Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Scripture, Tradition, and Rome, Part 2
Scripture: Selected Scriptures
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Modern Roman Catholic Apologetics and *Sola Scriptura*

As we established yesterday, the official Catholic position on Scripture is that Scripture does not and cannot speak for itself. It must be interpreted by the Church's teaching authority, and in light of "living tradition." *De facto* this says that Scripture has no inherent authority, but like all spiritual truth, it derives its authority from the Church. Only what the Church says is deemed the true Word of God, the "Sacred Scripture . . . written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records."

This position obviously emasculates Scripture. That is why the Catholic stance against *sola Scriptura* has always posed a major problem for Roman Catholic apologists. On one hand faced with the task of defending Catholic doctrine, and on the other hand desiring to affirm what Scripture says about itself, they find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. They cannot affirm the authority of Scripture apart from the caveat that tradition is necessary to explain the Bible's true meaning. Quite plainly, *that makes tradition a superior authority*. Moreover, in effect it renders Scripture superfluous, for if Catholic tr adition inerrantly encompasses and explains all the truth of Scripture, then the Bible is simply redundant. Understandably, *sola Scriptura* has therefore always been a highly effective argument for defenders of the Reformation.

So it is not hard to understand why in recent years Catholic apologists have attacked *sola Scriptura* with a vengeance. If they can topple this one doctrine, all the Reformers' other points fall with it. For under the Catholic system, whatever the Church says must be the standard by which to interpret all Scripture. Tradition is the "true" Scripture, written in the heart of the Church. The Church--not Scripture written in "documents and records"--defines the truth about justification by faith, veneration of saints, transubstantiation, and a host of other issues that divided the Reformers from Rome.

To put it another way, if we accept the voice of the Church as infallibly correct, then what Scripture says about these questions is ultimately irrelevant. And in practice this is precisely what happens. To cite but one example, Scripture very plainly says, "There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Nonetheless, the Catholic Church insists that Mary

is her Son's "co-mediatrix." And in the eyes of millions of Catholics, what the Church says is seen as the final and authoritative Word of God. First Timothy 2:5 is thus nullified by Church tradition.

If Rome can prove her case against *sola Scriptura*, she overturns all the arguments for the Reformation in one fell swoop. If she can establish her tradition as an infallible authority, no mere biblical argument would have any effect against the dictates of the Church.

Modern Roman Catholic apologists have therefore mounted a carefully focused attack against *sola Scriptura*.Hoping to turn the Reformation's greatest strength into an argument against the Reformation, they have begun to argue that it is possible to debunk *sola Scriptura* by using Scripture alone!This line of argument is now being employed by Catholics against evangelicalism in practically every conceivable forum.

For example, from some articles posted on the Internet:

The Protestant teaching that the Bible is the sole spiritual authority--*sola Scriptura*--is nowhere to be found in the Bible. St. Paul wrote to Timothy that Scripture is "useful" (which is an understatement), but neither he nor anyone else in the early Church taught *sola scriptura*. And, in fact, nobody believed it until the Reformation.

The Bible nowhere teaches that it is the sole authority in matters of belief. In fact, the Bible teaches that Tradition--the oral teachings given by Jesus to the apostles and their successors, the bishops--is a parallel source of authentic belief. (Quotes from 2 Thess. 2:15 and 1 Cor. 11:2 follow).

From some books written by Catholic Apologists:

Nowhere does [the Bible] reduce God's Word down to Scripture alone. Instead, the Bible tells us in many places that God's authoritative Word is to be found in the church: her tradition (2 Th 2:15; 3:6) as well as her preaching and teaching (1 Pet 1:25; 2 Pet 1:20-21; Mt 18:17). That's why I think the Bible supports the Catholic principle of *sola verbum Dei*, "the Word of God alone," [with "Word of God" encompassing both tradition and Scripture], rather than the Protestant slogan, *sola scriptura*, "Scripture alone."

The Bible actually denies that it is the complete rule of faith. John tells us that not everything concerning Christ's work is in Scripture (Jn 21:25), and Paul says that much Christian teaching is to be found in the tradition that is handed down by word of mouth (2 Tim. 2:2). He instructs us to "stand fast, and hold the traditions which you have learned, whether by word or by our epistle" (2 Th 2:15). We are told that the first Christians "were persevering in the doctrine of the apostles" (Acts 2:42), which was the oral teaching given long before the New Testament was written--and centuries before the canon of the New Testament was settled.

And from a public debate on the question of *sola Scri*ptura:

Sola Scriptura itself must be proved from Scripture alone. And if it can't be done, *sola scriptura* is a self refuting proposition, and therefore it is false.

[In] 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Paul commands the Church to stand firm and hold fast in the traditions that they had been given, whether orally, spoken, or through an epistle of theirs. So in other words, tradition is one major category, and there are two subsets in the one category:oral tradition, written tradition. That's what the Word of God says.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

First, it is necessary to understand what *sola Scriptura* does and does not assert. The Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* has to do with the sufficiency of Scripture as our supreme authority in all spiritual matters. *Sola Scriptura* simply means that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture.

It is not a claim that all truth of every kind is found in Scripture. The most ardent defender of *sola Scriptura* will concede, for example, that Scripture has little or nothing to say about DNA structures, microbiology, the rules of Chinese grammar, or rocket science. This or that "scientific truth" for example, may or may not be actually true, whether or not it can be supported by Scripture--but Scripture is a "more sure Word," standing above all other truth in its authority and certainty. It is "more sure," according to the apostle Peter, than the data we gather firsthand through our own senses (2 Pet. 1:19). Therefore Scripture is the highest and supreme authority on any matter to which it speaks. But there are many important questions on which Scripture is silent. *Sola Scriptura* makes no claim to the contrary.

Nor does *sola Scriptura* claim that everything Jesus or the apostles ever taught is preserved in Scripture. It only means that everything necessary, everything binding on our consciences, and everything God requires of us is given to us in Scripture.

Furthermore, we are forbidden to add to or take way from Scripture (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32, cf. Rev. 22:18-19). To do so is to lay on people's shoulders a burden that God Himself does not intend for them to bear (cf. Matt. 23:4).

Scripture is therefore the perfect and only standard of spiritual truth, revealing infallibly all that we must believe in order to be saved, and all that we must do in order to glorify God. That--no more, no less--is what *sola Scriptura* means.

The Westminster Confession of Faith defines the sufficiency of Scripture like this:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men (1:6).

The Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican Church include this statement on *sola Scriptura*:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation (article 6).

So *sola Scriptura* simply means that Scripture is sufficient. The fact that Jesus did and taught many things not recorded in Scripture (Jn. 20:30; 21:25) is wholly irrelevant to the principle of *sola Scriptura* . The fact that most of the apostles' actual sermons in the early churches were not written down and preserved for us does not diminish the truth of biblical sufficiency one bit.What is certain is that all that is necessary is in Scripture--and we are forbidden "to exceed what is written" (1 Cor. 4:6).

Scripture clearly claims for itself this sufficiency--and nowhere more clearly that2 Timothy 3:15-17. A brief summary of that passage is perhaps appropriate here as well. In short, verse 15 affirms that Scripture is sufficient for salvation: "The sacred writings . . . are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." Verse 16 affirms the absolute authority of Scripture, which is "God-breathed" (Gk. *theopneustos*) and profitable for our instruction. And verse 17 states that Scripture is able to equip the man of God "for every good work."

So the assertion that the Bible itself does not teach *sola Scriptura* is simply wrong.

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