

Surprised by What?

A Defense of Sola Scriptura

by Jake Magee

This article is an examination of various Roman Catholic apologist's arguments against the doctrine of Sola Scriptura as found in the original "Surprised by Truth" book.

In the book entitled *Surprised by Truth*,^[1] Patrick Madrid compiles eleven autobiographical short stories relating the conversions of Protestant Christians to the Roman Catholic faith. This book does not deal with nominal Protestant believers who, not really understanding their own religion, turn to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, it details the conversions of individuals who are presented as devote and learned Protestants, and even sometimes devoutly anti-Catholic. Despite the strong mental and emotion ties to Protestantism, these individual find various arguments and considerations strong enough to break these ties. The first question we must ask ourselves in light of such dramatic conversions is this: "What was it that changed their minds?" Of course the follow up question must be, "Do these reasons justify their departure?"

Although there are various reasons that are offered to justify their conversions, I believe that the issue of what is authoritative is one of the most fundamental to consider. For the Protestant, it is Scripture alone that stands as the rule of faith. This doctrine is known as Sola Scriptura. For Roman Catholics, Scripture alone is insufficient to aid the believer and needs the compliment of church tradition and the church magisterium. It is also the opinion of many of the authors in *Surprised By Truth* that the issue of authority is paramount in the debate between Catholics and Protestants. Bob Sungenis, for instance, remarks that as he studied the Catholic case against Sola Scriptura he "knew instinctively that the whole debate between Catholicism and Protestantism could be boiled down to authority" (117). He claims that not only does Scripture not teach that it, by itself, is sufficient as a guide to Christian living (118), but he further recounts that as he placed the notion of Sola Scriptura under close scrutiny, he discovered that the idea was "a false doctrine, a tradition of men" (117). Rather than Scripture teaching that it is authoritative over the church and her members, Sungenis "began to see that the Bible in fact points to the Church as being the final arbiter of truth in all spiritual matters" (118). If Sungenis is right, Protestantism has been dealt a fatal blow.

"If Protestantism's fundamental doctrine was nowhere to be found in Scripture the implications are devastating to Protestantism: If sola scriptura is not taught in the Bible, then it is a self-refuting proposition. As Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformers claimed, if sola scriptura is false, Protestantism, as a theological response to the Catholic Church, is likewise false, since Protestantism was founded upon the idea of the Bible as the sole infallible rule of

faith for the Church” (103).

In this article, I would like to examine the issue of what is authoritative as a normative guide for Christians. To do this, I will examine the allegation that the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is false. The reasons given to justify this assertion can be broadly categorized in two ways: (1) Sola Scriptura is anti-biblical. (2) Sola Scriptura is anti-common sense. It is my contention that these reasons fail to make the Catholic case against Protestantism.

Is Scripture Anti-Sola Scriptura?

In concert with Scott Hahn’s (a famous convert from Protestantism to Catholicism) conclusion on the topic, Sungenis believes that “far from being merely a concept with obscure or minimal scriptural support, sola scriptura is simply not taught anywhere in the Bible, either explicitly or implicitly” (103). Their counter-claim is that Scripture instead presents the position that the church is the final authority (118, 215-221). Scott Hahn elsewhere relates the embarrassment he experienced when faced with a question from one of his students during class. The student asked, “where does the Bible teach Sola Scriptura?”^[2] As a Protestant professor and renown anti-Catholic, he was stumped. He had never stopped to consider that question before. Dr. Hahn rattled a few verses hoping to dodge the strength of this question.

However, the equipped student (who realized Dr. Hahn’s tactic of dodging the question) made plain to both Dr. Hahn and the students present how the verses cited were irrelevant as a response. Dr. Hahn later recounts how the very foundation of his Protestant conviction was crumbling.

Are Scott Hahn and Bob Sungenis right when they assert that “sola scriptura is simply not taught anywhere in the Bible, either explicitly or implicitly (103)? Is one of the most fundamental doctrine of Protestantism lacking Scriptural justification? Have Protestants either missed this obvious fact, or have they intentionally avoided it? What verses do Protestants offer as proof for this most foundational doctrine? Are these passages irrelevant as a justification for the Protestants position? These are questions we now turn to.

I find the assertion of Hahn and Sungenis entirely puzzling in light of the apostle Paul’s clear testimony to the necessity and sufficiency of Scripture found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17; a Scripture that Protestants have always offered as definitive proof for Sola Scriptura. Let’s examine this passage in detail.

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness 16; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work 17” (NASB).

First of all, Scriptures are described by Paul as being “inspired by God.” The phrase “inspired by God” is translated from the Greek word “theopneustos” which is literally rendered “God-breathed.” By this Paul is communicating that the very writings were breathed out of the mouth of God. Further, the authority that Scriptures do have is derived from the verity that the very words were spoken by God.

Secondly, notice that Scriptures are “profitable.” No one in this debate disagrees about this statement. However, the text says that Scripture is profitable “for” one kind of thing “in order that” another kind of thing might be true. To put the matter formally, Scripture is profitable for x , in order that y . The variable x refers to “teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.” The variable y refers adequacy and equipping believers. It is the y that Protestants point to as a clear declaration in Scripture of its own sufficiency. Let’s look at verse 17 more closely.

Paul says that Scripture can produce believers which are “adequate” and “equipped for every good work.” The TDNT defines “adequate” (artios) as “fitted, complete, perfect.”^[3] Bauer defines “adequate” as “complete, capable, proficient = able to meet all demands.”^[4] The TDNT defines “equipped” (exartizo) as “to complete, finish, to furnish perfectly, to accomplish” (1:475,80). Bauer also defines “equipped” as to “finish, complete...equip, furnish” (273).

These definitions point to the meaning of our English word “sufficiency.” To make this issue as clear as possible, let’s define and contrast the words “sufficiency” and “necessity.” To say that one thing is necessary for another is to say that without this condition in place the desired effect will not occur. For example, water is necessary for human life. That is, water is a condition without which human life could not exist. To say that a thing is “sufficient” is to say that this condition is all one needs. In the case of water, it is necessary but not sufficient for human life (for we need food in addition to water). If it were the case that water is both necessary and sufficient for human life, than food is irrelevant.

Keeping all these definitions in mind, let’s restate 2 Tim 3:16-17:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness (16); that the man of God may be complete and perfect, furnished perfectly for every good work and able to meet all demands (17).”

The Authorized Version translates verse 17 the following way:

“That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

Now, if I say that Frank's Furniture Farm is complete or adequate to furnish perfectly my house, I mean that I don't need to go anywhere else. In other words, Frank's Furniture Farm is sufficient, or good enough; no other store is necessary. In the same way, Paul is saying that Scripture is adequate and complete to perfectly furnish the believer to live life as God intends; nothing else needs to be added. In short, Scripture is necessary and sufficient. Contrary to Scott Hahn's and Bob Sungenis' assertion that "sola scriptura is simply not taught anywhere in the Bible, either explicitly or implicitly," 2 Tim 3:16 & 17 is as explicit and clear in its support of Sola Scriptura as John 1:1-3 is explicit and clear about Christ's deity.

This is important for our discussion, for the Catholic Church says that Scripture is insufficient; something does need to be added (i.e. tradition and Church interpretation). In keeping with our definitions, Scripture is not able to meet all demands. It is through the tradition and the authority of the church that we learn what else we need in order to do good works (e.g. the sacrament of penance, confession, the Eucharist, and apostolic succession). Without this addition to Scripture, a believer cannot be furnished perfectly for every good work. As a result, Protestant believers are missing out in what God wants for them, that is, they are not fully equipped. In light of this clear exegesis that demonstrates that Scripture, by itself, is sufficient to thoroughly furnish a believer for a life pleasing to God, the Roman Catholic apologist's claim (that Sola Scriptura is a false doctrine that cannot be found either explicitly or implicitly in the Bible) must not be taken seriously.

How might a Roman Catholic respond?

Perhaps the Catholic might respond by saying that Paul doesn't state that Scripture is "alone sufficient." He might argue that Scripture is sufficient as a guide, but tradition is also sufficient as a guide. That is, Scripture is not the "only" guide available to believers. Tradition gives us instruction that either spells out doctrines which are implicit in Scripture, or perhaps it gives us revelation not found in Scripture. So a person who has tradition but no Scripture is also "complete and perfect, furnished perfectly for every good work."

To illustrate this point, one may use a compass to point to true north, or one may use astronomic markers to perform this task. Both rely upon something different in pointing to the same truth. The person using the compass relies on the magnetic field of the earth. The person using astronomical markers relies upon the earth's position relative to the stars. The one depending on the compass cannot claim to have the only way of finding true north, and vice versa. And so it is with Scripture and Tradition.

However, there are a number of problems with this line of reasoning. Firstly, when Protestants say that the Bible alone is sufficient as a normative guide for Christians, we don't necessarily mean that nothing else *could be* sufficient. For example, if Christ appears to a native in Africa who doesn't have a Bible and reveals the truths about God's kingdom, this might also be sufficient. So, when we say "Sola Scriptura," we mean that the Bible, by itself and without the addition of anything else, is good enough as a guide to the Christian life. I

don't need to know what Christ revealed to the native in Africa, for the Bible is good enough for me in America. Yet, Protestants also urge that nothing else *is actually* sufficient, for nothing else has proved itself to be the authoritative voice of God.

Secondly, this line of reasoning must be disregarded by Catholics. For this idea would mean that the Protestant would be within her rights to disregard tradition because she has something which, by itself, is able to guide her in the correct path. But this is no good, for the Catholic believes that the Protestant is missing out by not adhering to the content contained within tradition (whether it is the elucidation of what is already in Scripture, or a wholly separate revelation). That is, the Catholic is clearly saying that the compass, by itself, is insufficient. But then they must again face the clear teaching of Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. The objection collapses.

What's another route that a Catholic might take? Roman Catholic apologists have argued that Scripture is insufficient because Scripture itself clearly teaches that believers must also affirm and hold onto oral traditions (Staples 224). These are some of the passages they cite:

1Co 11:2 Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.

2Th 2:15 So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by letter from us.

2Th 3:6 ¶ Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.

2Tim 3: 14 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*;

From these passages the Catholic argues that Scripture clearly spells out that in addition to the written word, believers must also hold firm to the preserved spoken word. Both are God's revelation. This, then, I take to be their argument:

Premise 1: God communicates by Scripture.

Premise 2: God communicates by Tradition (which is God's spoken word faithfully preserved by the church).

Premise 3: In addition to Scripture, one also needs tradition.

Conclusion: Therefore, Scripture is insufficient.

If I have represented the Catholic argument correctly, we immediately notice a critical assumption that has been made. The assumption is that what God communicates in writing is substantially different from what is communicated orally. But nowhere in the texts cited do we see this dichotomy. In fact, the context of these passages suggest that Paul has the basic tenets of the gospel in mind. For example, in the verses immediately preceding 2Thess 2:15, we read

“But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth (13). And it was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (14).”

Notice that there is no mention made of doctrines which differ substantially in content from what is basic and fundamental to the gospel. In light of this, *the Roman Catholic must show that the authors of Scripture meant that the content of tradition differs from the content of Scripture*. Further, the Roman Catholic cannot appeal to the fact that the traditions which they possess differ in content from what is revealed explicitly in Scripture, for this would be viciously circular.

To turn the tables, I offer an argument that shows that the tradition which Paul speaks of does not differ substantially from what is explicitly revealed in Scripture:

Premise 1: Scripture is necessary and sufficient as a normative guide for believers.

Premise 2: If tradition contains elements which are not found explicitly in Scripture, then these extraneous elements are not necessary for

believers to hold.

Premise 3: Paul says that holding to tradition is necessary for believers.

Conclusion: Therefore, the tradition of which Paul speaks doesn't contain

extraneous elements.

As to premise one, the Catholic might protest that I'm assuming the truth of Protestant interpretation. Yet, until they provide us with an adequate answer for the Protestant interpretation of 2 Timothy 3:16-17, our assumption is grounded in solid interpretation.

Remember, the appeal to Scriptures which make reference to tradition is an attempt on the part of the Catholic to answer 2 Timothy 3:16-17. But, we have shown that this attempt was based upon an assumption which these Scriptures do not support (i.e. the content of tradition differs from the content of Scripture). As a basic rule of argumentation, one cannot launch a counter attack from an area that one has not secured. Furthermore, as a basic rule in interpretation, one should interpret unclear passages in light of clear passages. It is manifest that the passages which the Catholic cites concerning tradition are at best unclear, whereas 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is clear. Therefore, it is improper to twist the meaning of 2 Timothy 3:16 & 17 in keeping with passages which are not clear.

As to premise two, despite the attempts of Catholics to point to various typological shadows as proof that their doctrines are found within the pages of the text, the fact remains that no one approaching the text without the prior commitment to these doctrines would come away with these beliefs. For example, to find Mary's supposed sinless state symbolized by the Old Testament Tabernacle is wholly unwarranted and dangerous, for this type of hermeneutic creates a breeding ground for every cult and false religion to find his or her cultic tenets buttressed by Scripture. Again, the basic rules of interpretation guard against forming doctrines upon such speculative probing of Scripture.

As to premise three and the conclusion, it simply follows that whatever is contained in tradition is also contained in the text of Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 requires this conclusion. Additional support for this conclusion may be found in the words of Paul in Acts 17:11,

“Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, *to see* whether these things were so (11).”

Luke states that the Bereans were praiseworthy in that they eagerly checked the oral teachings of Paul and Silas to see whether or not they spoke truth. Notice that if Scriptures did not contain concepts communicated by Paul and Silas, the Bereans would have concluded that the concepts themselves were dispensable (although not necessarily untrue). Now if Catholics claim that tradition differs in substance from the Holy Writ, and Paul and Silas were communicating these traditions, then the Bereans would have been lauded by Luke for dispensing with these traditions. Or, if Luke had believed that there are oral traditions which are on par with, but not necessarily equivalent in substance to Scripture, Luke would have withheld his praise from the Bereans for their actions. Or, if Paul and Silas believed the Catholic concept of authority, then they should have chastened the Bereans for not recognizing that outside of the written text, there is an oral tradition which is equal in authority and different in substance. In this case, Paul might have responded to their efforts by saying, “you may or may not find what we are talking about in the text. But that's irrelevant because Scripture is not the only authority.” But we find no such things.

Let's say that our Catholic friends are not convinced by our arguments so far. Let us even

grant that Scripture alone isn't sufficient. With these two hypothetical concessions, one might think that Catholics have won the debate; Catholic tradition does supplement Scripture. But not too fast! Even if we were to give in, we are far from establishing the assertion that "Catholic tradition supplements Scripture." Why not "Gnostic tradition supplements Scripture?" Or, "Greek Orthodox tradition supplements Scripture?" This list grows large at the prospect of various "traditions" held by various groups. My point is that the burden of proof resides upon Catholics to show us that any one tradition can be traced back to the disciples and the Lord. That is, Catholics must show us that the traditions that supplement Scripture most assuredly come from Christ or the Apostles. But, of course, this is where Catholics reveal their true playing hand. Ultimately, Catholics believe that any one tradition is authoritative because the Church Magisterium deems it so (with or without historical verifiability). So, in some sense, Roman Catholics believe in sola-ecclesia (the church alone), for both Scripture and Traditions are defined by the Church.

How might a Catholic further respond to our exposition of 2 Timothy 3:16-17? Some Catholics have argued that the Protestant interpretation of these passages leads to a conclusion which no Christian can accept.^[5] Here's the argument:

- (1) When Paul refers to Scripture, he can only be referring to the Old Testament.
- (2) If Paul is teaching the sufficiency of Scripture, then he is teaching the sufficiency of the Old Testament only.
- (3) If the Old Testament is sufficient, then the New Testament isn't necessary.
- (4) The New Testament is necessary.
- (5) Therefore, Paul is not teaching the sufficiency of Scripture.

Putting the argument less formally, it is asserted that Paul had the Old Testament canon in mind when writing 2 Timothy 3:16&17, for the New Testament (as we know it) didn't exist. If this is the case, then the Protestants can only hold to their interpretation of this passage at the cost of the New Testament. But no Christian can accept this conclusion. We must then concede that Paul doesn't teach Sola Scriptura, but only that Scripture is necessary.

Though at first compelling, with further consideration the argument fails. So, when (1) is asserted, it is incumbent upon the one offering this argument to show that when Paul says "Scripture," he means *only* the Old Testament and nothing else. However, there is nothing prohibiting the notion that Paul had the nature of the canon in mind rather than the extent of the canon. Paul may be referring to that *which is God-breathed* without specifying *what is God breathed*. In light of this, there is nothing prohibiting the notion that Paul had the panoply of the completed canon in mind, including the contemporaneous letters written by apostles and prophets which were circulating in the churches. In fact, the New Testament indicates that there was a recognition of the divine authority of apostolic letters both by their authors and the

authors' contemporaries. 2 Peter 3:14-16 stands out as a good example:

“Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, 15 and regard the patience of our Lord *to be* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

Note that Peter includes Paul's writings with Scriptures. For Peter, Paul's writings are Scripture. So, “if all Scripture is inspired by God, and is profitable...,” and Paul's writing are Scripture, therefore all Scripture includes Paul's writings and is profitable...etc. Thus, the New Testament is not excluded from 2 Tim 3:16&17.

With this in mind, we are able again to turn the tables on our Catholic friends. First of all, for their argument to work, Catholics must show that there is no possibility that Paul could have had the New Testament in mind. But they are unable to do this, for their argument is based upon what 2 Timothy 3:16 doesn't say. Secondly, this serves as another example of where a questionable hermeneutic has been employed. Those using this argument assert that Paul can only be referring to the Old Testament in verse 16. From this premise they argue that the Protestant interpretation of verse 17 must be wrong. Yet, the hermeneutic is backwards. Verse 16 should be interpreted in light of verse 17. Verse 17 doesn't allow us to read anything other than the sufficiency of Scripture. However, verse 16 does allow us to read in something in addition to the Old Testament. Their interpretation of verse 16 is a possible inference, but not a necessary inference. As such, it doesn't bear the weight that must be carried. Thirdly, it is this very possibility that allows for the Protestant to secure a persuasive counter to this argument. In this light I offer my counter argument:

- (1) Scripture is necessary and sufficient as the normative guide for Christian living.
 - (2) When referring to Scripture, Paul may mean either
 - (a) the Old Testament only
 - (b) or both Old and New Testament.
 - (3) If Paul is teaching the sufficiency of the Old Testament only, then the New Testament isn't necessary..
 - (4) The New Testament is necessary.
 - (5) Therefore, Paul means that (b) both the Old and New Testament are sufficient.

Is Common Sense Anti-Sola Scriptura?

In addition to charging that the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is controverted by Scripture itself, Catholics argue that this doctrine is further repudiated by common-sense. There are three main arguments presented by the author's of *Surprised by Truth*: 1) The argument from the composition of the canon. 2) The argument from fallible interpretation. 3) The argument from the divisions within Protestantism.

1. The Argument from the Composition of the Canon:

The term “canon” refers to the totality of God-inspired writings. The Bible is a collection of many books written by over forty different authors over a two-thousand year period. The difficult question is how did fallible people determine which books should be included as God’s word and which shouldn’t? Catholics argue that fallible people didn’t determine the canon, but that the infallible church did. Under-girding this proposition appears to be the idea which I will label the *infallibility thesis*. This idea is that in order for a person to know anything for certain, one must have infallible insight from some source. For the Catholic, the church is that infallible source. This has important implications for our discussion at hand. On this view, the church isn’t founded upon Scripture, but Scripture is founded upon the church who declares which books are sacred Scripture. Therefore Scripture is insufficient, for it requires the church for her very existence. Anything less than a perfect judgment impervious to error leaves the Protestants to place their confidence in a compilation of books which may or may not contain true “God-breathed” writings. Note the words of Bob Sungenis,

“Since the Bible does not indicate which books belong within it, and since Protestants do not believe the Church has any authority to infallibly determine which books belong and which books don’t, Protestants are left in an epistemological dilemma. Hence they are forced to the logical but heretical conclusion that there may be inspired books that should be in the Bible but were left out in error, and that there may be uninspired books in the Bible that have no business being there, but were added in error” (123).

Sungenis asserts that Protestants are left in an epistemological dilemma:^[6] If Scripture alone is what is authoritative, then the church isn’t. If the Church isn’t infallibly authoritative, then it is insufficient to guide us to truth. Yet, the church decides which books comprise the Bible. Therefore, we have no sufficient reason for believing that we have the right books to begin with. But, then how are we to base our Christian existence on a canon which may or may not

contain all of God's word?

How does the Protestant respond to this argument? First of all, Sungenis has raised the epistemological bar higher than he can jump. If he is seeking for epistemological certitude for the correct canon, he has done little by asserting that the church is infallible. For we can then ask, "what is the infallible justification for the belief that the church is infallible?" He may answer that Christ promised this in the gospels. However, this is an appeal to Scripture. If certitude is the only thing that is acceptable, even the appeal to Scripture must be discarded. For, how do we know that the gospels are accurate? Further, how do we know that this gospel belongs in the canon? It is always "possible" for both Protestants and Catholics to be wrong about this matter.

Perhaps a Catholic would give tradition as the justification for the belief that the church is infallible. However, besides the complaint that this is begging the question (for one is assuming the infallibility of tradition to support the infallibility of the church), how can we be 100% sure that traditions have not been corrupted? The same problems accompany historical evidences.

The point is that any justification that is given by the Catholic to support the thesis that the Church is infallible is a fallible justification. At the very best, he may offer reasons why it is highly probable that the church is infallible. At the very worst, he may say that the church is infallible because the church says of itself, "We are infallible." In either case, we have something short of certitude as a basis for our belief in the infallibility of the church. In other words, the problem that Catholics raise for Protestants about their doctrine of Scripture is the same one they face about their doctrine of the Church (which is supposed to solve the problem of the Protestant's doctrine of Scripture).^[7]

Secondly, though the infallibility thesis is supposed to appeal to our common sense, common sense is decidedly against it. It seems that fallible human beings can know certain things for certain without recourse to an infallible source. For example, although I'm a fallible human being, I'm able to know certain things with complete certainty. So, I know that $2 + 2 = 4$. Furthermore, I can say that my pronouncement that " $2+2=4$ " is infallible. If this is the case, we have a clear example of a fallible human being discovering and knowing an infallible truth of mathematics.

Another example can be found in the sciences. Fallible human beings are said to find or discover "laws" which are naturally unalterable. Newton discovered the truth of gravity. It would be absurd for us to insist that Newton never discovered the truth of gravity since he was a fallible human. Put differently, it's just not common sense to maintain that a scientist must be infallible to discover certain truths about the physical universe.

A further example closes the case against the infallibility thesis. Let's say that my daughter runs through the living room haphazardly and stubs her toe. She yells with a shrill cry, "I hurt myself!" There are two things that are apparently going on here. The first is that my daughter is in one mental state and not another (i.e. she is experiencing pain and not pleasure). This is a fact about both her body and mental life. The second is my daughter's *evaluation* of this state of affairs taking place in her body and mental life. Now, it seems that even though my daughter may be wrong about many things in this world (e.g. she may be wrong that you are in pain, for

you are tricking her), this is something that she can never be wrong about. In other words, when she is in pain, she infallibly know this. She cannot be wrong, though she is a fallible human being, about certain conscious experiences.^[8]

To sum up my point, if I can know for certain various truths of mathematics, if Newton can know for certain various truths about the universe, and if my daughter can know for certain truths about her own conscious experiences, it is at least possible for the church fathers to discover (not determine) with certainty God-inspired writings.

Thirdly, Sungenis' argument is simply a false dilemma. Remember, his argument is that if Protestants say that the church is fallible, then they can never be certain that the canon is correct. Hence, how can they place their sole confidence in the church's fallible determination? However, this argument assumes that God is unable to infallibly carry out his eternal purpose using fallible human beings. Yet, not only is this a logical possibility (and that's all the Protestant needs to avoid the proposed dilemma), but it's a truth unmistakably attested to by Scripture. Note the following passages:

Psm 33:11, "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation."

Dan 4:35, "But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What hast Thou done?'"

Job 23:13, "¶ "But He is unique and who can turn Him? And *what* His soul desires, that He does."

Psalm 115:3, "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases."

Acts 2:23, "this *Man*, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death."

Acts 4:27-28, "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur."

These passages clearly teach that God's infallible purpose and plan is accomplished in this world. He does whatever he pleases, and no one can stop him. Even more striking are the last two passages that clearly state that God used not only fallible human beings, but wicked human beings to accomplish His infallible and perfectly righteous plan of redemption through Christ.

The idea that I draw from these passages, over and against Bob Sungenis, is that Protestants find their certitude or confidence (in the canon) in God's providential work in the lives of the early church fathers, not solely in their reasoning which is in principle fallible. If God is able to

accomplish his infallible and righteous purpose in providing redemption by means of fallible and wicked men, surely He has the power to guide the fallible minds of the church fathers to identify what is Scripture.

2) The Argument from Interpretation:

Tim Staples relates a thorny question that he encountered as a Protestant: How can the Bible be the supreme authority when the Bible cannot interpret itself (216)? Furthermore, it was asked of Tim (who planned on going into the ministry),

[since you are fallible], “how can your interpretations of Scripture be binding on the consciences of the members of your congregation? If you have no guarantee that your interpretations are correct, why should they trust you? And if your interpretations are purely human in nature and origin, aren’t they then merely traditions of men? Jesus condemned traditions of men which nullify the Word of God. If it’s possible, as you admit, that your interpretations may be wrong-then it’s possible that they are nullifying the Word of God (218).”

This argument is also presented earlier in the book by Bob Sungenis:

“Since only an entity with the ability to observe and correctly interpret information can act as an authority, I saw that the Bible, though it contains God-breathed revelation, cannot act as a final authority since it is dependent on thinking personalities to observe what it says and, more importantly, interpret what it means” (118).

From these quotes I derive the following argument:

- (1a) The very nature of Scripture (in virtue of it being a book) necessitates an interpreter outside of the text.
- (2a) In order for Scripture to be binding, it needs an infallible interpreter.
- (3a) Therefore, Sola Scriptura is wrong on two counts:
 - i. Since Scripture needs an interpreter, it alone cannot be sufficient.
 - ii. Since Scripture needs an infallible interpreter, the Church provides what Scripture alone can’t: divine guidance.

Although premise (1a) is correct, I believe it does little to advance conclusions (i) and (ii). So let us take conclusion (i): *Since Scripture needs an interpreter, it alone cannot be sufficient.* This conclusion rests upon a misunderstanding of the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. The doctrine of Sola Scriptura doesn't mean that Scripture is necessary and sufficient *for everything*. In other words, we readily admit that even though Scripture is necessary and sufficient for *x*, it may be necessary and not sufficient for *y*. For example, we maintain that although Scripture is necessary and sufficient as *a guide to live a godly life*, it is insufficient as to whether or not *I live a godly life*. For, in addition to the guide, I must add my will. To use an analogy, a compass is sufficient to guide me to the north pole, but it is insufficient in actualizing my trip to the north pole. There are all sorts of other conditions that are to be met in the actualization of this trip. As it pertains to *living a godly life*, we don't believe in Scripture alone (we believe in Scripture + God's grace + human volition). But certainly that doesn't take anything away from the sufficiency of Scripture as a *guide to live a godly life*. In the same way, even though there is need for an interpreter doesn't take away the necessity and sufficiency of Scripture as a guide.

Revisiting premise (1a), our Catholic friends point out that it is the nature of what is written that there must be an interpreter. Though this is true, this idea is impoverished. It is only one branch upon a large tree. Recasting premise (1a) more adequately, "it is the nature of communication that there must be an interpreter." Our Catholic opponents appear to restrict interpretation to things which are written down. However, interpretation is true of things written down because it is true of communication in total. As such, it is also true of verbal communication. When my wife says, "Jake, dinner will be ready in a few minutes," I of necessity interpret that my wife means one thing and not another. By the spoken word "Jake," I interpret her to mean me, and not another person standing behind me with the name Jake. By "dinner," I take her to mean a meal not resembling breakfast or brunch. By the spoken words "in a few minutes," I take her to mean approximately 15 minutes, and not 3 minutes. So although premise (1a) is true, it fails to take into account that it is true of all forms of communication.

Let us now rephrase the first two premises in keeping with a clearer understanding of interpretation and communication:

(1b) All forms of communication (including verbal) necessitate an interpreter.

(2b) In order for any form of communication to be binding, it needs an infallible interpreter.

What sort of conclusion can we draw from these revised premises? Firstly, notice that unless the hearer is infallible, the words that are spoken by the speaker are not binding upon the hearer. But in this case, it's not only the Pope that needs to be infallible, but also the people

listening to the Pope. For the Pope either writes down or verbally interprets a passage like Matt 16:17-20 for us. However, we in turn interpret the words of the Pontiff. In other words, there is no essential difference between me interpreting Scripture and interpreting the pronouncements of the Pope. As such, if (2b) is true, then *I* must be the infallible interpreter. Thus conclusion (ii) is wrong. Contrary to Sungenis' claim that *Sola Scriptura* "is a euphemism for 'sola ego,'" in reality the reasons offered for the Catholic concept of authority reduce to very thing he labels Protestant's with (119).

Since the conclusion derived from (2b) is absurd, then by *reductio ad absurdum*, so must be premise (2b). Not only is it erroneous given the reasons just given, but notice that premise (2a) or (2b) is a derivation of *the infallibility thesis* addressed in the first argument from common sense. As such, it is equally vulnerable to the criticisms raised in that section. Since (2b) is erroneous, then so is (2a): *In order for Scripture to be binding, it needs an infallible interpreter*. The correct view would maintain that Scripture can be binding, even though the interpreter is fallible. As such, the Protestant's position stands.

3. The Argument from Division

The last argument that I will mention insists that *Sola Scriptura* cannot be true since the body of Christ has been hopelessly fragmented by the doctrine. Yet, Christ prayed that the Church will be unified. This unity consists in a visibly undivided church. But, Protestantism is ripe with division. Sungenis puts the matter as follows:

"The more I thought about it the more I began to see that the theory of *sola scriptura* had done untold damage to Christendom. The most obvious evidence of this damage was Protestantism itself: a huge mass of conflicting, bickering denominations, causing, by its very nature of 'protest' and 'defiance,' an endless proliferation of chaos and controversy" (118-119).

Sungenis further infers God's divine stamp of approval on the Catholic Church from its longevity in the face of various internal and external assaults (120). This unity is external and visible, not the kind of invisible pseudo-unity proposed by Protestants.

"The thought of a merely spiritual and invisible church composed of some sort of amorphous collection of "true believers" from every denomination, as many Protestants conceive of it, is completely unbiblical. Jesus established only one Church, not a group of squabbling rival denominations" (121).

How does a Protestant respond? First of all, the mere longevity of the Roman Catholic

Church proves nothing by itself. For example, Judaism and the Jewish people have existed for a lot longer and through far greater trials than the Roman Church. Yet, surely that doesn't argue for the correctness of Judaism and the falsehood of Christianity. So this consideration proves nothing.

Secondly, the assertion that the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is the source of division demonstrates the same misunderstanding about the doctrine we encountered earlier: that Sola Scriptura means that the Bible is necessary and sufficient for everything in Christian living. If this is what we maintain, then of course the doctrine would be disproved by reality. But, equally, if a Catholic maintains that the Bible, Tradition, and the Church Magisterium are the necessary and sufficient conditions for everything in Christian living, then this theory is also disproved by reality. For example, the Corinthian Church had all three present in their assembly. However, when Paul addressed the church in 55 A.D., it was fractured by factions (1:10). Various groups in the congregation formed in isolation to others, each one claiming to be closer to the truth. Some claimed to be of the Pauline school, others the Apollosian school, others of the Petrine persuasion, and still others claimed to be allied with Christ himself (1:12). In short, disparaging disunity.

Perhaps our Catholic friends would interrupt my argumentation at this point and insist that all three conditions of Roman Catholic authority weren't present prior to this letter. But, after the letter was received by the church, all three pieces of authority conjoined to do its work in the church. However, there are serious problems with this objection. First of all, why would Paul chide the church when they didn't have the proper tools with which to create and maintain unity? That's like commanding a carpenter to make a desk without his tools. Secondly, this objection is silenced by history. For even after Paul addressed the church in two letters, the Corinthians persisted in their sectarian ways. When Clement addressed the same church (approx. 97 AD), the church had grown worse. Sounding much like the late apostle, Clement says,

“Why are there strifes, and tumults, and divisions, and schisms, and wars among you? Have we not [all] one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us? And have we not one calling in Christ? Why do we divide and tear to pieces the members of Christ, and raise up strife against our own body, and have reached such a height of madness as to forget that “we are members one of another?...Your schism has subverted [the faith of] many, has discouraged many, has given rise to doubt in many, and has caused grief to us all. And still your sedition continueth.”^[9]

Clement continues on in his epistle urging the Corinthians to read the epistles written to them by Paul, pointing out that various parties had formed under the same roof. So, even after Paul had addressed the church, she continued in disunity.

Given these observations, if Catholics want to maintain that their tripartite view of authority is the kind that is necessary and sufficient for everything in Christian living, including unity,

and yet the Corinthian church displays a seditious disunity in the midst of this tripartite authority, should we conclude that the Catholic is wrong in their doctrine of authority? We must if we follow the line of reasoning presented in *Surprised by Truth*. However, it's simply silly to maintain that either view of authority (Protestant or Catholic) is necessary and sufficient for *everything pertaining to Christian living*. Rather, both parties should only maintain that their view of authority is necessary and sufficient as a guide for living a complete Christian life. However, both parties must admit that their position is insufficient to effect any Christian to listen, obey, and follow that guide.

So my question is this? If a Catholic can maintain their tripartite view of authority in the midst of the seditious disunity in the Corinthian church, then why can't the Protestant maintain Sola Scriptura even though all of Christendom seems to be a macrocosm of Corinth? What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Using our analogy of the compass once again, we recognized that it is sufficient for guiding us to the north pole. However, it isn't sufficient to actualize our trip to the north pole. It may be the case that though I attempt to hike to the north pole, I never make it (I might freeze to death for not wearing the proper clothing). However, just because I don't make it doesn't impugn the sufficiency of my guide. In the same way, neither does disunity by itself discount the sufficiency of Scripture as a guide for unity.

Thirdly, this argument assumes that the Roman Catholic Church is the pure form from which Protestants have deviated. However, that is the very assumption in dispute. The Protestant argues that Roman Catholicism, in official teaching, has deviated from the purest form of Christianity, as found in the New Testament. The Protestant further argues that the Roman Catholic Church, in its official teaching, is not even the same church as the one present in the Council of Nicea (325AD).^[10] So the mere assertion that the Roman Catholic Church (as it is defined in present day official Catholic dogma) is the same church found in the New Testament is presumption that must account for counter claims.

Some might protest that Protestants are asserting that the gates of hell have prevailed against the church, thus making Christ a liar. It is alleged that we maintain that there was a time at which the church didn't exist. But this is simply not true. Our claim against Roman Catholicism is not the same claim advanced by Joseph Smith about all of Christendom (i.e. the entire church had been thoroughly corrupted). We maintain that even though official Church teaching gradually deviated from its origin, there was always a contingent of people who didn't take official teaching to heart and maintained God's revealed truth. Thus, the church has always existed. Christ promised that the gates of hell wouldn't prevail, not that the gates of hell would never assault and inflict pain upon the church.

An illustration of this is found in the eleventh chapter of Romans. Paul is addressing the concern that the Jews have been rejected by God. In other words, Roman Christians thought that maybe the gates of hell had prevailed against the Jewish people, seeing that they had disobeyed God and had apparently been rejected by him. Paul responds that nothing could be further from reality. Although all visible markers pointed to a national and religious system gone bad, Paul urges that there was a contingent of people that had been preserved by grace

from this corruption. Paul points to the prophet Elijah who lived at a time when the national religion had been perverted, even to the extent of religious officials being dispatched to hunt down and kill the men and women of God. Elijah despairs of life, thinking himself all alone. However, God speaks to Elijah, "I HAVE KEPT for Myself SEVEN THOUSAND MEN WHO HAVE NOT BOWED THE KNEE TO BAAL" (vs.4). In the same way, Paul argues that God had kept and united a remnant of Jews (including himself) in grace.

The Protestant says that the relation between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism is something similar to the relation between the remnant and the national and religious system of Judaism both in the time of Elijah and Paul. Even though this position is vehemently opposed to by Rome, she will have to admit that it is possible to have a unified contingent of people who do not necessarily know each other (apparently Elijah didn't know any other faithful followers), and yet are unified by the truth even within the very institution that has gone astray. Thus, there is an invisible unity. She will also have to admit that even though there may be a great assault, true religion is preserved in the remnant (who are preserved by God's electing grace). Therefore, the gates of hell have not prevailed.

Conclusion

Those presented in the book *Surprised By Truth* give various reasons for their fascinating conversions from Protestantism to Catholicism. But of all the reasons that warrant attention, the issue of authority must serve as one of the most important in assessing the differences between Catholics and Protestants. Authors like Bob Sungenis and Tim Staples maintain that their conversions were justified in part because the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is false. They have argued that this doctrine is not found in Scripture and is controverted by common sense. I have attempted to show that these allegations are empty, and as such do not justify their departure from Protestantism.

End Notes

1 Patrick Madrid, ed. *Surprised By Truth: 11 Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic* San Diego Basilica Press, 1994.

2 The Conversion of Scott Hahn. Audio Tape. Speaker: Scott Hahn. The Mary Foundation.

3. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:475,80.
4. Walter Bauer *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*, 110.
5. This objection is derived from an internet article entitled, "Scripture and Tradition." (www.catholic.com)
6. *Epistemology* refers to a branch in philosophy that seeks to understand the nature, extent, and justification for knowing things (e.g. what count's as good or bad evidence for believing that God exists).
7. *The infallibility thesis* stems from the theory of knowledge developed by Rene Descartes (see Descartes, Rene. "Meditations on First Philosophy." Core Questions in Philosophy. Elliott Sober Englewood Clifs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995.) Those familiar with this theory realize that if it is adopted, there are only a handful of beliefs that one can be certain about (and even these are still debated). For example, I know that I must exist, for to make this statement presupposes my existence. The other beliefs which are derived from this one proposition are simple and reveal nothing about an institution who infallibly speaks the truth. Today, most epistemologists have turned away from Cartesian epistemology as a viable enterprise for human knowledge (see *Epistemology: An Anthology*. Ed. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000).
8. See Rodrick Chisholm "The Myth of the Given." *Philosophy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964, pp.261-86.
9. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., *The First Epistle of Clement To The Corinthians*. *The Anti-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Vol. 1 Chapters 46 & 47.
10. See, for example, "The Great Debate III: *How Biblical and Ancient Is the Papacy?*" A debate between James White vs. Father Mitchell Pacwa (<http://www.straitgate.com/jwmpope.ram>). See also "The Early Church Did Not Believe in the Papacy." A debate between James White vs. Gerry Matatics (<http://www.straitgate.com/jwgmpope2.ram>).

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