesus, then they provide the foundation for the Church.

And now this teaching of the Apostles was received as a body of truth which was a criteria for doctrine and for life in the Church of Jesus Christ. The teaching of the Apostles was received as a body of truth that was the standard for doctrine and for life. To make my point here, let me just refer to what the Apostles had as the truth. Now this truth comes from God (we've already seen that it's a revelation of the Father and the Son and the power of the Spirit) — this truth from God (I'm saying) was the standard for doctrine and life in the early days of the Church.

I don't think anyone has any problem with that, at this point. But the question is: how did the Church come to know this Truth? How did the Church, in its earliest days, learn of the apostolic truth from God? How did they come into contact with this body of dogma that the Apostles had every right and authority to communicate to God's people? Well, we know that the body of truth was 'passed down' to the Church and through the Church. And because it was 'passed down' from the Apostles, it was often called "that which was delivered" or "the deposit".

See, the truth gets 'passed down' to the Church! And because it's "passed down" or "handed over" — the Greek word *paradosis* is used which means "to hand over" — it can be translated "the deposit," "that which is given by hand," that which is communicated from one person to another. And that is translated into English often as "the tradition," that which is entrusted, that which is deposited, that which is delivered. Or as I've said, handed over or committed to another, the tradition. The Apostles have the truth from God and they hand it over to the Church. They deliver it to the Church. And that comes to be called the 'tradition'! The 'tradition' is just the truth that the Apostles teach as a revelation from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now what does the New Testament tell us about this 'tradition'? Let's look at a few verses together here for a few moments. Turn in your Bibles please to II Timothy 1:13 and 14. II Timothy 1:13, Paul says, "Hold the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee guard through the Holy Spirit which dwelleth in us." (ASV) Here Paul speaks of the 'deposit' — that which has been committed unto him — the 'deposit' that he has received, he passes on and he says is to be guarded! The Apostolic 'deposit' then is the pattern of sound words for the Church. Notice that? "Hold the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee" — that 'deposit', that 'pattern of sound words' that is the system of doctrine ('pattern of sound words'), that system or network of healthy truth and teaching, the 'pattern of sound words', is the Apostolic deposit.

In I Timothy 6:20-21, we learn that this is to be guarded: “O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee, turning away from the profane babblings and oppositions of the knowledge which is falsely so called; which some professing have erred concerning the faith.” (ASV) The pattern of sound words, the deposit of the Apostles, is to be guarded. People put their faith in jeopardy when they do not! Timothy is warned by Paul that some people professing to know the truth have erred concerning the faith because they haven’t guarded the Apostolic deposit.

Indeed, the Apostolic deposit, “the pattern of sound words,” passed to the Church by the Apostles was the standard for Christian life — look at II Thessalonians 3:6 — “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us.” (ASV) Here the English word ‘tradition’ is used — “that which was delivered from us and you received” — if any brother departs from that, then you’re to withdraw yourselves from him! That is the standard for Christian living: “the pattern of sound words” delivered by the Apostles to the Church and received by the Church.

Look at II Peter 2:21, “For it were better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered unto them.” To turn away from that which has been delivered by the Apostles is a horrible thing to do! It’d be better that you never knew the truth than you should reject it after the Apostolic deposit has been received.

And moreover this ‘pattern of sound words’ which is to be guarded as the standard for Christian living is to be the standard for all future teaching in the Church — II Timothy 2:2, “And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” The Apostles have a truth (a body of truth, a ‘pattern of sound words’) received from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — they pass it on to the Church. And the Church is to guard that Apostolic pattern of sound words — they are to mark off as heretics those who depart from it! They are to use that as the standard for all future

teachers in the Church.

What is this tradition? Is it the holy tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church? Is it the tradition of the popes in the Roman Catholic Church? No, it is the Apostolic tradition that truth which they have received from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit! Can you not see that? It should be obvious in the reading of Scripture unless you go to the Bible trying to make it prove some preconceived idea! That tradition, the deposit, that which is handed over or delivered is not Church tradition, papal tradition — it's rather the pattern of sound words taught by the Apostles. And they teach that on the basis of revelation from God the Father.

Now, we have to ask the next question. We know what the truth is (it's the deposit). We know why it's called tradition (because it's 'passed on' to the Church and through the Church). Now the question is: how was it passed? In what form was it passed to the Church? And to answer that let's turn in our Bibles to II Thessalonians 2:15. Paul says, "So then, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours." Paul says, "Stand fast in the traditions," that is, what the Apostles have delivered, handed over to the Church! Stand fast by that pattern of sound words, the truth, the deposit that they have from God to give to God's people. Stand fast by it! And how did the Church learn about this deposit? How did the Apostles hand it over or deliver it? Well, Paul tells us right here. They did it not only by word but by epistle, by letter, by writing (if you will). "So then, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours."

And so what I want to say is the truth was passed to the Church orally and in writing. In two ways that same deposit (or pattern of sound words) came to the Church. Is there any hint at all in this verse that what Paul means is part of the tradition came orally and part of the tradition came in writing — so make sure you keep the two of them together so you get everything? Is there any hint of that? It's just the traditions; it's just the deposit; it's just the pattern of sound words that is communicated in two different ways! Paul doesn't suggest that one or the other supplement the opposite. He simply says guard the traditions — and you received them in writing and you received them orally!

Now why am I stressing this point? Because, you see, Roman Catholics maintain that if you only keep to the Written Apostolic Tradition, you haven't got the whole Word of God! You've got to have the Oral Apostolic Tradition as well. Well, there's just a huge logical fallacy involved in that thinking! Because Paul doesn't say, "Make sure you hold on to the oral traditions and to the written traditions," does he? He says, "Hold fast to the traditions whether you heard them orally or in writing." Can you see the difference there? Do you have one thing that comes to the Church in two ways? Or do you have two things that come to the Church?

If I might schematize the two different positions here, and what I have been arguing is that Paul says the Apostolic traditions are the pattern of sound words that govern the Church. And the Church, in that day, learned of them both orally and in writing, because there's no suggestion when Paul says that there's an oral aspect to the teaching and a written aspect, and you've got to make sure you keep the two together. And I'm emphasizing this because this is the favorite verse of contemporary Roman Catholic apologists where they try to prove that God's people today must have oral tradition as well, because it says right here that you're to hold fast to those traditions whether by word or epistle of ours.

And the answer to that, first of all, is that if you have it in either form you've got the 'pattern of sound words'. But more than that, why is it that the truth could be passed through the Church orally and that would be binding on the Church? It's because the one who was speaking this word had Apostolic authority! Remember Jesus said, "He who receives you receives Me!" So when the Apostles went to various congregations and taught, that was to be received as the very Word of Jesus Christ Himself. When the Apostles speak the Word of Christ, then that binds the Church.

But how about other teachers? Is their oral teaching authoritative in virtue of it being oral? Do they carry Apostolic authority? How about Dr. Bahnsen? Many of you (I'm happy to say) have some regard for my teaching; you have a desire to learn and you invite me here to have this nice conference, and dinner with you and so forth... What if I were to stand up here and say, "I want you to believe what I'm teaching you because I say it?" Do I have the right to do that? God forbid! And you

wouldn't flatter me if you say, "You know, I think you're right because you're so smart, or you're Greg Bahnsen, or you're a minister in the OPC," or whatever it is, "therefore I'm going to believe it!" That's not flattery! I have no right, and you aren't under any obligation to receive my oral teaching just because it's me speaking. I don't have Apostolic authority. Paul, on the other hand, did! John, on the other hand, did! And when they taught orally, that was the truth passed down from God to the Church.

Now when contemporary Roman Catholic apologists look at II Thessalonians 2:15 and say, "We're bound to follow the traditions, oral as well as written," my response to that is not only are oral and written two different ways of saying the same thing; but my response to that is simply, I'm under obligation to listen to the oral teaching of the Apostles; you're absolutely right, and they're not around any more! And you know, catch up with what's happening in the Church, friend — we don't have Apostles today! Where do you get the idea — even on your misreading of this verse — where do you get the idea that the authority of the Apostles in oral instruction has passed on to other people?

Well of course, those of you familiar with the Roman Catholic Church know that they have something of an answer to that. However, I've never known a Roman Catholic to think that their answer to that question was based on biblical exegesis. They believe that the tradition of the Apostles (or the authority of the Apostles) can be passed through the office, particularly, of the vicar of Christ on earth, the pope, and the pope has been ordained by previous popes ordained by previous popes, the vicar of Christ, the deputy of Christ on earth. The problem is, that's not biblically founded! And that's the closest they would be able to show that the authority of the Apostles continues in the Church.

But you see, the authority of the Apostles continues in the Church not by their oral instruction — that should be obvious; the Apostles are dead! The authority of the Apostles continues in the Church through their teaching, through the deposit that they have passed to the Church. And the only way in which we now receive that deposit is in writing. The Apostles are dead! They don't orally instruct us! But what they taught continues in their

writings, in the Scriptures, which we take as the standard of our faith.

Indeed, in the NT, what the Apostles wrote was to be accounted as the very Word of God. Look at I Corinthians 14:37, “If any man thinks himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord.” And indeed, what the Apostles wrote was not only accounted as the very Word of God, their written epistles came to have for the Church the same authority as what Peter called “the other Scriptures.” Look at II Peter 3:16! Peter’s talking about “our beloved brother Paul,” and he says, “as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; wherein are some things hard to be understood, which the ignorant and unstedfast wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.” Peter puts the writings of Paul in the same category as “the other Scriptures” (that would be the OT). Paul and what he writes has the same authority as did the Old Testament for God’s people in that day! There is no continuing supply of new Apostolic oral instruction! But in the Scriptures, written by the Apostles, we find the same authority, the same inspired Word of God as the Old Testament for us. Beyond the first generation of the Church, after the Apostles passed away, the authority of the Apostles was found in their written word in the objective testimony that they left the Church, not in their subjective personal instruction. Because the office of Apostle and the gifts which accompany the ministry of the Apostles were intended to be temporary, they were confined to the founding of the Church.

The office of Apostle is not a continuing office in the Church! To be an Apostle it was required to be a witness of the resurrected Christ as we see in Acts 1:22 — also reflected in Paul’s defense of his Apostolic credentials in I Corinthians 9:1. Moreover, it was required that you be personally commissioned by the Lord Himself which is what Paul claims in Galatians 1:1, that He is an Apostle not by the Word of men but by revelation of Jesus Christ! The Apostles were those who were witnesses of the resurrected Christ and personally commissioned by Him. And thus the Apostolic office was restricted to the first generation of the Church. Paul considered Himself “the least” (perhaps translated “the last”) of the Apostles in I Corinthians 15. And Paul’s personal successor Timothy is

never given that title in the New Testament. And so in the very nature of the case, Apostolic revelation did not extend beyond the Apostolic generation. It never extended beyond the foundational days of the Church! Ephesians 2:20 says the Church is founded upon the Apostles and Prophets, Christ being the chief cornerstone. And beyond the foundational days of the Church, the foundation-laying days of the Church, there is no Apostolic revelation. And that's why when you look at Jude (the 3rd verse) you see the author in his own day — when Apostolic instruction was still current by the way — Jude in his own day could speak of “the faith” as “once for all delivered unto the saints.” The ‘faith’ here is the teaching content of the Christian faith! It is that dogma (if you will), that truth given by the Apostles through the Revelation of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Jude says “the faith” has “once for all” been “delivered unto the saints.”

About that verse, F. F. Bruce wrote these words: “Therefore all claims to convey an additional revelation are false claims, whether these claims are embodied in books which aim at superseding or supplementing the Bible, or take the form of extra-biblical traditions, which are promulgated as dogma by ecclesiastical authority.” The faith, the deposit, the tradition has once and for all been delivered to the Church! And that was accomplished in the generation of the Apostles. It is not a growing tradition. It is not a living tradition by which we mean something the pope or others can add to! It is simply the body of truth that the Apostles, having received by divine revelation, passed on to the Church, whether orally in their own day or by writing.

Now, what governs the Church today? Is it the oral teaching of the Apostles? Well, that couldn't very easily be true; the Apostles are dead (just to repeat that point). And so it has to be the teaching of the Apostles in some objective form. That means it would be the written word of the Apostles.

III. So thirdly, we need to look at the need for inscripturation—the need for God's Word to be committed to writing. God verbally revealed Himself in many ways from the beginning of redemptive history. God was not restricted to writing! Throughout the development of redemptive

history and the growth of God's people, God revealed Himself not only in writing, but through personal messengers, sometimes by personal address and appearing to people. God spoke directly to Adam; He spoke directly to Abraham. God was heard in the inspired preaching of Jonah, Amos, and Ezekiel. Christ and the Apostles engaged in oral instruction. We've already granted that that the Apostolic tradition came both in written form and oral instruction.

But that's not the only way God has communicated with His people throughout history. He's also sent His Word in writing to them. From the tablets of the Mosaic Law to the written messages of Isaiah or Jeremiah, as well as the epistles of Paul, God has revealed Himself in writing, in inscripturated form! Now this is the stuff that I want you to pick up on here. The Word of God, which was originally delivered orally, needed to be reduced to writing in order for the rest of God's people to know about it and for it to function as an objective standard for faith and obedience. Where God had spoken by personal address orally, if that was going to be a standard for the Church at large (for all of God's people), that oral instruction (as authoritative as it was in itself) needed to be reduced to writing so that it would be an objective standard that governed all of God's people... An objective standard to test the prophets who proclaimed these words... An objective standard to test later claims to revelation... To have a standard by which to compare what other alleged prophets would say... An objective standard for the establishment of a corporate body as the church and by which it could be defined in all generations... An objective standard for the better preserving and propagating of that truth... An objective standard to guard against corruption and the malice of Satan and the world who would love to foul-up the lines of communication if we're just going to depend upon oral instruction... An objective standard to communicate assurance of salvation to people against human opinions, and the way in which even their preacher or their priest might communicate God's Word to them.

God's Word needed to be inscripturated to govern His people through all generations. And so it's not surprising that this written Scripture became the standard for testing even the prophets — and this is the amazing thing — and the standard for testing the Apostles!

Now in my second point up here, I've already granted that the Apostles have authority in their oral instruction to deliver the deposit of God to the Church. And now I'm adding another dimension which (I think) is very important that the Apostles — when there was any question about what they taught — the Apostles who had the authority of Christ nevertheless appealed to inscripturated revelation as the basis for what they taught.

In the Old Testament, the word of false prophets was exposed by the previously inscribed Law. Deuteronomy 13:1-5 says if any prophet comes and teaches contrary to what's been revealed before that that prophet is to be executed. That prophet presumes to speak for himself and he says something contrary to what is already written down in the Law. In Isaiah 8:20 we read, "To the Law and to the Testimony!" That didn't mean to the oral testimony; it meant to the written inscribed testimony of God's prophets and the Law which was already there in writing.

Even our Lord Jesus Christ, when not appealing to His own inherent authority, clinched His arguments with His opponents by saying, "It stands written!" or "Have you not read" in the Bible? He said, "Ye search the scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life; and these are they which bear witness of me." John 5:39 (ASV) In Jesus' day, Jesus acknowledges that the appropriate approach to salvation was to search for it in the Scriptures! And you know, that in Jesus' day, the scribes had about as much authority as has ever been given to human tradition. And yet, Jesus pointed them to the Scriptures, not to the oral tradition, not to the authority of the scribes, but to the Scriptures. And then He said, "The Scriptures bear witness of Me!"

In the New Testament, the "spirit of error" was to be identified by comparing whatever the prophets are saying to the teaching of the Apostles. In I John 4:6, the Apostle John says, "He who knows God hears us!" That's the standard; what we have taught! In I Corinthians 14:37,

Paul says, “If any man thinks himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him take knowledge of the things which I write unto you, that they are the commandment of the Lord.” And yet, even the Apostles called for the Church to test their own instruction according to the written revelation of God, according to the Scriptures which were in hand.

Why did Paul commend the Bereans? What were the Bereans doing? In Acts 17:11, you’ll read of this commendation because (he says) “they examined the Scriptures daily whether these things were so,” i.e., the things taught by Paul. Paul commends that; and he’s an Apostle! He’s got ‘Power of Attorney’ for the Lord Jesus Christ. He speaks with the authority of the Savior Himself! And yet, even with that Apostolic authority, Paul commends them, because when they wanted to test what he was saying, they went to the written Scriptures to see if these things were so.

In I Corinthians 4:6, we have what amounts to a virtual declaration of the Protestant doctrine or principle of Sola Scriptura! I Corinthians 4:6, Paul says, “Now these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes; that in us you might learn not to go beyond the things which are written; that no one of you be puffed up for the one against the other.” Paul says, “Brothers, I have applied (I’ve used a figure of speech) I’ve applied these things (I think he’s referring here “these things” about pride in men, or in their ministries) — I’ve applied these things to myself and to Apollos for your benefit in order that you might learn by us,” the saying, “not to go beyond the things which are written.

Isn’t that amazing? Here’s Paul (long before Luther, long before Calvin, long before the controversy in the late 20th century) saying, I want you to learn the meaning of this, “Not to go beyond the things which are written!” That you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written!” (That’s the NIV.) The RSV says, “that you may learn by us to live according to Scripture.” Or in the Tyndale Commentary on this verse, Leon Morris says, “that what Paul is referring to is a ‘catch’ cry familiar to Paul and his readers, directing attention to the need for conformity to Scripture.” A ‘catch’ cry, a popular slogan! “Not to go beyond the things written!” And Paul says I want you to learn the

meaning of that! That is an important principle for you! It is very simply the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*.

Now, let me end here by asking three, maybe four, pointed questions, or making three or four pointed observations rhetorically about the Roman Catholic Church and its appeal to tradition over and above the words of the Old and New Testament.

(1) The first question is this: What is it precisely that Rome accepts as a source of doctrinal truth and authority in addition to the Scriptures? What is it that they accept? Because, you see, when they talk to some Roman Catholics, they'll tell you, "We accept the tradition of the Church because it stems from the Apostles!" As though the Apostles orally taught something, and in every generation that teaching has been passed on orally. I don't know why it would never be (you know) put down in writing! But, it never was put down in writing; it comes down to us only in oral form. Other Roman Catholics will tell you that they are committed to tradition not only from the original teaching of the Apostles allegedly, but also ecclesiastical tradition (i.e., what the Church itself has generated through papal decree or the councils) whether the Apostles originally said it or not!

And so you need to be clear when you're talking to a Roman Catholic. What is it they would add to the Scripture? What do they mean by tradition? And then after they answer that question, we have to ask, "Well, how do you properly identify tradition?" After all, not all tradition is tradition to the Roman Catholic. There are some things which were done traditionally in the Church which Roman Catholics would say should not have been done, or which they do not consider authoritative. Not all tradition counts then as authoritative tradition! Well, how do you properly identify authoritative tradition?

And then another question, "What are the proper bounds of authoritative tradition?" Has all oral tradition now been divulged? Has everything the Apostles taught now been given to the Church? That has to be answered by Roman Catholics; or are we still waiting for this to build and build and build? Is tradition limited to what was orally taught by the Apostles? Is

every tradition allegedly something that traces back to them (the Apostles)? And then, “By what warrant, theological or epistemological, by what warrant does Rome accept this additional source of doctrine or ethical truth?”

So let me focus all of this in a challenge. (This is still part of number one here in conclusion.) My challenges to my Roman Catholic friends: give me a convincing example of some doctrinal or ethical principle which make the following five criteria. Give me an example of some doctrinal or ethical principle that is (1) not already in Scripture; (2) not contrary to Scripture; (3) based upon what is properly identified as tradition (that’s what all these introductory questions were about); (4) is necessary in some sense to the Christian life or Church (necessary); and (5) could not have been revealed during the days of the Apostles.

If the Roman Catholic Church intends to be taken seriously when it tells us that tradition supplements Scripture, then it should be able to offer an example of something that is not in the Bible, that’s not contrary to the Bible, it’s part of what’s properly considered tradition, is necessary for the Church but could not be revealed in the days of the Apostles. We have to understand why it couldn’t have been revealed in the days of the Apostles! That’s the first problem that I would give to my Roman Catholic friends. Can you even give me a convincing illustration of something that matches all these criteria?

(2) Secondly, I want you to notice the problem with the oral nature of tradition, and it’s found right in the pages of the New Testament itself in John 21... John 21 at the 23rd verse... This follows the words of our Lord Jesus to Peter about being “girded about and taken where he does not wish to go”... Verse 19 says, “Now this he spake, signifying by what manner of death he should glorify God.” Verse 20: “Peter, turning about, sees the disciple whom Jesus loved following (John); who also leaned back on his breast at the supper, and said, Lord, who is he that betrayeth thee? Peter therefore seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.” Now verse 23: “This saying therefore went forth among the brethren, that that disciple should not die: yet Jesus said not unto him,

that he should not die; but, If I will that he (John) tarry till I come, what is that to thee?"

In verse 23, we already have an indication in the New Testament of the unreliability of oral tradition. Right there, it's called down! That is not what Jesus was trying to communicate. And so secondly, you have to understand that, Roman Catholics who think they're relying upon what orally traces all the way back to the Apostles, already (in the days of the New Testament) what was orally taught was being corrupted — and testimony is given to it!

(3) Thirdly, what is a believer to do when Church traditions contradict each other? There are many traditions in the Church and they are not all harmonious. Some traditions in the church support the office of the universal bishop; other traditions denounce the office of a universal bishop (read Gregory the Great and Cyprian for instance).

What are we to do with the tradition that was alive in the early Church that said Christ would shortly return and establish an earthly kingdom? Other traditions contradict it! What do we do about the use of images as a help to worship, or a help to prayer? Some traditions in the Church endorse the use of images; other traditions in the Church condemn the use of images! If tradition is authoritative, what are we to do with conflicting traditions?

(4) And then finally, fourth, I would just make this observation: that the distinctive and the controversial doctrines or practices of the Roman Catholic Church (the distinctive and controversial doctrines, and practices of the Roman Church) are all founded solely upon alleged tradition! Purgatory, the mass, transubstantiation, indulgences, the treasury of merit, penance, the rosary, prayers to Mary, holy water, the papacy, and on and on. Those things which are distinctive to the Roman Catholic Church, you will find, that when you get into debates with Roman Catholics, they appeal not to biblical exegesis to support, but they appeal to this alleged Apostolic Oral Tradition that supposed to still be alive in the Church. And I think that's just asking a bit too much of anybody to expect that those heavy and controversial points could be founded not upon an objective Word from God (in the way that we've seen at the beginning of tonight's

lecture), but to be founded upon an unverifiable, subjectively adduced tradition that is said to be Apostolic.

Now I think that once you think about this and what the Bible has to say about authority in our doctrinal convictions and our practices — when you think about the abuses that arise, and the confusion that arises from trying to follow oral tradition — when you see that even the Apostles were tested by the written Word of God, I think that I would still like to stand with Martin Luther. I'm not willing to recant or to affirm any doctrine unless it can be shown to be taught on the basis of Scripture and Scripture alone! That's not a Protestant concoction; that, you see, is just honing very closely to the very teaching of God's Word itself! We should all learn this principle: "Not to go beyond the things which are written!"

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