

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

What Think Ye of Rome—Part 3

The Catholic-Protestant Debate on Biblical Authority

NORMAN L. GEISLER AND RALPH E. MACKENZIE

1



SYNOPSIS

Traditional Roman Catholicism has always, in its official pronouncements, held sacred Scripture in high esteem. Indeed, doctors of the church such as Jerome, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas — when dealing with Holy Writ — at times sound positively Protestant. Unfortunately, Roman Catholicism has not followed their lead and has elevated extrabiblical tradition to the same level as the Bible. The authors maintain this is a serious error, having dire consequences on the practical formation of the layperson's Christian faith. Scripture itself should be the final authoritative guide for the Christian. As the apostle Paul reminds Timothy, "From infancy you have known [the] sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15 [The New American Bible]).

How should evangelical Protestants view contemporary Roman Catholicism? In the first two installments of this series¹ Kenneth R. Samples showed that classic Catholicism and Protestantism are in agreement on the most crucial doctrines of the Christian faith, as stated in the ancient ecumenical creeds. Nonetheless, he also outlined five doctrinal areas

¹ See Kenneth R. Samples, "What Think Ye of Rome?" (Parts One and Two), *Christian Research Journal*, Winter (pp. 32-42) and Spring (pp. 32-42) 1993.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

that separate Roman Catholics from evangelical Protestants: authority, justification, Mariology, sacramentalism and the mass, and religious pluralism.

Samples observed that Roman Catholicism is foundationally orthodox, but it has built much on this foundation that tends to compromise and undermine it. He concluded that Catholicism should therefore be viewed as “neither a cult (non-Christian religious system) nor a biblically sound church, but a historically Christian church which is in desperate need of biblical reform.”

2

With the first two installments of this series being largely devoted to establishing that Catholicism is a historic Christian church, it is appropriate that in the remaining installments we turn our attention to the most critical doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants. This is especially important at a time when many ecumenically minded Protestants are ready to portray the differences between Catholics and Protestants as little more important than the differences that separate the many Protestant denominations. For although the doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants do not justify one side labeling the other a cult, they *do* justify the formal separation between the two camps that began with the 16th-century Protestant Reformation and that continues today.

Among the many doctrinal differences between Catholics and Protestants, none are more fundamental than those of *authority* and *justification*. In relation to these the Protestant Reformation stressed two principles: a formal principle (*sola Scriptura*) and a material principle (*sola fide*)²: The Bible alone and faith alone. In this installment and in Part Four we will focus on the formal cause of the Reformation, authority. In the concluding installment, Part Five, we will examine its material cause, justification.

PROTESTANT UNDERSTANDING OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

By *sola Scriptura* Protestants mean that Scripture alone is the primary and absolute source for all doctrine and practice (faith and morals). *Sola Scriptura* implies several things. First, the Bible is a direct *revelation* from God. As such, it has divine authority. For what the Bible says, God says.

Second, the Bible is *sufficient*: it is all that is necessary for faith and practice. For Protestants “the Bible alone” means “the Bible only” is the final authority for our faith.

² Some Reformed theologians wish to point out that the material principle is really “in Christ alone” and faith alone is the means of access.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Third, the Scriptures not only have sufficiency but they also possess *final authority*. They are the final court of appeal on all doctrinal and moral matters. However good they may be in giving guidance, all the fathers, Popes, and Councils are fallible. Only the Bible is infallible.

Fourth, the Bible is *perspicuous* (clear). The perspicuity of Scripture does not mean that everything in the Bible is perfectly clear, but rather the essential teachings are. Popularly put, in the Bible the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things. This does not mean — as Catholics often assume — that Protestants obtain no help from the fathers and early Councils. Indeed, Protestants accept the great theological and Christological pronouncements of the first four ecumenical Councils. What is more, most Protestants have high regard for the teachings of the early fathers, though obviously they do not believe they are infallible. So this is not to say there is no usefulness to Christian tradition, but only that it is of secondary importance.

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

CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS FOR THE BIBLE PLUS TRADITION

One of the basic differences between Catholics and Protestants is over whether the Bible alone is the sufficient and final authority for faith and practice, or the Bible plus extrabiblical apostolic tradition. Catholics further insist that there is a need for a teaching magisterium (i.e., the Pope and their bishops) to rule on just what is and is not authentic apostolic tradition.

Catholics are not all agreed on their understanding of the relation of tradition to Scripture. Some understand it as two sources of revelation. Others understand apostolic tradition as a lesser form of revelation. Still others view this tradition in an almost Protestant way, namely, as merely an *interpretation* of revelation (albeit, an infallible one) which is found only in the Bible. Traditional Catholics, such as Ludwig Ott and Henry Denzinger, tend to be in the first category and more modern Catholics, such as John Henry Newman and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in the latter. The language of the Council of Trent seems to favor the traditional understanding.³

³ Henry Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma* (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1957) [section] 783, 244. From the Council of Trent, Session 4 (April 8, 1546).

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Whether or not extrabiblical apostolic tradition is considered a second source of revelation, there is no question that the Roman Catholic church holds that apostolic tradition is both authoritative and infallible. It is to this point that we speak now.

The Catholic Argument for Holding the Infallibility of Apostolic Tradition

The Council of Trent emphatically proclaimed that the Bible alone is not sufficient for faith and morals. God has ordained tradition in addition to the Bible to faithfully guide the church.

Infallible guidance in interpreting the Bible comes from the church. One of the criteria used to determine this is the “unanimous consent of the Fathers.”⁴ In accordance with “The Profession of Faith of the Council of Trent” (Nov. 13, 1565), all faithful Catholics must agree: “I shall never accept nor interpret it [‘Holy Scripture’] otherwise than in accordance with the *unanimous consent of the Fathers*.”⁵

Catholic scholars advance several arguments in favor of the Bible and tradition, as opposed to the Bible only, as the final authority. One of their favorite arguments is that the Bible itself does not teach that the Bible only is our final authority for faith and morals. Thus they conclude that even on Protestant grounds there is no reason to accept *sola Scriptura*. Indeed, they believe it is inconsistent or self-refuting, since the Bible alone does not teach that the Bible alone is the basis of faith and morals.

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

One Catholic apologist even went so far as to argue that the apostle John stated his *preference* for oral tradition. John wrote: “I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink. Instead, I hope to see you soon when we can talk face to face” (3 John 13). This Catholic writer adds, “Why would the apostle emphasize his preference for oral Tradition over written Tradition...if, as proponents of *sola Scriptura* assert, Scripture is superior to oral Tradition?”⁶

Roman Catholic apologist Peter Kreeft lists several arguments against *sola Scriptura* which in turn are arguments for tradition: “First, it separates Church and Scripture. But they are one. They are not two rival horses in the authority race, but one rider (the Church) on one

⁴ Denzinger, “Systematic Index,” 11.

⁵ [sections] 995, 303.

⁶ See Patrick Madrid, “Going Beyond,” *This Rock*, August 1992, 22-23.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

horse (Scripture).” He adds, “We are not taught by a teacher without a book or by a book without a teacher, but by one teacher, the Church, with one book, Scripture.”⁷

Kreeft further argues that “*sola Scriptura* violates the principle of causality; that an effect cannot be greater than its cause.” For “the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church, decided on the canon, the list of books to be declared scriptural and infallible.” And “if the Scripture is infallible, then its cause, the Church, must also be infallible.”⁸

According to Kreeft, “denominationalism is an intolerable scandal by scriptural standards — see John 17:20-23 and I Corinthians 1:10-17.” But “let five hundred people interpret the Bible without Church authority and there will soon be five hundred denominations.”⁹ So rejection of authoritative apostolic tradition leads to the unbiblical scandal of denominationalism.

Finally, Kreeft argues that “the first generation of Christians did not have the New Testament, only the Church to teach them.”¹⁰ This being the case, using the Bible alone without apostolic tradition was not possible.

A PROTESTANT DEFENSE OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

As convincing as these arguments may seem to a devout Catholic, they are devoid of substance. As we will see, each of the Roman Catholic arguments against the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura* fails, and they are unable to provide any substantial basis for the Catholic dogma of an infallible oral tradition.

Does the Bible Teach Sola Scriptura?

Two points must be made concerning whether the Bible teaches *sola Scriptura*. First, as Catholic scholars themselves recognize, it is not necessary that the Bible explicitly and formally teach *sola Scriptura* in order for this doctrine to be true. Many Christian teachings are a necessary logical deduction of what is clearly taught in the Bible (e.g., the Trinity). Likewise, it is possible that *sola Scriptura* could be a necessary logical deduction from what is taught in Scripture.

⁷ Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 274-75.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Second, the Bible *does* teach implicitly and logically, if not formally and explicitly, that the Bible alone is the only infallible basis for faith and practice. This it does in a number of ways. One, the fact that Scripture, without tradition, is said to be “God-breathed” (*theopneustos*) and thus by it believers are “*competent, equipped for every good work*” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, emphasis added) supports the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. This flies in the face of the Catholic claim that the Bible is formally insufficient without the aid of tradition. St. Paul declares that the God-breathed writings *are* sufficient. And contrary to some Catholic apologists, limiting this to only the Old Testament will not help the Catholic cause for two reasons: first, the New Testament is also called “Scripture” (2 Pet. 3:15-16; 1 Tim. 5:18; cf. Luke 10:7); second, it is inconsistent to argue that God-breathed writings in the Old Testament are sufficient, but the inspired writings of the New Testament are not.

Further, Jesus and the apostles constantly appealed to the Bible as the final court of appeal. This they often did by the introductory phrase, “It is written,” which is repeated some 90 times in the New Testament. Jesus used this phrase three times when appealing to Scripture as the final authority in His dispute with Satan (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10).

Of course, Jesus (Matt. 5:22, 28, 31; 28:18) and the apostles (1 Cor. 5:3; 7:12) sometimes referred to their own God-given authority. It begs the question, however, for Roman Catholics to claim that this supports their belief that the church of Rome still has infallible authority outside the Bible today. For even they admit that no new revelation is being given today, as it was in apostolic times. In other words, the only reason Jesus and the apostles could appeal to an authority outside the Bible was that God was still giving normative (i.e., standard-setting) revelation for the faith and morals of believers. This revelation was often first communicated orally before it was finally committed to writing (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:5). Therefore, it is not legitimate to appeal to any oral revelation in New Testament times as proof that nonbiblical infallible authority is in existence today.

What is more, Jesus made it clear that the Bible was in a class of its own, exalted above all tradition. He rebuked the Pharisees for not accepting *sola Scriptura* and negating the final authority of the Word of God by their religious traditions, saying, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? ... You have nullified the word of God, for the sake of your tradition” (Matt. 15:3, 6).

It is important to note that Jesus did not limit His statement to mere *human* traditions but applied it specifically to the traditions of the religious authorities who used their tradition to misinterpret the Scriptures. There is a direct parallel with the religious traditions of Judaism that grew up around (and obscured, even negated) the Scriptures and the Christian traditions that have grown up around (and obscured, even negated) the Scriptures since the first century. Indeed, since Catholic scholars make a comparison

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

between the Old Testament high priesthood and the Roman Catholic papacy, this would seem to be a very good analogy.

Finally, to borrow a phrase from St. Paul, the Bible constantly warns us “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6).¹¹ This kind of exhortation is found throughout Scripture. Moses was told, “You shall not add to what I command you nor subtract from it” (Deut. 4:2). Solomon reaffirmed this in Proverbs, saying, “Every word of God is tested. ... Add nothing to his words, lest he reprove you, and you be exposed as a deceiver” (Prov. 30:5-6). Indeed, John closed the last words of the Bible with the same exhortation, declaring: “I warn everyone who hears the prophetic words in this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words in this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life...” (Rev. 22:18-19). *Sola Scriptura* could hardly be stated more emphatically.

Of course, none of these are a prohibition on future revelations. But they do apply to the point of difference between Protestants and Catholics, namely, whether there are any authoritative normative revelations outside those revealed to apostles and prophets and inscripturated in the Bible. And this is precisely what these texts say. Indeed, even the prophet himself was not to add to the revelation God gave him. For prophets were not infallible in everything they said, but only when giving God’s revelation to which they were not to add or from which they were not to subtract a word.

Since both Catholics and Protestants agree that there is no new revelation beyond the first century, it would follow that these texts do support the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. For if there is no normative revelation after the time of the apostles and even the prophets themselves were not to add to the revelations God gave them in the Scriptures, then the Scriptures alone are the only infallible source of divine revelation.

Roman Catholics admit that the New Testament is the only infallible record of apostolic teaching we have from the first century. However, they do not seem to appreciate the significance of this fact as it bears on the Protestant argument for *sola Scriptura*. For even many early fathers testified to the fact that all apostolic teaching was put in the New Testament. While acknowledging the existence of apostolic tradition, J. D. N. Kelly concluded that “admittedly there is no evidence for beliefs or practices current in the period which were not vouched for in the books later known as the New Testament.”

¹¹ There is some debate even among Protestant scholars as to whether Paul is referring here to his own previous statements or to Scripture as a whole. Since the phrase used here is reserved only for Sacred Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15-16) the latter seems to be the case.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Indeed, many early fathers, including Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Chrysostom, and Augustine, believed that the Bible was the only infallible basis for all Christian doctrine.¹²

Further, if the New Testament is the only infallible record of apostolic teaching, then every other record from the first century *is fallible*. It matters not that Catholics believe that the teaching Magisterium later claims to pronounce some extrabiblical tradition as infallibly true. The fact is that they do not have an infallible record from the first century on which to base such a decision.

All Apostolic "Traditions" Are in the Bible

It is true that the New Testament speaks of following the "traditions" (=teachings) of the apostles, whether oral or written. This is because they were living authorities set up by Christ (Matt. 18:18; Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20). When they died, however, there was no longer a living apostolic authority since only those who were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ could have apostolic authority (Acts 1:22; 1 Cor. 9:1). Because the New Testament is the only inspired (infallible) record of what the apostles taught, it follows that since the death of the apostles the only apostolic authority we have is the inspired record of their teaching in the New Testament. That is, all apostolic tradition (teaching) on faith and practice is in the New Testament.

This does not necessarily mean that everything the apostles ever taught is in the New Testament, any more than everything Jesus said is there (cf. John 20:30; 21:25). What it does mean is that all apostolic teaching that God deemed necessary for the faith and practice (morals) of the church was preserved (2 Tim. 3:15-17). It is only reasonable to infer that God would preserve what He inspired.

The fact that apostles sometimes referred to "traditions" they gave orally as authoritative in no way diminishes the Protestant argument for *sola Scriptura*. First, it is not necessary to claim that these oral teachings were *inspired* or *infallible*, only that they were *authoritative*. The believers were asked to "maintain" them (1 Cor. 11:2) and "stand fast in them" (2 Thess. 2:15). But oral teachings of the apostles were not called "inspired" or "unbreakable" or the equivalent, unless they were recorded as Scripture.

The apostles were living authorities, but not everything they said was infallible. Catholics understand the difference between *authoritative* and *infallible*, since they make the same distinction with regard to noninfallible statements made by the Pope and infallible *ex cathedra* ("from the seat" of Peter) ones.

¹² D. N. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 42-43.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Second, the traditions (teachings) of the apostles that were revelations were written down and are inspired and infallible. They comprise the New Testament. What the Catholic must prove, and cannot, is that the God who deemed it so important for the faith and morals of the faithful to inspire the inscripturation of 27 books of apostolic teaching would have left out some important revelation in these books. Indeed, it is not plausible that He would have allowed succeeding generations to struggle and even fight over precisely where this alleged extrabiblical revelation is to be found. So, however authoritative the apostles were by their office, only their inscripturated words are inspired and infallible (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. John 10:35).

There is not a shred of evidence that any of the revelation God gave them to express was not inscripturated by them in the only books — the inspired books of the New Testament — that they left for the church. This leads to another important point.

The Bible makes it clear that God, from the very beginning, desired that His normative revelations be written down and preserved for succeeding generations. “Moses then wrote down all the words of the Lord” (Exod. 24:4), and his book was preserved in the Ark (Deut. 31:26). Furthermore, “Joshua made a covenant with the people that day and made statutes and ordinances for them... which he recorded in the book of the law of God” (Josh. 24:25-26) along with Moses’ (cf. Josh. 1:7). Likewise, “Samuel next explained to the people the law of royalty and wrote it in a book, which he placed in the presence of the Lord” (1 Sam. 10:25). Isaiah was commanded by the Lord to “take a large cylinder-seal, and inscribe on it in ordinary letters” (Isa. 8:1) and to “inscribe it in a record; that it may be in future days an eternal witness” (30:8). Daniel had a collection of “the books” of Moses and the prophets right down to his contemporary Jeremiah (Dan. 9:2).

Jesus and New Testament writers used the phrase “It is written” (cf. Matt. 4:4, 7, 10) over 90 times, stressing the importance of the written word of God. When Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders it was not because they did not follow the traditions but because they did not “understand the Scriptures” (Matt. 22:29). All of this makes it clear that God intended from the very beginning that His revelation be preserved in Scripture, not in extrabiblical tradition. To claim that the apostles did not write down all God’s revelation to them is to claim that they were not obedient to their prophetic commission not to subtract a word from what God revealed to them.

The Bible Does Not State a Preference for Oral Tradition

The Catholic use of 3 John to prove the superiority of oral tradition is a classic example of taking a text out of context. John is not comparing oral and written tradition about the past but a written, as opposed to a personal, communication in the *present*. Notice carefully what he said: “I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

and ink. Instead, I hope to see you soon when we can talk face to face" (3 John 13). Who would not prefer a face-to-face talk with a living apostle over a letter from him? But that is not what oral tradition gives. Rather, it provides an unreliable oral tradition as opposed to an infallible written one. *Sola Scriptura* contends the latter is preferable.

The Bible Is Clear Apart from Tradition

The Bible has perspicuity apart from any traditions to help us understand it. As stated above, and contrary to a rather wide misunderstanding by Catholics, perspicuity does not mean that everything in the Bible is absolutely clear but that the *main message* is clear. That is, all doctrines essential for salvation and living according to the will of God are sufficiently clear.

Indeed, to assume that oral traditions of the apostles, not written in the Bible, are necessary to interpret what is written in the Bible under inspiration is to argue that *the uninspired is more clear than the inspired*. But it is utterly presumptuous to assert that what fallible human beings pronounce is clearer than what the infallible Word of God declares. Further, it is unreasonable to insist that words of the apostles that were not written down are more clear than the ones they did write. We all know from experience that this is not so.

Tradition and Scripture Are Not Inseparable

Kreeft's claim that Scripture and apostolic tradition are inseparable is unconvincing. Even his illustration of the horse (Scripture) and the rider (tradition) would suggest that Scripture and apostolic tradition *are* separable. Further, even if it is granted that tradition is necessary, the Catholic inference that it has to be infallible tradition — indeed, the infallible tradition of the church of Rome — is unfounded. Protestants, who believe in *sola Scriptura*, accept genuine tradition; they simply do not believe it is infallible. Finally, Kreeft's argument wrongly assumes that the Bible was produced by the Roman Catholic church. As we will see in the next point, this is not the case.

The Principle of Causality Is Not Violated

Kreeft's argument that *sola Scriptura* violates the principle of causality is invalid for one fundamental reason: it is based on a false assumption. He wrongly assumes, unwittingly in contrast to what Vatican II and even Vatican I say about the canon,¹³ that the church determined the canon. In fact, God *determined* the canon by inspiring these books and no others. The church merely *discovered* which books God had determined (inspired) to be

¹³ See Austin Flannery, gen. ed., *Vatican Council II*, 1, rev. ed. (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1992), *Dei Verbum*, 750-65 and Denzinger, [section] 1787, 444.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

in the canon. This being the case, Kreeft's argument that the cause must be equal to its effect (or greater) fails.

Rejection of Tradition Does Not Necessitate Scandal

Kreeft's claim that the rejection of the Roman Catholic view on infallible tradition leads to the scandal of denominationalism does not follow for many reasons. First, this wrongly implies that all denominationalism is scandalous. Not necessarily so, as long as the denominations do not deny the essential doctrines of the Christian church and true spiritual unity with other believers in contrast to mere external organizational uniformity. Nor can one argue successfully that unbelievers are unable to see spiritual unity. For Jesus declared: "This is how all [men] will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Second, as orthodox Catholics know well, the scandal of liberalism is as great inside the Catholic church as it is outside of it. When Catholic apologists claim there is significantly more doctrinal agreement among Catholics than Protestants, they must mean between *orthodox Catholics* and *all Protestants* (orthodox and unorthodox) — which, of course, is not a fair comparison.

Only when one chooses to compare things like the mode and candidate for baptism, church government, views on the Eucharist, and other less essential doctrines are there greater differences among orthodox Protestants. When, however, we compare the differences with orthodox Catholics and orthodox Protestants or with all Catholics and all Protestants on the more essential doctrines, there is no significant edge for Catholicism. This fact negates the value of the alleged infallible teaching Magisterium of the Roman Catholic church. In point of fact, Protestants seem to do about as well as Catholics on unanimity of essential doctrines with only an infallible Bible and no infallible interpreters of it!

Third, orthodox Protestant "denominations," though there be many, have not historically differed much more significantly than have the various "orders" of the Roman Catholic church. Orthodox Protestants' differences are largely over secondary issues, not primary (fundamental) doctrines. So this Catholic argument against Protestantism is self-condemning.

Fourth, as J. I. Packer noted, "the real deep divisions have been caused not by those who maintained *sola Scriptura*, but by those, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, who reject it." Further, "when adherents of *sola Scriptura* have split from each other the cause has

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

been sin rather than Protestant biblicism...."¹⁴ Certainly this is often the case. A bad hermeneutic (method of interpreting Scripture) is more crucial to deviation from orthodoxy than is the rejection of an infallible tradition in the Roman Catholic church.

First Century Christians Had Scripture and Living Apostles

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

12

PROTESTANT ARGUMENTS AGAINST INFALLIBLE TRADITION

There are many reasons Protestants reject the Roman Catholic claim that there is an extrabiblical apostolic tradition of equal reliability and authenticity to Scripture. The following are some of the more significant ones.

Oral Traditions Are Unreliable

In point of fact, oral traditions are notoriously unreliable. They are the stuff of which legends and myths are made. What is written is more easily preserved in its original form. Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper notes four advantages of a written revelation: (1) It has durability whereby errors of memory or accidental corruptions, deliberate or not, are minimized; (2) It can be universally disseminated through translation and reproduction; (3) It has the attribute of fixedness and purity; (4) It is given a finality and normativeness which other forms of communication cannot attain.¹⁵

By contrast, what is not written is more easily polluted. We find an example of this in the New Testament. There was an unwritten "apostolic tradition" (i.e., one coming from the

¹⁴ J. I. Packer, "Sola Scriptura: Crucial to Evangelicalism," in *The Foundations of Biblical Authority*, ed. James Boice (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 103.

¹⁵ See Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 28.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

apostles) based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus said. They wrongly assumed that Jesus affirmed that the apostle John would not die. John, however, debunked this false tradition in his authoritative written record (John 21:22-23).

Common sense and historical experience inform us that the generation alive when an alleged revelation was given is in a much better position to know if it is a true revelation than are succeeding generations, especially those hundreds of years later. Many traditions proclaimed to be divine revelation by the Roman Catholic Magisterium were done so centuries, even a millennia or so, after they were allegedly given by God. And in the case of some of these, there is no solid evidence that the tradition was believed by any significant number of orthodox Christians until centuries after they occurred. But those living at such a late date are in a much inferior position than contemporaries, such as those who wrote the New Testament, to know what was truly a revelation from God.

There Are Contradictory Traditions

It is acknowledged by all, even by Catholic scholars, that there are contradictory Christian traditions. In fact, the great medieval theologian Peter Abelard noted hundreds of differences. For example, some fathers (e.g., Augustine) supported the Old Testament Apocrypha while others (e.g., Jerome) opposed it. Some great teachers (e.g., Aquinas) opposed the Immaculate Conception of Mary while others (e.g., Scotus) favored it. Indeed, some fathers opposed *sola Scriptura*, but others favored it.

Now this very fact makes it impossible to trust tradition in any authoritative sense. For the question always arises: *which of the contradictory traditions (teachings) should be accepted?* To say, “The one pronounced authoritative by the church” begs the question, since the infallibility of tradition is a necessary link in the argument for the very doctrine of the infallible authority of the church. Thus, this infallibility should be provable without appealing to the Magisterium. The fact is that there are so many contradictory traditions that tradition, as such, is rendered unreliable as an authoritative source of dogma.

Nor does it suffice to argue that while particular fathers cannot be trusted, nonetheless, the “unanimous consent” of the fathers can be. For there is *no* unanimous consent of the fathers on many doctrines “infallibly” proclaimed by the Catholic church (*see below*). In some cases there is not even a majority consent. Thus, to appeal to the teaching Magisterium of the Catholic church to settle the issue begs the question.

The Catholic response to this is that just as the bride recognizes the voice of her husband in a crowd, even so the church recognizes the voice of her Husband in deciding which tradition is authentic. The analogy, however, is faulty. First, it assumes (without proof)

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

that there is some divinely appointed postapostolic way to decide — extrabiblically — which traditions were from God.

Second, historical evidence such as that which supports the reliability of the New Testament is not to be found for the religious tradition used by Roman Catholics. There is, for example, no good evidence to support the existence of first century eyewitnesses (confirmed by miracles) who affirm the traditions pronounced infallible by the Roman Catholic church. Indeed, many Catholic doctrines are based on traditions that only emerge several centuries later and are disputed by both other traditions and the Bible (e.g., the Bodily Assumption of Mary).

Finally, the whole argument reduces to a subjective mystical experience that is given plausibility only because the analogy is false. Neither the Catholic church as such, nor any of its leaders, has experienced down through the centuries anything like a continual hearing of God's actual voice, so that it can recognize it again whenever He speaks. The truth is that the alleged recognition of her Husband's voice is nothing more than subjective faith in the teaching Magisterium of the Roman Catholic church.

Catholic Use of Tradition Is Not Consistent

Not only are there contradictory traditions, but the Roman Catholic church is arbitrary and inconsistent in its choice of which tradition to pronounce infallible. This is evident in a number of areas. First, the Council of Trent chose to follow the weaker tradition in pronouncing the apocryphal books inspired. The earliest and best authorities, including the translator of the Roman Catholic Latin Vulgate Bible, St. Jerome, opposed the Apocrypha.

Second, support from tradition for the dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Mary is late and weak. Yet despite the lack of any real evidence from Scripture or any substantial evidence from the teachings of early church fathers, Rome chose to pronounce this an infallible truth of the Catholic faith. In short, Roman Catholic dogmas at times do not grow out of *rationally weighing* the evidence of tradition but rather out of *arbitrarily choosing* which of the many conflicting traditions they wish to pronounce infallible. Thus, the "unanimous consent of the fathers" to which Trent commanded allegiance is a fiction.

Third, apostolic tradition is nebulous. As has often been pointed out, "Never has the Roman Catholic Church given a complete and exhaustive list of the contents of extrabiblical apostolic tradition. It has not dared to do so because this oral tradition is such a nebulous entity."¹⁶ That is to say, even if all extrabiblical revelation definitely exists

¹⁶ Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Authority* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959), 68.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

somewhere in some tradition (as Catholics claim), which ones these are has nowhere been declared.

Finally, if the method by which they choose which traditions to canonize were followed in the practice of textual criticism of the Bible, one could never arrive at a sound reconstruction of the original manuscripts. For textual criticism involves weighing the evidence as to what the original actually said, not reading back into it what subsequent generations would like it to have said. Indeed, even most contemporary Catholic biblical scholars do not follow such an arbitrary procedure when determining the translation of the original text of Scripture (as in *The New American Bible*).

In conclusion, the question of authority is crucial to the differences between Catholics and Protestants. One of these is whether the Bible alone has infallible authority. We have examined carefully the best Catholic arguments in favor of an additional authority to Scripture, infallible tradition, and found them all wanting. Further, we have advanced many reasons for accepting the Bible alone as the sufficient authority for all matters of faith and morals. This is supported by Scripture and sound reason. In Part Four we will go further in our examination of Catholic authority by evaluating the Catholic dogma of the infallibility of the Pope.

This article first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, Spring (1994). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* [please click here](#).

Article ID: DC170-3

Norman L. Geisler, PhD. was the author or co-author of more than 100 books and hundreds of articles.

Ralph E. MacKenzie has dialogued with Roman Catholics for 40 years. He graduated from Bethel Theological Seminary West, earning a Master of Arts in Theological Studies (M.A.T.S.), with a concentration in church history.

[The material for this article was excerpted from the forthcoming (at the time of publication) book by the authors titled, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Baker Book House).]

© 2022 The Christian Research Institute, April 1, 2009, Retrieved November 7, 2022.

<https://www.equip.org/articles/what-think-ye-of-rome-part-3-the-catholic-protestant-debate-on-biblical-authority/>

WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG

© 2022, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297