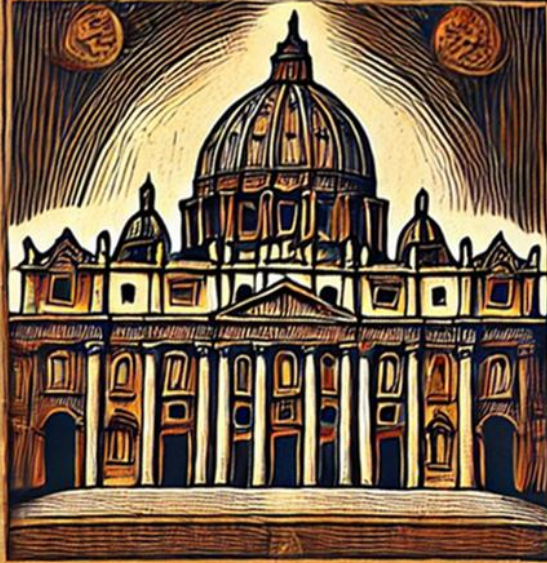


CATHOLICISM



STEVE HAYS

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Preface

Some of these categories overlap, so the topical distribution is somewhat arbitrary. That's more for convenience than hard-edged distinctions.

I. Miracles

Catholic cognitive dissonance

I'm going to comment on some statements in this article by a Catholic film critic:

<http://www.ncregister.com/blog/steven-greydanus/chill-out-about-noah>

Let's begin by recognizing that most Christians are familiar with a strictly Sunday school version of the Noah story. Children love the stories of creation and Noah's ark for an obvious reason: children love animals. These stories loom large in picture books and children's Bibles, which play up the cute animals, sanitize and smooth out the narrative, and so forth.

I've read a number of Christian reviewers make that sweeping claim. Speaking for myself, I rarely attended Sunday school as a kid. I wasn't raised on a cartoon version of the flood narrative. Likewise, many people come to the Christian faith as adults. They had no Christian upbringing.

Whatever the movie looks like, I expect some pious moviegoers, especially

biblical literalists, will be upset or angry about anything in the film that goes beyond the biblical text...

Well, Catholics are literalists when it comes to the Bread of Life discourse (John 6).

Likewise, in the flood narrative, the “sons of God” who took wives from the “daughters of men” have widely been interpreted in both Jewish and Christian exegesis as angelic spirits of some sort. Developed Christian angelology doesn’t easily lend itself to the notion of angels fallen or unfallen marrying human beings, despite attempts of some commentators to paper over the problem with theological speculation.

I think that's an anachronistic interpretation, based on reading later Intertestamental literature (i.e. 1 Enoch) back into Genesis. I disagree with that interpretation:

<http://butthesethingsarewritten.blogspot.com/2013/08/the-nephilim.html>

It has been recognized for some time that **the early chapters of Genesis**, i.e., Genesis 1–11 (the pre-Abrahamic primeval history), **represent a literary form quite different from later, historical texts.**

*In fact, Pope Pius XII in **Humani Generis** characterizes these chapters as “not conforming to the historical method” as practiced by ancient as well as modern writers, calling them instead “a popular description of the origin of the human race and the chosen people” in “simple and metaphorical language.”*

This is not to say that Adam and Eve or Noah and the flood are only metaphors for something that never happened. The pope adds that these early chapters still “pertain to history in a true sense” (“which however must be further studied and determined by exegetes”). But clearly the accounts of creation, Adam and Eve and Noah and the flood are not historiography in the same sense as, say, the Gospels. That is, they are not a record of human experiences in living memory, based directly on eyewitness testimony, interviews with eyewitnesses, and so forth. The Gospels offer historical evidence for the basic outline of Jesus’ life that even unbelievers must reckon with.

The early chapters of Genesis are different. They

describe events thousands of years before Genesis was written — events which, in some cases, no human eye witnessed. While it's possible to imagine the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah being handed down by oral tradition for thousands of years, no believer accepts Genesis 1-11 based on the trustworthiness of millennia of oral tradition. Even if the writer of Genesis saw the whole flood story exactly as it happened in a vision from God, that would make it true, but it still wouldn't be historiography in the same sense as the Gospels; it would be visionary writing.

In fact, the writer of Genesis mentions neither visions nor millennia of oral tradition; he doesn't say where his material comes from, or on what authority he has it. Historical criticism suggests that the stories as we have them incorporate material drawn from a number of ancient oral traditions ("popular narrations," Pius XII calls them). Of course, we believe that the selection and shaping of sources was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Pope John Paul II said of the story of Adam and Eve:

Following the contemporary philosophy of religion and that of language, it can be said that the

language in question is a mythical one. In this case, the term “myth” does not designate a fabulous content, but merely an archaic way of expressing a deeper content.

Following these papal sources, we should be able to say that it is not beyond the pale of Christian orthodoxy, and defined Catholic teaching in particular, to classify the Flood narrative in Genesis as divinely inspired mythology. Again, that to say this is not to say that there was no flood or no Noah. It is simply to say that the writer of Genesis did not have the kind of historically verifiable access to the events he was writing about that pertains to writers of history.

i) To say Gen 1-11 is metaphorical rather than historical is a rearguard action. That reflects the triumph of modernism in contemporary Catholicism. It's certainly not the traditional view of Gen 1-11.

ii) Scholars who deny the historicity of Gen 1-11, or treat it as metaphorical, don't suddenly view the rest of the Pentateuch as historical. Scholars who take that view of Gen 1-11 don't think the patriarchal narratives, or Exodus, or wilderness account, constitute a record of human experiences in living memory, based directly on eyewitness testimony, interviews with eyewitnesses.

By the same token, Catholic NT scholars like Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, John Meier, and Luke Timothy Johnson, are fairly skeptical about the historicity of the Gospels. They spend a lot of time trying to sift the historical residual from the legendary embellishments—as they see it.

iii) But here we also witness a profound tension in modern Catholic piety. For instance, the same pope who characterizes these chapters as “not conforming to the historical method” as practiced by ancient as well as modern writers, calling them instead “a popular description of the origin of the human race and the chosen people” in “simple and metaphorical language,” also said:

we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus_en.html

Likewise, the same pope who said "the language in question is a mythical one...an archaic way of expressing a deeper content" also commissioned a new catechism, which his successor had a leading role in editing. That document makes claims such as:

The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man. In fact, Christ's birth "did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it." ⁽⁴⁹⁹⁾.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p122a3p2.htm

When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism. Jesus performed exorcisms and from him the Church has received the power and office of exorcizing. In a simple form, exorcism is performed at the celebration of Baptism. The solemn exorcism, called "a major exorcism," can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop. The priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church. Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted to his Church (1673).

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c4a1.htm

In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained" (1374).

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a3.htm

John-Paul II was devotee of Fatima:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html

This raises an interesting question. Why not interpret "Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth" as mythical or metaphorical language? Why not interpret demonic possession and exorcism as an archaic way of expressing a deeper content? Why not interpret the claim that "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained*" in a wafer as mythical or metaphorical? Why not treat the Assumption of Mary as a metaphor? Why not treat Marian apparitions like Fatima as mythical or metaphorical?

Devout Catholic intellectuals are by turns skeptical and superstitious. Rationalistic and fideistic.

Catholic miracles

A cessationist objection to modern miracles is that once we allow for modern miracles, we can't screen out Catholic miracles. Since miracles attest doctrine, God won't answer Catholic prayers.

There are several problems with that objection:

- i)** First of all, it doesn't seem fair to treat all Protestant miracles as suspect just to preempt Catholic miracles.
- ii)** The objection sounds admirably uncompromising. Seems to erect a thick high wall against Rome.

Unfortunately, the wall has a backdoor. Unintentionally, this is a standing invitation for Protestants to convert to Rome. Practically dares them to convert to Rome. For if miracles attest doctrine, then it only takes one Catholic miracle for the wall to become a portal to Rome.

What starts out like firm opposition to Rome actually poises the Protestant right on the tipping-point of conversion to Rome. A single Catholic miracle will be a wholesale defeater for Protestant theology. You could hardly have a more unstable position.

- iii)** A cessationist fallback is to allow for the possibility that a Catholic prayer might be miraculously answered, but attribute the source to the dark side. But although that explanation is worth considering in its own right, it succeeds by forfeiting the original premise. The miracle loses its evidentiary value as a witness to doctrine.

- iv)** Why might God answer a Catholic prayer?

Consider this. Every Protestant of Anglo-European extraction is descended from Roman Catholics, going back

to our pre-Reformation forebears—or sooner.

That was an age of high infant mortality. Modern medicine didn't exist. Other than folk remedies, which were often ineffective or positively harmful, prayer was the only recourse. And when a medieval parent prayed for a sick child, that's going to be a prayer to the Virgin Mary or St. Jude.

So the question is, would God ever answer the prayer of a Medieval mother or father, pleading for the life of a sick child? If you say no, then you're taking the position no Protestant of Anglo-European descent was the beneficiary of God answering the prayer of a Catholic ancestor, going back scores of generations.

If, in fact, God answered the prayer, it wasn't to validate Catholic dogma, or attest the cult of the saints . Rather, it's so that hundreds of years down the line, you and I would exist today. God healed your great-great-great forebear with you in view. It was a way of creating Protestants! A delayed reaction.

It's not the Virgin Mary or St. Jude who answered the prayer, even if it was directed at one of them, but God.

And it doesn't stop with medieval Catholicism. Before there were Catholics, there were pagans. Every Christian today is the descendent of pagans. And that includes Christians of every ethnic group.

So the question is whether God ever answered the prayer of a pagan parent, interceding for a sick child. Take Samson Occom, the great Mohegan missionary. He's a direct descendent of heathen Indians. Or take Abraham, a direct descendent of moon-worshippers.

Consider their linear ancestors, many of whom were deathly ill as children. Did God never answer the prayer of their

desperate parents? Or were all their lineal descendants preternaturally healthy?

v) Someone might object that if God ever answered a pagan prayer, that would validate paganism in the mind supplicant. To that objection, I'd say two things:

a) Before Christian missionaries began evangelizing the pagan world, pagans were going to practice their pagan faith regardless of God answering or not answering any of their prayers.

b) In addition, cessationists do make allowance for the possibility that witchdoctors have real power. They attribute that power to the dark side.

But if a sick child is healed by a witchdoctor instead of God, that will still be taken to validate paganism. Whether God answers the prayer, or permits a demonic miracle, the pagan parent or heathen onlookers will still credit that to their false gods. If that's a problem, cessationism isn't the solution. It just relocates the problem.

Anthony, don't pray for me

I'm somewhat hesitant to comment on this post:

<http://www.thecatholicthing.org/2015/05/21/st-anthony-pray-for-us/>

It's a sensitive, personal issue. However, Beckwith put it out there for public consumption. And it contains an implicit Catholic apologetic (i.e. a Catholic miracle confirms Roman Catholic theology). Moreover, I've waited three months.

So what are we to make of this?

i) On one interpretation, this is a minor miracle. Too timely and unlikely to be sheer coincidence. And, by implication, this validates the Catholic cult of the saints.

ii) I have reservations about explaining this naturalistically. That might seem like special pleading. Would I do the same in case of Protestant answered prayer?

iii) That said, there's nothing inherently wrong with evaluating a theological claim by theological criteria.

iv) And even if we consider this miraculous, does it support Catholic dogma? To begin with, there's a certain irony: Beckwith prays to the patron saint of cancer patients on behalf of a cancer patient, who nevertheless dies shortly thereafter. How does that validate St. Anthony's reputation as a long-distance healer? If the patient was cured, that would be impressive. But since the patient succumbed, that hardly furnishes supporting evidence for Anthony's reputation.

It's like "evidence" for global warming. If there's a warming trend, that's evidence for global warming—but if there's a cooling trend, that's consistent with global warming. Whether it's wetter or drier, that's evidence for global warming.

If either outcome is consistent with St. Anthony's reputation, then does anything really count as evidence for or against his reputation? Or is it just random?

v) Assuming (ex hypothesi) that it's a miracle, what kind of miracle would it be? Not like turning water into wine or the multiplication of food. Rather, this would be a coincidence miracle. A result of God's extraordinary providence.

That, however, is very predestinarian. That assumes God prearranged ordinary circumstances to converge on this opportune and naturally improbable outcome. If so, that's inconsistent with the libertarian strand of Catholic theology (e.g. Jesuit theologians).

vi) Assuming (ex hypothesi) that it's a miracle, does it validate the cult of the saints? Not unless you think the only function of a miracle is to attest doctrine. Moreover, that's offset by Protestant miracles.

vii) Assuming (ex hypothesi) that it's a miracle, it could be a case of God's merciful condescension. Giving consolation to the grief-stricken. I don't reject that out of hand.

viii) But is a naturalistic explanation special pleading in this case? How extraordinary in this incident?

On the one hand, Anthony of Padua is a very popular saint in Catholic piety. There's nothing unusual about Catholics

having medallions of St. Anthony. Odds are, that's pretty common.

If, moreover, a Catholic has been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, that ups the odds that he will turn to St. Anthony—and do so more often.

On the other hand, the fact that Francis Beckwith singled out St. Anthony requires no special explanation under the circumstances:

When my father first told us that he had cancer, I made it a point to pray for him each morning and each evening from that day forward. Although I wanted to do so by asking for the assistance of one of the great saints of the Church, who that saint would be was not obvious. After a little research, I discovered that St. Anthony of Padua was the patron saint of cancer victims.

There's nothing improbable about that. The only thing that's unusual in this case is the conjunction of these two individuals praying to the same saint. And even in that case, it's not the conjunction of independent causal chains, for the action of Francis was dependent on the condition of patient.

The combination is unlikely, but not uncanny, or even all that remarkable. It's striking enough to grab your attention, and it invites the possibility that this was miraculous. But it's not naturally inexplicable or even extraordinary.

Does Lourdes undercut the Resurrection?

Should we think that the general reliability of the early Christians who spread the Jesus story was greater or less than the pilgrims at Lourdes? I should think it would be much lower. The pilgrims are modern, educated, scientific era people. Many of them are doctors, lawyers, and scientists, people who are trained in making good decisions and being skeptical. They have the benefit of 2,000 years of investigations into the natural causes of allegedly supernatural events. The early Christians, by contrast, would have been largely illiterate, poor, uneducated. They would not have the benefit of the huge body of scientific and empirical knowledge that we take for granted.

When people take the Jesus stories seriously and make comments like, “Why would the early Christians lie?” or “what incentive could that have for making it all up?” or “how could they have perpetrated such a deception?” they are simply ignoring the strength of the tendency in the human mind to see miracles or events of spiritual or supernatural origin at every turn. We don’t need to

have a better, alternative explanation to be quite sure that Jesus was not resurrected from the dead. The reliability of the information transmitted in those stories to us is just too low.

<http://www.provingthenegative.com/2009/04/putting-odds-on-jesus.html>

Several problems:

i) McCormick is using Lourdes as a wedge tactic. The gist of his argument is: if you don't believe miracles ever happen at Lourdes, why believe Biblical miracles?

A problem with that analogy is that it's reversible. If you *do* believe there are credible reports of miracles at Lourdes, then by parity of argument, that lends credibility to Biblical reports.

I'm not saying that's why Christians should believe in Biblical miracles. I'm just responding to McCormick on his own terms.

ii) McCormick also muddies the waters by speculating on the percentages. The ratio of pilgrims to reported miracles. But that's a decoy. Atheism is a universal negative. Atheism disallows a single miracle. So the fraction, however small, is irrelevant. Even one well-attested miracle at Lourdes would be sufficient to sink his position.

iii) Likewise, raw percentages are irrelevant. You can only evaluate the claim on a case-by-case basis. The specific details in any given case.

iv) I don't have any antecedent objection to the possibility of miracles at Lourdes. For one thing, it's not as if the

Church of Rome has a monopoly on reported miracles. Moreover, I don't think the sole function of miracles is to corroborate doctrine.

v) It's not that hard to call McCormick's bluff. Stanley Jaki researched two cases at Lourdes. I find them fairly persuasive:

<http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/VOYLLOUR.HTM>

<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=2866&CFID=41997320&CFTOKEN=94565835>

Ecclesiastical miracles

In 3:114-115 of the *Institutes* (in Dennison's edition), Turretin has a compact critique of ecclesiastical miracles, as Bellarmine's 11th mark of the church. There's a lot of sound sense in his brief critique. However, it's unduly defensive.

Turretin is, of course, attempting to deflect or debunk the Roman church's claim to be the church of miracles. Unlike the schismatic Protestant sect, Rome is verifiably the one true church because she enjoys miraculous attestation. So goes the argument.

One problem with this claim—a problem which has become more manifest since the Reformation—is the fact that Rome doesn't enjoy a monopoly on reported miracles. There are reported Protestant miracles as well as reported Catholic miracles. Therefore, even if we grant for the sake of argument that Catholicism enjoys *prima facie* miraculous evidence, the same holds true for Protestantism.

Of course, this raises the question of how to sift the credibility of reputed miracles. My immediate point, however, is that Rome no longer enjoys any advantage over Protestants in that regard. Let's take a few illustrative examples:

i) Although I haven't researched the issue in depth, in Scottish church history, during the "Killing Times," there were reported miracles involving the Covenanters.

ii) George Müller was famous for miraculous answers to prayer in support of his orphanage.

iii) Pioneering Chinese missionaries like John Sung and Pastor Hsi were renowned for their reputed miracles.

iv) Both in his letters as well as his *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Cotton Mather carefully documents area miracles.

v) Most notably, Pentecostalism has spawned a vast cache of reported miracles.

vi) Finally, we have Craig Keener's magisterial survey of miracles, past and present, which is quite ecumenical in scope.

My point is not to vouch for any particular claim, but just to make the fairly obvious observation that this fixture of the traditional apologetic for Roman Catholicism now backfires. We can call your reputed miracles and raise you.

Parsing Catholic miracles

1. From time to time I discuss reputed Catholic miracles. What position should evangelicals take regarding these claims? Are Catholic miracles bogus? Do Catholic miracles accredit the Roman Catholic faith? This post makes no effort to be exhaustive. I'll give some examples to illustrate general principles.

2. There are different kinds of Catholic miracles.

i) Some Catholic miracles are attributed to Catholic saints, viz., levitation, biolocation, inedia, luminosity, stigmata, exorcism.

ii) Some Catholic miracles are attributed to dead Catholic saints, viz, Marian apparitions, incorrupt corpses/odor of sanctity, liquefaction of blood.

iii) Some Catholic miracles are attributed to Catholic objects, viz. weeping/bleeding madonnas, bleeding Host.

3. What's a Catholic miracle?

Both the noun and the adjective are ambiguous. What does it mean to be a Catholic *miracle*?

i) Bogus. Fraudulent.

ii) A genuine supernatural event.

If (ii), that's subdivisible into:

a) A divine miracle

b) A paranormal or occultic phenomenon

iii) What does it mean to be a *Catholic* miracle?

For instance, the Martyrdom of Polycarp says he was fireproof when the Romans tried to burn him alive. Assuming that's true, should that be classified as a *Catholic* miracle? Was Polycarp Roman Catholic? Or is that an anachronistic designation? He wasn't Catholic in the sense that Ignatius Loyola was Catholic, or Matthias Joseph Scheeben—much less Joseph Ratzinger.

iv) *For* a Catholic, as the intended beneficiary. If some Catholics are bona fide Christians, God might perform miracles for their benefit, just as he does for Christians generally.

v) *To* a Catholic, but for someone else. God might perform a miracle, not for the immediate effect but the long-range effect.

vi) To authenticate the Roman Catholic faith.

These aren't mutually exclusive distinctions. Some apply in some cases, while others apply in other cases.

4. Sources

The material on Catholic miracles is a swamp. There's loads of stuff on RadTrad websites, but that's unreliable. Here's some examples of more scholarly sources: Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*; Michael Grosso, *The Man Who Could Fly: St. Joseph of Copertino and the Mystery of Levitation*; Stanford Poole, *The Guadalupe Controversies in Mexico; Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origins and Sources of a Mexican National*

Symbol, 1531-1797; Jacalyn Duffin, Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints and Healing in the Modern World.

5. Naturalistic explanations

i) Consider the cult of Padre Pio. There's evidence that he used carbonic acid. If so, his stigmata might be the result of self-mutilation.

ii) To establish if bilocation happens, we need evidence from both locations to verify that the individual was in fact at two different places at the same time. A kind of reverse alibi where there are witnesses or other types of evidence to verify that the individual was at one place at the same time the same individual was at another place. By the same token, in order to ID the individual, witnesses must have a comparative frame of reference to recognize the individual in question. Finally, the sighting must distinguish between bilocation and apparitions. Do ostensible examples meet those condition?

iii) In principle, some eucharistic miracles might be staged. A homemade communion wafer with ingredients designed to have a chemical reaction that simulates blood when immersed in wine. Or actual human blood could be one of the ingredients.

iv) Catholic tropes

There are stereotypical miracles attributed to Catholic saints. Is that because Catholic saints typically experience these types of miracles, or is that a cliché motif of the hagiographic genre?

v) What happens when the miracle fails? For instance:

http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2016/12/21/san_genaro_s_blood_fails_to_liquefy_because_2016.html

6. Supernatural explanations

i) Miracles are, at most, a necessary rather than sufficient criterion to authenticate a religious claimant. That needs to be combined with other kinds of evidence.

Moreover, it can be indirect. For instance, Jesus performed miracles as well as choosing representatives (the disciples) to pick up where he left off after the Ascension. It isn't necessary for each and every disciple or apostle to perform miracles to attest their vocation as a bona fide messenger of God. If Jesus performed miracles that validate his mission, and if Jesus picked the disciples, then his action authenticates their mission. There's a kind of transference.

ii) The miracles attributed to St. Joseph Copertino include levitation, psychokinesis, poltergeist activity, and materialization of objects.

a) Even if genuine, there's nothing specifically Christian about that phenomena. That sort of thing can be paralleled in quality literature on the paranormal. For instance:

<http://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/071527.html>

b) By the same token, there's nothing specifically divine about such phenomena. If genuine, it's more like a supernatural stunt. They fail to exhibit divine wisdom, justice, mercy, holiness, and truth. We'd expect a divine miracle to have a certain dignity or fittingness. Not just be something weird or frivolous.

c) From what I've read, there's a connection between possession and levitation.

iii) Here's a programmatic text on false prophets:

13 “If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, 2 and the sign or wonder that he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, ‘Let us go after other gods,’ which you have not known, ‘and let us serve them,’ 3 you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 4 You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him. 5 But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave

the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from your midst (Deut 13:1-5).

According to that text:

- i) It's possible for a false prophet to perform genuine miracles
- ii) If it happens, that's a test of faith. Rather than finding that persuasive, the faithful are duty-bound to disregard the miracle.

That principle is reaffirmed in the NT:

For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect (Mt 24:24).

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed (Gal 1:8).

And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).

Here's another example:

13 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads. 2 And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast. 4 And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

5 And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. 6 It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. 7 Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.

11 Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. 12 It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. 13 It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, 14 and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would

not worship the image of the beast to be slain (Rev 13:1-7,11-15).

i) These are delusive miracles. Their express purpose is to mislead and to attest a counterfeit religion. A parody of the Christian faith.

ii) The church of Rome literally waged war against Protestant believers (cf. [Rev 13:7](#)).

iii) "Giving breath" to the image suggests a statue that supernaturally comes to life. Compare that to weeping/bleeding madonnas, or the crucifix of Limpias. Even if some of those reports are the real deal, that doesn't automatically authenticate Roman Catholicism. Indeed, the malevolent design of some miracles is to mimic the real deal. That's the nature of spiritual counterfeiting.

iv) I'm not suggesting that Rev 13 is a direct prediction of Roman Catholicism. Rather, I think Revelation supplies paradigm-examples of repeatable kinds of events that recur in the course of church history. Likewise, I'm not suggesting that these explanations prove that Catholic miracles are occultic. Rather, we need to make allowance for that possibility.

7. Regarding eucharistic miracles in particular:

Blood is a potent symbol in Christianity because we're redeemed by the blood of Christ. And that's foreshadowed by bloody animal sacrifice in the OT. It's not coincidental that counterfeit religion trades on that symbolism:

And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems (Rev 12:3).

And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns (17:3).

The dragon (Satan) and the beast (Antichrist) are both blood red. Their color deliberately evokes Christian symbolism. Incidentally, that's applicable to the liquefaction of blood (St. Januarius) as well as eucharistic miracles.

In that connection, here's another instructive passage:

17 Thus says the Lord, "By this you shall know that I am the Lord: behold, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall turn into blood...19 And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers, their canals, and their ponds, and all their pools of water, so that they may become blood, and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.'"

**20 Moses and Aaron did as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood.
21...There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt.
22 But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts. (Exod 7:17-22).**

The text is ambiguous because Hebrew uses the same word for blood and the color red. Nevertheless, the Egyptian magicians were able to muster a counter-miracle that mimicked the bloody water. That's reminiscent of eucharistic miracles.

I'm not claiming they're identical. Rather, that's one explanation we should take into consideration when we evaluate these claims.

8. Taking stock

When assessing reported Catholic miracles, it isn't necessary to sift the material. Even if some Catholic miracles are genuine, that doesn't prove Catholicism to be true.

"The miracle of the sun"

In this essay I'm going to discuss the cult of Fatima, with special reference to the so-called "miracle of the sun."

This will constitute a two-pronged analysis. I will evaluate the sun-miracle on both Catholic and Evangelical grounds. And I'm going to restrict myself to Catholic sources for my information regarding the reported miracle, and attendant phenomena. So this is, by turns, both an internal and external analysis.

When, in the course of this post, I speak of a Catholic miracle, I'm referring to a reported miracle, and not necessarily an actual miracle. Putative miracles.

The report may or may not be true. The putative miracle is a candidate for a true miracle. Whether it passes muster is another question.

It would be pedantic to qualify my usage each time, so keep this caveat in mind.

I. DESCRIPTION

What was the miracle of the sun?

Because the miracle of the sun comes down to us in several first and second-hand reports, the details vary, but here's a conventional account of what allegedly occurred:

During the night of 12-13 October it had rained throughout, soaking the ground and the pilgrims who make their way to Fátima from all directions by the thousands. By foot, by cart and even by car they came, entering the bowl of the Cova from the Fátima-Leiria road, which today still passes in front of the large square of the Basilica. From there they made their way down the gently slope to the place where a trestle had been erected over the little holm oak of the apparitions.

As for the children, they made their way to the Cova amid the adulation and skepticism which had followed them since May. When they arrived they found critics who questioned their veracity and the punctuality of the Lady, who had promised to arrive at noon. It was well passed noon by the official time of the country. However, when the sun arrived at its zenith the Lady appeared as she had said she would.

While the rain had stopped, dark clouds continued to obscure the sun, which suddenly bursts through them and is seen to be a soft spinning disk of silver.

From this point two distinct apparitions were seen, that of the phenomenon of the sun seen by the 70,000 or so spectators and that beheld by the children alone. Lucia describes the latter in her memoirs.

As the children viewed the various apparitions of Jesus, Mary and Joseph the crowd witnessed a different prodigy, the now famous miracle of the sun. Among the witnesses there were the following:

Dr. Almeida Garrett, PhD (Coimbra University):

I was looking at the place of the apparitions, in a serene, if cold, expectation of something happening, and with diminishing curiosity, because a long time had passed without anything to excite my attention. Then I heard a shout from thousands of voices and saw the multitude suddenly turn its back and shoulders away from the point toward which up to now it had directed its attention, and turn to look at the sky on the opposite side.

It must have been nearly two o'clock by the legal time, and about midday by the sun. The sun, a few moments before, had broken through the thick layer of clouds which hid it, and shone clearly and

intensely. I veered to the magnet which seemed to be drawing all eyes, and saw it as a disc with a clean-cut rim, luminous and shining, but which did not hurt the eyes. I do not agree with the comparison which I have heard made in Fátima—that of a dull silver disc. It was a clearer, richer, brighter color, having something of the luster of a pearl. It did not in the least resemble the moon on a clear night because one saw it and felt it to be a living body. It was not spheric like the moon, nor did it have the same color, tone, or shading. It looked like a glazed wheel made of mother-of-pearl. It could not be confused, either, with the sun seen through fog (for there was no fog at the time), because it was not opaque, diffused or veiled. In Fátima it gave light and heat and appeared clear-cut with a well-defined rim.

The sky was mottled with light cirrus clouds with the blue coming through here and there, but sometimes the sun stood out in patches of clear sky. The clouds passed from west to east and did not obscure the light of the sun, giving the impression of passing behind it, though sometimes these flecks

of white took on tones of pink or diaphanous blue as they passed before the sun.

It was a remarkable fact that one could fix one's eyes on this brazier of heat and light without any pain in the eyes or blinding of the retina. The phenomenon, except for two interruptions when the sun seemed to send out rays of refulgent heat which obliged us to look away, must have lasted about ten minutes.

The sun's disc did not remain immobile. This was not the sparkling of a, heavenly body, for it spun round on itself in a mad whirl. Then, suddenly, one heard a clamor, a cry of anguish breaking from all the people. The sun, whirling wildly, seemed to loosen itself from the firmament and advance threateningly upon the earth as if to crush us with its huge and fiery weight. The sensation during those moments was terrible.

During the solar phenomenon, which I have just described in detail, there were changes of color in the atmosphere. Looking at the sun, I noticed that everything around was becoming darkened. I looked first at the nearest objects and then

extended my glance further afield as far as the horizon. I saw everything an amethyst color. Objects around me, the sky and the atmosphere, were of the same color. An oak tree nearby threw a shadow of this color on the ground.

Fearing that I was suffering from an affection of the retina, an improbable explanation because in that case one could not see things purple-colored, I turned away and shut my eyes, keeping my hands before them to intercept the light. With my back still turned, I opened my eyes and saw that the landscape was the same purple color as before.

The impression was not that of an eclipse, and while looking at the sun I noticed that the atmosphere had cleared. Soon after I heard a peasant who was near me shout out in tones of astonishment: "Look, that lady is all yellow!"

And in fact everything, both near and far, had changed, taking on the color of old yellow damask. People looked as if they were suffering from jaundice, and I recall a sensation of amusement at seeing them look so ugly and unattractive. My own hand was the same color. All the phenomena which

I have described were observed by me in a calm and serene state of mind, and without any emotional disturbance. It is for others to interpret and explain them.

<http://www.ewtn.com/fatima/apparitions/October.htm>

II. IMPORTANCE

Why am I discussing the miracle of the sun rather than any number of other Catholic miracles—whether real or reported? What sets this event apart from the pack?

As Stanley Jaki explains:

*Is it not precisely those who stake their purpose in life on Christ as the greatest and incomparably miraculous fact of history, who should be most attentive to facts that support it? And of those supportive facts or miracles that have not ceased occurring for the past 2000 years, has anything more grandiose occurred than the miracle of the sun? S. Jaki, *God and the Sun at Fatima* (RVB 1999), 287.*

So you might say that the miracle of the sun is the trump card among Catholic miracles. They don't get any better than this. Indeed, nothing else approaches the level of public attestation.

III. STATE OF THE RECORD

However, the appeal to thousands of eyewitnesses is misleading. There's a big difference between 50,000 eyewitness reports, and reports of 50,000 eyewitnesses.

What is the actual state of the record? Here's what Jaki has to say:

“On April 14 [1930], the Canonical Commission presented to Bishop da Silva its findings in a long document...It contained not a word on the miracle of the sun,” *ibid.*, 186.

“Was any miracle seen by so many and, unfortunately, attested in writing by relatively so few, and indeed painfully few?” (287).

“A careful study of the relatively small amount of first-hand information available today on the miracle of the sun can establish nothing more with certainty than that it was in some way a miracle, though not a miracle involving the sun itself...the

miracle of the sun was a meteorological event, however out of the ordinary” (369).

“But as the years went by, their general and often inarticulate impression about the miracle of the sun began to be superseded by elaborations on it by Fatima writers, most of whom could not say that they were eyewitnesses. One eyewitness author, Jose Galamba de Oliveira, was a seminarian in 1917...Galamba failed even more than did Coelho in carrying out the task of giving a detailed account of what he had seen about the sun” (368).

“Another eyewitness-author of books on Fatima was Canon Formigao. A chief apostle of devotion toward our Lady of Fatima, he wrote precious little about what he had seen in the sky over the Cova on October 13, 1917. The work of an eyewitness writer, Mabel Norton, who gave a most perceptive and moving account, is still to be rescued from almost total oblivion. No other major student of Fatima, who wrote a book or several on Fatima, was an eyewitness to the miracle” (368).

And here is what Karl Rahner has to say:

“There is no critical history as yet of the celebrated visions of Fatima and its message and no sound critical edition of the texts. C. M. Staehlin points out the omissions and textual variations in so-called ‘critical’ studies of the visions (op. cit., 351-78). On p378 he says of the devotional literature...’When publishes and editors of diaries and the like think nothing of suppressing or alternating parts of the MS it is difficult to control one’s anger. In such cases the reader cannot possibly discovery the fraud. If we write such things it is because we have in our possession evidence which refutes whole pages of allegations in many books now in the hands of pious people,’ K. Rahner, Visions & Prophecies (Herder & Herder 1963), 9-10n5.

“The chroniclers of Fatima, for instances, have taken ample liberties in adapting its history...in Fonseca’s Le meraviglie di Fatima and its translations, where he quotes the Visconde de Montelo with...and without acknowledgement...To give one example of ‘adaptation’: on p23 we read: ‘Francisco, however, only heard Lucia’s voice, but he observed that the Lady spoke, because he saw her lips moving. Is this circumstance not a proof of the

little seers' veracity?' Yet in Visconde de Montelo we read on p115: 'Didn't you see (Francisco is addressed) that her lips moved?' — 'I saw nothing!' (74-75n96).

"These are probably involved in Lucia's later statements (since 1936) about the message and promise of Fatima...To claim the assistance of the Holy Ghost in writing down supplementary material twenty-five years after the event makes any further discussion difficult," (75n97).

So the actual record of the event is far less impressive than the usual claim of 50,000 eyewitnesses, give or take.

IV. LOCALITY

One ironic point of tension is not that so many observers witnessed this phenomenon, but so few did. For even if tens of thousands of people saw it, it was a geographically limited phenomenon. And this creates a potential discrepancy between the scale of the event and the scale of the witness base. As Jaki explains:

"As to the term 'cosmic phenomenon,' if it occurred, say in the vicinity of the sun, it should have been observed even by the naked eye over thousands of miles outside of Portugal. In addition, if the sun did

indeed dance, the gravitational effects all across the solar system should have been enormous, in fact devastating,” ibid., 42.

“The alleged motions of the sun had to have an enormous effect on the rest of the solar system, an effect nowhere noticed. Was one therefore to assume that the sun had those motions, but that they were also deprived of their effects, except in their optical range, though only for those in the Cova and for a very few elsewhere, though not too far away?” (264).

Jaki will offer a way of relieving the tension, but, as we shall see, his harmonization comes with certain trade-offs.

V. CATHOLIC CRITERIA

Catholic apparitions and miracles are subject to traditional Catholic criteria. As Rahner explains:

“Genuine apparitions certainly will not resort to blackmail, threatening with punishments from heaven anybody who is not prepared to yield unqualified assent to everything,” ibid. 10.

“The imaginative vision can be conceived as accompanied by purely spiritual divine influence upon the soul which would give the visionary infallible and objectively valid evidence that here God is really at work. Two points should be noted here, however.

First, that such spiritual evidence is of its nature incommunicable to others. How could one prove to somebody else that one really had it and was not deceived?” (54).

“Piety and personal honesty are absolutely prerequisite before a vision can possibly claim to be considered genuine, but are no proof of its authenticity because these qualities are no protection against error. Even saints have frequently been deceived in such matter” (76).

“Père Tonquedec, with his vast experience as an exorcist in Paris, strongly advises against concluding that a vision must be genuine if the visionary is sincere and seems incapable of deceiving anyone” (78).

“The second type of prophecy is of the ‘parapsychological’ kind, prophetic dreams, second

sight, clairvoyance, foreknowledge of death, &c... They seem often to be hereditary and endemic, associated with a certain region” (92-93).

“As for us, outside observers, if it is a matter of purely mystical visions which do not claim a prophetic mission the same criteria will apply, mutatis mutandis, which we have established for the visionary himself. But, as we cannot directly observe the interior, mystical experience of infused contemplation in the seer and it will be less certain or less probable (for us) that it really has occurred, our power to arrive at reasonable certainty, through the use of the same criteria, though not nullified will be seriously diminished” (80).

“Whether what the visionary saw does or does not have a meaning for one’s own spiritual life is a matter for one’s own free judgment. Certainly there is no obligation to attach much importance to such things when classic mystical doctrine warns the visionary himself against attributing too much value or significance to these experiences...The principle always remains valid that supernatural agency is not to be presupposed but must be proved...With such occurrences, therefore, there is

more danger of error in credulity than in scepticism, especially in unsettled times” (81).

“But where we encounter ‘prophetic’ visions, which lay demands upon us the validity and binding force of which are not evident apart from these visions, the only criterion which can justify this claim is a real miracle (physical or moral) in the strict sense.” (82).

“If Catholic fundamental theology can and must apply this criterion to public Christian revelation, how much more must it apply to private prophetic revelations...Without a miracle such a vision can lay no claim whatever to the assent of outsiders. To reject such a revelation (always conformably to our general human duty of caution, restraint, and reverence) in any case never implies resistance to divine grace, and may rather be part of man’s duty to ‘believe not every spirit; but try the spirits if they be of God’ [1 Jn 4:1],” (82-83).

And, with reference to Fatima, the Vatican has said the following:

Public Revelation And Private Revelations – Their Theological Status

Before attempting an interpretation...there is a need for some basic clarification of the way in which, according to Church teaching, phenomena such as Fatima are to be understood within the life of faith. The teaching of the Church distinguishes between “public Revelation” and “private revelations”. The two realities differ not only in degree but also in essence.

In this context, it now becomes possible to understand rightly the concept of “private revelation”, which refers to all the visions and revelations which have taken place since the completion of the New Testament. This is the category to which we must assign the message of Fatima. In this respect, let us listen once again to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Throughout the ages, there have been so-called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church... It is not their role to complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history” (No. 67). This clarifies two things:

The authority of private revelations is essentially different from that of the definitive public Revelation...In this regard, Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, the future Pope Benedict XIV, says in his classic treatise, which later became normative for beatifications and canonizations: “An assent of Catholic faith is not due to revelations approved in this way; it is not even possible. These revelations seek rather an assent of human faith in keeping with the requirements of prudence, which puts them before us as probable and credible to piety”.

The criterion for the truth and value of a private revelation is therefore its orientation to Christ himself. When it leads us away from him, when it becomes independent of him or even presents itself as another and better plan of salvation, more important than the Gospel, then it certainly does not come from the Holy Spirit, who guides us more deeply into the Gospel and not away from it.

The Anthropological Structure Of Private Revelations

In these reflections we have sought so far to identify the theological status of private

revelations. Before undertaking an interpretation of the message of Fatima, we must still attempt briefly to offer some clarification of their anthropological (psychological) character. In this field, theological anthropology distinguishes three forms of perception or “vision”: vision with the senses, and hence exterior bodily perception, interior perception, and spiritual vision (*visio sensibilis - imaginativa - intellectualis*). It is clear that in the visions of Lourdes, Fatima and other places it is not a question of normal exterior perception of the senses: the images and forms which are seen are not located spatially, as is the case for example with a tree or a house. This is perfectly obvious, for instance, as regards the vision of hell (described in the first part of the Fatima “secret”) or even the vision described in the third part of the “secret”. But the same can be very easily shown with regard to other visions, especially since not everybody present saw them, but only the “visionaries”. It is also clear that it is not a matter of a “vision” in the mind, without images, as occurs at the higher levels of mysticism. Therefore we are dealing with the middle category, interior perception. For the visionary, this perception certainly has the force of

a presence, equivalent for that person to an external manifestation to the senses.

Interior vision does not mean fantasy, which would be no more than an expression of the subjective imagination. It means rather that the soul is touched by something real, even if beyond the senses. It is rendered capable of seeing that which is beyond the senses, that which cannot be seen—seeing by means of the “interior senses”. It involves true “objects”, which touch the soul, even if these “objects” do not belong to our habitual sensory world.

“Interior vision” is not fantasy but, as we have said, a true and valid means of verification. But it also has its limitations. Even in exterior vision the subjective element is always present. We do not see the pure object, but it comes to us through the filter of our senses, which carry out a work of translation. This is still more evident in the case of interior vision, especially when it involves realities which in themselves transcend our horizon. The subject, the visionary, is still more powerfully involved. He sees insofar as he is able, in the modes of representation and consciousness available to him. In the case of

interior vision, the process of translation is even more extensive than in exterior vision, for the subject shares in an essential way in the formation of the image of what appears. He can arrive at the image only within the bounds of his capacities and possibilities. Such visions therefore are never simple “photographs” of the other world, but are influenced by the potentialities and limitations of the perceiving subject.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html

VI. EVIDENTIARY VALUE

Is the primary purpose of a miracle to attest dogma?
According to Catholic theology:

Some writers—e.g., Paley, Mansel, Mozley, Dr. George Fisher—push the Christian view to the extreme, and say that miracles are necessary to attest revelation. Catholic theologians, however, take a broader view. They hold that the great primary ends of miracles are the manifestation of God's glory and the good of men; that the particular or secondary ends, subordinate to the

former, are to confirm the truth of a mission or a doctrine of faith or morals, to attest the sanctity of God's servants, to confer benefits and vindicate Divine justice.

Hence they teach that the attestation of Revelation is not the primary end of the miracle, but its main secondary end, though not the only one.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10338a.htm>

*Their motive was mercy. Most of Christ's miracles were works of mercy. They were performed not with a view to awe men by the feeling of omnipotence, but to show compassion for sinful and suffering humanity. They are not to be regarded as isolated or transitory acts of sympathy, but as prompted by a deep and abiding mercy which characterizes the office of Saviour. The Redemption is a work of mercy, and the miracles reveal the mercy of God in the works of His Incarnate Son (**Acts 10:38**).*

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10338a.htm>

VII. MIRACLE OR MIRABLE?

Catholic theology draws a distinction between miracles, which are heaven-sent, and mirables, which are occultic:

*“Holy Scripture shows the power of evil spirits as strictly conditioned, e.g., testimony of the Egyptian magicians (**Exodus 8:19**), the story of Job, evil spirits acknowledging the power of Christ (**Matthew 8:31**), the express testimony of Christ himself (**Matthew 24:24**) and of the Apocalypse (**Revelation 9:14**). Granting that these spirits may perform prodigies -- i.e., works of skill and ingenuity which, relatively to our powers, may seem to be miraculous -- yet these works lack the meaning and purpose which would stamp them as the language of God to men.”*

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10338a.htm>

VIII. INTERPRETATION

Due to the geographical confinement of the observable

event, Jaki regards the miracle of the sun as a rare, but naturally occurring meteorological phenomenon (ibid., 347-49,60).

This would make it an extrinsic miracle rather than an intrinsic miracle. It's miraculosity would lie in its prophetic timing: *“The most miraculous aspect of what physically happened, whatever it was, is that a sign, as predicted months ahead of time, manifested itself so that all may believe” (370).*

In this respect he compares the sun-miracle to the plagues of Egypt and Red Sea crossing (343).

As I say, on this interpretation the miraculous character of the event inheres, not in the event itself, but in the opportune timing of the event. It occurred when it was predicted to occur.

From a theological perspective, there's nothing inherently amiss with this explanation. A miracle can be an extraordinary conjunction of otherwise ordinary conditions.

But there are three potential downsides to this interpretation:

i) That explanation comes at a cost, for it involves a potential shift in the testimonial support.

For, on Jaki's interpretation, the crucial question is not who-all witnessed the event itself, but who-all witnessed the prediction, of which the event is the putative fulfillment.

The fulfillment is only as good as the prediction. How many people were privy to the prediction?

I'm not saying that you need a huge number of people to validate a prediction. But what sets apart the miracle of the sun from so many other Catholic miracles or Marian apparitions is the quantitative factor.

If the key piece of connecting evidence which turns a naturally occurring event into a miraculous event due to the timing of the event wasn't witnessed by hundreds or thousands or tens of thousands of observers, but by just a handful of people, then it's no different than any other report of its kind.

Unless I missed something, Jaki spends a lot of time sifting through reports of the sun-miracle, but doesn't offer a single eyewitness report to the prophecy of the sun-miracle.

The oversight is glaring. Perhaps, though, Jaki doesn't think it's necessary to document the prophecy since it can be validated after the fact in the sense that unless there were rumors of something miraculous in the offing on October 13, 1917, you wouldn't have had thousands of people showing up at that place and time. So even if we didn't have much direct documentation for the miracle, we enjoy indirect confirmation of the prophecy in the simple fact that so many spectators turned out for the event.

I happen to think this would be a successful way of rehabilitating the original argument. Yet it's odd that Jaki is apparently unaware of the lacuna in his own argument.

But that won't fix other problems:

ii) For there's another point of tension involving the prophecy, since a further issue is whether the prediction specified what form the sign would take. This is a typical feature of Biblical predictions—and for the obvious reason that the level of specificity between prediction and fulfillment is what identifies a particular portent or prodigy as, indeed, a prophetic fulfillment.

According to Jaki, "only in November did Lucia state that according to the Apparition the sun was to be part of the miracle" (38n11; cf. 289).

Indeed, he makes this general point on several different occasions, as if the lack of predictive specificity is an argument in favor of the eyewitness reports. If so, he never explains why he thinks this would be a mark of authenticity.

Perhaps, though, his reasoning is as follows: if the prediction has specified the sun, then that prior expectation could have an autosuggestive influence what the onlookers thought they saw.

And there's some psychological validity of that contention, if, indeed, this is what Jaki has in mind.

Unfortunately for him, it's in tension with the evidential value of the event. For it augments the credibility of the reports by diminishing the miraculosity of the event.

Remember that, for Jaki, this is an essentially natural event. What makes it miraculous is its uncanny timing.

But the vaguer the forecast, the vaguer the fulfillment. The credibility of the reports is coming at the expense of the reported phenomenon.

It's more credible that it occurred, but less credible that it occurred on cue, as a prophetic miracle.

iii) And that's not the only problem. For, as we've seen, the prophetic timing is further beclouded by apparent repetition. If, to take one example, the same sort of event was seen a week later, in the same general vicinity, then that undercuts the unique timing of the event.

IX. COUNTEREVIDENCE

In addition to the evidence for the miracle of the sun, there is a certain amount of evidence to the contrary. This takes different forms:

i) The fact that the Vatican has withheld a formal endorsement of the miracle.

If the Vatican isn't prepared to stick its neck out, why should we?

ii) Conflicting reports of what was seen on October 13, 1917.

iii) Reports of repeated phenomena.

This would not, of itself, undermine the factuality of the event. Rather, it would undermine the miraculosity of the event.

For if the event is a natural phenomenon which is only miraculous due to its providential timing, then repetition undercuts the distinctive timing of the event.

iv) Implausibilities involving the other apparitions.

One cannot assess the significance of the sun-miracle in complete isolation. For the sun-miracle is of a piece with the other Marian apparitions at Fatima. It was allegedly given to confirm the other apparitions and oracles. But that cuts both ways.

According to Jaki:

*“The church as such never endorsed the miracle of the sun, the chief external sign of the message,”
ibid. 359.*

Then came the most important part of his [Coelho’s] article...He claimed nothing less than that the next day he saw the sun do the same again, and apparently over the same place” (56).

“Several people, including Domingos Frutuoso, the bishop of Portalegre, saw, a week later, a recurrence of the miracle of the sun, though with less intensity, in the sky over Leiria” (62; cf. 148).

“Far more significant was the testimony which Jacinto de Almeida Lopes made on December 20.

For he not only recalled what he had seen on October 13, 1917, but also that he had seen the same again on the Feast of Purification, February 2, 1918” (153).

The case of “Maria Philomena Moraes de Miranda, who acted as Lucia’s sponsor at her confirmation in Tuy on April 24, 1925. Between June 13, 1922, and August 13, 1927 she saw, so she claimed, the miracle of the sun on four different occasions and sent statements to the bishop of Leiria” (195n37).

“That chapter Martins dos Reis brought to a conclusion with a full reproduction of what the Cardinal Legate Tedeschini had told the huge gathering at the Cova on October 13, 1951...’It was four o’clock in the afternoon on October 30,31, and of November 1 of the last year, 1950...In the Vatican gardens the Holy Father turned his gaze towards the sun and suddenly there reoccurred under his very eyes the miracle that had been witnessed years before, in this vale, on this same day...Is not this Fatima transported to the Vatican?” (301-302).

“To see that problem it would have been enough to recall the dictum, miracula non sun multiplicanda

praeter necessitatem, an old age in scholastic theology” (302).

“He [Martindale] reported that the aunt of a lady whom he had met several times in Portugal and a friend of hers went to the Cova on October 13 and knelt during the miracle of the sun with another woman between them. This woman saw the miracle while the two others ‘saw nothing at all” (323).

“Such concerns were prominent in a four-part article which the Jesuit G. J. Strangfeld published... The article was probing into the credibility of the large number of reports about apparitions of Mary since Fatima, couple with sightings of the miracle of the sun. Strangfeld, who listed specifically twenty-apparitions between 1931 and 1950, tried to follow a middle course between too much and too little credence to be given to private revelations” (303).

“I [Journet] heard reports about a highly cultured Portuguese woman, very devoted to the Blessed Virgin, who saw nothing [at Fatima]” (305).

“The fact that in Fatima a dozen or so people failed to see the miracle of the sun, forced on him

[Cordonnier] the second thought that perhaps 'his explanation was not certain' (356).

"Only in November did Lucia state that according to the Apparition the sun was to be part of the miracle" (38n11; cf. 289).

According to Rahner:

*"This emphatic distinction among the various Madonnas becomes more understandable if one reads Fonseca in 'Fatima y la critica' (Santander, 1953), p44: if a priest hearing confession of pilgrims at Fatima gives a certain number of 'Hail Mary's' for a penance, the penitent immediately asks 'To which Blessed Virgin?' The people, especially the children, wish to know exactly whom they should address: The Queen of the Rosary, the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Sorrows, Our Lady of Joys, or the Assumpta. They know all these from the different statues. They do not know any statue of the Mother of God without a particular name," *ibid.* 34n34.*

"Finally we must mention the prayer which Lucia learnt from the angel. In this prayer men are to

offer God the Father not only the body and Blood but also the soul and the divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which is theologically impossible,” ibid. 71.

“Lucia’s answer to the theological objection, according to Fonseca, was that ‘the angel may just not have studied any theology.’ — This expression ‘body and blood, soul and divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ...’ is found in the (Portuguese and Spanish) catechism not quite a prayer but as the answer to the question: What is the consecrated Host? Is this not another case of ‘reproduction,’ of which Staehlin cites many examples (op. cit., 109-33).

“Even if one assumes that sun-miracle of Fatima to be a true miracle, it would not prove that the seer’s revelations of the future have received the divine seal. The miracle occurs to confirm the vision, but it does not follow that every pronouncement of the visionary on the future is warranted, especially since this information about the future was only disclosed at a much later date,” ibid. 104.

“1941. The books on Fatima published before that date know nothing about them...but how is it comprehensible that God should reveal certain

matters to the whole world to a person, in order that this person should keep them secret until after their fulfillment” ibid. 104n133.

“These miracles, however, must not themselves raise a problem, like the miracle of the sun, which was not by any means seen by all those present. Thus Izabel Brandae de Melo writes in a letter dated October 13, 1917: ‘this (the report of the sun-miracle) is what people were saying next to me, and what thousands of persons claim they saw. I did not see it, although I looked at the sun and felt terribly moved to hear everybody screaming that they saw extraordinary things in the sun” Cf. L. G. de Fonseca, Fatima y la critica, 18 and note 17... Father Martindale in his book The message of Fatima (82) speaks of two English ladies who did not see the sun-miracle either,” ibid. 82-83n108.

“The mystical doctors recognize three kinds of visions: the corporeal, the imaginative, and the purely spiritual,” ibid. 32.

“After the Queen of the Rosary disappeared at Fatima, e.g., on October 13, 1917 (according tot he statements of Jacinta and Francisco) the Holy

Family appeared high in the sky, grouped round the sun: on the left side of the sun was St. Joseph with the child Jesus, who presently took up a position under the sun, and our Lady was on the right side (cf. Visconde de Montelo, op. cit., pp114,119),” ibid. 33n25.

“How, for instance, would this objectivistic conception explain the appearance in visions of Jesus as a child? Since he is not a child anymore, how can he appear as such at this particular time and place before the visionary? How would one explain Our Lady under various titles—as the Sorrowful Mother, the Queen of the Rosary, the Virgin of Carmel, &c. —appearing in rapid succession, while other visionaries simultaneously see the Holy Family? Or the appearance of a celestial person (the Saviour carrying his Cross, the Mother of God weeping) in a situation and frame of mind which are inappropriate to that person now? How can one explain those visions which, conveying as vivid an impression of actuality as other visions, present past events as happening here and now and that in a manner which contradicts the known

historical facts as well as other visions of the same event?” Ibid. 34-35.

X. INTERNAL APPRAISAL

So what actually happened at Fatima on October 13, 1917?

How we interpret the phenomenon depends, in large measure, on what presuppositions we bring to the claim, and how firmly we do or ought to hold to our presuppositions.

Some people would take this admission as a recipe for relativism. But that’s excessive. Through education, it’s possible to become self-aware of our presuppositions, as well as rival presuppositions. It is possible to compare and contrast competing conceptual schemes according to their internal consistency, correspondence with the evidence, and explanatory power.

Catholics are apt to treat the sun-miracle as genuine, Evangelicals as diabolical, secular sceptics as a paradigm-case of mass hallucination, and ufologists as a flying saucer.

So let’s take stock of where we stand at this point in the process. If I were to judge the sun-miracle on Catholic grounds alone, what would I conclude?

One reasonable explanation is that the sun-miracle was a fluke. This would be a naturalistic explanation. It follows from several considerations:

i) The official report of the Canonical Commission doesn't even discuss the sun miracle.

ii) Only a handful of eyewitnesses committed their impressions to writing.

iii) We lack critical editions of their writings.

iv) In some cases, the editions we do have are guilty of legendary embellishment.

v) Due to the geographical confinement of the phenomena, the most plausible interpretation construes the event as a rare, but naturally occurring event. What would render it miraculous is the timing of the event, rather than the nature of the event.

vi) Lucia did not predict a solar phenomenon. She only identified the sign as a solar phenomenon after the fact.

vii) According to reports, not everyone present even witnessed the miracle of the sun.

viii) According to other reports, the same phenomenon recurred after the appointed day. But since the timing of the event is what distinguishes the event as miraculous, repetition directly undercuts the miraculous character of the event.

ix) Other Marian apparitions at Fatima, which the sun-miracle was allegedly meant to confirm, are suspect in the way they conform to provincial features of Iberian liturgy and iconography. Prior religious conditioning clearly had a shaping influence on the interpretation of the apparently

numinous encounters.

x) Why would Mary predict the future, but bind the recipient to secrecy? To reveal a prediction after the fact undermines the evidential value of the oracle. Anyone can predict the future as soon as the future is past!

xi) According to the Vatican, the apparitions at Fatima were subjective visions.

xii) Subjective visions, even if veridical for the recipient, are hardly veridical for a second party.

xiii) Private revelations can be delusive.

xiv) Private revelations lack the binding force of public revelation.

xv) Miracles are not primarily evidential in value.

xvi) The dark side can simulate miracles.

XI. EXTERNAL APPRAISAL

Turning from an internal appraisal to an external appraisal, what alternative explanations are available, prescinding Catholic criteria?

1. One naturalistic alternative would be mass hallucination. Possible evidence for this interpretation would be the fact that some of the reported onlookers denied seeing the sun-miracle.

But there are major problems with this explanation:

i) The allegation of mass hallucination assumes what it needs to prove. It explains (or explains away) the phenomenon by appeal to the category of mass hallucination. But this classification makes a couple of unstated assumptions:

a) The miracle of the sun could not or did not happen. Hence, some alternative explanation is in order—preferably naturalistic.

b) Mass hallucinations occur, of which one well-attested example is the reported event at Fatima.

Notice the circularity of the reasoning. The nonoccurrence of the miracle of the sun-miracle is evidence for mass hallucination, while mass hallucination is evidence for the nonoccurrence of the miracle of the sun.

So this explanation leaves unexplained why we should either reject the phenomenon or accept the psychological surrogate. Where is the independent evidence for either assumption?

As Gary Habermas observes:

Collective Hallucinations. One of the central issues in this entire discussion concerns whether a group of people can witness the same hallucination. Most psychologists dispute the reality of such occurrences, as pointed out below. A rare attempt suggesting that collective hallucinations are

possible, without any application to Jesus' resurrection, is made by Leonard Zusne and Warren Jones. They point to phenomena such as claimed sightings of the virgin Mary and other accompanying reports from groups of people. In cases like these, "expectation" and "emotional excitement" are "a prerequisite for collective hallucinations." In such groups we see the "emotional contagion that so often takes place in crowds moved by strong emotions..." [xxv]

But favoring collective hallucinations is highly problematic, and on several grounds. (1) To begin, the chief examples of "collective hallucinations" provided by Zusne and Jones were group religious experiences such as Marion apparitions. But these citations simply beg the question regarding whether such experiences could possibly be objective, or even supernatural, at least in some sense. In other words, why must a naturalistic, subjective explanation be assumed? [xxvi] This seems to rule them out in an a priori manner, before the data are considered.

http://www.garyhabermas.com/articles/crj_explainingaway/

crj_explainingaway.htm

ii) Habermas also makes the following point: *“In my opinion, one necessary distinction is between hallucinations & illusions. The former are subjective, while the latter are objective, where actual objects are perceived, but taken to be something else—such as spinning suns, etc. The majority of Marion events, at least as reported by the crowds, are the latter. Not only does psychiatry make distinctions between these two, but another contrast is with delusions. My ‘Trinity Journal’ article (the third item under articles on my website) discusses this distinction a bit, in case you want to have a look” (12/11/06 email).*

iii) In addition, Jaki repeatedly points out that no one was expecting the sign to take the form of a solar phenomenon. Therefore, generic appeals to Catholic piety and crowd psychology fail to select for this particular “hallucination.”

2. Another naturalistic explanation, if you can call it that, is a ufological interpretation.

But there are several problems with that interpretation:

i) Ufological explanations are only as good as ufology in general, which is subject to many scientific criticisms.

ii) Beyond that, not everyone regards ufology as essentially naturalistic. Some critics regard ufology as essentially diabolical.

For a critique of ufology from both angles, cf. H. Ross et al., *Lights in the Sky* (Navpress 2002); G. Bates, *Alien Intrusion* (Creation Book Publishers 2010).

iii) And even if we didn't reject ufology outright, a generic appeal to ufology would not, of itself, make that the best explanation for Fatima.

iv) There is a level at which both the ufological and pious Catholic interpretation are parallel, for, in both instances, the phenomena are construed in light of preexisting cultural categories. Yesterday's Fatimist might be today's ufologist, while today's ufologist might be yesterday's Fatimist.

For Lucia, Iberian liturgy and iconography supplied the interpretive grid while, for an ufologist, science fiction supplies the interpretive grid.

3. How should a Protestant approach this phenomenon?

i) To some extent, how we answer this question is bound up with how we answer a related question. For this goes in part to the cessationist/charismatic debate.

At one end of the continuum is the cessationist view, represented by men like B. B. Warfield, Conyers Middleton, and O. P. Robertson, according to which miracles came to an end at the end of the apostolic age.

Cf. C. Middleton, *A Free Inquiry* (1748); B. B.

Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (1983); O. P. Robertson, *The Final World* (Banner of Truth 2004).

At the other end of the spectrum is the charismatic position, according to which miracle workers of one sort or another (e.g. prophets, healers) continue in the life of the church.

Somewhere in the middle is the semicessationist position, according to which miracles continue, but not miracle-workers.

In other words, miracles continue, but not in an official capacity. God now works miracles directly or individually, rather than working through an official intermediary (e.g. apostle, prophet, healer).

This taxonomy is subject to further refinements, but that gives you the basic idea. It also allows for diabolical activity during the church age. For a useful review of Biblical demonology and its modern-day manifestations, cf.

http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1995Territorial.htm

For the record, I subscribe to the semicessationist position.

It almost seems as if Warfield position is framed with the express purpose of excluding Catholic miracles, on the unspoken principle that it's better to filter out every sub-apostolic miracle for fear a single Catholic miracle might slip through the screen, however fine the mesh.

Now, I'm as much opposed to Catholicism as Warfield. But I don't allow the opposing side to define my own position.

Ironically, when your own position is that reactionary, then you put yourself at the mercy of the very thing you disdain. It dictates the contours of what you allow yourself to believe. You are left with the residual scraps of unincorporated land that the other side did not annex or appropriate. But I'm not prepared to cede over so much territory to the other side.

Mind you, Warfield was no one's fool. His arrows rarely miss their target. I have little reason to take issue with his examples.

But that's the problem. The power of the presentation lies less in the logical force of the argument than it does in the polemical choice of the illustrations.

If you select a ridiculous example, then your investment will return a ridiculous yield. The argument writes itself. All it takes is a series of well-chosen illustrations and a witty prose style.

This is the stuff of Voltaire, and it's a bit hair-raising to see B. B. Warfield banish every purported miracle—from subapostolic times to modern times—to banish a single Catholic claim. Rather like euthanizing a whole hospital ward for fear one pathological patient will recover and kill again.

There's also a central tension in Warfield's position. Although he deploys cessationism to uphold and undergird the authority of Scripture: "Warfield's cessationism involves a double standard: in *Counterfeit Miracles* he applies the same rationalistic critical methods as Hume and Harnack to postbiblical miracles that he attacks in liberal critics who

apply them to the biblical accounts.”

<http://home.regent.edu/ruthven/cess.html>

Speaking for myself, I think it’s better if we don’t burn the house down to exterminate the rats. I prefer a few well-positioned mousetraps to a match and a gallon of gasoline.

I also think there’s a lot of merit in O. Palmer Robertson’s analysis. The problem, though, is the tendency to use one form of overkill to dispatch another form of overkill. Rival reactionaries.

There is a charismatic strand within Reformed tradition:

<http://www.reformedpresbytery.org/books/prophecy/prophesy.htm>

http://www.frame-poythress.org/poythress_articles/1996Modern.htm

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1462_A_Passion_for_ChristExalting_Power/

So it would be a mistake to claim that Reformed theology is committed to cessationism.

For a fair and balanced debate, cf. *W. Grudem, ed. Are Miraculous Gifts For Today?* (Zondervan 1996).

ii) Semicessationism is open to miracles generally, but whether we should credit any particular claim is subject to further considerations. So what about Catholic miracles?

Many Evangelicals will dismiss a Catholic miracle out of hand on the assumption that a Catholic miracle would attest Catholic dogma, and if we have good reason to reject Catholic dogma, then we have good reason to reject a Catholic miracle.

iii) But this is a bit ambiguous. It assumes that any miracle that happens to a Catholic is a Catholic miracle, in the sectarian sense that it occurred to attest some point of Catholic dogma.

And there is no doubt that some Catholic miracles serve this function. That is to say, appeal is made to a purported miracle to attest the distinctives of Catholicism.

iv) But, in Scripture, the function of miracles is broader. A miracle may simply be an act of divine mercy. God, in his common grace, is often merciful to the reprobate ([Acts 14:17](#)).

Or a miracle may be designed to bless the elect via the reprobate. Like the parable of the wheat and the tares, elect and reprobate share a common field. In order to bless the elect, God must bless the reprobate as well—sending his sun and rain on each alike ([Mt 5:45](#); [13:24-30](#); [36-40](#)).

Dropping the metaphor, election cuts across family lines. A father may be damned, while the son is redeemed. But without the father, there would be no son.

Suppose that God miraculously heals the impious father for the sake of a pious son. Such a miracle would hardly attest the truth of atheism, even if the atheist was the immediate beneficiary.

I'm not saying that this distinction is applicable in every case. But we do need to draw some principled distinctions.

v) Should an Evangelical take the position that God would never answer the prayer of a Catholic? I don't see why.

If God could bless an atheist, why not a Catholic? So even on the most uncharitable reading, I wouldn't rule out the possibility of Catholic miracles—although we must still judge the claim on a case-by-case basis.

vi) But I also think that we can be a bit more charitable. After all, even if you deem the Church of Rome to be an apostate denomination, this doesn't mean that every individual member thereof is apostate.

Traditionally, Calvinism, among other Evangelical traditions, has allowed for the fact that some Roman Catholics are genuine believers.

Years ago I read the memoirs of Fulton Sheen: *Treasure in clay: the autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen*. (Doubleday 1980).

It's been a while, so I'm fuzzy on the details, but as I recall he prayed for the conversion of a woman, she came to the faith, and the timing of the effect in relation to the time of the prayer made it clear that her conversion was, indeed, in answer to prayer.

If we were so inclined, we could, of course, dismiss this account on various grounds. But even though Bishop Sheen always struck me as being rather vain and full of himself, I

don't have any reason to doubt his integrity. Catholicism is better than atheism. So there's no particular reason, from my vantage-point, to question the story.

vii) But what about Catholic miracles that really are sectarian? Miracles that are tailor-made to attest Catholic dogma, like Marian apparitions?

viii) Well, for one thing, if a claim seems made to order, then it may very well be made to order. It's exactly what it appears to be—a contrivance!

ix) Another explanation is to treat these as genuine, but diabolical. Cf. E. Miller & K. Samples, *The Cult of the Virgin* (Baker 1993).

I expect this will strike many people as special pleading. And maybe it is.

On the other hand, it isn't obviously an instance of special pleading. After all, this is a case of opposing one supernatural explanation to another supernatural explanation. So it operates within the same framework. And Catholicism itself regards some supernatural phenomena as diabolical in origin.

I wouldn't be as open to Catholic miracles as I am were I not a Christian to begin with. So my theological outlook cuts both ways on this issue.

x) The diabolical explanation also turn on the question of how much power the dark side has over the natural world. Based on Moses encounter with the Egyptian magicians (Exod 7-8), there is some evidence that the dark side can

manipulate natural forces—up to a certain point.

xi) But that's not the only option.

xii) There is also the question of how, if at all, we correlate the miraculous with the paranormal. Is it possible that some paranormal abilities are natural abilities?

Writers like Stephen Braude, Rosemarie Pilkington, and Rupert Sheldrake operate with this general paradigm.

If so, their possession of paranormal abilities would be morally or spiritual neutral, although what is done with them would not be morally or spiritually neutral.

But even if some paranormal abilities are natural, they can't account for more spectacular events. Otherwise, we would expect events on this scale on a fairly regular basis.

xiii) By "natural" I don't mean that they are natural to everyone.

xiv) In addition, the natural/supernatural distinction is more essential to the naturalist than the supernaturalist. From a Christian standpoint, even natural events have an ultimately supernatural origin. It's the naturalist who needs to create a natural/supernatural dichotomy in order to banish the supernatural from his worldview.

xv) At the same time, some apparently natural paranormal abilities may, in fact, have an obliquely occultic origin. Kurt Koch, the Lutheran exorcist, regarded paranormal abilities as a form of hereditary, mediumistic magic.

An ancestor acquired these abilities through occultic involvement. This, in turn, was passed down the family line.

As such, a devout individual who would never think to dabble in the occult might inherit such abilities. He would be unconscious of the process of transmission.

If this analysis is correct, then paranormal abilities would not be morally or spiritual neutral, even if their exercise was morally or spiritually innocent.

So what actually happened at Fatima on October 13, 1917?

1. I've already offered an evaluation of the event, using Catholic criteria, when I treated the phenomenon as a historical curiosity. And I happen to think that's a perfectly reasonable interpretation for an Evangelical to take.

For example, another problem with the miracle of the sun is that if the purpose of this event was to attest Marian dogma, then it was a rather roundabout and ultimately ambiguous way of making the point.

Would it not have been more to the point for Mary to simply put in a public appearance to 70,000 onlookers? Complete with photographers?

There is, after all, no internal relation between the Virgin Mary and a solar phenomenon. So why choose such an oblique method of getting the message across?

I'd add that one can be sincere, but sincerely deceived. The very ingenuousness of the children would make them easy targets for the dark side.

2. But while a naturalistic explanation is plausible, we're not limited to naturalistic explanations. Another, equally reasonable explanation, is to construe the phenomenon as a supernatural event.

This does not, however, commit us to a favorable interpretation of the event, for not every numinous encounter or supernatural event is a miraculous confirmation of revealed theology.

As I said before, Catholicism of itself distinguishes between a miracle and a mirable. And Scripture draws the same distinction.

In **Deut 13:1-5**, we have a programmatic statement regarding the relation between miracle and doctrine. As one commentator explains:

*“Prophecy and dreams are common vehicles of divine revelation in the Bible (see **1 Sam 28:6**). God truly speaks through these means in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, signs and wonders sometimes accompany the revelation as a means of confirmation. These are normally to be interrelated as confirming the word of the true prophet of Yahweh (18:22).*

Here Moses provides an exception: even if the prophet or dreamer produces signs and wonders, if he is promoting apostasy, he is not to be listened

to...The people are to maintain exclusive allegiance to Yahweh. Thus the Israelites' first response is to be rejection of the message given by the false prophet," J. Currid, Deuteronomy (Evangelical Press 2006), 260.

Several elements are noteworthy in this passage:

- a)** The miracle may be genuine.
- b)** The miracle may be sectarian in the sense that a false prophet is performing this miracle to attest his idolatrous belief-system.
- c)** The miracle is ultimately attributed to God.
- d)** The miracle is a test of faith.
- e)** Preexisting revelation supplies the criterion.
- f)** This passage has its NT counterpart in delusive, endtime signs and wonders (Mt 24:24; 2 Thes 2:9-10; Rev 13).

This passage (and others like it) poses a logical problem for some Christians. How can miracles attest revelation if miracles are subject to revelation? Isn't that viciously circular?

The short answer is that miracles amount to probative evidence, but insufficient evidence, considered in isolation. The argument from miracles is not a self-standing

argument. Miracles are one piece of evidence, but there are other considerations which figure in our assessment. For an overview of the issues,

Cf. http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1985Brown.htm

The OT text is significant in several respects:

- a)** It isn't necessary to deny the miracle.
- b)** It isn't necessary to attribute the miracle to the dark side.

God may or may not employ a secondary agent. In this case, the miracle has a proximate, occultic point of origin.

- c)** But the larger point is lies in the purpose of the miracle, as a test of faith.

Regardless of whether the cause is directly attributable to God or the dark side, the overarching purpose is to test the spiritual allegiance of the covenant community. Are its members loyal to the true God, or false gods?

Such a miracle has a winnowing and refining effect. It induces some to defect, but those who remain are numbered among the faithful.

xvi) On the one hand, Deut 13:1-5 is reminiscent of the encounter between Moses and the Egyptian wizards. Cf. J. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus* (Evangelical Press 2000), 1:175-176; J. Durham, *Exodus* (Word 1987), 89-110.

On the other hand, it foreshadows endtime prophecies in the Olivet discourse and other parts of the NT. Cf. C. Evans, Mark 8:27-16:20 (Word 2001), 323-24; R. France, The Gospel of Mark (Eerdmans 2002), 528-29; D. Hagner, Matthew 14-28 (Word 1995), 706; C. Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Eerdmans 1999), 573-75; 582.

As Beale puts it, commenting on Rev 13:11:

“This beast from the land has been variously identified as Satan, Antichrist, the Roman imperial priesthood, the Catholic Church (so the Reformers), and false teachers...This beast may well take many forms and may at times even be equated with the state, as well as false prophets in the church (as in 2:2,14-15,20-24). That manifestations of the beastly false prophet occur in the church is also suggested by the OT, where false prophecy almost always takes place within the covenant community. This is reinforced by Christ’s prophecy that false prophets and messiahs would arise in the believing community itself (Mt 25:5,11 and parallels). Jesus also likened false prophets to beasts and foretold that ‘false prophets’ would ‘come in sheep’s clothing but are inwardly ravenous wolves’ (Mt 7:15). The image of a wolf in lamb’s clothing

suggests a traitor within the fold of the church,” G. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans 1999), 707-08.

“Therefore, the imagery and background suggest deception within the covenant community itself. Whereas the first beast speaks loudly and defiantly against God, the second beast makes the first beast’s claims sound plausible and persuasive,” *ibid.* 708.

“His activities are described [v13] by an ironic echo of the acts of Moses, whose prophetic authority was validated by ‘great signs’ (e.g. **Exod 4:17,30; 10:2; 11:10**). Even in Exodus (7:11) Pharaoh’s magicians ‘did the same [signs] with their secret arts,’” *ibid.* 708.

“That an inside threat by a ‘false apostle’ is alluded to is apparent from the fact that the second beast’s authority is modeled on the credentials of Christ’s apostles in that (1) the beast is a successor of his mastery in both ministry and authority (**Rev 13:12a; cf. Acts 1:1-11**), (2) his attempts to persuade others to worship his master are inextricably linked to his master’s resurrection (**Rev 13:12b,14b; cf. Acts 2:22-**

47), and (3) he performs miraculous 'signs' as concrete manifestations of his authority (**Rev 13:13; Acts 2:43; 5:12; 15:12**). Perhaps the 'false apostles' of 2:2 are partly in mind. This inside-outside threat of deception is linked to the prophecy in **Dan 11:30-37**, where external pagan forces attack the covenant community on two fronts, both persecuting saints who do not compromise their faith and penetrating the covenant community in some way through false teaching and persuading some to defect from following the true God, while remaining apparent members of the community in order to influence others to compromise their loyalty to God and give their allegiance to the idolatrous state," 709.

Commenting on **1 Thes 2:6-7**, the same author notes that "Jesus referred to the same prophecy from Daniel in Mt 24 (see **Mt 24:4-5, 10-13, 23-26**)... Jesus predicts that before he comes many antichrists will indeed come. He is focusing not on the final coming of one antichrist but on the coming into the church of many antichrists who are the semifulfillments and forerunners of the final predicted opponent of God (**Mt 24:5, 10-15, 24**)," 1-2

Thessalonians (VIP 2003), 219.

xvii) Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the miracle of the sun is a genuine miracle. Suppose, further, that it's a Catholic miracle in the sectarian sense.

If various features of Marian dogma (e.g. Assumption, immaculate conception, Mediatrix, Co-Redemptrix, Queen of Heaven, perpetual virginity [ante, in, et post partum]) are contrary to Scripture, then, according to Deut 13 and its NT counterparts, a Christian is obliged to reject the evidentiary status of the miracle.

Paradoxically, if it does attest false doctrine, then that's reason, not to accept it, but to not accept it. The very reason which a Catholic theologian or apologist will give for crediting the miraculous attestation is the very reason which Scripture gives for discrediting the miraculous attestation.

And a Christian is under no obligation to offer an alternative explanation. He doesn't have to explain what really happened. Or how it happened. Whether the witnesses were deceivers or self-deceived.

The onus is not on him to answer these questions or disprove the event. For even if everything happened as exactly described, a Christian would still be duty-bound to reject the evidentiary status of the miracle. For, under the circumstances, it would be a test of faith.

xviii) Is Marian dogma contrary to Scripture? That's a separate argument. It would take me too far afield to address that question. Instead, I'd refer the reader to the

following works:

Roman Catholicism (Moody Publishers 1998)

by John Armstrong (Editor)

ISBN-10: 0802471692

ISBN-13: 978-0802471697

The Conflict with Rome (Baker 1958)

by G. C Berkouwer

ASIN: B0007EC3Q8

**The Cult of the Virgin: Catholic Mariology
and the Apparitions of Mary (Cri Books 1992)**

by Elliot Miller, Kenneth R. Samples

ISBN-10: 0801062918

ISBN-13: 978-0801062919

**Evangelical Answers (Reformation Press
1999)**

by Eric Svendsen

ISBN-10: 0967084083

ISBN-13: 978-0967084084

**Mary-Another Redeemer (Bethany House
1998)**

by James R. White

ISBN-10: 0764221027

ISBN-13: 978-0764221026

xix) Does the occultic interpretation sound like special-pleading? It might come across that way if this were a debate between a believer and an unbeliever over the evidential force of miracles—although I don't think it would be special-pleading even in that context.

But in an intramural debate between two Christian traditions which both take the Bible as a reference point, there's nothing arbitrary or ad hoc about pointing to a programmatic passage like ***Deut 13:1-5*** or its NT counterparts, in which we're given explicit criteria adjudicating the relation between revelation and miracle, with canonical revelation taking precedence.

The Evangelical didn't invent that priority structure as an apologetic escape-hatch. Rather, he is applying to a contemporary analogue a preexisting criterion in Scripture.

In sum, I think a Christian can reject the evidential value of the sun-miracle on either Catholic grounds or Protestant grounds.

On a final note, I'd like to thank Jason Engwer, John Frame, Gary Habermas, and Eric Svendsen for commenting on a brief, preliminary draft of this essay.

"Our Lady of Fatima"

About 10 years ago I did a long post on Fatima, with special reference to the "miracle of the sun":

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2007/01/miracle-of-sun.html>

Now I'd like to revisit the issue of Fatima, with special reference to the purported Marian apparitions:

i) I don't have antecedent objections to angelic apparitions, apparitions of the dead, or visions of Jesus in church history. In a sense I don't object to "saintly apparitions". However, by that I mean, not individuals canonized by the church of Rome, by crisis apparitions in which a departed Christian might appear to a friend or relative who's going through an ordeal to lend strategic, timely encouragement at a critical juncture in his life.

ii) I don't have antecedent objections to children experiencing God in miraculous ways. But by the same token, children are less reliable witnesses than adults. Children are suggestible, impressionable. Less able to distinguish imagination from reality.

iii) In addition, there's a difference between firsthand experience and secondhand information. Suppose you say you had a private supernatural experience. If in fact you did, then you're warranted in believing what happened to you. But an outside observer can't vouch for your purported experience, even if it happened, since he didn't experience what you did.

Mind you, we rightly believe many things on the basis of secondhand information. I'm not suggesting there's anything wrong with that. And sometimes secondhand information from multiple independent sources is more reliable than one firsthand experience.

But in general, I don't have the same epistemic duty to believe your reported observation than I have to believe my own observations. I'm not necessarily obligated to believe you.

Indeed, there are situations in which I'm obligated not to believe a secondhand account. For instance, Muhammad, Swedenborg, Joseph Smith, and Lucia dos Santos all report supernatural encounters, yet they can't all be right, although they can all be wrong.

iv) I admit that I rule out Marian apparitions as a matter of principle. I don't think Mary would appear to people because that usurps devotion to Jesus. Indeed, the Fatima cult is a classic example of Mary supplanting Jesus in the hearts of Catholic devotees.

A Catholic might object that I suffer from unfalsifiable skepticism regarding Marian apparitions. No kind of evidence would convince me otherwise.

In a sense that's true, but keep in mind that there's conflicting prima facie evidence. I can't be equally and simultaneously open to the reputed revelations Muhammad, Swedenborg, Joseph Smith, and Lucia dos Santos. Even if I wanted to believe all these reports, they involve contradictory messages by competing religious claimants. I can't be equally and simultaneously open to contrary lines of prima facie evidence. At the level of opposing reports,

unfalsifiable skepticism is inevitable because it isn't even possible to credit all of them.

Of course, that doesn't mean we should discount all reports of supernatural encounters. But it does mean we must bring certain criteria to bear when sifting the putative evidence. And that includes theological criteria (e.g. [Deut 13:1-5](#)).

v) In my experience, Catholic apologists treat Fatima as a package. Now, from what I've read, the "miracle of the sun" was a well-attested event. I'm prepared to credit that event. Of course, there's still the question of how to interpret that phenomenon.

By contrasted, the purported angelic and Marian apparitions which preceded that event are not nearly so well-attested. I believe the primary source material consists of newspaper reports, interviews with Lucia and her two cousins, and Lucia's memoirs. And from what I've read, Lucia's memoirs contain key details that are missing from recorded interviews and newspaper reports.

But in that event, some of the central claims narrow down to a single conduit: the testimony of Lucia. To my knowledge, there's no independent corroboration for many of her claims.

vi) In addition, she wrote this down years after the fact. Yet the claims include Marian prophecies. Oracles of doom.

But even if Mary actually spoke to Lucia, unless Lucia was blessed with verbatim recall, what we're getting isn't a statement in Mary's own words, but in Lucia's own words. Suppose Lucia remembered the gist of what Mary said. Yet when reporting what Mary told her, Lucia must put that in

her own words, paraphrasing the ideas. That's even assuming Mary actually appeared to the three children.

vii) There's also the vexed question of how you'd verify a Marian apparition even if you had direct experience of a putative Marian apparition. Suppose you have an encounter that's unmistakably supernatural. An apparition that's recognizably the Mary of traditional Catholic art. As if she stepped right out of a Raphael painting. Suppose she has a nimbic aura and identifies herself as the mother of Jesus.

But once we grant the realm of the supernatural, there are other candidates who could presumably impersonate Mary. What about a malevolent ghost or fallen angel? Catholics might regard that as sacrilegious, but once again, reported numinous encounters are hardly confined to Mary. How do Catholics assess the claims of Muhammad, Swedenborg, and Joseph Smith?

viii) It's interesting to compare purported Marian apparitions with purported dominican apparitions in that regard. Unlike Mary, Jesus, by virtue of his divine mind, has direct telepathic access to whoever he might appear to. He can make his identity known in a way that Mary cannot.

ix) If we take the reports at face value, Mary is quite the linguist. She speaks so many different foreign languages, depending on the audience. Does she speak foreign languages with an Aramaic accent?

You don't have the same issue in the case of purported dominical apparitions, since Jesus, by virtue of his divine mind, is fluent in every dead and living language. Indeed, the Son knew all those languages before any humans spoke them.

x) By the same token, why are major Marian apparitions confined to Catholic witnesses? Compare that dreams and visions of Jesus by Muslim and Jewish recipients?

Assessing Lourdes

This is a post on Lourdes. Lydia McGrew kindly provided feedback on a draft version, so I'm including our exchange (with permission) at the end.

1. It seems to me that there are two different ways we might classify the cures at Lourdes as coincidental. One way, championed by atheists, is to say that in any sufficiently large sample group, it's statistically inevitable that some medical conditions will natural resolve themselves. This will happen anyway, regardless of prayer. The cliché example is spontaneous remission from cancer.

2. However, atheists don't think just any cure is susceptible to that explanation. Take the cliché example of amputees. They don't think the spontaneous regeneration of organs or body parts is something that naturally happens in a sufficiently large sample group. They concede that if that occurred, it would be naturally impossible. That would be a bona fide miracle.

3. But there's another sense in which the cures might be coincidental. And that's whether it's coincidental in place. According to the official site, only 70 cases have been formally confirmed as miraculous healings by the Catholic church:

<https://www.lourdes-france.org/en/miraculous-healings/>

In addition, I've read from 3 different sources that the total number of pilgrims is over 200 million:

<https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-pope-lourdes-history/factbox-the-roman-catholic-pilgrimage-site-lourdes-idUKLB15892820080911>

<https://www.lourdescenter.org/bernadette.html>

https://sacredsites.com/europe/france/lourdes_facts.html

Assuming that estimate is approximately accurate, the question it raises is whether, in any sample group of 200 million people who pray for miraculous healing, there will be a comparable percentage of naturally impossible cures. If so, the geographical association with Lourdes is random. That concedes a genuine miracle, but the location is an adventitious variable. Miraculous healings happen at the same rate in answer to prayer regardless of locality.

4. Mind you, that may oversimplify things. Perhaps this happens more often in a Christian context, and not, say, when Muslims, Hindus, or Buddhist pray for miraculous healing. That's another variable.

5. In fairness, the comparison (3) may be misleading in another respect. The same official site lists 7000 unexplained cures:

<https://www.lourdes-france.org/en/miraculous-healings/>

And unpacks that category is a bit more detail:

The members of the International Medical Committee of Lourdes have the task of assessing and, as may be the case, “certifying” that the course of the cure, which has been declared “unexplained” by the Bureau des Constatations Médicales of Lourdes, is indeed “unexplained” on the basis of current medical knowledge” (4).

<https://www.lourdes-france.org/en/medical-bureau-sanctuary/>

So that changes the percentages by changing the standard. Put more precisely, that raises the percentages by lowering the standard. The question is whether in any sample group of 200 million people who pray for miraculous healing, there's a comparable percentage of unexplained cures. That's a less stringent standard. And it may be impossible to draw a comparison if we lack a relevant survey of the respective sample groups.

Since "7000" is obviously a round number, I wonder where that number comes from. Where's the source?

Lydia

I'd be very surprised if those 7000 are on the order of the restoration of amputated limbs. Verified not to have been hoaxes, as well. It's important to remember that plenty of people aren't going to suffer any serious consequences for perpetrating a religious hoax. Nobody is going to crucify them.

Hays

It might be argued that the official figure (70 miraculous cures) is artificially low because the criteria are artificially rigorous. Since the Catholic church is putting its reputation on the line, it has stringent standards to vouch a miracle (in the past it wasn't so scrupulous).

If so, then the actual number of miracles is probably higher than the official figure, but because "unexplained" is so vague, without further information about specific cases, we can't judge if the real figure is at the low end of the 7000, high end, or somewhere in the middle.

Lydia

I think you are suggesting that God might cure them because they prayed or because he has some other reason to perform a miracle, not because of anything to do with Mary. That's a legitimate possibility, but it has some problems since God presumably knows that such a miracle will be credited to Mary's intercession. He could just have cured the person before he left to go to Lourdes.

Hays

i) It raises difficult issues regarding providence however we slice it. I wish to avoid a double standard. As you know there are cessationists and "anti-Catholics" who set the bar low enough so that every biblical miracle gets over the bar, but then reset the bar impossibly high so that no Catholic or Pentecostal miracle gets over the bar. Yet that's textbook special pleading.

ii) Mind you, a Catholic apologist might accuse me of special pleading because I detach the miracle from Marian claims. But a Catholic apologist is in the same situation, only in reverse. Because there are well-documented

Protestant and/or charismatic miracles, a Catholic apologist must be able to distance those cases from Protestant claims. So both sides have the conundrum of conceding a miracle but denying that it verifies a sectarian claimant.

iii) There's also the question of whether providence will avoid situations that cause some individuals to form a false impression regarding the religious significance of the incident. Given the complexity of historical causation, it's hard to see how providence can achieve certain goals without some intervening events having the incidental consequence of leading some people to draw the wrong conclusion.

Take popular perception of Marian apparition in a bank window. As you know, that's a real case. God knows that if the bank is built in that location, then natural lighting conditions will generate a visual pattern or "image" that recognizably corresponds to Marian iconography. But that's arguably a coincidental side-effect of natural processes that have a different purpose entirely independent of that result. Yet for those predisposed to Marian apparitions, on the lookout for Marian apparitions, that will have a predictable result.

Now, it might be argued that that's different from miracles at Lourdes, a site explicitly linked to a purported Marian apparition, and further linked to the Immaculate Conception. Indeed, it probably contributed to the elevation of that folk tradition to the status of dogma.

At the same time, that's a matter of degree rather than kind, compared to the bank window. Both have the same effect.

iv) In addition, if a Catholic prays to Mary at home or in church, then undergoes a remarkable cure, she will attribute that to the intercession of Mary. And she will share her testimony with friends and family. So it's still similar to Lourdes, although it doesn't have the official certification.

Lydia

I can't remember if you consider the distinction important between God's performing a miracle and God's refraining from preventing something from happening. I do consider it important. It seems to me less likely that God would refrain from intervening to prevent someone from happening to have an amazing healing at Lourdes (by secondary causes) than that God would perform a miracle to heal someone at Lourdes. So that may be a difference between us.

Hays

Even if we grant the distinction in principle, that breaks down in relation to a healing that is naturally impossible, circumventing secondary causes and natural processes. At best that might apply to a subset of healings that are preternatural or coincidence miracles rather than something contrary to nature that bypasses secondary process.

Lydia

Oh, I agree. If one granted that God had deliberately performed a real miracle (one might say a miracle-miracle) *at Lourdes*, one would have to deal with the implications of that. I would say in that case it would have *some* evidential value in favor of Marian doctrines, for the reason I have already given. Because it is not akin to the case of a reflection in a bank window or a pattern on burnt toast or whatever but rather a real miracle.

Of course, we have some evidence for all kinds of things that are false! I think sometimes it's difficult to bear in mind

that "some evidence" doesn't mean "strong evidence" or "evidence to which there is no counterweight." I'm quite willing to say that there is probably some evidence for Catholicism in the form of reported miracles, visions, etc., but that it is strongly counterbalanced by the evidence against. Of course, the *theoretical* arguments for Catholicism are *extremely* bad, as many of your posts show. The empirical argument is really the basket into which Catholics should place their eggs, as it were.

I would even go so far as to say that the conversion story of Wright (he's a sci-fi author, I can't remember his first name—John?) is *some* evidence for Catholicism. He was an atheist. IIRC, he prayed one of those "atheist prayers" (such as "If you're there, God, show me"). Very shortly thereafter, he had a heart attack and was in a coma or something for a while. During that time he claims that he had visions of the Virgin Mary. I *think* he says Jesus as well, but my memory is a little hazy. I found his blog increasingly weird and coarse and stopped reading it several years ago. Anyway, he recovered and promptly became Roman Catholic, which I suppose is understandable under the circumstances.

Robert Larmer on Lourdes

Christian philosopher Robert Larmer, who specializes in miracles, was kind enough to provide feedback on my Lourdes draft, which I'm posting with permission.

The question is whether in any sample group of 200 million people who pray for miraculous healing, there's a comparable percentage of unexplained cures.

I have no basis upon which to answer that question. I do have a few comments.

- 1.** "Spontaneous remission" is not an explanation of why someone gets better. It is the admission that no explanation is known. It is probable that some events labelled as 'spontaneous remission' are answers to prayer, but that the attending doctors will not countenance a supernatural explanation. I am not claiming there are no spontaneous remissions that have a natural cause.
- 2.** I agree that some events cannot be plausibly thought to be explicable in terms of natural causes.
- 3.** The criteria for an event being called a miracle at Lourdes are extremely strict. Stanley Jaki in his "Miracles and Physics" references a case where a compound fracture, i.e. bones sticking through the skin, was instantaneously healed, but it did not meet Lourdes' criteria for calling something a miracle because a medical doctor was not in attendance. Jaki quotes a commentator to the effect that

one does not need to be a tailor to tell if a coat is full of holes.

4. I do not think that healing miracles have to happen at certain special sites, but it does not bother me if God's providence includes people coming to certain locations to experience healing. If I need to be healed then God may require me to exhibit enough faith to go to a healing meeting being held in a certain location.

5. I think God may well perform miracles at Lourdes. That does not to my mind provide strong evidence for Marian doctrine, given that He also performs miracles for people who do not accept Marian doctrine. Both George Whitefield's and John Wesley's ministries were distinguished by events I view as miraculous, but Whitefield was Calvinist and Wesley was Arminian. Miracles are evidence of God's mercy and power, but in His mercy God does not require that we get all our doctrines totally right before He grants a miracle. When Jesus fed the five thousand he did not first ask who accepted him as the Messiah and who did not.

The Blue Nun

One of the traditional arguments for Catholicism is the argument from miracles. Catholic miracles.

A problem with that argument is that reported miracles are hardly confined to Catholicism. There are well-documented Protestant miracles (see case studies by Craig Keener and Robert Larmer).

But there's another wrinkle. What if Catholic miracles provide evidence that Catholicism is false? That's a paradox, but here's what I mean:

i) Take Fatima. Lucia dos Santos became a threat to the papacy because she accused the papacy of disobeying the Marian command to consecrate Russia to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. That puts the papacy in a bind. If Lucia is the mouthpiece of the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven, what pope dare oppose Sister Lucia?

ii) Or take the claim that Catholic seer and stigmatic Anne Catherine Emmerich foresaw the the apostasy of the Roman church?

iii) Or take Maria de Agreda, the Blue Nun. She could reputedly bilocate, and her corpse is reputedly incorrupt. For instance:

<http://mariadeagreda.org/en/who-was-she/the-lady-in-blue/>

Yet her writings were repeatedly condemned by Catholic authorities:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01229a.htm>

These examples generate a dilemma for the Catholic argument from miracles. They become rogue power centers.

II. Exposition

Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of Fantasia

In this post I'll comment on some representative passages in Robert Barron's *Catholicism: A Journey to the Heart of the Faith* (2011). I already commented on one section:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/07/our-lady-of-guadalupe.html>

I believe Barron has a virtual following second only to Pope Francis. That may be due in part to the theological vacuum in the hierarchy. So few bishops seem to be believers, even by Catholic standards. In addition, he has a certain charisma. A prissy, sissy, fussy, fusty old biddy like Cardinal Burke lacks the common touch and popular appeal.

Barron is an eloquent, seductive mythmaker. His biblical prooftexts for Catholicism detach the text from the original meaning, and reattachment it to "development". Once theology is cut off from the sacred text, it takes on a life of its own, in ever-bolder flights of fantasy. The exercise has a snowball effect, as seminal errors accumulate and magnify. No longer constrained by the reality of revelation, it goes wherever imagination takes it. In some ways, Barron's book is a throwback to Chateaubriand's *The Genius of Christianity*. An apologetic heavy on aesthetics. Catholicism is too pretty not to be true!

Essential to the Catholic mind is what I would characterize as a keen sense of the prolongation of the Incarnation throughout space and time, an extension

that is made possible through the mystery of the church. Catholics see God's continued enfleshment in the oil, water, bread, imposed hands, wine, and salt of the sacraments; they appreciate it in the gestures, movements, incensations, and songs of the Liturgy; they savor it in the texts, arguments, and debates of the theologians; they sense it in the graced governance of popes and bishops; they love it in the struggles and missions of the saints; they know it in the writings of Catholic poets and in the cathedrals crafted by Catholic architects, artists, and workers (3).

i) Notice how the "prolongation" of the Incarnation becomes increasingly diaphanous. On his model, what is *not* Incarnational?

ii) Barron's fundamental error is failure to distinguish between providence and Incarnation. The Incarnation is a unique, unrepeatable, one-time event. But God is providentially active throughout history.

Newman said that a complex idea is equivalent to the sum total of its possible

aspects. This means, he saw, that ideas are only really known across great stretches of space and time, with the gradual unfolding of their many dimensions and profiles. The Incarnation is one of the richest and most complex ideas ever proposed to the mind, and hence it demands the space and time of the church in order fully to disclose itself (3).

That's a wedge for the theory of development.

St. Paul referred to Jesus as "the icon of the invisible God." By this he means that Jesus is the sacramental sign of God, the privileged way of *seeing* what God looks like (6).

Here's an example of legend in the making:

i) "Icon" is a loaded word that's acquired connotations it didn't have in Pauline usage. So Barron's rendering is anachronistic.

ii) "Sacramental" is another loaded word that's foreign to Paul's statement.

iii) The "privileged way" is Barron's code language for hopeful universalism.

But in the sweet invitation of the angel at the Annunciation...Mary's freedom and dignity are respected (89).

The Annunciation was an announcement, not an invitation. It was no more an invitation than God calling Abraham, Jeremiah, St. Paul, &c.

She recapitulates all the great figures of the holy people...She is, accordingly, the daughter of Abraham, the first one to listen to God in faith; she is like Sarah, Hannah, and the mother of Samson, since she gave birth while trusting in God against all expectations; she is the true Ark of the Covenant and the true temple, for she bore the divine presence in the most intimate way possible; she is like the authors of the Psalms and the books of Wisdom and Proverbs, for she becomes the very seat of Wisdom. And she is like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—the prophets who longed for the coming of Messiah (92-93).

Instead of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, we now have *The Heroine with a Thousand Faces*. Why not go full Hindu and declare Mary the White Goddess with multiple avatars? Why not throw in Tinker Bell and Glenda the Good Witch while he's at it?

We can read this story [Jn 2] at the literal level and see Mary as graciously acting to spare the young people embarrassment, but we can also read it more symbolically and appreciate Mary as expressing the prophetic longing of Israel. Wine—delicious, refreshing, intoxicating—is a sign, throughout the OT, of the divine life. Running out of wine, therefore, is an incisive description of the spiritual condition of Israel, alienated in its sin from God's grace. In asking Jesus to act, Mary is speaking according to the rhythms and cadences of the great prophets, who continually called upon Yahweh to visit his people... (94).

i) As long as he's going to indulge in unbridged allegory, why stop there? What about the six stone water pots? Let's tease out their numerological import. And the composition

of the water pots. The *stone* must have some emblematic significance. And the *third* day.

Of course, the reason Barron resorts to allegory, absent any textual clues, is because there's not nearly enough at the "literal level" of the Gospels to justify Catholic Mariology.

ii) And even assuming, for argument's sake, that the text has this subtext, it hardly follows that you can read the narrator's subtle allusions back into Mary's mind.

If she is the one through whom Christ was born, and if the church is Christ's mystical body, then she must be, in a very real sense, the mother of the church. She is the one through whom Jesus continues to be born in the hearts of those who believe (98).

Notice the wild leaps of logic. The studied equivocation.

i) Throughout the book he says the church is the "mystical" body of Christ. What does that mean? Where does he get that from Scripture—or does he?

ii) Does this mean that "in a very real sense," the church was virginally conceived?

iii) Even if we wish to play along with the maternal metaphor, children outgrow their parents, so "in a very real sense," the church should outgrow Mary.

...Mary, through a special grace, was preserved free from original sin from the first moment of her conception. Were this not the case, the angel would not have referred to her at the Annunciation as Kecharitomene (full of grace) [100].

i) Once again, notice the wild leaps of logic. Does *kecharitomene* actually mean "full of grace"? or is that reading the Vulgate back into the Greek? This is substituting tradition for what the text actually says.

ii) In context, Mary is favored by God to be messiah's mother. Gabriel can't refer to someone as the object of divine favor unless they were immaculately conceived? Because Catholic Mariology is so underdetermined by Scripture, Catholic theologians must inflate the few references to Mary in the NT.

Just as the holy of holies in the Temple was kept pure and inviolate, so the definitive temple, the true Ark of the Covenant, which is Mary herself, should be all the more untrammelled (100).

i) The Bible never says Mary is the ark of the covenant. That's another example of Catholics building on a false

premise.

ii) In John's Gospel, Jesus is the true temple. But in Catholic Mariology, Mary replaces Jesus.

iii) The inviolate purity of the inner sanctum is an example of *symbolic* holiness, not *moral* holiness. These were inanimate objects. The high priest was ritually holy, not morally holy. So the attempted analogy breaks down.

...the stories concerning the young Mary's close association with the Temple in Jerusalem (found in the Protoevangelium of James, a 3C text) are, if not necessarily historically accurate, nevertheless theologically suggestive (100).

Now he has to pad out Catholic Mariology by appeal to a historically worthless apocryphal work. Why not appeal to the Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Judas while he's at it?

After recounting the tale of Bernadette, he says:

What is the Immaculate Conception but a great act of healing on the part of Jesus...How appropriate that Mary's ratification of that title would be forever

accompanied by and associated with, the curing of the sick (104).

i) To prop up the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, he must force a fanciful parallel between the Immaculate Conception and Lourdes. Both are about "healing". That's such a reach.

ii) Moreover, only an infinitesimal fraction of desperately ill pilgrims who go to Lourdes return healed. Where is Mary's mojo? If "the Blessed Mother" intended the site to be a place where the faithful receive miraculous healing, why is almost no one healed here?

This [Platonic] philosophy is utterly alienate to the biblical imagination, which does not envision salvation as the separation of the soul from the body, but rather as the transfiguration of the entire self. To give just two examples of this pervasive attitude, the authors of both the book of Revelation and the first letter of Peter dream not of an escape from the world but of "a new heavens and a new earth" (1 Pet 3:13). The dogma of the assumption of Mary describe the full salvation of this prime

disciple of Jesus–Mary's entry, in the fullness of her person, into the presence of God (104-5).

And where's the evidence that it actually happened? Or is make-believe sufficient?

In entrusting Mary to John ("Behold, your mother"), Jesus was in a real sense, entrusting Mary to all those who would be friends of Jesus down through the ages (108).

i) How does that actually follow from the concrete circumstances of the situation?

ii) That makes no sense even on its own grounds. Jesus entrusts Mary to the care of John. If you're going to turn that into a general analogy for Christians, that means Christians have a duty to protect and provide for Mary. But that's the opposite of the Catholic doctrine, according to which Christians should entrust themselves to the care of Mary, who will protect and provide for them. So the comparison is backwards.

The Blessed Mother's basic task is always to draw people into deeper fellowship with her son. The church's conviction is

that the Blessed Mother continues to say yes to God and to "go in haste" on a mission around the world (108).

This is building on one false premise after another. Inventing the evidence they need. Inventing evidence out of whole cloth.

The Gospel (Jn 21) curiously enough, tells us that Peter was naked (gymnos in the Greek) and threw on some clothes before going to the Lord. This detail is meant to remind us of the story of Adam in the book of Genesis (120).

Seriously? Isn't that strained parallel drawn at the expense of historicity? Was Peter, in an utterly different situation and setting, recapitulating the story of Adam? That's the kind of artificial symmetry you encounter in fiction. Given his interpretation, does Barron think that really happened? Or is that the narrator crafting a story to evoke that comparison?

Prior to the fall, Adam walked in easy and unself-conscious nakedness before God, but after the primal sin, he hid himself, ashamed of his nudity. So Peter,

still deeply regretting his denial of Christ, covers up his nakedness in the presence of Jesus. (120).

That's not how I interpret the account:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/it-is-lord.html>

And notice, too, how Jesus uses the future tense—"I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). Therefore he cannot be speaking simply of Peter personally but of all those who will participate in his charism throughout the centuries (122).

I don't think Peter is the primary referent:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/09/hellmouth.html>

The church is a sacrament of Jesus and, as such, shares in the very being, life, and energy of Christ (143).

By Catholic stipulation, the church is a sacrament, and as such shares those properties. Circular proof.

According to the inexhaustibly rich metaphor proposed by St. Paul, the church is the body of Jesus, an organism composed of interdependent cells, molecules, and organs. Christ is the head of a mystical body... (143).

i) Because metaphors are open-textured, it's necessary for the reader to respect its intended scope.

ii) I seriously doubt Paul had cellular and molecular biology in mind. And I'm sure the original audience did not.

"I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15:5; cf. Jn 6:53).

If that's a parable of the church, notice the absence of any mediating structures. No papacy, episcopate, priesthood, or sacraments.

"Whatever you did for one of these least bothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25)...[Jesus states] that these acts are performed for him personally, but this can make sense only on the condition that the poor, hungry, and the imprisoned belong to Jesus, that they are incorporate with him (144-45).

That they are "incorporate" with him is hardly the only condition on which it makes sense. Rather, it assumes the principle of representation. You honor or dishonor Christ by how you treat Christians, as representatives of Christ. Jesus illustrates the principle in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mt 21:33-46).

Yet this mysterious Christ insisted that Saul was harassing him personally—"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting"—a claim that makes sense only on the condition that Jesus has identified himself with his followers in a manner so vivid and incarnate that when they suffer, he suffers (145).

That they "incarnate" him is scarcely the only condition on which that makes sense. It's not that Jesus vicariously suffers through them. Rather, this is, once again, the principle of representation.

The church is one because its founder is one (156).

Is that supposed to be an entailment relation? Are crocodiles one because God made them? Is there's only one Creator, does that mean there's only one crocodile?

I don't deny a sense in which there's one church. I'm just drawing attention to the flaccid, specious logic by which Barrow tries to prove Catholicism.

...the many faiths, religions, and philosophies do, in fact, to varying degrees, already participate in the fullness of Christ's gifts and are hence implicitly related to the Catholic Church... Buddhists and Catholics come together in a keen sense of the finally ineffable quality of ultimate reality, and in their commitment to definite forms of mystical contemplation. Catholics and Hindus share a profound sense of the immanence of God to the world. All of these points of contact, all of these "rays of light," are not only semina verbi (seeds of the word) but also semina catholicitatis (seed of catholicity). (166).

i) A gear-shearing effort to retrofit traditional Catholic exclusivism to mesh with modern Catholic inclusivism. *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* is twisted 180° by shoehorning everyone into the church, so that no one is outside the

church. That's unrecognizable in relation to the original meaning of the slogan.

ii) Notice the abject pluralism and syncretism.

...the Eucharist is nothing other than a sacramental extension of the Incarnation across space and time, the manner in which Christ continues to abide, in an embodied way, with his church (188).

This is Humpty Dumpty hermeneutics: "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

God creates the whole of the universe through the power of his word: "Let there be light," says the Lord, "and there was light" (Gen 1:3)...Jesus says "Lazarus, come out!" (Jn 11:43), and he came out; "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" (Mk 5:41), and she got up: "Child, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5), and they are forgiven. The night before he died, Jesus took bread and said, "This is my body..." (Lk 22:19)...Since Jesus's word is the

divine Word, it is not merely descriptive but transformative. It creates, sustains, and changes reality at the most fundamental level. When at the consecration the priest moves into the mode of first-person quotation, he is not speaking in his own person but in the person of Jesus—and that's why those words change the elements (191-92).

Notice the bait-n-switch as Barrow makes indicatives equivalent to imperatives. Let's plug his logic into a couple of test cases:

This is my Son (Mt 3:17)

By his logic, the Father's statement is transformative rather than descriptive. This is the moment at which Jesus became the Son of God. He wasn't the Son of God before the Father's transformative utterance. Rather, the Father, through the creative power of the divine word, *changes* Jesus into the Son of God!

This is a wicked generation (Lk 11:29)

It wasn't a wicked generation before Jesus said that. Rather, it's his statement that makes it a wicked generation!

Finally, Barron has two paeans to Thomas Merton (225-32; 246-49). You have to wonder if Barron wrote this before Merton's sexcapades were exposed.

<https://harpers.org/archive/2019/04/on-thomas-merton-mary-gordon-review/>

Likewise, he idolizes Pope John-Paul II (e.g. 151-54). Yet his reputation is forever stained by his indolence in the clerical abuse scandal.

Catholicism is a cautionary tale about taking a wrong turn, then continuing to drive in the wrong direction so that a driver is increasingly distant from the right destination. It's especially dangerous when there's a serious mismatch between religion and reality, because religion is about ultimate things. And these aren't just innocent mistakes. Rather, Sacred Tradition locks in primitive errors that lead to ever-expanding error. Like a whirlwind, people can be swept up and swept away by the inner momentum of a religious tradition, especially one with the theatricality of Catholicism.

Catholicism in the dock

I'll be doing a few posts on a recent introduction to Catholicism: **THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE, THE LIGHT OF CHRIST: AN INTRODUCTION TO CATHOLICISM (CUA 2017)**. I believe this is regarded as the best contemporary overview of Roman Catholicism, so it's a good foil.

This constancy and universality of Catholic tradition are features that no historian can fail to notice (34).

To the contrary, many church historians notice the inconstancy and provinciality of Roman Catholic tradition. After all, many church historians are Protestant or Eastern Orthodox. For that matter, modern Catholic church historians acknowledge dramatic discontinuities.

Nor can critics of Catholic tradition avoid making use of some kind of tradition of their own. On a practical level, the rejection of tradition is not a realistic option for anyone who takes scripture seriously. For as soon as we begin to articulate what we think scripture means (or any other book for that matter), we inevitably set a precedent that can be accepted, denied, or qualified by another. In this way, every text that has a seminal role in

human culture also acquires traditions of interpretation down through time, and these are embodied in turn in living communities that promote them or distort them, alter them creatively or develop them homogeneously, reject them or maintain them...To remain constant in any teaching down through time, any community that wishes to maintain its own unity must not only have principles, but also develop a commonality of vital intellectual teaching that is passed on to others across time and place.

The Catholic Church does not dispute whether scripture is to be read within tradition or to be read outside of it, but whether it is to be read according to the human traditions of a John Calvin (some of whose key teachings function practically as a magisterium of reference for many over centuries) or through recourse to the Catholic tradition and established teachings of the Church. The realistic question is not whether we will have a tradition, but which one are we to have (34-35).

i) The claim that critics of Catholicism can't avoid referencing a tradition of their own is at odds with the common assertion that Protestants are guilty of proposing

theological innovations. But a theological position can't be simultaneously traditional and innovative.

There's a first time for everything. It's quite possible for a theologian to make a break with the past.

ii) However, White objection misses the larger point. The question is whether tradition is regarded as intrinsically authoritative and unquestionable. Tradition as an argument from ecclesiastical authority, that isn't subject to review.

That's quite different from tradition as an interpretation of Scripture that appeals to reason and evidence rather than authority. There is moreover, a difference between interpretations that become traditions and traditions that prejudge the meaning of Scripture.

There are traditional interpretations in the sense of a tradition that starts out as an interpretation of Scripture, then becomes traditional, and something that starts out as a tradition, then casts about for prooftexts to retroactively validate a tradition that developed independently of Scripture.

In addition, some traditional interpretations become dogma. The tradition is frozen in place and becomes the foundation for a theological skyscraper. But that's different from a traditional interpretation that remains subject to scrutiny. Traditional interpretations that must prove themselves to each new Christian generation. Traditions that are responsive to logic and evidence.

iii) It's true that some Protestants pay lip-service to sola Scriptura. But that's because humans are social creatures, so theological tribalism is a powerful impulse. Yet there's the same dynamic in Catholic affiliation. If the correct

interpretation of Scripture is ascertainable, then sooner or later someone will come up with the correct interpretation. It's not inconsistent with sola scriptura for the right interpretation, whoever is the first to publish it, to become a traditional interpretation.

To expect each person to adjudicate for himself each and every possible Christian teaching within the course of a lifetime is absurd. Consequently, we do depend upon interpretations of others inevitably, and our own interpretations do contribute to those of a larger community. We are bound to receive the greater part of our understanding of revelation from a life in community with others (35).

It doesn't occur to White that his objection cuts both ways. Each cradle Catholic or convert to Catholicism can't adjudicate for himself each and every possible Christian teaching within the course of a lifetime. They rely on others to do the sorting and sifting for them. But then, isn't their preference for Catholicism just a coin toss? They haven't systematically compared and contrasted the competing theological alternatives.

Therefore, God has established in the Church from the beginning a living stream of apostolic tradition that is continuously maintained and

safeguarded by divinely instituted authority. Had he not done so, a thousand incompatible interpretations of scripture on major issues would proliferate inevitably among Christian believers and splinter them into a disbanded set of divided communities (35).

i) How many interpretations there are is irrelevant. The salient question is whether there's a best interpretation. The most reasonable interpretation. Does the evidence point to the superiority of one interpretation?

ii) White can't legitimately stipulate that Catholicism is the solution, for Catholicism is itself one of the myriad contenders.

Furthermore, without such a unified tradition maintained down through time, no one person would ever be able to come to a comprehensive set of judgments about the truths of the faith, simply due to the sheer volume of enigmatic questions posed from theological controversies down through the ages (35).

i) Catholic apologists always frame theological/hermeneutical diversity as a problem for Protestantism. A problem generated by sola Scriptura. Yet that only follows if in fact Catholicism is the true alternative. But what if Catholicism is false?

What if the problem, or situation, is generated, not by Protestantism, but by *reality*? What if that's the actual situation God has put us in?

To take a comparison, consider the problem of evil. Atheists say that problem is generated by Christian theology.

But Christians counter that the problem is generated, not by Christian theology, but by reality. That's the actual situation God has put us in.

As I see the world, sometimes God intervenes and sometimes he doesn't. There's a seeming randomness in divine intervention. Who gets the healing miracle and who doesn't. Who gets his prayer answered and who doesn't. Who gets divine guidance and who doesn't. Who gets a divine sign and who doesn't.

I'm not saying it's actually random. More like God's special providence surfaces from time to time. But on the face of it, it often appears as though God has thrown us back on our own resources. Divine guidance is not continuous but occasional and unpredictable. There's no oracle that answers all our questions.

ii) White is appealing to an idealized version of Catholicism. A paper theory. But to an outsider, the behavior of the Rome church is indistinguishable from an organization that lacks supernatural direction. An organization that's making

things up on the fly. That changes position in response to unforeseen developments. A fumbling, bumbling, stumbling organization with pretensions to divine superintendence.

The Church is not above scripture. She is only ever subordinate to scripture. But under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the advocate that was promised to her... (35).

i) Catholic apologists and theologians say the church is subordinate to Scripture rather than above it, but if, according to them, the Magisterium is the arbiter of what Scripture means, then Scripture means whatever the Magisterium says it means. So that puts the Magisterium above Scripture. Scripture can never act as an independent check on the Magisterium if the Magisterium is the definitive interpreter.

ii) Moreover, in Jn 14-16, Jesus didn't promise the Spirit to "the Church", much less the pope or the Roman Magisterium, but to the Eleven. This is a classic example of how Catholics read out of Scripture what they first read into Scripture.

Catholic appeal to Scripture is circular inasmuch as Scripture is only allowed to mean whatever meaning the Magisterium assigns to Scripture. But in that event, how do they establish the authority of the Magisterium in the first place?

Modern biblical scholarship, when done well, achieves modest results...None of this is trivial, but none of it proves that Christianity is true either. For that, supernatural faith is necessary because the subject matter of Christianity is a mystery that transcends natural human reason (25).

What would be stranger—in fact illogical in its own right—would be the claim God has revealed himself most certainly but that we might just as certainly deny the capacity of the Church to identify his teaching with any certitude. If the Church cannot teach infallibly, then we are in fact required to say something absurd of just this kind: "God has revealed himself, but the Church can never say with assurance what God has revealed" (37).

i) To begin with, suppose our interpretations *do* fall short of certainty? But unless all interpretations are equally uncertain, why is that a problem?

ii) White appeals to "supernatural faith", which seems to function as a makeweight. "Supernatural faith" closes the gap between evidence and certainty. But even if we grant that paradigm, how does that principle select for Catholicism? Why can't Protestant epistemology appeal to "supernatural faith"?

iii) White is shooting a hole in the bottom of his own boat. If, by his own admission, scholarship falls short to proving Christianity, then even by his own lights, the case for Catholicism can only achieve probability rather than certainty. At this stage of the argument he can't invoke the infallibility of the church to bridge the gap since that in itself is one of those hotly-contested issues where he relies on his fallible interpretation of the historical sources.

iv) Catholic apologists are looking for a mechanism to secure assurance. They locate that mechanism in the Magisterium.

But what about divine providence? We might compare the relationship between providence and theological/hermeneutical diversity to a passenger ship. Ultimately, the passengers only need to be going in the same direction in the sense of boarding the same ship. Some heretics miss the boat. Once on board, the ship takes all of them to the same destination, unless some of them jump overboard (apostates).

Once on board, there's a sense in which passengers going in different directions as well as the same direction. They're continuously moving in different directions. Up and down different decks. Moving from stem to stern, port to starboard. Walking in circles around the deck.

Yet they're all headed in the same direction insofar as they are going wherever the ship is going. So long as Christians are heavenbound, why is hermeneutical certitude required?

A second event is depicted in Acts 2. Here, fifty days after the resurrection of Christ (the "Pentecost"), the Spirit is sent upon the apostles gathered in prayer with the early Christian community and the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. The apostles are given illumination and fortitude, as well as charismatic gifts to preach the gospel to all the nations, without fear of persecution or death (181).

Although the Spirit is given to the apostles at Pentecost, that's inclusive rather than exclusive to the apostles. The Spirit is given to Christians in general, including revelatory dreams and visions ([Acts 2:16-17](#)). Throughout the Book of Acts, the gift of the Spirit is common property of Christian converts, including supernatural phenomena. There's no clerical/lay dichotomy in that regard.

This means that after the time of the apostles there cannot be any additional new revelation that adds to the initial

apostolic deposit of faith. The Church can understand more explicitly and conceptually what was contained implicitly and intuitively in the apostolic doctrine. But this "development" of Church doctrine can only take place because it stems from what is truly contained in the primal revelation of the apostolic Church (182).

A basic problem is that modern Catholicism tries to combine two divergent paradigms. The deposit of faith represents the traditional paradigm. That's fixed. Complete.

But modern Catholicism has added the theory of development. That leads to special pleading, where theological innovations are reclassified as theological developments.

Chosen by Christ himself as the "Rock" upon whom the faith of the Church rests, Peter...(185).

If you consider the rocky setting where Jesus said that, I think the primary reference is not to Peter, but to the symbolism of Caesarea Philippi, a rocky borderland between Jewish Palestine and pagan territory, having historic associations with Baal-worship and Pan. I take Jesus to be

saying that he will build his church behind enemy lines. The Church invades the kingdom of darkness.

[Peter] is portrayed throughout the NT as the central authority of the early Church, the primary apostolic teacher, upon whom the others depend for the final decisions in matters of governance (185).

It's demonstrably false that throughout the NT, Peter is the central authority, the primary teacher on whom all others depend for final rulings in church governance. For the first few chapters in Acts, Peter takes the lead. After that, others like Stephen and Philip step in. Then Peter is eclipsed by Paul, because Paul is more talented than Peter.

The NT has two letters attributed to Peter. In mainstream Catholic scholarship, sanctioned by the Magisterium, Petrine authorship is denied. Most of the NT was composed by writers other than Peter. The Book of Acts contains some Petrine speeches, but mainstream Catholic scholarship regards the speeches in Acts as fictional. My point is not to agree with that but to respond to modern Catholicism on its own terms. And even if we take a more conservative position, the dominant and predominant NT teaching is from teachers other than Peter.

Catholicism in the dock, part 2

This is another installment in my selective review of White's *The Light of Christ*. For the first installment:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/06/catholicism-in-dock.html>

A good example of this is the 20C proclamation of the dogma of the bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This teaching is an expression of what the tradition has always affirmed for the Virgin Mary, and for all human beings in our capacity to participate in divine life. Our bodies are not an impediment we need to shed for shared intimacy with God. From the earliest times the Church taught that all human beings will be resurrected from the dead in the end times and that the Virgin Mary was the new Eve, fully redeemed by the grace of Christ her Son (a teaching we will return to below)...Christ has worked perfectly in the Virgin Mary what he intends to work

more broadly in all of humanity at the end of time (185).

Notice White's methodology. He's attempting to infer an event from an idea: the Immaculate Conception, Mary as the new Eve, and the general resurrection—then attempts to infer the Assumption of Mary from that set of ideas, as if you can infer a historical fact from mere ideas. But historical events derive from causation, not entailment. Events don't operate on the same plane as logical implications. Events are contingent facts.

That's what makes the future humanly unpredictable. It's not like a logical syllogism.

When thinking about the biblical foundations of Mariology, it is important to recall the Catholic principle that scripture is a book inspired within the context of the early apostolic community and rightly interpreted within the early tradition of that same apostolic Church... This scriptural teaching [the real presence] is clearest when one finds very express witnesses to it in the teachings of Church Fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Ambrose, and Augustine...We gain even better

understanding, however, by a living participation in the liturgy of that same apostolic Church where there is the true confection of the Eucharist (by a validly ordained ministry)...Likewise, the scriptures that refer to the Virgin Mary are intelligible for us when we read them within the larger community of the early apostolic Church that is devoted to the mystery of the Mother of God as a deep and nonnegotiable aspect of the mystery of Christ (217).

i) That's a key preliminary move. In hermeneutics, one concern is to identify the implied reader. In standard hermeneutics, when you interpret a document, the context is the author's past and present. His past (e.g. background material) and present (e.g. when the author wrote, the first readers). What may have influenced him. What occasioned the writing. What's the situation of the audience he's responding to.

ii) By contrast, White is trying to make what is future to the author, reception history, the context. That's highly idiosyncratic. The biblical author wasn't writing with the church fathers in mind. He wasn't influenced by the future.

iii) When they exegete the text, Catholic Bible scholars (e.g. Brown, Collins, Fitzmyer, Johnson, Meier) employ the same methodology as Protestant Bible scholars. What we're

getting from White is a kind of theological hermeneutics that diverges from Catholic Bible scholarship. Two compartmentalized approaches that yield different and contrary results.

iv) If you make representatives of your own sect or denomination the arbiters of what Scripture means, then by happy coincidence, Scripture invariably endorses your sect or denomination. Scripture can never be a corrective.

v) Why does White even bother with the text of Scripture when the Catholic distinctive derive, not from Scripture, but from church fathers, church councils, &c? Scripture doesn't contain the specific claims of developed Catholic theology. That's why he must supplement the sacred text with extrabiblical texts that do. But in that event it's the extrabiblical texts that actually teach Catholic distinctive. At best, the biblical texts are merely consistent with subsequent developments, without affirming or entailing subsequent developments. But that means they're consistent with disaffirming subsequent developments. They're consistent with more than one theological trajectory.

White's hermeneutic is like a treasure hunt in which you first plant your conclusion in the text from sources outside the text, draw a map to find the treasure, then "discover" what you inserted into the text. But if you admit at the outset that you're reading out of the text what you first put into the text, then the exercise is circular and self-delusive. When you interpret the text in light of subsequent theological developments, then by definition it will mirror those developments. But the exercise is patently fallacious.

vi) And even if we use reception history as our frame of reference, that doesn't single out the church of Rome. If

you say the author was writing for the benefit of posterity, reception history includes Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Anabaptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Welsh Methodists, &c.

vii) Throughout the book, White appeals to the church fathers to document the antiquity of some Catholic dogmas. But there's a problem with that inference. Even in the case of the "apostolic fathers" who may have had some personal knowledge of the apostles, Christians are quite capable of misunderstanding what they were taught. Many NT letters are written to congregations which were instructed by the apostles. Yet despite that face-to-face teaching, they often misunderstood what they were told, which is why the same apostles wrote letters correcting their confusion. Or in some cases it may not be that they misconstrued what they were taught; rather, they filled the gaps with their own judgment. If it's possible and indeed common for 1C Christians with firsthand knowledge of apostolic teaching to misinterpret apostolic teaching, there's no presumption that the church fathers had the inside track on what the apostles meant.

In addition, some church fathers are much further removed in time, place, and culture from the NT than others. It's fallacious to put them in the same basket as if all church fathers were in the same privileged epistemic situation.

As John Henry Newman pointed out, she is referred to in the second and third century as the new Eve by St. Justin Martyr in Rome, St. Irenaeus in Gaul, and Tertullian in north Africa...By this term they mean to designate the Virgin Mary

as the one who was distinctively sanctified by the grace of Christ...Where Eve fell, Mary was obedient to God in a particularly perfect way by the grace of God. Where Eve was a point of departure for the human race in the order of nature, the Virgin Mary was a new point of departure for the redemption of human beings, in the order of grace (214-15).

There's a sense in which you could say Mary is the new Eve. By the same token, there's a sense in which you could say Noah's wife is the new Eve. A sense in which Noah is the new Adam while Naamah is the new Eve. But that illustrates the risks and limitations of these facile parallels.

The Virgin Mary is not only part of the mystery of the Church but is in a sense the most manifest realization of the Church. She shows us what humanity can become when redeemed most perfectly by the grace of Jesus. It is for this reason that the Catechism of the Catholic Church calls her an "eschatological icon of the Church": alive now in heaven with Christ, she is an anticipation of the final state of the Church.

Based on NT teaching, the Church has always held that Mary was the worthy Mother of God, meaning that she was rightly disposed by grace to accept the Incarnation of the Son as her own mystery and to live deeply in accord with Christ as his most perfect disciple. This life was primordial in Mary, a gift of grace disposing her from the beginning of her existence to live out her vocation as the Mother of God. It allowed her to remain faithful to Christ to the end, interceding for sinners in the crucifixion, and being conformed to Christ even in his death and resurrection, by her bodily Assumption into heaven...Her life is a microcosm of the life of the Church and an example to all Christians... (216)

i) That's an exposition of Catholic Mariology. It's useful in telling you what pious Catholics believe about Mary. But it doesn't give a reader who's not Catholic any reason to agree with that biased viewpoint, any more than reading an exposition of Mormon theology is any reason to believe it. In fact, it's just a statement of White's theological prejudice.

ii) It illustrates how pious Catholics are intoxicated by the *idea* of Catholicism. Swept away by appealing ideas. (Appealing to *them*.) They begin, not with evidence, but wonderful sounding ideas.

iii) Mary is not the only person alive now in heaven with Christ. She shares that distinction with countless other deceased Christians.

iv) There's nothing in the Gospels about Mary interceding for sinners.

v) She piously submits to her assigned role, but it's a fait accompli. God didn't put it up for a vote. Gabriel announces what will happen to her. Her submission is admirable, but God's plan is not contingent on her consent.

So likewise as St. Jerome noted in the 4C Vulgate, when the Virgin Mary is hailed by the angel as "full of grace" (in Greek, kecharitomene), it is a perfect passive participle that is employed, one having a very strong sense: literally, "Hail, one who has been fully or most perfectly graced". The angel acknowledges that she is holier than he is (218).

i) Here's we see the process of legendary embellishment right before our eyes. Notice that White's argument is explicitly dependent on the wording, not of the original text of Luke, but the Vulgate. He's not even conscious of the problem when he departs from the Greek text to draw his inference from a nuance in the Latin translation that can't

be traced back to the text that Luke actually wrote. That's not what it means in the Greek—or even the Latin.

ii) It's an essentially fictional hermeneutic, where you allow for creative additions and expansions, like the evolving mythos of the Arthurian saga, the Faust legend, Dracula, Superman, Star Wars, or Star Trek.

The mythos takes on a life of its own, independent of the original source, because it's not constrained by reality. Rather, it follows dramatic logic.

Mary is depicted as this "new Eve" figure three times in scripture. This occurs twice in John's Gospel: at the wedding of Cana where her petition to Jesus inaugurates his ministry, and where he calls her "woman" (that is to say, Eve) and at the Cross near the end of the Gospel. In the latter passage he says to her "woman, behold your son," speaking of the apostle at the foot of the Cross, but also referring through him to the whole Church. Mary is the new Eve who is moved by God's grace to petition the adult Christ to begin his earthly ministry among us. She is the perfect disciple at the foot of the Cross, who stands (and

does not wilt) as the perfect disciple in faith, even when her Son is crucified. By her loving consent to his mission as our redeemer, she becomes with him and in him an intercessor for the whole Church. "Woman, behold, your son" (220).

i) This illustrates the blinding power of a theological paradigm to overwhelm the proof-text—as well as the groupthink dynamic of self-reinforcing communities. It's also what makes interfaith debates so time-consuming, because there are so many layers to peel away.

ii) Mary did not intend to make Jesus inaugurate his ministry at this point. She simply wanted to solve a practical problem, perhaps a socially embarrassing problem, at a wedding. That this precipitated a public miracle, thereby initiating his ministry, is an unconscious side-effect of her request.

iii) The mere use of "woman" as a term of address must be an allusion to Eve? Is that how "woman" as a term of address typically functions in 1C Judaism?

iv) Mary isn't the only one standing by Jesus right up to the bitter end. There's John, the Beloved Disciple and narrator. White completely omits that.

Scripture refers to the Virgin Mary as the "Mother of God" overtly. The title is

employed by Elizabeth in the infancy narratives of Luke (221).

That's not a title but a description. You can turn it into a title, but there's no reason to think Elizabeth is addressing Mary according to a formal title, like the queen.

As we have noted above, the crucifixion scene in Jn 19 depicts the Virgin Mary standing next to the Cross of Jesus, faithful and unwavering even in the most extreme of personal trials. In her perfect discipleship she becomes not only the Mother of God but now also the Mother of the Church (221).

There's nothing uniquely holy, muchness vicarious, about Mary's presence at Calvary. It's the behavior of a devoted mother. Countless mothers would do the same thing. That's natural maternal devotion.

This idea is shown symbolically but unambiguously in Revelation, where the Mother of God is depicted as a woman "clothed with the sun". The image clearly refers to Mary because it pertains to the

mother of Jesus. Here she is the new Eve, the woman who is attacked by the ancient serpent, as was Eve. She is also a figure here of the Church, persecuted by the Roman Empire, and she is protecting her "offspring," members of the Church, who are also then children of the Virgin Mary (221).

i) A basic problem with that interpretation is that it fails to be consistently literal or metaphorical. It arbitrarily careens between literality and figurality.

If you identify Mary as the referent in Rev 12 because she's the biological mother of Jesus, then you can't suddenly drop that principle and say she's the metaphorical mother of Christians, or a symbol of the church. For if the depiction is metaphorical, then you can't infer that the referent is the mother of Jesus because Mary is his biological mother.

The interpretation needs to be consistently literal or consistently figurative on the same plane. The referents must operate on the same level of literality or figurality. If the woman is figuratively the Church, then the manchild can't literally be Jesus.

ii) In this passage, Mary doesn't personify the church. Rather, the church/Israel is personified by a woman. In the OT, Israel is personified as a mother in labor. The text also evokes Exodus motifs. Cf. C Koester, *Revelation* (Yale 2014), 542.

iii) Although the passage alludes in part to Gen 3, the serpentine/dragonesque imagery also derives from passages in Isaiah and the Psalter regarding the Red Sea crossing (e.g. **Ps 74:13-14**; **Isa 27:1**). So that's not just about Eve, but Israel and the Exodus.

White has cut the text loose from its literary moorings. It's now adrift, going wherever Catholic theology blows it.

The "sun" with which the Virgin Mary is enrobed is the divinity of God himself. Just as the Lord was conceived in her womb and dwelt humanly with her, so she is assimilated by the resurrected Christ, her Son, into the life of God and by her bodily Assumption dwells spiritually with Jesus in the life of the resurrection (222).

i) If the sun is the divinity of God himself, what about the moon and stars? White is arbitrarily picking certain elements while ignoring others. He doesn't offer a cohesive, integrated interpretation. For him, it's not about how these elements correspond to *each other in the text*, but how certain elements can be commandeered to correspond to Catholic Mariology.

ii) Notice how far removed his conclusion is from his prooftexts.

Catholicism in the dock, part 3

Continuing my review of **THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE'S THE LIGHT OF CHRIST:**

The Catholic church teaches that there are seven sacraments, each instituted by Christ either during his earthly life or after his resurrection during the apostolic age. We can find references to all of them in the NT (187).

Notice the assumptions:

- i)** They were instituted by Christ
- ii)** The NT refers to all seven
- iii)** They are "sacraments"

Let's consider these assumptions:

i) There's no evidence that Christ instituted last rites. In a footnote, White cites **Mk 6:12-13**. That, however, isn't about people on their deadbed but sick people generally. Many don't have life-threatening conditions. Moreover, the people in **Mk 6:12-13** are actually healed, whereas last rites is typically for the dying. It's not to heal the sick but to ensure (insofar as that's possible) that they will die in a state of grace. Very different function.

ii) The fact that the NT *mentions* a rite doesn't ipso facto imply that this is when the rite was first instituted. For instance, in what respect did Christ institute matrimony? In fact, Jesus traces marriage back to Adam and Eve (**Mt 19:4-6**). So it's grossly anachronistic to say that Jesus, in the 1C, instituted the sacrament of marriage.

iii) Perhaps what White means is that while matrimony preexisted the ministry of Jesus, he elevated marriage to a sacrament. But his prooftexts don't say or imply that.

iv) "Sacrament" has a specialized meaning in Catholic theology. White provides a definition:

The sacraments of the new covenant are sacred signs or symbols which are of divine origin and that act as "instrumental causes," or channels of grace" (187).

To classify matrimony or anointing the sick as a "sacrament" in *that* sense can't be derived from White's prooftexts.

v) His prooftexts for confirmation are **Jn 20:22, Acts 2:1-4; 8:15-17; 10:38; 19:5-6**. There's no attempt to exegete these passages in context.

vi) He says:

The sacrament of holy orders is contained implicitly in the eucharistic institution narratives: "Do this in memory of me" (187n17).

By itself, his inference is entirely opaque. But he later says:

It is because of the priesthood that there can be an enduring presence of Christ in the Church: in the Eucharist, in penance, and in the graces of confirmation and anointing of the sick. All of these sacraments depend immediately upon that of holy orders... (193).

The priest standing there in the place of Christ says these words ["This is my body"]...and these words transform what lies before him (194).

Problem is:

i) In the NT it's not the priest who takes the place of Christ but the Holy Spirit (Jn 14-16).

ii) The NT doesn't reserve administration of the eucharist for a priest, or even an elder.

iii) The NT doesn't say the words of institution are transformative.

Catholic theology builds on layers of false premises.

The resurrection is not merely a return of Jesus to an ordinary human life. It is a mystery of the radical transformation and glorification of our human state...In one set of apparitions, such as with Mary Magdalene in the garden of the tomb in Jn 20, Jesus appears as an ordinary human being...In another set of apparitions, particularly in Christ's appearances to Saul of Tarsus and to John, the seer at Patmos receiving the apocalyptic vision of Revelation, Christ appears in his unhindered glory, and is overwhelming. Here the emphasis is on the transformed character of Christ's glorified flesh... (173).

An obvious problem with White's dichotomy is how he overlooks the Transfiguration. Christ appears to Paul on the Damascus road and John on Patmos with the same luminous way he appeared to the disciples at the Transfiguration, before his crucifixion and resurrection. So that's not a property of the glorified body, in contrast to an ordinary mortal body.

Medieval theologians spoke about four properties of the resurrected body of Christ...Impassibility is a characteristic denoted negatively: in his risen body Jesus is now incapable of being subject to suffering or death. The transformed state of his risen flesh is one in which he can die no more (174).

Actually, there's no reason to think the glorified body is indestructible. It's no longer subject to senescence or certain diseases. However, it's a mistake to attribute immortality entirely to the nature of the glorified body, as if we're like mutants in a superhero movie. Rather, some of that is due to providential protection from exposure to natural harms.

The physical body of Jesus is still material, but the matter of his body is so transformed by the glory of the resurrections to be perfectly subject to the influence of the spiritual soul and the movements of the spiritual life. From this, there follows agility: we see in the Gospels that Christ can make himself present where he wills: to the apostles

on the road to Emmaus, in the cloister of the Upper Room, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. There is a mysterious power of the risen Lord to manifest himself to us as one who is no longer of this physical world...In his glorified life of the resurrection, Jesus is no longer a part of this physical cosmos, if by that we would mean that he would be somewhere "in" the physical world or contiguous with other physical realities. The glorified bodies of Christ and of the saints (such as that of the Virgin Mary) are of another order (175-78).

i) As an omnipotent being, Jesus can perform nature miracles. He did that prior to the crucifixion and resurrection. So there's no reason to attribute his supernatural "agility" to a property of the glorified body rather than his omnipotence. In other words, that's a property of his divine nature rather than his human nature.

ii) Why insist that Jesus isn't somewhere in the universe? According to biblical eschatology, Jesus will physically return to the earth. Likewise, the saints will live on planet earth.

At a given time, then, we can postulate that due to a new initiative of God, animals were elevated to a higher level. God began to create spiritual souls in human animals, and so the human adventure began. There was a passage from the "merely animal" world of homo sapiens to the specifically spiritual world of the human person. This is the passage where God initiated the new project of humanity, by creating the spiritual soul, and infusing it as the "form of the body" in what constituted the first human beings (103).

That's a makeshift explanation which labors to amalgamate Gen 1-3 with the theory of biological evolution. But that's not something we can derive from Genesis, the fossil record, the theory of evolution. It's a pastiche that arbitrarily selects and redefines elements from independent sources into a papier-mâché composite. A wholly artificial construct that isn't consistently biblical or scientific.

You have to wonder how people like White can work themselves into the mindset that makes so much of what he confidently says remotely plausible. He's like the stereotype of the geeky twenty-something who plays video games in his mom's basement. Not having a normal social life, not having to assume the adult responsibilities of a

husband, father, and breadwinner, while living in a self-reinforcing community of like-minded monks, may explain how he can be carried away with these vapories. Like a cult where things are credible inside the hothouse environment of the compound—that lose all plausibility once you leave the compound, and wonder how you could ever be taken in.

Catholicism in the dock, part 4

Continuing my episodic review of Thomas Joseph White's *In the Light of Christ*:

We should note that none of this entails that Christ suffers the wrath of God the Father, or that he is punished as one deemed guilty on our behalf. This is a theory of penal substitution that was popularized especially by John Calvin, and that some Catholics have held, but which ciphers from traditional Catholic teaching about the atonement. It is true to say that Jesus takes upon himself our punishments, in the sense that he endures consequences of original sin that are collective punishments for man sin (suffering and death). He also confronts the horror of our moral iniquity with unique insight, due to his understanding of the damage done by human evil, and he mourns for our human guilt with intense suffering of contrition of heart, due to the perfection of his charity.

Fundamentally, though, Christ's mystery is in no way one of his own guilt, but of his infinite innocence in the face of our sinfulness. The passion is not a mystery of divine wrath and vengeance but of divine justice, mercy, and reparation. There is no problem with the use of the language of "substitutionary atonement," but there is a question of what this language connotes. Jesus' substitutionary atonement for our sins is above all something positive, not something negative. He substitutes his love, his justice, and his obedience there where the human race has lacked love, justice, and obedience. He "remakes" our condition from within, "justifying us," presenting us anew to the Father as authentic "children of God" by grace, grace merited for us by the only-begotten Son, in and through his passion (170).

i) I agree with White that Christ doesn't suffer the Father's wrath. The atonement concerns the satisfaction of divine

justice. It's not satisfaction made by one person of the Trinity to another person. Divine justice is common property of the Trinity, not a distinguishing property of one Trinitarian person in particular. In redemption, the Son doesn't make atonement to the Father. Rather, God, in the person of the Son, satisfies divine justice. From God, by God, to God.

ii) However, the wrath of God is a central theme in Scripture. The atonement of Christ averts the wrath of God. White erects a false dichotomy between divine wrath and divine justice, but divine wrath is a colorful, anthropomorphic description of divine justice and judgment.

iii) Jesus suffers "contrition of heart"? Since Jesus is sinless (indeed, impeccable), he can't be penitent. There can be no vicarious contrition in the atonement.

iv) The Reformed doctrine of penal substitution is positive rather than negative. Not merely acquittal, but the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect.

v) Justification doesn't remake us from within. Justification is an ascribed status. Regeneration and sanctification remake us from within. The Holy Spirit remakes us from within.

vi) There's an exegetical case for penal substitution. Cf. Simon Gathercole, **DEFENDING SUBSTITUTION: AN ESSAY ON ATONEMENT IN PAUL** (Baker 2015); S. Jeffery, M. Ovey, & A. Sach, **PIERCED FOR OUR TRANSGRESSIONS: REDISCOVERING THE GLORY OF PENAL SUBSTITUTION** (Crossway 2007); Thomas Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," J. Beilby & P. Eddy, eds. **THE NATURE OF THE ATONEMENT** (IVP 2006).

Christianity proposes that the final end of man is to see the essence of God, that the human intellect might see God face to face, "as he is" in his eternal mystery" [1 Cor 13:12; 1 Jn 3:2; Rev 22:5]...The beatific vision entails knowledge not only of God himself and of his Trinitarian life. To see God is to participate in some degree (as God wishes) in the knowledge of all things that God himself knows. So to see God face to face is also to understand the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Church "from within," in the eternal light of God...The insight into Christ that is given to the blessed amounts to an inversion of what we experience in our earthly lives. In this life, through the grace of faith, we come to know the divinity of Christ primarily through the medium of his human actions and sufferings. We discover who Christ is through his incarnate human life, his teachings, miracles, passion, and

resurrection. In the life of the world to come, however, the human soul knows the divinity of Christ immediately by the grace of the vision, and "sees" the mysteries of the life of Christ (his Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection) in the light of the glory of God...In the life of the world to come we will contemplate these same mysteries through the medium of the divine essence, in the splendor of the deity of Christ. There we will perceive "the Lamb that was slain," who is now alive forever, in the glory of his resurrection. What will result is the holy liturgy of heaven, a hymn of thanksgiving, where the souls of the saints praise God continually, in union with the risen Christ and with the Blessed Virgin Mary (273,275-276).

i) There's his perfunctory appeal to Scripture. However, the dogma of the beatific vision makes a much more specific claim than his prooftexts. They don't say or imply the beatific vision. At best, they might be consistent with the beatific vision, but by the same token, they might be inconsistent with the beatific vision—since mere consistency is compatible with divergent positions.

ii) The development of doctrine is supposed to be constrained by what's inferable from the deposit of faith. But the beatific vision goes well beyond that's inferable from his prooftexts. So he has no evidence that the beatific vision is true. It's just a pretty idea. This is a problem with Catholicism. Pious Catholics like White are entranced by the *idea* of Catholicism. But ideas aren't the same as facts. White is staking his immortal destiny on flights of fancy.

iii) His prooftexts say nothing about the Virgin Mary.

iv) I'm not sure what White means by claiming we come to know Christian mysteries "from within". That has a pantheistic tinge, as if we can enter into God's viewpoint. But we can never perceive things the same way God perceives them. We remain creatures. The divine essence is not our medium. God's mode of knowledge is unique to God.

v) In general, we experience God indirectly through the world he has made. It's possible for God to communicate telepathically, but even then, direct revelation is adapted to human intelligence. Our finite mind is the filter. That's not a problem because God created the filter. God created the human mind. As such, it can be an adequate medium. White's position is subversive to the categorical distinction between God and man.

vi) In the world to come, we will still experience Jesus through the medium of his Incarnate persona, like how Jesus appeared to John on Patmos (reminiscent of the Transfiguration). We won't bypass our finitude or the Incarnation.

Nothing could be more serious than what happens after death. The stakes could not be higher. Everything to gain if you're right and everything to lose if your wrong. Therefore, it's all-important to base your views of salvation on reliable evidence. But what is White's source of information? It's not natural theology or revelation. It's not the deposit of faith. It's just wishful thinking.

The Catholic tradition has always taught that there are degrees of holiness of those who attain to heaven, based on the degree of charity that each soul attained in his or her earthly life. The intensity of the beatification of each person is based on the intensity of his charity in this world...The souls of the saints are like cups of various sizes, some very small and some very great. Each can receive a different amount of the living water of grace that pours forth eternally from the side of Christ, and yet all are filled to the brim, eternally running over (277).

i) White is substituting imagination for fact.

ii) Even on its own grounds, the claim is illogical. Why would degrees of holiness be frozen at the time of death?

Why wouldn't heaven be an opportunity for all saints to achieve perfect holiness?

There is a communion of saints that exists in the heart of the Church, of prayers shared in common by the living and the dead. There is also a spiritual ecology of interdependence between our world and the world of those who have died. We can pray for the souls in purgatory. The souls in heaven can intercede for us (277).

That's Catholic dogma, but there's no reason to believe it's true. Suppose, for argument's sake, that the dead can pray for the living. If so, that in no way implies that saints who are perfect strangers to you and me are in any position to pray for us. It might make some sense to say a dead Christian relative could pray for me. They know who I am. Even that's speculative. It's inhumane to suppose Mary can simultaneously process millions of prayers everyday, in hundreds of foreign languages.

Even in heaven, in the joy of the beatific vision, the soul remains incomplete without a body...It is difficult to see how

a human person can live forever without a body... (279).

That's certainly a problem in Thomistic anthropology. If the soul is the form of the body, how does the soul survive death? That's not just my impression. For instance:

“It is a savage superstition to suppose that a man consists of two pieces, body and soul, which come apart at death; the superstition is not mended but rather aggravated by conceptual confusion, if the soul piece is supposed to be immaterial...In truth a man is a sort of body, not a body plus an immaterial somewhat; for a man is an animal, and an animal is one kind of living body; and thinking is a vital activity of a man, not of any part of him, material or immaterial. The only tenable conception of the soul is the Aristotelian conception of the soul as the form, or actual organization, of the living body; and thus you may say that a man thinks with his soul, if you mean positively that thinking is a vital activity of a living human being, and negatively that thinking is not performed by any bodily organ”
Peter Geach, God and the Soul, 38.

“There is a primary principle of the life of any kind of material thing...This primary principle I call its soul...The vegetative functions are performed in animal life too. But except for growth they are transposed to a new key. And similarly the remaining vegetative functions and the animal activities and powers are transposed in the life of man. For here there is something new: the intellective principle is the differentia of the human soul” “Has Mankind one Soul?” Elizabeth Anscombe, Human Life, Action and Ethics,18,22.

“There is no reason whatever for believing in a temporal immortality of the soul apart from the resurrection; above all there is no ‘natural immortality of the soul’ that can be demonstrated by philosophy...I take the Christian doctrine of immortality to be the doctrine of an unending human life, happy or unhappy, after the resurrection and not the doctrine of an immortal sort of substance, the soul, to which is appended the doctrine of the resurrection because a disembodied soul is not a complete man, though I know that in apologetics the matter is often

presented like that” Anscombe, “The Immortality of the Soul,” Faith in a Hard Ground, 77.

“Well, he [Aquinas] investigated it [postmortem survival]. It was for him a serious problem precisely because he believed the Aristotelian principle – the soul is the form of the body...Probably he did [think this]. I would say to him it was a problem and it is not clear that he solved the problem, Anscombe, “The Existence of the Soul,” 53f.

But on something like Cartesian dualism, I don't think it's difficult to see how disembodied souls could live forever. To extrapolate from biblical visions of heaven, heaven is like a vivid, collective dream.

Their bodies will remain truly material, but will be subject to the spiritual soul in a much more perfect way, even as the soul is itself enlightened by the beatific vision, and so perfectly subject to God. That is to say, in the resurrection from the dead, the material body will be highly "spiritualized" by the dominance of the soul, and the grace of the beatific vision will irradiate the whole human

subject, affecting the sensations and feelings of the resurrected body, as well as the physical integrity and material quality of the body (279-280).

This is where White's anthropology pulls in opposite directions. On the one hand it's hard for hylomorphism to make room for an immortal soul. On the other hand, the dogma of the beatific vision makes the body an impediment to spiritual apprehension.

III. Competing Paradigms

Paradigm shift

I. PARADIGM SHIFT

Converting from the Protestant faith to the Catholic faith, or vice versa, involves a paradigm-shift. I'm defining a theological paradigm as a comprehensive interpretive grid. A way of viewing, integrating, and simplifying a mass of issues by reference to a particular conceptual scheme. One impediment which prevents some Catholics from conversion is that they are used to filtering everything through their theological paradigm, and they can't imagine an alternative. They don't know the explanatory power of a Protestant paradigm. They don't know how it answers the same questions. They don't think it *can* answer the same questions.

In this post I'm going to compare and contrast Catholic and Protestant paradigms. This is a thumbnail sketch. I've provided documentation in other posts.

Of course, there's no one Protestant paradigm—although they share a family resemblance with many common assumptions—so I'll be speaking for myself. In addition, there's no one Catholic paradigm. So I'll be selective and generalize. My analysis deliberately oversimplifies some issues, but the basic contrast remains the same after we add some caveats. Sometimes we need to see the forest rather than the trees. We can revisit the trees at a later date.

II. CRITERIA

It's natural for Catholics to use their paradigm as the standard of comparison. They contrast what they deem to be the theoretical advantages of their paradigm with what they deem to be the theoretical disadvantages of the Protestant alternative.

But at one level that begs the question, for unless your theological paradigm is true, it is illegitimate to use it as a yardstick to measure the competition. Even if one paradigm has theoretical advantages compared to another, that's not the same thing as having factual advantages.

Consider an analogy: some Christians never go to the doctor because they have a faith-healing paradigm. They think God has made a promise to miraculously heal every medical condition in answer to prayer.

Now the faith-healing paradigm has theoretical advantages over the medical paradigm. For one thing, it's free! In addition, some medical conditions are incurable. There are genetic defects and degenerative illness that medical science can't correct or cure. Likewise, people can be irreparably mangled in accidents. Medical science can't restore them. Medical science can't fix every broken body. Miraculous healing is clearly superior.

But there's a little problem: the theoretical advantages of the faith-healing paradigm aren't factual advantages. In reality, God doesn't answer every prayer for miraculous healing. Hence, it is illegitimate to use that as a yardstick to measure the medical paradigm since the faith-healing paradigm isn't true (which is not to deny that God sometimes intercedes to heal). So you can't merely handicap claimants based on which has better (hypothetical) consequences.

III. TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC PARADIGM

1. TRADITION

Oral apostolic tradition. Stuff Jesus taught the disciples which isn't recorded in Scripture. In that regard, tradition is static and overlaps the deposit of faith. Tradition is a thing of the past.

2. INFALLIBILITY

Ecumenical councils can infallibly resolve doctrinal disputes. Likewise, the pope is a tiebreaker or referee who intervenes to resolve intractable, high-level disputes. This is a safeguard against damnable errors.

3. PRIESTHOOD AND SACRAMENTS

i) Saving grace is channeled through the sacraments. Salvation is contingent on access to Catholic sacraments.

ii) Humans are born under the curse of original sin. Born in a state of mortal sin. Born hellbound. Infant baptism shifts them to a state of grace. However, that's unstable because saving grace is resistible. Salvation can be lost. There's the constant peril of reverting to a state of mortal sin. So a cradle-to-grave maintenance program is required to keep Catholics in a state of grace, viz. baptism, confirmation, penance, the Mass, last rites.

iii) The Catholic priesthood has a monopoly on the sacraments. Valid sacraments depend on validly ordained priests, which in turn depends on apostolic succession.

iv) To be saved, you must be a communicant member of the Roman Catholic church.

v) There are certain strands of Catholic tradition that soften that paradigm, viz. invincible ignorance, implicit faith, Limbo. Those stand in tension with the austere inner logic of the primary paradigm.

4. CULT OF THE SAINTS

i) The good works of Catholics have (congruent) meritorious and satisfactory value, feeding into the treasury of merit, which can be tapped into (indulgences).

ii) As Queen of Heaven, the intercession of Mary has particular efficacy.

IV. MODERN CATHOLIC PARADIGM

1. LIVING TRADITION

Tradition evolves in unforeseeable ways (doctrine of development). The pope is a living oracle who provides up-to-the-minute guidance in doctrine and ethics.

2. HOPEFUL UNIVERSALISM

The Roman Catholic church is the universal sacrament of salvation. Non-Catholic Christians can be saved. Non-Christians can be saved. Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and even atheists can be saved. Perhaps hell is empty.

3. The Bible is only infallible in matters concerning salvation.

V. PROTESTANT PARADIGM

1. SOLA SCRIPTURA

i) The primacy of revelation. Divine revelation (i.e. public/propositional revelation) is the supreme source and standard of doctrine and ethics. Public revelation is now codified in Scripture.

ii) Hermeneutical, doctrinal, ethical, and factual questions (e.g. the scope of the canon) can't be leveraged by appeal to an authority figure or magisterium. Truth, reason, and evidence are the criteria, rather than an argument from authority.

2. FALLIBILITY

i) According to one Protestant paradigm (e.g. Lock, Butler), we must settle for probability rather than certainty. It's possible that our answers are mistaken.

ii) That's okay since God won't damn us for innocent mistakes. We can only form judgements based on the evidence that God has left at our disposal. If God wanted us to form a different judgment, he could provide more evidence or better evidence.

iii) Catholics are in the same boat. Catholics must rely on fallible reason to arrive at their belief in Rome or defend it. Although they believe that Rome is infallible, that's a fallible belief in the infallibility of their denomination. A bottom-up process rather than a top-down process. Their conclusion regarding Catholicism is only as good as the fallible reasoning they use to reach that conclusion. Their

conclusion is not infallible. They can't escape the vicissitudes of errable judgment. The destination can't rise higher than the process. Appeal to infallibility to retroactively validate their faith is illusory.

3. CERTAINTY

i) *Pace* (2), according to another Protestant paradigm (Calvinism), God, in his meticulous providence, is able to cultivate true, justified beliefs by putting his people in an epistemic environment where they will be exposed to orthodox doctrine and ethics. Special providence is a reliable belief-forming process. It's possible to have beliefs that are uninspired but infallible. Beliefs that could not be mistaken. Not merely inerrant but without possibility of error—if God is guiding the process to yield that intended result.

ii) *Apropos* (i), consider the question, "Is it a sure thing?" That's ambiguous. To take a comparison, a Christian's salvation might be a sure thing at a metaphysical level. If he's elect, his salvation is inevitable. Conversely, his salvation might be unsure at an epistemic level. Suppose he lacks the psychological confidence in his salvation. But that doesn't mean the outcome is uncertain; rather, he's uncertain about the outcome. Self-doubt doesn't affect the outcome.

4. CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

i) The fact that Scripture won't answer all our questions doesn't mean Scripture is unclear. There's a difference between giving an unclear answer and leaving a question unanswered. The problem is that some people demand answers when answers are unavailable, because it's not

that important or because reason will suffice in those cases.

ii) Sometimes people ask the wrong questions. Sometimes people have the wrong priorities. A Protestant paradigm seems defective to a Catholic because it doesn't answer some of their questions, or because the answers are unsatisfactory from a Catholic standpoint. But that's circular. It's using the Catholic paradigm as the yardstick. But that begs the question.

5. WORD & SPIRIT

The Protestant paradigm doesn't rely on historical continuity. It doesn't depend on a chain of custody. So long as people have access to revealed truth, the Spirit can start or restart the church at any time and any place.

6. SOLA GRATIA

Christians are saved by God's unilateral grace. We don't make an independent contribution to our salvation.

Finding the church

We believe in one holy catholic, and apostolic church.

That's a traditional definition of the church, from the Nicene creed. Catholic, Anglo-Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox use that as a frame of reference. The terms are ambiguous, and become ciphers in the hands of high-church partisans. They don't use those criteria to define the true church, but use their denomination to define the criteria. The criteria become mirror images of their denomination.

Catholic converts and apologists like Bryan Cross harp on "the visible church". Where do you find the visible church? Protestants don't have a visible church.

Here's another definition of the church:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42).

That's a nifty compact definition. A functional definition.

i) What constitutes apostolic teaching is illustrated throughout the Book of Acts. The apostolic kerygma centered on the mission of Christ. Key events in the mission of Christ, interpreted through the lens of the OT. And Luke's Gospel supplies background information.

Nowadays, the teaching of the apostles is preserved in Scripture.

ii) "Fellowship" is a broad concept for the communal life of the church. Pooling resources as well as a common faith (cf. 4:32). Alms. Corporate worship.

iii) Does "breaking of bread" (cf. v46-47) allude to the eucharist or ordinary communal Christian meals? False dichotomy inasmuch as that formal distinction didn't exist at the time. The eucharist was incorporated into common meals (cf. 1 Cor 10-11).

iv) Private and corporate prayer have always been fixtures of Christian life, a carryover from Judaism. That's illustrated in the Book of Acts, as well as other NT documents.

This is where you find "the church". You find the church whenever and whenever you find groups of Christians who exemplify [Acts 2:42](#), both inside and outside of church.

For further reading:

Darrell Bock, **ACTS** (Baker 2007), 149-51.

Craig Keener, [Acts 1:1-2:47](#) (Baker 2012), 1000-1011.

David Peterson, **THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES** (Eerdmans 2009), 159-62.

Eckhard Schnable, **ACTS** (Zondervan 2012), 177-80.

Rome's house of cards

I'd like to remark on a neglected argument for the Protestant faith. Or, to put this in reverse, a neglected argument against Catholicism.

The primary objection to the Protestant faith is Protestant diversity. "Interpretive pluralism." The "scandal" of denominations. Sola scripture is a "blueprint for anarchy".

However, we can flip that around. Even if we say Protestant pluralism is a point of weakness, that's simultaneously a point of strength. Mind you, I think it's nonsensical to say the truth is a point of weakness, but for the sake of argument, let's say Protestant pluralism is a point of weakness. Yet that's also, and equally, a point of strength.

Here's what I mean: Traditionally, since the time of Trent, Catholicism has been a tight package. A take-it-or-leave-it package. The entire package must be true. If any Catholic dogma is false, then that falsifies the whole package.

This means Catholicism has an extremely high burden of proof. Or, to put it in reverse, a very low threshold for disproof. It can't afford to be wrong at a single point. You must check every box.

Because traditional Catholicism is so inflexible, that makes it highly vulnerable to falsification. It has no give. Every Catholic essential and distinctive must be true for Catholicism to be true.

So Catholicism has many exit points. And a Catholic apologist has to block every single exit.

To put this another way, from a Catholic standpoint, if Catholicism is false, then Christianity is false. According to Catholicism, the church of Rome is the One True Church, directly founded by Jesus, 2000 years ago. This means that from a Catholic standpoint, if Catholicism is false, then there's no Christian fallback option. Christ was a false messiah. Or he was misrepresented by the NT, church fathers, and church councils.

By contrast, the very flexibility of the Protestant faith makes the burden of disproof far higher. For instance, from a Presbyterian standpoint, if Presbyterianism is false, it doesn't follow that Christianity is false. Within the Protestant faith, there are lots of Christian fallback options. Like the principle of redundancy in engineering, the Protestant faith has many backup systems. I'm not saying that's intentional. Rather, it's a fringe benefit.

Ironically, what Catholic apologists single out as a strength of Catholicism and a weakness of evangelicalism is, in fact, a fatal weakness of Catholicism. Puncture the hull at any point and the ship sinks.

Now, I say "traditionally" because Catholicism, since about the time of Pius XII, has been undergoing drastic change—a trend accelerated by Pope Francis. So it's unclear, after the dust settles, what Catholicism still represents. I pity someone attempting to write an introduction to the Catholic faith under the pontificate of Francis. That may be out of date before the ink is dry. Catholics must consult the daily newspaper to know what they're still supposed to believe.

Word and Spirit

A while back a Catholic apologist tried to PM me this:

The only Authority on Christian doctrine is Christ, as I'm sure you'll agree. You'll also agree that the Church and Christ are one. The only question is, how to identify the One True Church among all the candidates. There are marks and attributes that enable us to identify the Church. This is not difficult, and you can discover the Church quite easily. It is not a problem of the intellect, but a problem of the will. God help us all.

Let's run back through this:

Let me know if you want to pursue this discussion.

I'm not going to conduct a private theological debate with a Catholic apologist. Why would I invest lots of time in a futile debate with somebody who won't be persuaded, and no one

else in the world gets to see it? How's that a responsible use of my time?

The only Authority on Christian doctrine is Christ, as I'm sure you'll agree.

No, I don't agree.

i) I don't consider one person of the Trinity to be a higher authority than another.

ii) And in any event, I don't have direct access to the mind of Christ. He doesn't appear to me in weekly interviews.

iii) My authority for Christian doctrine is biblical revelation. That's something I do have access to.

iv) There's a metaphysical sense in which the Son is more ultimate than Scripture, but that concerns the order of being, not knowing.

v) Moreover, Scripture is a product of the Spirit. So it's not as if Christ outranks the Spirit. They are coequal persons.

You'll also agree that the Church and Christ are one.

He sure is confident about my agreement in advance! The statement is equivocal in several respects:

i) "One" in what sense? Christ and the church aren't one and the same thing. They're not identical.

ii) Perhaps he means "one" in the sense that the church is in union with Christ. In a sense, that's true.

iii) That, however, becomes a question of how to define the church. He has a centralized definition while I have a decentralized definition. I'm a nondenominational Calvinist. The only question is, how to identify the One True Church among all the candidates.

I don't grant the assumption that there's One True Church in contrast to multiple candidates. Rather, the church is multiply-instantiated in Christians. Where the Spirit is, there is the church. A one-to-many relation. It's like color. Red can be exemplified in many different objects and in varying shades.

There are marks and attributes that enable us to identify the Church. This is not difficult, and you can discover the Church quite easily.

i) This illustrates the problem when you get off on the wrong foot. I don't concede that that's where we should be looking in the first place. That's not my starting-point.

ii) There's no agreed-upon list of what constitutes the marks of the church. Catholics typically default to the four Nicene marks, but Bellarmine, the premier Catholic apologist of the Counter-Reformation, said there were fifteen. Confessional Calvinists have a different list. For instance:

“The marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin” (Belgic Confession, Article 29).

On that definition, the Roman church is not a true church, much less the One True Church.

But speaking for myself, I'd use a Word and Spirit rubric rather than a Word and Sacrament rubric.

iii) I don't grant the authority of the Nicene council to dictate the marks of the church. That's not my standard of comparison. And it's a circular appeal. The Nicene bishops only had the authority to dictate the marks of the church if you view them as authoritative representatives of the One True Church—which assumes the very issue in dispute.

iv) And it's circular in another respect inasmuch as Catholic apologists always define the marks of the church to include the church of Rome while excluding Protestants.

v) Even if, for argument's sake, I used that frame of reference, it's doubtful that all the Nicene bishops defined "one," "holy," "Catholic," and "apostolic" the same way.

vi) In theory, I might be able to operate within the Nicene paradigm if I glossed the marks with necessary caveats, but

the four Nicene marks are arbitrary, and it's highly inefficient to tweak a flawed paradigm.

This illustrates the challenge of reasoning with so many lay Catholic pop apologists. They have so many layers of assumptions to peel away.

Where was your church before the Reformation?

One question Catholic apologists like to ask evangelicals is "Where was your church before the Reformation?"

i) Now that's a loaded question because Catholics operate with a different paradigm of the church than evangelicals. As I've remarked several occasions, Catholics operate with a priest-sacrament paradigm that requires historical continuity (i.e. apostolic succession) whereas evangelicals (or low-church Protestants) operate with a Word-Spirit paradigm that doesn't require historical continuity.

ii) In addition, there are various ways we can turn the question around. "Where's the Roman Catholic church"?

Problem is, there are multiple candidates for the Roman Catholic church. For instance, is the church of St. Augustine the same church as the church that excommunicated the Jansenists? Jansenism was a Catholic post-Reformation revival of Augustinian theology.

Is the Tridentine church the same church as the post-Vatican II church? Is the church of anti-modernist popes like Pius IX and Leo the XIII the same church as the church of Pope Francis? For that matter, is the church of Pope John-Paul II the same church as the church of Pope Francis?

iii) Where is the NT church before the Reformation? Where do we find the NT church in the medieval Latin church?

iv) Where do we find the Roman Catholic church in the Gospels? Where do we find "the church" in the Gospel of

Mark? Mark's Gospel never mentions "the church". Where do we find "the church" in the Gospel of Luke? Luke's Gospel never mentions "the church". Where do we find "the church" in the Gospel of John? John's Gospel never mentions "the church". The only Gospel that even mentions "the church" is Matthew's Gospel. And it mentions "the church" just two times. That's it!

In fairness, a concept can be present where the word is absent. In the Gospels there's a notion of Christian community. But you can't find the Roman Catholic church anywhere in the Gospels.

All four Gospels have accounts of the Last Supper, but there's nothing about a priest officiating at the Eucharist. And only one Gospel has a clear reference to Christian baptism.

Where are the seven sacraments in the Gospels? Nowhere.

Where's the cult of the saints in the Gospels? Nowhere.

Where's the Roman Catholic priesthood in the Gospels? Nowhere.

Where's the papacy in the Gospels? Nowhere.

Where's the Immaculate Conception in the Gospels (or anywhere in the NT)? Nowhere.

Where's the Assumption of Mary in the NT? Nowhere.

Now, a Catholic apologist might object that it's anachronistic to expect a blueprint of the church in the Gospels. But is that an unreasonable expectation? Catholic apologists tell us that the Roman Catholic church was

directly founded by Jesus Christ. Catholic apologists tell us that Jesus instituted the seven sacraments. So it's a reasonable expectation that when we compare the Roman Catholic church to the Gospels, we find something in the Gospels recognizably corresponding to the Roman Catholic church.

A Catholic apologist might counter that Jesus indirectly founded the Roman Catholic church by establishing the initial conditions, then leaving the rest to theological development. Suppose we grant that for the sake of argument. If so, why can't we claim the Protestant Reformation as an intended theological development?

Nuclear winter

I'd like to expand on an illustration I sometimes use to compare and contrast Catholic and Protestant paradigms. Take those dystopian scenarios in which 99% of the human race is wiped out by some catastrophe. But a sample of the human race survives in subterranean cities. They may be there for generations until it's safe to come outside.

If, during that interruption in normal human life, all the popes, priests, and bishops died, that's the end of the road for Catholicism. The Catholic faith can't restart if there's a break in apostolic succession. Even if some of the original survivors were Catholic, when they surface, generations later, Catholicism can't make a comeback.

By contrast, the Protestant faith operates with a Word and Spirit paradigm. It can reinitialize anytime, anywhere. All that's needed is knowledge of Scripture and the direct, independent action of the Spirit to engender faith. Protestant faith could be forgotten for centuries or millennia, but come back to live in a flash. When the survivors emerge, they can pick up where their ancestors left off.

Needle in a haystack

There's a popular Catholic trope that goes something like this: Protestantism poses a dilemma for Protestants: why do you hope to find and join the right church when there are 30,000 candidates to sift through?

There are several problems with this trope:

i) "The 30,000 denominations" is an artificial, misleading figure, as even Catholic apologists like Trent Horn admit. However, let's grant the 30,000 figure for argument's sake.

ii) Catholics are unconsciously superimposing a Catholic paradigm on Protestants. It's not a Protestant dilemma. It's not a conundrum internal to Protestant theology. It's only a dilemma if you take Catholic ecclesiology as the frame of reference.

In Protestant theology, salvation isn't contingent on locating and joining "the right church". In Protestant theology, salvation is mediated by Jesus, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit, not the church. While the church often plays a vital role in disseminating the Gospel, in Protestant theology, we're not saved through the church in the traditional Catholic sense, where saving grace is piped through sacramental channels.

We don't need to find a needle in a haystack. God doesn't make salvation that elusive. We don't need to comb through 30,000 straws to find the needle. It's not about us finding God but God finding us. And the knowledge of salvation is available through multiple sources. In evangelical theology, you don't have to be in union and communion with "the right church" to be in union and communion with God.

iii) The Catholic objection is like a Hindu telling a Christian, "how do you expect to escape from the wheel of reincarnation unless you practice yoga to get in touch with your inner godhood?"

But that's not Christian predicament since pantheism is false and reincarnation doesn't exist.

Now, a Catholic might try to use a Catholic yardstick to measure the Protestant faith, but he can't reasonably expect a Protestant to accept a Catholic yardstick. Too many Catholics argument from their paradigm rather than arguing for their paradigm when debating Protestants. But that begs the question.

iv) In addition, the way Catholics frame the issue ironically generates a dilemma for their own position. If you have to find the needle in the haystack, then that means Catholics can only discover the One True Church® through exhaustive process of elimination. Since, according to them, there are 30,000 candidates for that singular distinction, they must compare and contrast 30,000 candidates to isolate and identify the true claimant. But of course, no Catholic engages in that winnowing process. No Catholic examines 30,000 individual straws to find the needle.

v) Finally, Catholics who raise this objection are operating with a defunct theological paradigm. According to the traditional paradigm, you had to receive valid sacraments to be saved. Valid sacraments were dispensed by Roman Catholic priests. There was no salvation outside the Roman sacramental system. But that's been shredded by post-Vatican II theology. For instance:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/001-who-can-be-saved-8>

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/05/the-population-of-hell>

<https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/article/is-hell-crowded-or-empty-a-catholic-perspective/>

At best, Roman Catholicism has stretched the definition of "the Church" so that you can be in union and communion with "the Church" even if you're completely ignorant of Catholic theology, have never received Catholic sacraments. On that expansive redefinition, "the Church" becomes like oxygen: something universally available. Everyone can breathe it.

Brother, can you paradigm?

Roderick Chisholm famously delineated two divergent approaches to epistemology. He distinguished between "methodists", who begin with criteria, and "particularists", who begin with examples. Methodism is more deductive while particularism is more inductive.

Recently, as I was debating a convert to Catholicism, that distinction came to mind. The convert has a philosophical turn of mind.

There are different types of converts to Catholicism. In my experience, Catholicism is appealing to philosophically-oriented guys. They are methodists. They are captivated by the Catholic paradigm. It's a complex paradigm that massages their intellectual pride. And its complexity renders it resistant to easy disproof. The Catholic paradigm has escape clauses, so that when you raise evidential objections to Catholicism, they can evade the objections by making vague appeals to the theory of development, or degrees of authority, and so on.

As I was talking to this convert, I mentioned dramatic reversals in Catholic theology, such as salvation outside the church, and the contrast between mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship and the anti-modernist injunctions of the BPC c. Leo XIII.

It became evident that I was drawing a blank. The convert had no idea what I was referring to.

That's because the convert is a methodist rather than a particularist. He didn't begin with facts about Catholicism, but the entrancing paradigm. As a result, his conversion is

deeply uninformed. He's ignorant of many historical facts about Catholicism which he needs to know to properly assess the evidence for or against Catholicism. And that's because his point of entry into Catholicism isn't primarily evidential; rather, he's smitten by the *idea* of Catholicism.

Now I think we need to strike a balance between methodism and particularism. We shouldn't be straight particularists. We need to steer clear of falling into the trap of positivism. Facts must be interpreted. What counts as factual is in itself an interpretive judgment. Evaluating evidence is a value-laden enterprise. So we need criteria.

But by the same token, we shouldn't be straight methodists. We mustn't operate with a fact-free, a priori filter that has no evidential grounding in reality. An extraneous interpretive grid we impose on the world, which arbitrarily screens out inconvenient facts. We need to combine inductive and deductive approaches.

In my experience, converts to Catholicism use the Catholic paradigm as a shield to ward off factual objections, but how do they know that their paradigm is true in the first place? Is there a tipping point where the paradigm takes on too much water? Or is the Catholic paradigm unfalsifiable? If so, how is that distinguishable from a religious cult?

Is the Catholic church 2000 years old?

Catholic apologists compare their "2000-year-old" church to upstart Protestant denominations. I've discussed that before, but I'll expand on that:

1. Suppose a young couple buys a Fixer Upper. At the time it's all they can afford on their meager income. As their income rises, they remodel the house. As their income continues to rise, they make additions on either side. Finally, they demolish the original house, preserve the additions, and build a new house in-between the flankers. Is the final house the same house as the original house?

There's a kind of historical continuity in play. But no part of the original house exists. It's been replaced, part by part. And not even by the same kinds of parts, but different kinds of parts. It's unrecognizable compared to the Fixer Upper. So mere historical continuity doesn't make it the same house or even similar to the original house.

Moreover, even if some of the original parts were preserved, it's undergone so much change that it's equivocal to say it's the same house. It's the same in some respects but not the same in key respects.

2. There are different ways a faith-tradition might be new. On the one hand, it might have new doctrines, new interpretations. On the other hand, it might be a new combination of old doctrines and old interpretations. It might recombine them in different ways.

3. To some extent, Protestant theology was new. It emerged in the 16C. However, it didn't pop in out of the blue. In many respects it had theological antecedents. And

Protestants claim it's older than Catholicism because it represents a restoration of biblical theology, from which Catholicism deviated.

However, the Catholic church under Pope Francis, or even under Pope Benedict XVI or Pope John-Paul II, is a different church than it was under Leo XIII or Pius IX. The Catholic church under Pope Innocent X and Pope Clement IX is a different church from the medieval church. By condemning Jansenism, they anathematized the Augustinian tradition. What held an honorable place in Catholicism prior to Calvinism became intolerable after Calvinism. Catholic theology is reactionary.

One could give many other examples. There really is no such thing as "the Roman Catholic Church" because it keeps reinventing itself. Just as the Protestant movement emerged in the 16C, Catholicism reemerges in different mutations throughout the course of church history.

4. Catholic apologists save face by distinguishing between two different kinds of change:

i) In the case of inconsistent changes, those are extraneous to what's essential to Catholicism. Those were never dogmatic, infallible, irreformable, de fide teachings.

ii) Other changes represent the development of doctrine. They are said to be consistent with dogma.

But while that may be persuasive to conservative Catholics, it cuts no ice when debating with Protestants, since we don't grant their distinctions. These are ad hoc distinctions superimposed on Catholicism despite the evidence. While Catholics naturally assume a Catholic viewpoint, they can't reasonably expect or demand that Protestants share their

viewpoint. So comparing their "2000-year-old" church to the Protestant faith begs the question. When we look at the history of Catholicism, we don't see a 2000-year-old church. Rather, we witness a dialectical succession of ideas.

Like any historical process, you can retrace current developments to antecedent conditions and causes. That holds true for Catholicism and evangelicalism alike. But that doesn't mean the house standing on the same property as the Fixer Upper is the same house.

Why I'm still Protestant

1. Let's begin with an admission. As a Protestant, it would be nice to have more theological clarity and certainty on some issues. It would be nice not having to sift through multiple interpretations of Scripture. It would be nice to have more evidence or direct evidence for some OT events. It would be nice to have more evidence for some books of the Protestant canon. The evidence for the Protestant canon is patchy in places. It would be nice to have more evidence for Jude and 2 Peter, or the Megillot (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther).

2. So why aren't I Roman Catholic? For one thing, I know too much about Roman Catholicism to mistake that for the solution.

i) To take one example I just used, if I pick up a Protestant commentary, it sometimes reads like a multiple choice exam. The commentator will list several competing interpretations, then by process of elimination, explain why he thinks one interpretation is the best. But sometimes he will confess that it's hard to choose between two competing interpretations.

Guess what—when I pick up a Catholic commentary on the same book, by a scholar like Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Jerome Quinn, or Luke Timothy Johnson, it's exactly the same process. They're in the same boat.

ii) Take another example I used: where the Catholic canon happens to coincide with the Protestant canon, the evidence is uneven in all the same places. Thinner on some books and thicker on others. Catholics don't have an extra stash of

evidence to bolster the less well-attested books. So that's no improvement.

But they have an addition problem we don't, which is poor evidence for the Deuterocanonicals. In that regard, they're worse off than we are.

BTW, does anyone seriously think that Tobit or Bel and the Dragon is the equal of Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Songs?

3. Now at this point a Catholic apologist will exclaim: That proves our point! Who decides? That's why the Magisterium is indispensable.

But there are fundamental problems with that "solution":

i) It's an appeal to ersatz evidence. An artificial makeweight. Catholics have no additional evidence, so they invent an oracle to fill the gap. Yet Catholic apologists must resort to so much special pleading to defend the machinations and peregrinations of the papacy. To all appearances, the papacy behaves just like you'd expect an uninspired institution to behave.

ii) The problem with asking "who decides" is that it only pushes the same question back a step: Who decides "who decides"? *You* decide who decides! A convert to Catholicism decided to make the Magisterium the decider. So the convert is the ultimate decider.

4. God could make it easier to be a Protestant. But that's hardly a damaging admission. God could make it easier to be a Catholic. God could make it easier to be a Christian. Catholic and Protestant alike find themselves in situations where they crave greater clarity and certainty. Times when

we wish we had more evidence. When you're going through an ordeal, or watching a loved one go through an ordeal, when your life hit rock bottom, wouldn't it be nice to have Jesus appear to you? Or have an angel appear to you? And some Christians experience that, but Christophanies and angelophanies are not a normal part of Christian experience.

Wouldn't it be nice if God answered your prayers more often? Wouldn't it be nice if you could ask God a question and get an audible answer? But that rarely happens. Many lifelong Christians never have that experience.

So you just have to muddle through. That's not unique to Protestants. Consider Catholic "saints" who complain about the dark night of the soul. God wasn't there for them.

5. There's a sense in which charismatics and apostates or atheists have a Roman Catholic outlook, but they are more consistent than Catholics. They take it to the next step.

A charismatic expects that God will give us certainty, clarity, and evidence whenever we need it or ask for it. God will answer all our prayers. He will perform miracles upon request. He will give us a sign. So the charismatic goes the Catholic one better.

It's not that the charismatic position is completely wrong. Sometimes God does something extra. But that's unpredictable. Not something you can count on.

6. By the same token, apostates and atheists think that God, if there is a God, ought to make things easier. Why should we have to trudge through Ed Feser's, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God*, *The Blackwell Companion to Natural*

Theology, or Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God—when God can give me a personal, custom-made epiphany?

That's why some professing Christians become apostates. They had a Catholic outlook that was dashed by rude experience. God didn't give them the clarity, certainty, and evidence they demanded.

7. The Protestant experience is like hiking on a trail. On some stretches, the trail is indistinct. Are you still on the trail, or are you lost in the forest? However, the trail picks up on the other side, so you were on the right path all along, even when the trail might be unrecognizable in spots.

I'd add that to say the evidence is uneven doesn't mean it's inadequate. It's not that you don't have enough evidence but that in many cases you have more than enough.

But even if we sometimes lose our bearings, that's the actual situation God has put us in. God doesn't protect us from making mistakes. Rather, God protects us in our mistakes.

All be one

that they may all be one (Jn 17:21).

That's a Catholic prooftext I've discussed a more than one occasion. Some additional observations:

i) Catholics mentally translate this into a prayer that all Christians be (or become) Roman Catholic. But on the Catholic construal, not only has Christ's prayer gone unanswered for 2000 years, Catholicism has lost ground over time. For instance, Europe, Quebec, Great Britain, Latin America, and the USA are far less Catholic than they used to be.

ii) Furthermore, what hinders the Father from granting the Son's request? If it is God's wish that every Christian be Roman Catholic, God could greatly facilitate his wish by providing unmistakable evidence for Roman Catholicism in Scripture and church history. Instead of Catholic apologists laboring to piece together a case for Roman Catholicism from isolated prooftexts and quote-mining church fathers, God could have inspired the Bible to make very explicit statements about Roman Catholic theology, to establish a Roman monarchical episcopate from the get-go, and to give Roman Catholicism a monopoly on miracles.

Why debate Calvinism?

Since your salvation doesn't hinge on whether or not you believe in Calvinism, what's the point of debating Calvinism? What practical difference does it make whether you're a freewill theist or Calvinist?

As a matter of fact, it is possible to become obsessed with this debate to the exclusion of other important issues. It shouldn't be all about Calvinism all the time. That said, the difference has practical consequences:

1. Theological positions tend to develop internally to the point of taking their assumptions to their logical extreme:

i) Open theism resolves the tension between freewill and foreknowledge by ditching foreknowledge. But how can you trust a God who's in the dark about the future? How can you trust a God who gambles with human lives?

ii) There's often a shift from exclusivism to inclusivism. If God loves everyone, wants everyone to be saved, made provision for everyone to be saved, how's that consistent with restricted opportunities to take advantage of that provision? What about those who never heard the Gospel? Inclusivism logically demotes the urgency of missions and evangelism.

iii) Apropos (ii), this life isn't an even playing field. Spiritual opportunities vary drastically. That nudges freewill theism towards postmortem evangelism/conversion. And that, again, logically demotes the urgency of missions and evangelism.

2. Freewill theists sometimes alleged the predestination negates petitionary prayer. If true, that's a very practical issue. Conversely, open theists argue that divine foreknowledge is providentially useless because it's too late for God to intervene. If so, that would negate petitionary prayer.

3. Calvinism and freewill theism will give some different answers to the problem of evil. And that's a pastoral issue as well as a philosophical issue. Some theodicies can be adapted to Calvinism and freewill theism alike, but other theodicies pair off with Calvinism or freewill theism.

4. Freewill theism may erode inerrancy and commitment to biblical authority by appealing to moral intuitions that trump the witness of Scripture in case of conflict. There are freewill theists who admit that if Scripture taught Calvinism, then they choose their moral intuitions over Scripture. They repudiate the God of Scripture in that event.

Another example is that some freewill theists reject OT theism for the same reason they reject Reformed theism: they think the Calvinist God is too harsh, and they think Yahweh is too harsh.

5. Apropos (4), some freewill theists seem to think Calvinism is worse than atheism. So what's their fallback if they lose confidence in freewill theism? Since Calvinism is not an option, do they land in atheism?

6. Views on the necessary preconditions of moral responsibility can impact law and social policy:

i) If homosexuals don't actually choose their "orientation," then that's exculpatory in case libertarian freedom is a necessary precondition for moral responsibility. So it would

be unfair to discriminate against homosexuals in any respect.

Same with gender dysphoria. They ought to be accommodated if they didn't choose it.

ii) The insanity defense takes libertarian freedom for granted. If you're too evil to know the difference between good and evil, that's exculpatory. If you can't help yourself because the urges are overpowering, that's exculpatory.

7. A common objection to Calvinism is that a Calvinist can't tell everyone "God loves you!" But does everyone need to think that God loves them, or is that presumptuous? There are hardened sinners who believe God loves them because they have such a high opinion of themselves. How could God not love such a wonderful person as themselves! They'd benefit from being told that maybe God doesn't love them. They need to be shaken out of their complacency.

8. Freewill theists are more likely to reject penal substitution. That impacts how we preach the Gospel.

9. Although all classic Protestants subscribe to sola fide, Calvinists have a way of unpacking the concept in terms of a threefold imputation. That has more explanatory power than a bare affirmation of sola fide.

10. Traditional Catholicism has radically different views of how God saves people. Saving grace is mediated by the sacraments, which are mediated by the priesthood. Likewise, the intercession of the saints. That's a different theological paradigm than Calvinism. Are you putting your faith in Jesus for salvation-or Mary? Or a wafer? Or priestly absolution? If you're wrong, that makes a practical difference. Conversely, post-Vatican II theology is edging

towards universalism. That, too, is a different theological paradigm than Calvinism. If you're wrong, that makes a practical difference.

11. When a Calvinism debates a classical Arminian or Lutheran, they take Protestant essentials for granted. But when a Calvinist debates a Catholic, then the contrast involves divergent views on a wider range of issues, like the locus of interpretation.

12. Christians have to believe something. They can't leave all the blanks unfilled. Although they can suspend judgment on some controversies, they must take sides on some issues. Otherwise, their faith is a cipher. So the debate over Calvinism is part of that larger demand.

IV. Catholic Apologetics

Why be Catholic?

I recently asked a Catholic philosopher why he's Catholic rather than Protestant. I asked him because he's the smartest Catholic philosopher of his generation, so I was curious to get an answer from the best of the best, instead of the garden-variety Catholic apologist. Here's his reply:

In short: Scripture tells us that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26; 16:13; 1 Tim 3:15). And only the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have a plausible case for having the same teaching as the early Church. Sexual ethics is perhaps the clearest case: Protestants have largely abandoned the teaching on contraception and remarriage after divorce.

He's distilled the Catholic apologetic down to what he considers to be the strongest arguments. It boils down to two arguments, using sexual ethics to illustrate one of the two arguments. So let's to back through his reasons:

In short: Scripture tells us that the Church is guided by the Holy Spirit (Jn

14:26; 16:13; 1 Tim 3:15).

1. I'm not going to rehash **1 Tim 3:15**. I've discussed that here:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/12/catholic-prooftexts.html>

2. Regarding the Johannine verses:

i) The promise is made to the Eleven, not to "the Church".

A Catholic might counter that the promise extends to the successors of the Eleven. If the papacy/Roman episcopate is an extension of the Apostolate, then the promise extends to the papacy/Roman episcopate.

ii) Problem is, there's nothing in these verses, or John's Gospel generally, or 1-3 John, to warrant that extension.

iii) Moreover, it's not a promise exclusive to Peter and his (alleged) successors. Even if you think the promise extends beyond the Apostolate, there's nothing in the text to limit the extension to a Petrine line, to the elimination of the other disciples to whom the promise was made.

And only the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have a plausible case for having the same teaching as the early Church. Sexual ethics is perhaps the clearest case: Protestants have largely

abandoned the teaching on contraception and remarriage after divorce.

- 1.** As I've often remarked, there was false teaching in churches during the apostolic era. There was false teaching in churches planted and overseen by apostles. When the apostles were away, false teaching creeps into their churches. We see that from several NT epistles. So antiquity carries no presumption of orthodoxy or apostolicity.
- 2.** To my knowledge, early Christian opposition to contraception was inseparable from opposition to abortion because, before modern medical science, it was impossible in principle or practice to separate the two. So that's obsolete.
- 3.** I think the NT does allow for divorce (for desertion and infidelity). And while traditional Catholics have alternative interpretations, I think those are weaker. But even if we think the passages are ambiguous, the ambiguity cuts both ways. You can't use the ambiguity (assuming it's ambiguous) to rule out the standard Protestant interpretation.
- 4.** In addition, we need to distinguish between continuity of doctrine and continuity of practice. A practice may be historically continuous but the understanding or rationale for the practice may change over time. For instance, Christians have practiced water baptism since the origin of the Christian faith. As the theology of baptism developed, it came to be viewed as a rite to erase original sin. But to my knowledge there's no evidence that this reflects the original

understanding of baptism. Rather, that's a theological innovation. To say something represents "the same teaching as the early Church" is equivocal in that regard.

Boccaccio's argument for the Catholic faith

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2010/05/boccaccio-argument-for-catholic-faith.html>

There are three basic problems with the argument:

i) Why couldn't a Muslim redeploy the same argument to defend Islam? Despite all the corruption, Islam has flourished for centuries.

ii) Pruss sees continuity through rose-tinted glasses. Many observers see a dramatic lack of diachronic consistency in Catholic teaching over the centuries.

iii) It's spiritually pernicious and morally subversive to turn pervasive corruption into evidence for the true religion. The more evil it is, the truer it is. That's diabolically clever.

BTW, the combox has some interesting exchanges.

The counsel of Trent

I plan to do a series of posts commenting on Trent Horn's *The Case for Catholicism: Answers to Classic and Contemporary Protestant Objections* (Ignatius 2017). I'll begin with this:

Finally, if it were true that all Christian doctrine is explicitly found in Scripture, then one would expect the doctrine of sola scriptura to be found there as well. This could be in the form of a Bible passage that teaches sola scriptura or even a logical argument derived from multiple passages that, when taken together, teach the same doctrine...Of course, if sola scriptura were as implicit in Scripture as the doctrine of the Trinity, then why didn't the early Christians affirm it? The answer is that sola scriptura is not found in the Scriptures and, consequently, the early Church did not teach that doctrine (18).

1. This objection is a Catholic apologetic trope. I first encountered it in Francis Beckwith. However, there's nothing wrong with Catholic apologists raising the issue:

2. Let's begin with a brief definition: according to sola scriptura, the Protestant canon is the supreme source and standard of doctrine and ethics.

I'll refine this definition momentarily, but that will do for now.

3. As it stands, Horn's dilemma is a verbal trick. Start by saying that according to sola scriptura, all doctrine is found in Scripture. Then classify sola scriptura as a doctrine. Ergo, sola scriptura should be found in Scripture. (I'm not accusing Horn of deliberate trickery.)

But that's too facile. Even if we classified sola scriptura as a doctrine, it's not the same kind of doctrine. It's a regulative doctrine. A doctrinal criterion. It has a different function. So it wouldn't be treated just like other "doctrines" in general.

4. Apropos (3), it's like a ruler. You don't use a ruler to measure itself. Rather, you use a ruler to measure other things. You don't use a standard as a criterion for the standard itself (or a criterion as a standard for the criterion itself). A criterion is distinct from what it's used to evaluate.

5. Apropos (4), asking where sola scriptura is to be found in Scripture is like asking where is the ruler to be found in the ruler? But the ruler isn't contained in the rule. The ruler isn't a part of the ruler. Rather, the ruler is the standard.

By the same token, if I show you a chess set, it would be nonsensical to ask, "Where is the set? Is it the bishop? The queen? The castle? The knight?"

But the set isn't in the set. A chess piece isn't a chess set. Rather, the entire set comprises the set.

Likewise, we wouldn't expect the principle of sola scriptura to be in Scripture if sola scriptura just is Scripture.

6. Horn's objection is a variation on the composition/division fallacy. The whole isn't necessarily the same kind of thing as the parts, or vice versa. It's not reducible to prooftexts for sola scriptura. If a football team has the best quarterback in the league, that doesn't make it the best team in the league. The properties of the whole aren't necessarily transferable to the parts, or vice versa. So the principle of sola scriptura doesn't require a discrete prooftext somewhere in Scripture.

7. But let's unpack the principle:

i) Sola scriptura is synonymous with revelation alone/only. To be more precise: public, propositional revelation. To formulate the claim with greater precision: public, propositional revelation is the supreme source and standard of doctrine and ethics.

Put it this way: who's the best person to answer a question—any question? God is the best qualified person to answer any question. No one would be a better source of information than God. No one would be as good.

So revelation is the supreme source and standard for whatever it speaks to. And I don't see that Catholics should take exception to that principle.

ii) Assuming (i), the next question is where, at this stage in history, are we to find public, propositional revelation? There was a time when that included oral communication. There was a time when that was broader than the Bible. But in terms of what's survived, for the benefit of posterity, is there any extant source of public, propositional revelation over and above the Bible?

A Catholic may say revelation is found outside the Protestant canon—in the Catholic canon! But that's not an alternative to sola scriptura. Rather, that's a dispute over the boundaries of Scripture. The principle remains the same. What that corresponds to is disputed.

iii) I'd add that there's a pattern whereby revelation operates in tandem with redemption. God causes redemptive events, then causes an inspired record of redemptive events. An interpretive historical account. In

addition, God causes inspired theological interpretations. For instance, the life of Christ, the Gospels, and the Epistles.

It's not coincidental that the NT was written within living memory of the historical Jesus. We shouldn't expect new public, propositional revelation during the interadventual age because we shouldn't expect new redemptive events during the interadventual age.

The counsel of Trent, part 2.

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/06/the-counsel-of-trent.html>

I'm ambivalent about reviewing this book. That's because there's so much deja vu in reading a book like this. I've written so much over the years responding to Catholic apologetics. How much to I wish to repeat myself?

So this review will be scattershot. I'll try to find some new things to say, or new ways to say them.

Because Catholicism is a package deal, it isn't necessary to refute Catholicism en bloc to refute Catholicism. In principle, if you debunk a single Catholic dogma, that sinks the whole ship.

I. Relics

On p296, he appeals to the stock prooftexts ([2 Kgs 13:21](#); [Acts 5:15](#); [19:11-12](#)).

Several issues:

i) Given the inroads that modernism has made in contemporary Catholicism, I wonder how many bishops and Catholic Bible scholars even believe these accounts.

ii) God can assign a supernatural effect to a natural object. If you tampered with sacred furniture in the tabernacle, there were catastrophic consequences.

That, however, creates no presumption that natural objects produce supernatural effects. To the contrary, that's very rare.

iii) None of his prooftexts involve a divine command or apostolic command. In the passages in Acts, people take the initiative. They take it upon themselves to do this.

iv) Their attitude reflects folk theology. Superstitious belief in sympathetic magic. That things that come in contact with a wonder-worker store magic energy.

v) But didn't it work in [Acts 19:11-12](#)? Yes. I'd say that's an example of God's gracious accommodation.

vi) A Catholic might accuse me of special pleading. Problem is, these prooftexts are a double-edged sword. How often are ailing people healed when they make a pilgrimage to a Catholic reliquary? When was the last time a dead person was revived by contact with the relic of a Catholic saint?

How often are people healed when the pope's shadow falls on their sickbed? Why doesn't the pope empty the Gemelli of patients by paying a visit every so often to cast his healing shadow on the patients?

[Acts 19:11-12](#) indicates that the apostolic sweatbands were generally or uniformly efficacious in healing the sick and exorcising demoniacs. Do Catholic relics have anything remotely approaching the same success rate?

If ailing people were regularly healed at Catholic reliquaries, that would be very impressive. That would indicate something supernatural was afoot.

But to my knowledge, verified healings at Catholic reliquaries are rare at best. So Horn's prooftexts either prove too little or too much. They raise an expectation that Catholic reliquaries routinely disappoint. Horn wants the

prooftexts without the results. But you can't lay claim to the prooftexts unless you can produce the same results.

II. Intercession of the saints

In chap. 14, he justifies the intercession of the saints by asserting the possibility that the saints are aware of what's happening to us. But there are basic problems with that appeal:

i) It's possible that an anonymous benefactor will bail me out if I go into debt. Indeed, anonymous benefactors actually exist. Would it therefore be prudent for me to go into debt, in the expectation that an anonymous benefactor will cover my expenses?

It's possible that if I forego cancer therapy, my cancer will undergo spontaneous remission. Indeed, that happens every so often. Would it therefore be prudent for me to forego cancer therapy in the expectation that my cancer will undergo spontaneous remission?

The fact that we can't eliminate a possibility isn't justification to count on that possibility being a reality or probability. That's dangerous make-believe and wishful thinking.

ii) While it's possible for God to reveal my situation to a "saint", there are built-in limitations to what a saint can know. To be a creature is to be finite. Even an omnipotent God is restricted by the medium if he works through a natural medium. That's a self-imposed limitation. God can often circumvent a natural medium. But if God is working through human beings, then there are things that an omnipotent being can't do via that medium.

There's no reason to think the Virgin Mary can simultaneously process millions of prayers in hundreds of foreign languages. That's inhumane. Invoking divine omnipotence doesn't solve the problem, since there's an upper limit on what it means to be human.

iii) Assuming the departed can intercede for us, the obvious candidate wouldn't be a Christian who lived and died long before we were born, but a dead relative who knows who we are. An example is crisis apparitions. These typically involve a dead relative like your late mother. Not the Virgin Mary, but a close relative. If the dead know what's happens to the living—and that's a big *if*—the obvious candidates for that distinction wouldn't be strangers but Christian friends and relatives who predeceased us. People who knows us well in this life.

iv) In Catholic theology, the intercession of the saints isn't comparable to evangelical intercessory prayer. For instance:

The Mother of God herself revealed to St. Bridget that through the merit of her obedience she had obtained so great power that no sinner, however great were his crimes, who had recourse to her with a purpose of amendment, failed to obtain pardon. Alphonsus Liguori, The Glories of Mary.

By contrast, the efficacy of evangelical intercessory prayer isn't based on the merit of the prayer partners. The only merit is the merit of Christ.

III. Sacrifice of the Mass

1. In chap. 8, Horn tries to proof-text the sacrificial nature of the eucharist by appealing to sacrificial language in Lk 22 and 1 Cor 10-11:

i) The NT sometimes uses sacrificial language for the eucharist because the eucharist is the new covenantal counterpart to the Passover. That doesn't imply that the eucharist is sacrificial. Rather, that draws attention to the fact that Passover prefigures the eucharist. The eucharist replaces the Passover.

ii) Moreover, Scripture makes metaphorical usage of sacrificial imagery. For instance, Paul uses sacrificial language in [Rom 12:1](#), but that's figurative rather than literal. He's not advocating that Christians commit self-immolation.

2. Predictably, Horn tries to proof-text the real presence from Jn 6.

i) He doesn't even consider the obvious explanation that Jn 6 foreshadows the crucifixion (Jn 19) rather than the eucharist. Jesus is forecasting his death on the cross.

ii) Jn 6 can't refer to communion because Jesus says eating-drinking/believing-coming terminates hunger and thirst (v35). But communion doesn't put an end to physical appetite. So it must have reference to figurative consumption, which is permanently quenched and satiated. In other words: a metaphor for eternal life.

For that matter, Catholics don't think one-time communion is spiritually sufficient. Rather, Catholics are supposed to attend Mass at least once a week. It doesn't put an end to spiritual hunger and thirst.

IV. Baptism

In chap 9 he tries to make a case for baptismal justification/regeneration.

i) He selectively quotes from Everett Ferguson's *Baptism in Early Church History*. (BTW, Ferguson is consistently misspelled as Fergusson in Horn's book.) However, Ferguson is a double-edged sword. As a Church of Christ minister, he has a theological agenda. His denomination regards baptism as essential to salvation. But modern Catholicism doesn't regard baptism as essential to salvation. Indeed, in modern Catholicism, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists can be saved.

ii) Ferguson regards infant baptism as a theological innovation, viz.

There is general agreement that there is no firm evidence for infant baptism before the latter part of the second century.

This fact does not mean that it did not occur, but it does mean that supporters of the practice have a considerable chronological gap to account for. Many replace the historical silence by appeal to theological or sociological considerations.

The most plausible explanation for the origin of infant baptism is found in the emergency baptism of sick children expected to die soon so that they would be assured of entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

There was a slow extension of baptizing babies as a precautionary measure. It was generally accepted, but questions continued to be raised about its propriety into the fifth century. It became the usual practice in the fifth and sixth centuries (856-57).

iii) Horn quotes Doug Moo's claim that by the date of Romans "baptize" had become almost a technical term for the rite of Christian initiation by water.

Perhaps, but I'm unconvinced. In the NT, *baptisma* is used for John's baptism as well as Christian baptism, while *baptizo* has a long pre-Christian history, and *baptismos* ([Col 2:12](#)) is a synonym for *baptisma* in [Col 2:12](#).

In the Gospels and Acts, the narrative context makes water baptism the unmistakable meaning, but the epistles lack that descriptive setting. Does the word denote the sacrament of baptism in those occurrences, or metaphorical cleansing by water?

iv) An elementary oversight on Horn's part is failure to grasp the nature of symbolism. A sign is a substitute for what it signifies. In symbolic transference, you attribute to the sign what it stands for. For instance, if the pascal lamb is emblematic of Jesus, then writers ascribe to the pascal lamb what is literally true of Jesus. The pascal lamb doesn't actually have that effect. It's just a stand-in. Likewise, if baptism is a token of spiritual cleansing and the remission of sin, writers will attribute that significance to baptism, but that's a symbolic ascription.

At best, Horn's prooftexts are equally consistent with Zwinglianism and sacramental realism. However, scripture often promises salvation apart from baptism and

communion (not to mention the other Catholic "sacraments"). The condition is faith and repentance rather than the sacraments.

So that tilts the scales in favor of a Zwinglian interpretation. Baptism is a picture of spiritual cleansing. The reality is the direct action of the Spirit. Communion is a picture of the atonement. The reality is Christ's redemptive crucifixion.

V. The Priesthood

1. In chap. 7, he tries to prooftext auricular confession.

i) But he does a bait-n-switch by providing some exegetical evidence for public confession. Yet that's hardly equivalent to confessing your sins to a priest in private.

ii) He quotes [Jn 20:23](#) out of context to prooftext auricular confession. But that's not what it means. For instance:

The meaning and significance of forgiveness (or lack thereof) must be defined by the preceding context...The Gospel connects the mission of the church specifically to the forgiveness of sins...The message of the church is the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and the mission of the church is to liberate the world from the power of sin. And this commissioning cannot be narrowed to a single task but is prescriptive of the very life of the church, E. Klink, John (Zondervan 2016), 866.

Yet Matthew's context is very different from the present one...focussed not on a mission to the world but on relationships within the Christian community...What exactly, then, is Jesus promising his disciples? It appears to be a corollary of 13:20, 'the person who receives whomever I sent receives me, and the person who receives me receives the One who sent me,' while taking into account as well the negative equivalent now preserved in [Lk 10:16](#): 'The person who hears you hears me, and then person who reject you rejects me...' J. R. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Eerdmans 2010), 1014.

So [Jn 20:23](#) has nothing to do with auricular confession. Rather, the context is about a missionary church, where evangelized listeners are forgiven by believing the apostolic kerygma, but remain unforgiven if they disregard the apostolic kerygma.

2. Regarding [Mt 18:17](#), Horn says:

Jesus did not say "tell it to your church." He spoke of the Church, which implies that the believers were to be united organizationally as well as doctrinally. Without this organizational union, an excommunicated sinner or heretic could simply walk down the street to the next church that welcomes him (150).

i) By Horn's logic, all cases of church discipline must be brought before the universal church. Somehow, all congregations must be apprised of the situation, and render a collective verdict. But Horn doesn't believe that. Doesn't the Vatican make that determination?

ii) He assumes that Jesus is using *the* church in contrast to *your* church. But why think the possessive pronoun carries that intended contrast? The context itself is dealing with conflicts that arise in a local church setting, viz.

The case Jesus presents involves an individual believer who has been wronged by another Christian ('brother'), presumably in the same community of believers...The illustration here is personal...Ideally, the two individuals should resolve the problem without involving anyone else...In this context [v16] these people will almost certainly be fellow believers, though no particular officers of the church are specified. C. Blomberg, Matthew (Broadman 1992), 278.

At the risk of becoming repetitious, it is appropriate to point out again that no specific officers or leaders in the church are mentioned in these verses,

R. T. France, *The Gospel of St. Matthew* (Eerdmans 2007), 696.

iii) The 21C Catholic church has extremely lax standards of church discipline. You just pick a parish with a sympathetic priest or bishop. That's easy to find. Lots of liberal priests and bishops to choose from.

3. He tries to proof-text holy orders from [1 Tim 4:14](#). But that inference is complicated by alternative explanations:

i) In [2 Tim 1:6](#), Paul says *he* conferred the gift onto Timothy. But the fact that an apostle has that prerogative doesn't imply that elders have the same prerogative. Apostles had abilities and prerogatives that elders lack.

ii) The symbolism represented by the imposition of hands varies according to context. Although it's natural for readers conditioned by Catholicism to assume it must mean the transfer of authority, it can just as well function as a public witness. A gesture in the presence of the congregation to signify an appointment or commission. That isn't just hypothetical. It seems to have that significance in [Acts 6:6](#) and [13:2-3](#).

Notice that the candidates in 3:3 were already full of the Spirit. That wasn't the result of their commission, but a precondition. Likewise, in [Acts 13:2-3](#), Paul was already gifted for ministry. He was an apostle. But he and Barnabas were authorized to carry out a special mission.

iii) The primary function of a priest is to perform sacramental actions. If the Pastorals support Catholicism, why do they say next to nothing about the sacramental duties of a priest?

4. Predictably, Horn quotes [1 Tim 3:15](#). That's a classic Catholic proof-text, but what does it mean?

i) What's the source of Paul's architectural imagery? Here's one explanation:

*In [1 Tim 3:15](#) "the household of God" is further defined as "the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." The phrase oiko theou can be rendered "household of God" or "house of God." The phrase is used often (about 75 times) in the LXX to refer to the temple, and it never refers to a "household." The phrase "the pillar and support of the truth" also reflects, at least in part, OT temple language. For example, [2 Chron 4:11-12](#) refers to Chiram making for Solomon "in the house of God two pillars [stulous]," referring to the pillars at the entrance of the Holy Place. (See also [1 Kgs 7:3](#): Chiram "cast the two pillars [stulous] for the porch of the house"; so also Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 8.77; [Ezra](#)*

5:16, "the foundations of the house of God," though themelious is used and not stulous; Ezra 2:68 refers to people "establishing" the "house of God...on its prepared [etoimasian] place."). That "the house of God" is equated with "the church of the living God" in 1 Tim 3:15 points further to the notion of a temple, since God dwelt in Israel's temple. We have also seen earlier that about 19 of approximately 73 uses of ekklesia (rendering qahal) in the LXX are also directly linked to a temple context. Of particular interest is Neh 13:1-2, where ekklesia tou theou occurs in association with four repetitions of "house of God" (ho oikos tou theou) in the following context (Neh 13:4,7,9,11), and where the two expressions are closely related (see also, e.g., 2 Chron 23:3 and Ezra 10:1, where "the assembly" of Israel fathers before the "house of God"). Likewise, 1 Kgs 8 refers

four times to the ekklesia of Israel, which are in close proximity to reference to the temple. G. K. Beale, "The New Testament Background of ἐκκλησία Revisited Yet Again," J. Frame, W. Grudem, & J. Hughes, eds. Redeeming the Life of the Mind: Essays in Honor of Vern Poythress (Crossway 2017), 54.

Assuming this identification is correct, Paul is describing the church as a temple. And that would be consistent with what he says about Christians as temples of the Holy Spirit ([1 Cor 3:16-6:19](#)).

If so, what does it mean to say the church is a temple of truth? A temple is set apart from profane space. In the historical context of the 1C Roman Empire, that stands in contrast to pagan error. But none of this implies the infallibility of the church, or the church as the source of truth.

The truth is the apostolic kerygma. That's the criterion.

iii) When Catholic apologists quote [1 Tim 3:15](#), they don't think the church in general is infallible. They don't think the laity in general is infallible, or the priesthood, or individual bishops. Rather, they redefine the church as the pope speaking ex cathedra or ecumenical councils.

5. He quotes [Jn 17:23](#), then says:

The way to ensure that this unity would remain in the Church requires authorities who could settle disputes among Christians (149).

But the text doesn't say that. Moreover, outsiders don't think the Catholic church displays the requisite unity. They don't think the Catholic church is a witness to unity, but disunity and chicanery.

6. Horn says:

*[The NT] does not envision the congregation electing its leaders. Instead, the laity is instructed to "obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account" (**Heb 13:17**) [150].*

i) Of course, at this nascent stage of church history, when apostles were still alive, we wouldn't expect congregations to choose their pastors. That's anachronistic.

ii) Horn's acontextual appeal to [Heb 13:17](#) overlooks the link between ecclesiastical authority and a chain of testimony ([Heb 2:3](#); [13:7](#)). That was back when there were living witnesses to the life of Christ. But that generation

died out by the end of the 1C or so. Nowadays, elders are in the same boat as laymen. Both elders and laymen have the same source of information.

One sinking ship—or many lifeboats?

This year, Reformation Day was a bit more significant than the average Reformation Day because it marked the 500-year-anniversary of the Reformation Day. Admittedly, picking a particular day is somewhat arbitrary. The significance is symbolic. But that's often true for commemorations. We don't celebrate the Lord's Supper on the same calendar date as the Last Supper. We don't even know when that was.

On this occasion, Ryan T. Anderson, a high-profile Catholic culture warrior, posted a volley of antagonistic, denunciatory tweets. Perhaps it's not worth commenting on, but I'll say a few things. Before commenting on the particulars, I'll make a few general observations:

i) What was Ryan trying to accomplish? I understand that as a pious Catholic he won't join in the "celebration". He disapproves of the Reformation.

But what's striking about his reaction is that he made no effort at rational persuasion. He gave Protestant readers no reasons to share his point of view. It was one question-begging assertion after another. A string of tendentious talking-points.

So what's the point? Who's the intended audience for his tweets? If he thinks Protestant theology is that bad, shouldn't he be reaching out to Protestants by patiently explaining to us why he's right and we're wrong?

Admittedly, Twitter is a poor medium for rational discourse, but then, why not use Facebook or write an essay or arrange a formal debate or series of debates? Just telling

Protestants they are wrong without presenting an argument is totally unconvincing.

ii) In addition, there's an ironic quality to his tirade. Is his own Catholicism consistent with post-Vatican II theology? His belligerent disapproval perspective would make more sense if our eternal salvation were at stake. It would make more sense if Protestants were hellbound. And that's the position Rome used to take regarding everybody who wasn't in communion with Rome. But nowadays, the Magisterium is flirting with hopeful universalism. So it's not as if Protestants have much to lose, even from a Catholic standpoint.

iii) Another problem with his tweets is bigotry. To judge by what he said, it seems highly unlikely that he's had many, if any, conversations, with evangelical philosophers, theologians, Bible scholars, and church historians. His uninformed comments are a textbook case of prejudice.

iv) In addition, he's like a man standing in front of a burning house, which happens to be his own house, while he lectures the neighbors on how their house is an eyesore. We watch him stand there, scolding us, while right behind him we see his own house in flames.

Pope Francis is an aggressive modernist who's torching social conservatives like Ryan. Yet there stands Ryan, with that burning house at his back, scolding Protestants because we don't rush into his burning house. His angry comparison between Rome and the Protestant movement is unintentionally comical when his own denomination is on fire, and the sitting pope is the arsonist.

And that's not primarily the impression of a Protestant observer. Many devout Catholics are terrified at what they

see Pope Francis doing. This includes cardinals and bishops as well as conservative Catholic academics. Shouldn't Ryan be helping them douse the raging fire before he presumes to draw an invidious contrast between his own denomination and the Protestant movement?

Many poorly formed Catholics become Protestant. Whereas many converts to Catholicism were once fervent devout Protestants. An asymmetry.

What is Ryan's sample? Is that a representative comparison? What's the data-base for Ryan's generalization? Or is this just anecdotal, based on his insular experience?

"Orthodox Protestantism"? Which version of Protestantism is "Orthodox Protestantism"? Lutherans disagree with Calvinists, with Baptists, etc.

Okay, but which version of Catholicism? Francis is unweaving the Catholicism of Benedict XVI and John-Paul II. What about the long-gone but not forgotten Catholicism of anti-modernist popes like Pius IX and Leo XIII?

"The more I prayed, studied history & theology, read the Bible & Church Fathers, the more I felt God calling me to be Protestant" said no one.

Even assuming that's hyperbole, just about any major Protestant seminary has one or more church historians. How many conversations has Ryan had with Protestant church historians? Or Protestant pathologists? Or Protestant theologians and Bible scholars?

For that matter, modern-day Catholic Bible scholars typically debunk traditional prooftexts for Catholicism. Modern-day Catholic church historians typically debunk the traditional narrative of the papacy.

The knots Protestants tie themselves into to deny the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. John 6, Last Supper, 1 Cor 11, all symbolic..

What Protestant commentaries has Ryan even studied on the subject? And not just Protestant commentators. Take Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's commentary on 1 Corinthians.

Reforming the church (good) and creating a pseudo church (bad) are two very different things.

Does post-Vatican II theology regard Protestant denominations as pseudo-churches? Or is Ryan out of step with contemporary Catholic theology?

2,000 years of unbroken Christian practice, east and west, Catholic and

***Orthodox, rejected. That's the
Reformation today.***

If you turn a blind eye to all the internal dissension.

***Because of the Reformation, millions of
Christians lack intimacy with Christ in the
Eucharist. That's just tragic.***

Which assumes that Christ is to be found in a wafer. But what if that's a pious projection? What if Catholics are fellowshiping with an ordinary cracker? Like pagans who pray to an idol. No one's home.

***Orthodox Churches have valid Eucharist.
Reformation bodies do not.***

Is that the position of post-Vatican II theology?

BTW, why does the Eucharist require a Catholic priest to be valid, but baptism does not? What's the principle? Or is the distinction ad hoc?

***At best, Reformation was tragic
necessity. In actuality, much worse.
Celebrating the division and disunity in
the body of Christ is obscene.***

i) To begin with, there's a difference between a celebration and a commemoration.

ii) Ryan assumes that his religious sect is the body of Christ. I get that. But he doesn't give Protestants any reason to see things his way. Instead, he resorts to shaming rhetoric.

iii) If, by contrast, we view the Roman church on the eve of the Reformation as a morally and theologically corrupt religious monopoly, then competition is a good thing. It was good to give people options. It was good to have emergency exits. From an evangelical perspective, moreover, the church of Rome has gone from bad to worse.

What's better—one sinking ship or many lifeboats? Should everybody stay on board a sinking ship? If all the passengers go down with the ship, that's unity—but I'll take my chances with a lifeboat.

iv) I don't normally think about being Protestant. I just study the Bible with the wealth of resources at my disposal.

"Ecclesial deism"

I'm going to revisit an old argument by Bryan Cross:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2009/07/ecclesial-deism/>

Ecclesial deism is the notion that Christ founded His Church, but then withdrew, not protecting His Church's Magisterium (i.e., the Apostles and/or their successors in the teaching office of the Church) from falling into heresy or apostasy. Ecclesial deism is not the belief that individual members of the Magisterium could fall into heresy or apostasy. It is the belief that the Magisterium itself could lose or corrupt some essential of the deposit of faith, or add something to the deposit of faith, as, according to Protestants, allegedly occurred in the fifth, sixth, and seventh ecumenical councils.

i) Bryan begins by coining an ominous sounding label, but when he defines it, "ecclesial deism" is just a fancy, misleading label for the belief that God doesn't protect the pope from heresy/apostasy, or "ecumenical councils" from heresy/apostasy. Of course, when you put it that way, when you spell it out, there's nothing disturbing about that denial for anyone who's not a member of Bryan's sect. It just means non-Catholics don't believe God protects his denomination from heresy or apostasy. But that's hardly "deistic". Does Bryan think it's deistic that God doesn't protect Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans et al. from falling into heresy or apostasy?

So "ecclesial deism" is at best "papal deism" or "prelatial deism". But even that's silly. It's hardly deistic to deny that God protects Bryan's preferred denomination.

ii) Apropos (i), Protestants don't believe Christ founded the Roman Catholic church, but then withdrew, not protecting the Roman Magisterium from falling into heresy or apostasy—since we don't believe the premise. We don't believe Christ founded the Roman Catholic church in the first place. So it's not as if he first founded the Roman church, then subsequently withdrew, not protecting the papacy or Catholic church councils from falling into heresy or apostasy. Once you recast Bryan's claim from the viewpoint of an outsider (non-Catholic), his prejudicial characterization becomes manifest.

iii) Notice the bait-n-switch, where he begins with Christ's church, then substitutes the Roman Magisterium. Of course, Protestants don't classify the Apostolate as a Magisterium. There never was a continuous teaching "office" in that sense.

iv) Bryan is a selective "deist". He's deistic about everything except the Magisterium.

v) Protestants like me don't believe that God withdrew his protection of his people from apostasy. To the contrary, God preserves the elect from apostasy.

From a Reformed perspective, there's a sense in which the church is indefectible. Not in reference to a teaching office, but in the sense that God preserves his elect from damnable heresy. The Spirit is active in the life of his people. Of course, individual Christians can and do fall into error, but God doesn't allow the Christian faith to be extinguished. It continues from one generation to the next until Jesus returns.

A few weeks after I graduated from seminary, some Mormon missionaries came to our door. My wife invited them in, and we started talking. But we were just getting into the important questions when we ran out of time. So we agreed to meet with them the following week. They ended up coming weekly for the rest of the summer. Since I had just completed four years of training in biblical theology, Greek and Hebrew, I was quite confident that I could persuade these teenage missionaries by exegetical arguments from Scripture that Mormonism is false and that the Gospel, as we understood it then, is true.

Over the course of our discussions with these Mormon missionaries, when I argued that their teachings were contrary to Scripture, they would counter by appealing to the Book of Mormon, and I would respond by saying that the Book of Mormon is contrary to Scripture. But they viewed Scripture through the Book of Mormon, that is, in light of the Book of Mormon. They claimed that very shortly after the death of the Apostles (or maybe even before the death of the last Apostle) the Church fell into utter apostasy, and that the true Gospel had been preserved in North America where Jesus had come to preach to certain peoples living here at that time. For that reason, according to the Mormons, the Bible had to be interpreted and understood in light of this additional revelation that Joseph Smith had recovered, and not according to the teachings and practices of the early Church fathers. That was because in their view the early Church Fathers had corrupted Christ's teaching by incorporating into it both Greek philosophy and pagan rites in syncretistic fashion. So our conversation at some point reached fundamental questions such as: "Why should we believe the Book of Mormon over the early Church fathers?",

and “How do you know that the Church fathers corrupted Christ’s teaching?”

I realized at the time that I too, as a Protestant, could not appeal to the early Church fathers or the councils in a principled way to support my position against that of the Mormons. Of course, at that time I agreed with Nicene Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology, but like the Mormons I too believed that shortly after the death of the Apostles the Church had begun to fall into various errors, minor at first but progressively more serious. So in my mind, everything any Church father said had to be tested against [my own interpretation of] Scripture.

Protestants I respected had told me that they questioned or rejected parts of the Nicene Creed (e.g., saying that Christ was “eternally begotten”) as being both extra-biblical and based on Greek philosophy. I knew that Greek philosophy had been quite influential in Alexandria, and I believed that this is where the allegorical method of interpretation was introduced. This was a method, in my mind, that was at least in part responsible for the Church’s departure from the Gospel, and the

subsequent need for the Reformation. From my sola scriptura point of view, there was no difference between bishop and elder, no basis for the papacy or even Roman primacy, not even a real distinction between clergy and laymen. So the whole hierarchical organization of the early Catholic Church seemed to me to be a corruption, a departure from what was taught in the New Testament.

Similarly, I believed that the Catholic liturgy, holy days, almost everything in the liturgical calendar, vestments for clergy, veneration of saints and their relics and icons, prayers for the dead, and prayers to departed saints were all accretions from pagan holidays and practices. Even the idea that some Christians are saints in some greater way (with a capital 'S') than that in which all Christians are saints was, in my opinion, a corruption, because I thought that egalitarianism followed from our being saved by grace. This was epitomized, in my view, by the Catholic Church's veneration of Mary, treating her as "Mother of God," and claiming that she remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus, as though marriage and sexual intercourse were evil.

From my point of view at that time, the early Church had somehow been led astray from the finished work of Christ and come to believe in what I thought was a magical conception of the sacraments, presumably also imported from paganism. This magical way of conceiving of the sacraments explained why the bishops who wrote the creeds treated baptism as forgiving sins, why at some point they came to believe that the bread and wine really became the Body and Blood of Christ, and why they transformed the agape love-feast into the “Eucharistic sacrifice.”¹ That, along with their failure to adhere to sola scriptura, explained why they treated things like confirmation, marriage, penance, and ordination as sacraments. From the sola scriptura point of view, all these ‘additions,’ like purgatory, the exaltation of celibacy, mysticism, monasticism, and asceticism, had to have come from paganism, and were therefore a corruption of the purity of the Church and the Gospel, just as Israel of the Old Testament had played the harlot with the gods of the other nations.

So when the Mormons claimed that a great apostasy had overcome the Church by the time of the death of the last Apostle, I had no ground to stand on by which to refute that claim. The Mormons believed that the true gospel was recovered in the early nineteenth century by Joseph Smith. I believed, as a Reformed Protestant, that the true gospel was recovered in the early sixteenth century by Martin Luther. But we both agreed (to my frustration) that the early Church fathers and the councils were suspect and not authoritative in their own right. Over the course of our meetings with the Mormon missionaries that summer I realized that with respect to our treatment of the early Church fathers and ecumenical councils, there was no principled difference between myself and the two young Mormon missionaries sitting in my living room.

i) To borrow and adapt a distinction by Roderick Chisholm, there are, in theory, two ways to respond to cults and heresy like Mormonism. One strategy is "methodism". Attempting to refute Mormonism by appeal to some general, multipurpose principle that isn't specific to Mormonism. Bryan is a methodist.

The alternative is particularism. The most direct way to refute Mormonism is to impugn the credibility of Joseph Smith—which is ridiculously easy to do. Smith was a transparent fraud. Even prior to his claim that an angel appeared to him, Smith's reputation preceded him. He was known to tell whoppers and tall tales, dabble in folk magic, cheat clients, &c. And in his subsequent religious career, he made demonstrably false claims, like his claim to translate an ancient Egyptian document (the Book of Abraham).

By the same token, you can be a particularist in refuting other cults, heresies, and false religions like Islam, Buddhism, Scientology...and Roman Catholicism! It isn't necessary to have some general, all-purpose shortcut to winnow religious claimants. It's possible to assess them on a case-by-case basis.

ii) For instance, I used to ask Mormon missionaries how their god could answer prayer. How could a finite humanoid god, living lightyears from earth on the planet Kolob, sense Mormon prayers and process Mormon prayers? Likewise, how would he be in a position to answer them? How does a finite, humanoid god have the power to answer prayer?

Ecclesial consumerism

I'd like to revisit an old argument by Bryan Cross:

<http://www.calledto communion.com/2010/07/ecclesial-consumerism/>

In our contemporary culture, church-shopping has become entirely normal and even expected. Not only when moving to a new location, but if a person has some falling out with a pastor or other individual or family in his church, or even if his church-experience starts seeming dull or dry, he visits and tries out other churches, determining which one best suits his preferences. He might consider the kind of community they offer — how welcomed and wanted they make him feel. He might consider the kind of child care and/or Sunday school they offer, the quality of the preaching

and music, the driving distance, the ethnicity or degree of ethnic diversity, the average age and culture or tastes of their members, the opportunities available to contribute with his own talents and gifts, whether they have home groups that he could join, and what sort of moral and theological doctrines they hold, what their views are on various social issues, whether they share or at least do not disapprove his political and economic views, etc. He weighs all the various factors and tries to decide which church best matches what he (and his family) are looking for in a church. He might even make lists of all he is looking for in a church, and see which church comes closest to meeting all the criteria.

i) There was a time in European history when Roman Catholicism was the only game in town. Moreover, to publicly question Catholic tenets was an invitation to be tortured to death by the religious and/or civil authorities, so there was a powerful incentive to keep your head down even if you entertained private doubts.

ii) In addition, for devout Catholics, it's not just a set of beliefs but an all-encompassing way of life. Daily devotionals like the Rosary. A religious calendar littered with saints days and novenas for the occasion. Catholic art, music, novels. Prior to Vatican II, Catholic education K-12, plus college—back when students were systematically and unashamedly indoctrinated in Catholic dogma. Everyone within your inner social circle was Catholic. A complete, off-the-shelf package. That's how it used to be—less so now. That conditioning produces tunnel vision—so that any alternative is inconceivable. For those deeply immersed in Catholic culture, a break with Catholicism requires a radical paradigm shift.

That insular experience has parallels in 19C Germano-Lutheran immigrants and Dutch-Reformed immigrants who lived in close-knit, communities where everyone continued to speak the original language, retain old-country customs, &c. And it has parallels in other ethno-religious communities, viz. Judaism, Mormonism, Hinduism, Buddhism. Not just a belief-system, or even primarily a belief-system, but a whole prepackaged subculture.

iii) By contrast, America is a marketplace of ideas. There's nothing that resembles default sectarian national tradition. Rather, America is religiously and ideologically pluralistic, with the result that many Americans do compare and contrast the religious options, and they often choose a religion or denomination based on a set of ideas rather than a cultural package or distinctive way of life. Since the American experience disrupts homogenous religious enclaves, theological ideas are what's left. There is no overarching sectarian culture. That's been broken up through confluent waves of diverse and divergent immigrant groups.

Once inside, converts may deepen their religious practice to make it a more pervasive feature of their lives, but the entry-point concerns a set of doctrines. That may be inclusive of a complete, off-the-shelf package, but they're usually exposed to more of that after they begin attending a local church, reading the theological literature, or social networking with like-minded members of that religious persuasion.

There's no point in Bryan bitching about that situation, because that's the situation in which most Americans find themselves. The religious traditions are scattered and splintered. So seekers have no alternative but to go church-shopping. No sectarian tradition enjoys social hegemony. So there's no alternative to surveying the options. And that may involve mixing and matching the best (or perceived best) of two or more preexisting traditions.

iv) Moreover, that's a good thing. A person's religious affiliation shouldn't simply be a cultural given. To be randomly born into a particular religious package is not a good reason to be an adherent. That's the luck of the draw—which doesn't reliably select for truth.

So we do need to give some consideration to the religious options. It can be a coarse-grained rather than fine-grained consideration.

If we worship in a community or organization that is custom-made to our own tastes, desires, self-perceived needs, and interpretations, there is a sense in which what we are worshiping is something made in our own image, and thus self-

worshiping, even as we sing praise choruses describing how much we love Jesus.

That can be a problem, but contemporary Catholicism is no exception to that problem. At least since Pius XII, the church of Rome has been pandering to modernity. Bryan always talks about an idealized theological construct rather than the empirical church of Rome.

Ecclesial consumerism carries with it a crucial theological assumption. The church-shopping phenomenon presupposes that none of the churches is the true Church that Christ founded.

That's a misleading way to frame the issue. Low-church Protestants like me believe that Jesus founded "the church", but the church he founded is an essentially decentralized rather than centralized body. A church defined by Word and Spirit, which is portable. You find the church embodied in Christians. The church is lived out in Christians.

In short, only if Christ never founded a visible (i.e. hierarchically unified) universal Church, or that Church ceased

***to exist, does ecclesial consumerism
become an option.***

Agreed. Jesus never founded the Roman Catholic polity.

...the Catholic believes that the Catholic Church is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church founded by Christ, and whose bishops assembled in ecumenical council at Nicea in A.D. 325 and again in Constantinople in A.D. 381 to state the Church's faith concerning herself with those very words, "one, holy, catholic and apostolic."

Appealing to the Nicene marks of the church is circular inasmuch as that pivots on the authority of ecumenical councils.

For the [well-catechized] Catholic, the identity of the Church is not determined by her conformity to one's own interpretation of Scripture. Rather, one's

determination of which interpretation is authentic is determined by the teaching authority of the Church Christ founded.

And how is the identity of the church Christ founded to be determined? Not by appeal to Rome, since you can only appeal to Rome on the prior assumption that Rome is the church Christ founded. Since, according to Bryan, Scripture can't be the tiebreaker, what is?

Can't be the church fathers since, by Bryan's lights, their authority is determined by the church Christ founded. Moreover, your determination of which patristic interpretation is authentic is determined by the church Christ founded. So where do you break into Bryan's tight, Tungsten-steel circle? Unless, at a preliminary stage of the argument, he has an authority-source (or evidence) that's independent of his ecclesial candidate, he can't get going.

In my experience, Bryan always commences his discussion of Catholicism with key assumptions taken for granted, as if that's already been established. Bryan's view of Catholicism is like an axiomatic system in which the first principles are arbitrary postulates.

“What I like ultimately has nothing to do with why I am a Catholic. I’m Catholic because I believe the Catholic Church to be the one, true Church that Christ

founded, and all other churches to be sects or schisms from her.”

And Protestants like me return the favor by classifying Bryan's adopted denomination as a schismatic and heretical body which broke with the NT exemplars.

Presuppositional Catholicism

In my experience, Bryan Cross never begins with evidence; rather, he always begins with his preconception of what "the Church" must be like. By definition, "the Church" must be such-and-such. He has an unfalsifiable paradigm. Kinda like Barth's concept of suprahistory, where Christian essentials safely exist in a Never-never land sealed off from the risk of empirical or historical disconfirmation.

Even if he occasionally appeals to the church fathers, I suspect that's filtered through his Catholic paradigm. The Roman Magisterium has the "final interpretive authority" regarding the consensus patrum. So there is no independent evidence for Catholicism, only value-laden evidence that takes the Catholic paradigm for granted. It's a kind of Catholic presuppositionalism. An axiomatic system in which the "the Church" is axiomatic, but the axioms are indemonstrable.

The address of the "visible" Church is Shangri-La. Although you can't find it on the map, it's oh-so visible—unlike those hapless Protestant denominations.

Motives of credibility

I'd like to examine another argument by Bryan Cross. These are comments he made on his Tu Quoque post:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/05/the-tu-quoque/>

The motives of credibility establish with moral certainty the divine origin and divine authority of the Catholic Church [314]

Here again you're conflating the period of inquiry and the life of faith, as if what one in the period of inquiry would do entails epistemic equivalence between Protestants on the one hand, and on the other, Catholics living the life of Catholic faith. But a person in the period of inquiry is not in the epistemically equivalent state of the Catholic living the life of faith. Moreover, what would hypothetically serve as a motive of discredibility in the period of inquiry would not be even possible for that entity in which, through the motives of credibility, one may come to divine faith... The Catholic in the life of faith knows that the Church

through God's divine protection cannot teach false doctrine, and is therefore not subjecting the Church's doctrine to the judgment of his own interpretation of Scripture, but instead allowing the Church to guide and form his interpretation of Scripture.

Again, this conflates the period of inquiry into the motives of credibility, with the life of faith. The person in the stage of inquiry into the motives of credibility is, like the Protestant, not in an epistemic position of acknowledging and submitting to a divinely authorized magisterium. But that does not mean or entail that the Catholic living the life of faith, and thus having come to know and believe in the divine authority of the Church Christ founded, is in the same epistemic condition as the inquirer, or as the Protestant [#324]

i) The issue is whether Bryan's unconditional commitment to Roman Catholicism reflects the mindset of a cult member, where nothing can ever disprove the cult leader. And this isn't just hypothetical. After all, there are lots of religious claimants out there. They can't all be true.

ii) Bryan endeavors to distinguish between the preconversion stage of inquiry and the postconversion "life

of faith" (or "divine faith"). Once an individual converts to Catholicism, he's made an irreversible commitment. Crossed a line of no-return. At that juncture the convert relinquishes his own judgment to the superior judgment of the magisterium.

iii) One problem with Bryan's position is his claim that "the Catholic in the life of faith *knows* that the Church through God's divine protection cannot teach false doctrine." Does a convert to Rome actually *know* that to be the case—or does he merely *believe* that to be the case?

Bryan says "the motives of credibility establish with moral certainty the divine origin and divine authority of the Catholic Church."

That's a tremendously strong claim. What does Bryan mean by the "motives of credibility"? Here's out he defines it in another post:

God makes known His voice by way of marks that are unmistakable, i.e. something that only God can do (i.e. miracles). These are what are called the motives of credibility, by which we recognize God's word as God's word. (2')

Motives of credibility allow us to make the transition from human faith to divine faith. (3')

The motives of credibility allow the act of faith to be reasonable, and make the act of disbelief unreasonable; without them the act of faith would

be unreasonable, and would lay us open to superstition. (3')

Four categories of signs serving as motives of credibility:

(1) miracles, (5')

(2) prophecies (6')

(3) the Church (7')

(4) the wisdom and beauty of revelation itself, and Christ Himself (7')

The Catechism on the motives of credibility (8')

Thus the miracles of Christ and the saints, prophecies, the Church's growth and holiness, and her fruitfulness and stability "are the most certain signs of divine Revelation, adapted to the intelligence of all"; they are "motives of credibility" (motiva credibilitatis), which show that the assent of faith is "by no means a blind impulse of the mind." (CCC 156)

<http://www.calledto communion.com/2013/11/lawrence-feingold-the-motives-of-credibility-for-faith/>

iv) But how do the motives of credibility, thus defined, single out the church of Rome? Keep in mind that at the stage of inquiry, there's no prior assumption that the motives of credibility point to Rome. Why would an inquirer suppose the argument from miracles or argument from prophecy selects for Roman Catholicism in particular rather than Christianity in general?

Keep in mind, too, that in church history, up to the present, Roman Catholicism has no monopoly on reported miracles and prophecies. That's paralleled in Protestant circles.

Likewise, how does (4) select for Roman Catholicism?

At the stage of inquiry, the Catholic identification of (3) is not a given, but something to be established.

v) Bryan never allows for the possibility that a Catholic convert is sometimes justified in reexamining his conversion. Yet converts have more experience after conversion, and therefore have additional information they didn't have during the preliminary investigation. In that respect, a convert is sometimes in a better position to reconsider his conversion than an inquirer. A convert can make a more informed evaluation by virtue of his postconversion experience. This applies to conversion in general, where converts sometimes have second thoughts after they become better acquainted with the movement/institution/tradition they converted to.

How it looks from the inside may be dramatically different than how it looks from the outside. With that additional insight, why is he not in a better position than before to judge that he made a mistake?

To begin with, he may continue his studies upon conversion. And that may lead him to encounter objections he didn't consider beforehand.

In addition, there's a difference between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. Prior to conversion, he studied an abstract, idealized version of Roman Catholicism. A construct of Roman Catholic theologians and apologists.

But now, based on his firsthand experience, as an insider, he may discover a mismatch between the propaganda and the reality. There's nothing in principle that rules that out. To the contrary, that's assessing Catholicism on the basis of evidence he didn't have at his disposal prior to conversion. He now has a comparative frame of reference.

Blinker hood

Protestantism itself has no visible catholic Church. It has only denominations, congregations, believers and their children. Within Protestantism there is not some one additional entity to which the term “visible catholic Church” refers, consisting of these denominations, congregations, believers and their children...What allowed the authors of the Westminster Confession to believe sincerely that there was a “visible catholic Church” other than the Catholic Church headed by the Pope, was a philosophical error. This was the error of assuming that unity of type is sufficient for unity of composition. In actuality, things of the same type do not by that very fact compose a unified whole. For example, all the crosses that presently exist all have something in common; they are each the same type of thing, i.e. a cross. But they do not form a unified whole composed of each individual cross around the world. This crucifix, for example, in the St. Louis Cathedral Basilica, is not a part of a unified whole consisting of all the crucifixes in the world. All crucifixes are things of the same specific

type, but that does not in itself make them parts that compose a unified whole spread out around the world...One way to determine whether something is an actual whole or merely a plurality of things...

...when Matthew records Jesus saying to Peter in [Matthew 16:18](#), “upon this rock I will build My Church”, and then saying, in [Matthew 18:17](#), “tell it to the Church”, and “listen to the Church”, the most natural way of understanding these passages is that the term ‘ekklesia’ (‘Church’) is being used in the same way in all three places. And it is clear in the Matthew 18 passages that ‘ekklesia’ there refers to the visible Church, not a merely spiritual entity.

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2009/09/why-protestantism-has-no-visible-catholic-church/>

i) Catholic convert Bryan Cross is unintentionally comical because he wears a blinker hood. All he's done here is to invent his own definition of visibility, then proclaim that the Protestant faith fails to measure up to his idiosyncratic

definition. But Bryan's tendentious yardstick was never our standard of comparison.

ii) Actually, it's unlikely that Matthew is using *ekklesia* in quite the same way in Mt 16 & 18. Mt 16 is a statement about the church in general while Mt 18 is a statement about local church discipline.

iii) To play along with Bryan's illustration, individual crucifixes aren't "merely a plurality of things". Bryan must know that's a false description. A "mere plurality of things" would be disparate things that share nothing essential in common. By contrast, individual crucifixes are samples or instances of the same kind of thing. They all have the same basic design. Similar shape. As well as the same symbolic purpose and significance.

Bryan says that's insufficient for unity of composition. Suppose he's right. So what? Why should unity of composition in his specialized sense be the criterion for visibility? That's a highly idiosyncratic definition of visibility.

iv) Variation on a theme are an interesting phenomenon. Take snowflakes. Pachelbel's canon. The Mandelbrot set. Are they "merely a plurality of things"? No. They share essential unity.

Take da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks*. Da Vinci painted two versions of the same scene. Are they one painting or two? In a certain respect they're two different paintings, but there are degrees of difference. You can have two paintings on a different subject or two paintings on the same subject. Two paintings by different painters or two paintings by the same painter. In this case, they exemplify the one idea. Whether we count them as one or two depends on the level of abstraction.

v) Both in principle and practice, the concept of the church is not univocal. It can stand for different things. The church has some perennial elements, like church office and sacraments. These continue from one generation to the next.

Christianity has a corporate dimension because humans are social creatures. Moreover, humans who are otherwise unrelated can share the same experience of saving grace. That makes them a spiritual family.

But there's an interplay and overlay between the natural family and the spiritual family. In this life, natural and spiritual affinities intersect but they don't coincide. Three overlapping circles. And there's a sorting process after death.

Elevator out of order

In this post I'm going to revisit an argument for Catholicism by Bryan Cross and Michael Liccione:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/05/the-tu-quoque/>

This post will be deceptively long, because much of the raw length is due to verbatim quotes.

Michael Liccione May 25th, 2010 1:51 am :

Bryan:

Before I go to bed, I just wanted to say that this is excellent. I will take up a few of your arguments at my own blog, where I plan a post on Newman's doctrine of conscience. Of course, if the Reformed guys at places like Triablogue and Green Bagging takes note of your post, we will end up having some intricate epistemological debates. I say: bring it on!

Challenge accepted!

I. The authority argument

In various places I have argued previously that without apostolic succession, creeds and confessions have no actual authority.¹ They have no actual authority apart from apostolic succession because without apostolic succession the only available basis for a creed or confession's authority is the individual's agreement with the interpretation of Scripture found in that creed or confession. Each person picks the confession of faith that most closely represents his own interpretation of Scripture. If his interpretation of Scripture happens to change, he is not bound by his prior choice of confession; rather, he simply picks a different confession that more closely matches his present interpretation. I have described this as painting one's magisterial target around one's interpretive arrow, i.e. the practice of choosing and grounding magisterial authority based on its agreement with one's own interpretation of Scripture.²

But an important principle regarding authority is this: "When I submit (only when I agree), the one to whom I submit is me." In other words, agreement with oneself cannot be the basis for authority over

oneself. Therefore a creed or confession's agreement with one's own interpretation of Scripture cannot be the basis for its authority.³ And this is why without apostolic succession, creeds or confessions have no actual authority. That is a simple overview of the authority argument.⁴

Notice how Bryan prejudices the answer by casting the issue in terms of authority. His entire case is controlled by that master paradigm. So he's getting off on the wrong foot.

I certainly don't object to authority. It's necessary in social life. And I don't object to religious authority. God is the supreme authority figure. The Bible is the supreme authority in evangelical theology and ethics. I do, however, object to partitioning authority from truth and evidence.

II. The tu quoque objection

The primary objection to this argument is the tu quoque [lit. you too] objection, namely, that the person who becomes Catholic upon determining that the Catholic Church is the Church that Christ founded is doing so because the Catholic Church most closely conforms to his own interpretation of Scripture, history and tradition. In other words, in choosing to become Catholic, he has simply chosen the 'denomination' that best conforms to his own

interpretation of Scripture, tradition and history. Hence if Protestant confessions have no authority over the individual Protestant because Protestants select them on the basis of their conformity to their own interpretation of Scripture, then neither does the Catholic Church have any authority over the person who becomes Catholic, because Catholics select the Catholic Church on the basis of its agreement with their own interpretation of Scripture, history, and tradition. But if choosing the Catholic Church on the basis of one's own interpretation of Scripture, history, and tradition does not undermine the authority of the Catholic Church, then neither does choosing a Protestant confession on the basis of one's own interpretation of Scripture undermine that Protestant confession's authority. In other words, just as the person becoming Catholic claims to have discovered that those in the magisterium of the Catholic Church are the successors of the Apostles, and thereby bearing divine authority, so the person adopting a Protestant confession believes he has discovered that this particular confession is in agreement with Scripture, and thus that this confession derives its authority from Scripture. But if picking a confession

on the basis of its agreement with one's own interpretation of Scripture entails that this confession has no authority over oneself, then picking the Catholic Church on the basis of its agreement with one's own interpretation of history, tradition and Scripture entails that the Catholic Church has no authority over oneself. In short, the conclusion of the tu quoque objection is that either the Catholic Church likewise has no authority, or the Protestant confessions can truly have authority.

For discussion purposes, that's an adequate statement of the objection.

III. Reply

A. Deciding to become Catholic should involve study of Scripture, history and tradition.

Apart from a supernatural experience, ideally an adult would come to seek full communion with the Catholic Church only after a careful study of the motives of credibility, Church history, the Church Fathers, and Scripture.⁵ He would start with the Church in the first century at the time of the

Apostles, and then trace the Church forward, decade by decade, to the present day. As he traced the Church forward through the centuries, he would encounter schisms from the Church (e.g. Novatians, Donatists). In each case he would note the criteria by which the party in schism was the one in schism from the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church Christ founded, and not the other way around. By such a study, and by the help of the Holy Spirit, he would discover that the Catholic Church is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that Christ founded in the first century, and that has continued to grow throughout the world over the past two millennia. But as I will show below, this study of history, tradition and Scripture by which he discovers that the Catholic Church is the Church that Christ founded does not entail that the Catholic Church has no more authority than a Protestant confession.

i) We need to clarify the burden of proof. In this regard, Catholics have a much higher burden of proof. Notice the considerations: "the motives of credibility, Church history, the Church Fathers, and Scripture."

If the argument breaks down at any point, the case for Catholicism fails. A Catholic apologist must acquit Catholicism on all four counts. By contrast, if a Protestant can show that it fails on even one count, that sinks the deal.

ii) How many inquirers are qualified to conduct that exhaustive investigation? In fact Bryan's sidekick admits that in the comment thread:

Michael Liccione May 25th, 2010 8:43 pm :

But we cannot settle that question just by learning the historical dataset and deciding, with our own human judgment, whether it best supports Catholicism or some version of Protestantism. Most people are in no position to take in all the relevant data, and even those who are in such a position disagree on how to interpret it for the purpose at hand.

In the combox, Bryan tries to field that objection:

Bryan Cross May 26th, 2010 12:48 am :

I agree with you here, that not everyone is able, ready or equipped to do this. It requires the

resources and guidance and equipping to be able rightly to evaluate these things. Many people do not have that sort of equipping and guidance, and can easily be led into confusion and doubt by such an investigation. They need qualified guidance like the Ethiopian eunuch needed Phillip. But my claim was not that every Catholic is in a condition to do this, or that every Catholic should do this, but that in principle it can be done by Catholics.

But in that case, the vast majority of cradle Catholics as well as converts to Rome haven't actually made the discovery Bryan posits, since they haven't gone through the rigorous discovery process he outlined.

So why is discovering the Catholic Church through the study of history, Scripture and tradition not equivalent to discovering a confession that agrees with one's own interpretation of Scripture, and how does the difference explain why the Catholic Church so discovered can remain authoritative while the Protestant confession cannot? The difference lies fundamentally neither in the discovery process nor in the evidence by which the discovery is made, even though those may be different. The difference

lies fundamentally in the nature of that which is discovered.

B. The basis for the difference between the authority of Scripture and Protestant confessions

Because every confession is made by human interpreters, and these human interpreters are neither divinely inspired nor divinely authorized, these confessions are therefore merely human artifacts, not anything to which all men must submit on account of their divine authority. Just as every systematic theology book is a product of mere men, so every Protestant confession is the product of mere men. Some might be better than others, but none binds the conscience, because the authors were mere men, as are we, without divine inspiration or divine authorization.

Even though every Protestant confession has Scripture as its material source (i.e. that from which its authors draw), yet for anything in the confession that is not an exact re-statement of Scripture itself, the more it has merely human judgment mixed within it, with no guarantee of divine protection from error, the more it is merely a human

judgment, i.e. a human opinion. In other words, because Protestant confessions were crafted by mere humans not having divine authorization, to the degree they go beyond an exact re-statement of Scripture, they are essentially human opinion, and therefore have no more ecclesial authority than human opinion, even though their subject matter is the divine Word of God in written form.

If the Protestant finds his conscience bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture, and he finds that same interpretation of Scripture presented in a confession, then per accidens his conscience will be bound to that confession (or that part of that confession) not because of any intrinsic authority had by the confession, but because the confession happens to express the interpretation that he presently holds to be necessary and thus conscience-binding. If his conscience ceases to be bound by that particular interpretation, the confession no longer binds his conscience. This shows that the confession has no intrinsic authority; it is not the confession that is authoritative over his beliefs; rather, his present beliefs make the confession to be 'authoritative,' by

containing the interpretation he presently believes to be required of himself.¹¹ The confession has no interpretive authority, because the individual is not required to conform to the confession. The confession, if it is to be the individual's confession, must conform to the individual's interpretation. He picks this particular confession because it conforms to his interpretation; it does not oblige him to conform to it, or, once picked, to remain conformed to it. And that is why no Protestant confession has any actual authority. Each Protestant confession merely contains a distinct interpretation which some individuals happen to believe (or at one time happened to believe) is not only true but necessary, and thus, conscience-binding. For this reason, neither a Protestant confession nor parts of it can bind anyone's conscience; at most it is merely a record of what some people find or have found in their reading of Scripture to be the only way they can in good conscience interpret Scripture.

i) Notice, as usual, how Bryan frames the issue as a question of authority. Bryan suffers from tunnel vision. Why should that be the criterion? And why should that take precedence over other criteria? What makes something authoritative?

What about truth? Truth is "conscience-binding". Truth obligates assent. We have a duty to believe what's true. So, even if I play along with Bryan's authoritarian paradigm, doctrinal authority is contingent on prior truth.

ii) Apropos (i), I agree with Bryan that ecclesiastical creeds have no *intrinsic* authority. At best, they have *derivative* authority. Creeds are authoritative insofar as they are true. Truth has intrinsic authority. Doxastic authority. Does Bryan think creeds should be authoritative irrespective of their truth or falsehood?

iii) Perhaps Bryan would say we need an authority source to recognize truth. But do we? What we need is evidence to recognize truth.

And even if we needed an authority source to recognize truth, that only pushes the issue back a step since we need evidence for the authority source. And that depends on private judgment.

iv) Bryan says "the authors of Protestant confessions did not have divine authorization because they did not have Holy Orders." He's welcome to his opinion, but of course, that's not a Protestant criterion. For that matter, it's not as if Bryan has a Licentiate of Sacred Theology. He's just a layman.

iv) The church has divine authorization to teach. To promulgate the Gospel. Teaching is a gift or office in NT ecclesiology. God gave teachers to the church. Sure, Bryan doesn't think Protestant denominations count, but his opinion is not our standard of comparison.

C. The basis for the distinction between the authority of the Catholic Church and Protestant

confessions.

What the person becoming Catholic discovers in his study of history, tradition and Scripture is not merely an interpretation. If what he discovered were merely an interpretation of history, tradition and Scripture, then what he discovered would have no more authority than any Protestant confession. If his discovery were merely an interpretation, it too would be merely a human opinion. The prospective Catholic finds in his study of history and tradition and Scripture something that does not have a merely human source, either from himself or from other mere humans not having divine authorization. He finds in the first, second and third (etc.) centuries something with a divine origin and with divine authority. He finds the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church and its magisterial authority in succession from the Apostles and from Christ. He does not merely find an interpretation in which the Church has apostolic succession; he finds this very same Church itself, and he finds it to have divine authority by a succession from the Apostles. In finding the Church he finds an organic entity nearly two thousand years old with a divinely

established hierarchy preserving divine authority. The basis for the authority of the Church he finds is not its agreement with his own interpretation of Scripture, history or tradition. History, tradition and Scripture are means by which and through which He discovers the Church in reality. The Church he finds in history and in the present has its divine authority from Christ through the Apostles and the bishops by way of succession.

Many Protestant patrologists, theologians, Bible scholars, and church historians have conducted that very investigation. They don't discover the same church that Bryan professes to find. And not just Protestants. Many modern-day Catholic Bible scholars and church historians don't discover the same church that Bryan professes to find. The church that Bryan "discovered" is a construct of traditional Catholic theologians and apologists rather than a Biblical and historical deliverance.

Consider the following example. Jesus says:

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me” ([John 5:39](#)).

That's ironic. As long as we're quoting from John's Gospel, what about the purpose statement:

“but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31).

According to that statement, his Gospel gives the reader sufficient information to exercise saving faith. Just reading that one Gospel. A magisterium is superfluous.

Through searching the Scriptures, the reader is not supposed to find only an interpretation of Christ. The one who searches the Scripture is supposed to discover, through the Scriptures, the second Person of the Divine Trinity. The reader of Scripture who discovers only interpretations of Scripture, but does not discover Christ, has not discovered that Person to whom Scripture points. Such a reader of Scripture already knows that Scripture has divine authority, but through Scripture he has not yet discovered anything greater in authority than himself. Through his reading of Scripture he is supposed to discover

something (actually Someone) more authoritative than himself, and more authoritative than his own interpretation.

That's terribly confused:

i) In this life, most Christians know Jesus by description rather than acquaintance. Unless Jesus appears to someone in a revelatory dream or vision, they don't know Jesus directly. Rather, their knowledge is mediated by Scripture. And even if they had such a dream or vision, Scripture supplies the necessary background information and theological interpretation.

ii) Apropos (i), the object of faith *is* an interpretation. Assenting to a concept of Jesus, informed by Scripture. We believe in Jesus by grasping and believing revealed propositions about Jesus.

iii) Bryan fails to draw an elementary distinction between true and false interpretation. We learn who Jesus true is, has done, is doing, will do, by understanding what the Bible says about him. That's an interpretive act. So long as the interpretation is correct, that's what it means to believe in Jesus.

iv) In addition, biblical teaching is redundant, so it's possible to misinterpret Scripture to some degree but still have saving faith.

The tu quoque objection does not apply to the reader who through the Scriptures discovers Christ, because in discovering Christ such a reader is not picking as an 'authority' something that conforms to (or agrees with) his own interpretation of Scripture. Discovering Christ through the Scriptures differs altogether from picking a confession based on its agreement with one's own interpretation of Scripture. In picking a Protestant confession the individual retains interpretive authority, for the reasons I explained above. But the reader who through the Scriptures discovers the Person of Christ has discovered something more than an interpretation; he has discovered a Divine Person, Someone having authority over himself, even interpretive authority over himself.

- i)** Although Jesus has authority over the reader, you can't eliminate interpretation.
- ii)** Bryan skews the issue by reclassifying the interpretive act as "interpretive authority". But why should we accept

that characterization? What necessarily (or even usually) makes interpretation an exercise of authority?

Likewise, the person who reads history, tradition, and Scripture, and discovers the Church, has not merely discovered an interpretation, but has discovered something with a divine origin and hence with divine authority, and thus interpretive authority, even conscience-binding authority; he has discovered the Body of Christ.

Even if we grant the comparison, which begs the question, Bryan's claim is wrong on both counts, for reasons I just gave.

But if through and beyond his interpretation he discovers the actual Church that Christ founded, filled with the Holy Spirit and retaining divine authority through an unbroken succession from the Apostles, spanning through twenty centuries “terrible as an army with banners,” bearing the trophies

[relics] of the apostles and martyrs, and spread out over all the whole world, then he has discovered something that isn't merely human. He has discovered the divine society on earth, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church that Christ founded, to which not only his interpretation but his whole life must submit and conform.

What's the role of relics in Bryan's argument for Catholicism? Does he think we have genuine relics of the apostles? How were they authenticated?

This method of defining 'the Church' by its very nature does not allow 'the Church' any authoritative role in adjudicating interpretive disagreements, because for each disputant, if 'the Church' rules against his interpretation, for him she ceases to be 'the Church,' and hence he need not submit to her.

i) In case of disagreement, the church doesn't cease to be the church. Rather, that just means one side or both sides are wrong.

ii) Notice how Bryan opposes "the Church" to individual Christians. He's covertly uses "the Church" as a synonym, not for the faithful, but for a tiny subset of the church: popes and bishops in union with the pope.

If, however, the church *just is* the body of Christian believers, then Bryan's bifurcation is nonsensical.

Therefore the possibility of the Church having any authority, even “ministerial authority,” requires that the Church not be defined by its agreement with one’s own interpretation of Scripture. In this way, defining ‘the Church’ by way of agreement with one’s own interpretation of Scripture is nothing less than an implicit denial of a visible catholic Church. If Christ intended His followers to be united in one faith in a visible catholic Church...

i) I'd reverse Bryan's argument. Since Christians aren't united in one faith in a visible catholic Church (as Bryan defines it), that was never Christ's intention. If that was his

intention, then he's fallible and mistaken. I don't think God has failed intentions.

ii) Maybe Bryan thinks that Christ's intentions are realized in the church of Rome. If so, that would mean Jesus only intended for "Roman Catholics to be united in one faith in a visible catholic church," rather than Christians in general.

...and if there can be no such thing as a visible catholic Church simply by individual appeals to Scripture apart from the exercise of magisterial authority such as in ecumenical councils, then the Church cannot be defined by its agreement with one's own interpretation of Scripture. In that case there has to be another way of locating the Church, if there is to be a visible catholic Church. And the only other way available is by a succession of magisterial authority from the Apostles.

In another post, Bryan defines visibility in terms of its hierarchical polity. But that's a Roman Catholic criterion. That has no cachet with Protestants.

III. Follow-up Questions & Answers

Q1. But doesn't the Protestant also claim to have discovered the Church? If so, then why doesn't Protestantism avoid the tu quoque in this same way?

A. Protestants do believe that they have discovered the Church, but by that they mean that they have discovered other persons who have faith in Christ, or a faith in Christ that is sufficiently similar to their own.¹³ They do not claim to have discovered apostolic authority in an unbroken succession of bishops coming from the Apostles. And that is why they do not believe that the Church they have discovered has divine authority or interpretive authority to which all Christians should submit. From a Protestant point of view, Scripture is the only divine authority in the Church, and that is why Protestants believe that only Scripture can bind the conscience. For this reason, given the Protestant conception of the Church, the Church cannot provide divine authorization to any interpretation of Scripture, history or tradition. The individual Protestant, on the basis of his own interpretation of Scripture, always retains veto authority over

whatever his ecclesial community determines, even with its highest authority.¹⁴ Because what he refers to as 'Church' has no divine authority, the 'Church' he has discovered does not and cannot give his interpretation or confession divine authorization. That is why his situation is not like that of the Catholic. The individual Protestant himself remains his own highest interpretive authority, and the particular confession he has adopted (if he has adopted one) remains subject to his acceptance or rejection of it; it has no actual authority over him. The Catholic, by contrast, upon discovering the divine authority of the Catholic Church does not remain his own interpretive authority, and the Creed and doctrines he adopts, he adopts on the divine authority of the Church that has defined them, not on the basis of their agreement with his own interpretation of history, tradition and Scripture.

Q4. But isn't the person who becomes Catholic using his own private judgment just like the Protestant?

A. We cannot but use our own intellect and will in interpreting evidence, drawing conclusions,

discovering truths, and making decisions. In that respect, inquirers who eventually become Protestant or Catholic start in the same epistemic situation, using their own intellect and will to find the truth through the evidence available to them. Using our intellect and will in coming to believe something is not what makes the Protestant confession to be without divine authority, nor is it what makes the Catholic's faith in the Catholic Church not subject to the tu quoque objection.

Bryan Cross May 25th, 2010 7:21 pm :

In the case of submission to a magisterium on the basis of it having divine authority by apostolic succession, there are two 'levels,' as it were. In the lower level, by one's reason one makes a judgment that this group of persons is the magisterium of the Church Christ founded. In the upper level one submits by faith to the teaching of this magisterium. The person's judgment at the lower level about the authority of the magisterium is not based on his agreement with that magisterium's teaching, or on its agreement with his own interpretation of Scripture.

i) This goes to the nub of the issue. Bryan constantly speaks as though there's a turning-point in the investigation. Initially, an inquirer relies on private judgment to make "a careful study of the motives of credibility, Church history, the Church Fathers, and Scripture." During that preliminary stage, both Catholic and Protestant "start in the same epistemic situation, using their own intellect and will to find the truth through the evidence available to them." That's the "lower level".

Then there's the "upper level": "upon discovering the divine authority of the Catholic Church does not remain his own interpretive authority, and the Creed and doctrines he adopts, he adopts on the divine authority of the Church that has defined them, not on the basis of their agreement with his own interpretation of history, tradition and Scripture." The end-point is supposed to be a different epistemic situation than the starting-point.

But the epistemic switchover is illusory. For the process relies on private judgment every step of the way. There is no breakthrough, where a Catholic inquirer is finally able to bypass private judgment and directly apprehend the truth of Rome. A Catholic inquirer can never pierce through his own understanding to reach a truth that lies on the other side. Even if there were an infallible teaching office, a Catholic inquirer cannot achieve infallible knowledge of an infallible teaching office. He can never make the jump from his reasoning process to something that exceeds his reasoning process. So there's no qualitative shift in his epistemic situation.

It can never be more than his personal interpretation. In his fallible opinion, Rome is infallible. He never enjoys direct access to the allegedly infallible source that lies behind his

fallible understanding. Rather, that's always mediated by his own assessment of the evidence. Bryan's attempt to bootstrap the magisterium is viciously circular, for nothing ever really changes in the epistemic situation of the Catholic inquirer. Even if an infallible church lay in back of his understanding, his understanding constitutes a barrier to prevent verification of the allegedly infallible church.

ii) Now there *is* a sense in which a Catholic convert no longer relies on his own judgment. But that's because he's given up, and not because the process of inquiry yields a flash of insight that transcends the epistemic starting-point. Rather, he relinquishes his own judgment at that point, and vests blind faith in the magisterium *as if* that supplies infallible teaching office. There comes an arbitrary cut-off where he decides to delegate the final decision-making to Rome.

iii) Bryan has mistaken a utility closet for an elevator. He walks inside. The doors close behind him. He pushes a button. It rattles inside, then the doors reopen. He walks back out into the lobby, right where he began. He didn't go up a level from a fallible to an infallible epistemic situation.

There's no divine illumination which raises his prior epistemic situation to something new and superior. Rather, he now assumes a different viewpoint. He adopts a Catholic viewpoint. He's revised his epistemic attitude, but not his epistemic situation. He hasn't achieved a state of enlightenment that enables him to objectively discern where the truth lies, compared to his prior mindset. He has no new and better evidence than when he began. He has no new faculties.

In the nature of the case, there's a difference between pre- and postconversion perspectives. A convert assumes the viewpoint of his newfound faith. He now takes a different

stance towards the authority source of his adopted faith. That's hardly distinctive to Catholicism. But unless his new viewpoint matches reality, that's no advance over his initial epistemic situation.

Q6. If tomorrow the magisterium of the Catholic Church definitively proclaimed that Jesus was actually a mere prophet, not the Son of God, and did not die on a cross, you would not believe those teachings or submit to them. Doesn't this show that you too only submit when you agree, and that therefore, you are your own interpretive authority, just like the Protestant?

A. The question presupposes that the magisterium of the Church could do such a thing. But part of the dogma of the Catholic Church is precisely that the magisterium of the Church cannot possibly do such a thing, cannot overturn or oppose any dogma of the faith. So the question presupposes the falsity of that Catholic dogma, and in that respect is question-begging, just as the question "If Jesus had sinned, would you still follow Him?" is a question-begging question for Christians, because Christians believe that the Son of God cannot possibly sin. Individual bishops can and do fall into heresy and

schism. But Catholic faith includes the belief that the magisterium of the universal Church cannot do so. Orthodoxy and heresy are determined objectively by the magisterium of the universal Church, not ultimately by the individual's interpretation. The authority of the magisterium in infallibly defining doctrines preserves those doctrines until Christ returns, because the Church has no authority to reverse or overturn what she has already defined with her full authority.

i) But at best that's just hypothetical. And what distinguishes that mentality from unshakable faith in a cult-leader?

ii) Moreover, it's circular. If the evidence ever falsifies Catholic teaching, that can never be allowed to prove that "the Church" is fallible, but only that on this occasion, "the Church" didn't aim to speak infallibly. So the authority of the magisterium is untestable. When it's right it's right, and when it's wrong it's still right!

Michael Liccione May 25th, 2010 3:09 pm :

Prior to the assent of faith in the Catholic Church's claims for herself, the most that the sincere, objective, but uncommitted inquirer can do is study

the dataset and reach an opinion about which version of Christianity it best supports. If one forms the opinion that the dataset best supports the claims of the Catholic Church for herself, then one has good reason to make the assent of faith in them. Even so, that is not the same as intellectual compulsion, as though one could only hold such an opinion as something perfectly obvious. The assent is a free choice which, as such, is not compelled by the dataset itself or by any particular interpretation of it. Yet, once said assent is made, one cannot but see the dataset as making said assent more reasonable than the alternatives. For by making the assent, one has ipso facto adopted what is, in effect, a hermeneutical paradigm (HP) within which all the relevant data are altogether explicable in Catholic terms. Prior to the assent of faith, the Catholic HP only appears as one opinion among others that also have a certain plausibility; after the assent, the Catholic HP can no longer appear just as an opinion, but as a way of understanding the dataset that, in certain areas, is divinely protected from error. That's what it means to adopt the Catholic HP.

A Protestant as such always reserves to himself the right to judge the orthodoxy of something called “the Church” (in light of Scripture and whatever he also takes to be normative) even when he has joined what he takes to be either “the” Church or some branch thereof. Choosing to be Catholic means surrendering that putative right. If and when one comes to see the Catholic Church as the Church, and makes the corresponding assent of faith in her claims for herself, then one has chosen to have one’s orthodoxy is measured by her teaching, not vice-versa. Accordingly, a Catholic cannot see the definitive teaching of the Church as just one set of opinions over against others; nor can he see “Rome” as just one denomination or sect among others. Choosing to be Catholic means abjuring the very idea that religion is a matter of opinion, because choosing to be Catholic means joining what one has come to see as the Body of Christ, sharing in his teaching authority as her head through the bishops in apostolic succession, and thus as divinely protected from error when teaching with her full authority.

Accordingly, the key premise of Bryan's argument in the above post is, in effect, that the object of Catholic assent is fundamentally different in kind from the object of Protestant assent, even if the process of inquiry leading up to the assent is otherwise very similar in form and diligence. To put it in succinct technical form: the terminus ad quem is radically different even when the terminus a quo is the same. The terminus ad quem here is ecclesial infallibility, which is the pivotal feature of the Catholic HP, and requires as a correlate that some visible body is "the" Church outside of which there is no salvation. If and when one adopts that HP, then one is committed to rejecting any interpretation of the data that would falsify the Catholic Church's claims for herself. That is the stance which various Reformed critics are reacting against when they accuse Catholics like Bryan and me of "presuppositionalism" and of trying to make Catholicism "unfalsifiable." What such critics take to be the intellectually respectable alternative to our stance as Catholics is tantamount to treating religion as ultimately just a matter of opinion; for on the Protestant HP, nobody's teaching or profession of faith is admitted as infallible, hence

all are provisional and open to future revision—by the individual, if not by the institution itself.

All this is why the tu quoque rebuttal is inapt. The difference is that Catholics as such refuse to treat everything as a matter of opinion.

The problem with that lengthy exposition is fatal equivocation. The terminus ad quem isn't ecclesial infallibility, as if that's been demonstrated. The "assent" merely *posits* ecclesial infallibility as the terminus ad quem. A Catholic inquirer may come to *believe* that his sect is divinely protected from error, but his belief isn't divinely protected from error. He can't appeal to an infallible teaching office to retroactively validate his fallible belief in an infallible teaching office. Instead, he comes to a point where he "surrenders" his judgment to the judgment of the magisterium. But he doesn't do that because reason proved the magisterium to be divinely protected from error, thereby rendering independent judgment unnecessary beyond that point. He wasn't infallibly guided to infallibly discover an infallible guide.

Michael Liccione May 25th, 2010 8:43 pm :

But given his rejection of infallible interpretive authority, the Protestant leaves himself in no position to distinguish reliably between de fide doctrines—i.e., the doctrines to which God calls for

our assent—and the theological views of both authors and interpreters. Hence the Protestant as such has no way in principle to distinguish clearly the assent of faith, which is a divine gift involving assent to statements made with divine authority, from mere human opinions about what various “sources,” primarily Scripture, actually transmit to us as divine revelation.

This means, among other things, that the Protestant sees something called “the Church” in a fundamentally different way from Catholics. Given how he conceives assent to divine truth, the Protestant cannot see something called “the Church” as a sure guide to discerning it. Since “the Church” is fallible under all conditions, her orthodoxy is to be judged by what this-or-that person or group takes to be the doctrinally correct interpretation of Scripture (and other sources too, on some accounts), rather than vice-versa. Ultimately, the Protestant’s assent involves submission not to “the Church” but to himself as his most reliable guide to discerning divine revelation. “The Church,” from this point of view, is simply the set of people who ascribe to the “correct”

interpretation of the sources, where what's "correct" is what the individual believer provisionally accepts as such. The claims of this-or-that church to a certain kind of authority thus form no part of the deposit of faith; rather, what counts as "the Church" depends on its conformity to the deposit of faith, when said deposit is understood in a manner logically independent of any ecclesial claims to authority. Thus "the Church" is not strictly necessary for knowing Truth himself. It might be educationally useful for some, and is certainly pastorally useful for many. But that's about it. In principle, it's quite possible to read the Bible alone in a room and thereby learn all that God wants us to know for our salvation. Of course that sort of thing yields a variety of opinions whose holders like to call "doctrines" given by the Holy Spirit. Many of those opinions are, of course, mutually incompatible. That's why we have more Protestant denominations and sects than anybody, including Protestants themselves, can agree on how to count.

When the Catholic, on the other hand, makes his assent of faith, he is among other things assenting to the claims made by a visible, historically

continuous body that it is the Body of Christ on earth, authorized by him as her Head to teach in his name and thus, when speaking with her full authority, protected by his Spirit from requiring belief in propositions that are false. Accordingly, the Catholic does not, because as such he cannot, claim to know the deposit of faith in a manner logically independent of the claims the Church makes for herself. He does not, because he cannot, claim to know the “true doctrine” from the sources without depending on the authoritative certification of the sources as such by the Church, and the authoritative interpretations thereof by the Church. Thus for the Catholic, faith in the risen Christ, acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God, and faith in the teaching of the Church as that of the Body of Christ are logically inseparable from each other. And so the Catholic does not judge the orthodoxy of the Church; rather, he submits to the Church as, among other things, the judge of his orthodoxy.

But his assent merely *stipulates* that the Magisterium is a sure guide to discerning divine truth. His unconditional submission to the authority of the magisterium outstrips the

evidence for the claim (not to mention evidence to the contrary). What Bryan and Liccione fall back on is a last-ditch act of the will rather than discerning the truth.

We are now in a position to address the question why the Catholic mode of assent should be preferred to the Protestant's. From a historical point of view, the question is which hermeneutical paradigm to adopt for the purpose of interpreting the data: the Catholic, or some Protestant version.

Now the question which HP to adopt cannot be answered by appeal to the dataset itself, for the question is precisely which manner of interpreting the data is preferable. The question can only be answered, I believe, by asking ourselves which HP is better suited to distinguishing the propositionally expressible content of divine revelation itself—assuming there is such a thing as divine revelation—from mere theological opinions, and thus to facilitating the assent of faith as distinct from that of opinion. Now as you say, if Catholicism is true, the answer to that question is obvious. But if Catholicism is false, we are left only with provisional opinions. And if we are left only with provisional opinions, then we have no reliable way

to distinguish from human opinion that which God actually wants us to believe.

Except that his assent to the magisterium can never rise any higher than "human opinion". Even if an infallible teaching office did exist, that lies beyond the reach of reason to demonstrate. So the vicious circularity of the Catholic appeal remains inextricable.

That result is the epistemic aspect of the Protestant HP. History amply demonstrates that it doesn't leave us with any single, self-consistent body of doctrine; it yields a variety of mutually incompatible ones.

Which includes Catholicism alongside the competition. Not to mention a variety of mutually incompatible interpretations within Catholicism. There's no uniformity in Catholic teaching from either a diachronic perspective or even a synchronic perspective. Theological pluralism is rife in the big tent of Roman Catholicism.

Now on the assumption that there is such a thing as a definitive divine

revelation, and that even (or especially) the simple person can identify and assent to it by faith, such a result is hardly satisfactory. One would only feel obliged to accept it if one were convinced there was no alternative but to accept the idea that the Christian religion is just a matter of opinion. But there is such an alternative: Catholicism. And that fact, by itself, is a good reason to prefer Catholicism's epistemic stance to Protestantism's.

- i)** The "definitive divine revelation" is the Bible.
- ii)** There's nothing wrong with "opinion". The salient distinction isn't between opinion and the "assent of faith" but between true and false opinion.
- iii)** Moreover, what's so bad about innocent errors? Most Christians are fallible. God hasn't inspired most Christians. So disagreement ensues. God could prevent that by making every Christian infallible. He hasn't. So why presume God must be as annoyed by doctrinal disagreement as Catholic apologists?
- iv)** Catholicism's "epistemic stance" isn't preferable unless it matches reality.

Catholicism of the mind

Bryan Cross:

Today some Protestants publicized what they call a “Reformed Catholic Confession” that at least 250 have signed as of today. Much of the content of this Confession, of course, is common ground with the doctrine of the Catholic Church. And at least one of the intentions of the authors of this Confession seems to be growth in unity among Protestant Christians, for which I’m thankful. But this Confession neither bears any authority nor is formally or explicitly intended to be authoritative. Insofar as it is entirely a non-authoritative statement of the signers, it does not face the problems I described above with Clark’s position. Hence for that reason, just as with all the other Protestants confessions made over the past five hundred years, it is merely an historical record of what the signers presently believe, a sort of publicized theological snapshot or ‘selfie’ of the present theological position of persons brought together by their interpretive agreement with those

who share the same general interpretation as themselves. Regarding the problem of ad hoc 'catholicity,' see the section with the heading "Ad hoc catholicity" in Matt Yonke's article "Too catholic to be Catholic?: A Response to Peter Leithart," and the section titled "Confidence and the Consensus Criterion" in my reply to Christianity Today's Mark Galli, along with comment #16 under that post. And see the last paragraph of my reply to Carl Trueman in comment #89 under Brantly Millegan's CTC review of Brad Gregory's *The Unintended Reformation*.

However, insofar as this Confession sets itself up implicitly as an arbiter for all other Christians (or even for all Protestants) of what is or isn't "catholic," and is or isn't "mere" Christianity, it arrogates to itself an authority it does not have, and thereby faces the problems I described above with Clark's position. For example, this Confession treats Catholic doctrines concerning the Eucharist, ordination, baptism, Tradition, etc. as not part of what is "catholic" and "mere Christianity," while it treats sola scriptura and the first four ecumenical councils as inside the bounds of "catholic" and

“mere Christianity.” And this “catholicity” excludes Church Fathers as well. Tomorrow, for example, we (Catholics) celebrate the feast of the Church Father St. Chrysostom. But what St. Chrysostom teaches about the priesthood and about the Eucharistic sacrifice is incompatible with the “mere Christianity” of this “Reformed Catholic Confession.” In other words, this Confession is not sufficiently ‘catholic’ to include St. Chrysostom. And because not only St. Chrysostom but all the Church Fathers taught doctrines that are Catholic and incompatible with Protestantism, this Confession excludes them as well. So this implication not only raises a red flag, but it also raises the question of who has the authority to determine what is and is not ‘catholic,’ and what does and does not belong to Christianity.

The Church Fathers all believed and taught that the authority by which such questions were to be answered rested in the bishops who received this authority in succession from the Apostles. The authors of this Confession performatively arrogate this particular authority to themselves by what they include within the Confession and what they

exclude from it. And throughout Church history there have been heretical and schismatic groups that did the same, banding together around their shared heretical beliefs (mixed with orthodox doctrines), and arrogating to themselves the authority to determine what is and isn't orthodoxy, catholic, etc. Such groups and their confessions fade into history over the centuries, even as the Church carries on. Lumen Gentium teaches that many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of the Church's visible structure; these elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity. (Lumen Gentium, 8) May those elements and truths continue to impel our Protestant brothers and sisters toward the true catholic unity which is full visible communion with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church Christ founded.

<http://www.calledto communion.com/2014/01/clark-frame-and-the-analogy-of-painting-a-magisterial-target-around-ones-interpretive-arrow/#comment-217184>

i) I agree with Bryan that by framing the issue in terms of "catholicity", the document draws ad hoc distinctions. Of

course, that's true of ecumenism generally.

ii) But notice how Bryan can't think outside of his "authority" paradigm. Like Catholic apologists generally, he suffers from tunnel vision as he obsessively recasts the issue in terms of "authority" rather than truth or evidence. Why does a creed need to be authoritative rather than true? Put another way, why isn't truth inherently authoritative?

The relevant question shouldn't be "who has the authority to determine X", but whether the statement is true, and whether we can assess the truth or falsity of the statement by available evidence. By what "authority" did Bryan decide to convert to Catholicism? Not by Magisterial authority, for at that stage of his investigations and reflections, he wasn't convinced of Catholicism. He had to exercise his (gasp!) private judgment. In his personal fallible opinion, the church of Rome is the One True Church®.

iii) In addition, for converts like Bryan, their reference point isn't the empirical Catholic church. The object of their faith isn't the Catholic church as it actually presents itself in the course of church history. Not an audible, visible, verifiable organization, but the church as it exists in their minds. The Roman church as an idealized mental construct or mental projection. The Roman church as a philosophical solution to what they perceive to be the philosophical problem of Protestant epistemology. They don't convert to Catholicism based on evidence for Catholicism. Rather, they convert to Catholicism despite evidence to the contrary. They are captivated by a pristine idea that magically transcends the contradictions of Catholic history.

iv) Incidentally, Bryan was raised in Pentecostalism, and he's publicly discussed the death of his 3-year-old son in 1995. One wonders if that wasn't the catalyst that triggered his exit out of Protestantism and eventually into

Catholicism. He was raised in a theological tradition that inculcates expectant faith in miraculous healing. So that tragedy wasn't supposed to be in the cards. For many people, their childhood religion remains their frame of reference. Even if they rebel against their childhood religion, that's the standard of comparison. They continue to measure the alternatives by that yardstick.

As the world slept

26 HE ALSO SAID, “THIS IS WHAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS LIKE. A MAN SCATTERS SEED ON THE GROUND. 27 NIGHT AND DAY, WHETHER HE SLEEPS OR GETS UP, THE SEED SPROUTS AND GROWS, THOUGH HE DOES NOT KNOW HOW. 28 ALL BY ITSELF THE SOIL PRODUCES GRAIN—FIRST THE STALK, THEN THE HEAD, THEN THE FULL KERNEL IN THE HEAD. 29 AS SOON AS THE GRAIN IS RIPE, HE PUTS THE SICKLE TO IT, BECAUSE THE HARVEST HAS COME” (Mk 4:26-29).

Before its reputation became so tarnished by the clerical abuse scandal, the Catholic church bestrode the world stage. It used to be a major player in geopolitics. Therein lay much of its appeal for many. If Jesus founded a universal church, surely that's what it will look like. Big, conspicuous, spread out. Compared to that, Protestant denominations seem so provincial and piecemeal.

This dovetails with the claim of Catholic apologists that Jesus founded a *visible* church (i.e. unified hierarchical organization). It has a visible head (the pope).

But compare that to Christ's kingdom parable about the seed growing at night. In that respect, God's kingdom is invisible. It grows at night while the farmer sleeps. It grows at night while the world sleeps. In the Synoptics, the church and the kingdom of God are closely related categories.

In that respect, the church represents a silent revolution. It grows and spreads under cover of darkness. The world is

caught off-guard. The church escapes the notice of the world until it suddenly becomes unmistakable. The church takes root and spreads where the world least suspects it. Consider the underground church in China. Consider Christian revival in the heart of the Muslim world, due to dreams and visions of Jesus. Consider how the Pentecostal movement swept over Latin America.

In that respect, the world visibility of the Catholic church is antithetical to the kingdom of God. The progress of the kingdom is unexpected and unpredictable. It happens where you're not looking. The universality of the church isn't to be found in the neon signage of Roman Catholicism, but in surprising places. In corners and backwaters which the world overlooks until it's too late to ignore.

Prooftexting apostolic succession

[Acts 1:12-26](#) is a traditional prooftext for apostolic succession. I recently had an impromptu debate with a Catholic apologist over that appeal:

There is succession in the Apostolic offices ([Acts 1:12-26](#)).

That's about maintaining the symbolism of the Twelve after Judas defected. Which disproves your argument, since that means there can't be more or less than Twelve at a time.

Whether the transfer of office was motivated, in part, by symbolism, this no way diminishes the fact that transfers of office occurred, and that the Apostles went on to install bishops. You know the history of the early Church, for goodness sake.

You're trying to ride two horses at once.

i) The Twelve is a closed number. Judas was replaced to maintain the symbolism. By definition, you can't extrapolate

from a closed number (the Twelve) to an indefinite number beyond twelve at a time. The Twelve constitute a self-contained unit. There can only be changes *within* that unit.

ii) You then play a shell game by switching from that to apostles appointing elders, as if that flows out of the appointment of Mathias. But that's categorically different.

Never claimed that 12 is a closed number, just that it had symbolic significance, which I grant may have motivated the transfer of office.

No transfer of office. To the contrary, the Twelve is, in the nature of the case, a self-enclosed numerical unit. You can't legitimately expand from that to more than twelve at a time. So your prooftext disproves your contention.

Pretty clear from the New Testament that 12 is more symbolic than a strict number.

Pretty clear that there were originally 12 disciples, corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel, and when Judas defected, he was replaced to maintain that numerically closed unit.

Also, clearly Paul was an apostle, so no evidence 12 was a contained number.

A category error. The Twelve is not synonymous with the Apostolate. The fact that each of the Twelve might be classified as an apostle doesn't imply that all apostles are disciples in the exclusive sense of the Twelve.

You can't even read your proof-text. Look at the qualifications for candidates to replace the seat vacated by Judas: **"21 So ONE OF THE MEN WHO HAVE ACCOMPANIED US DURING ALL THE TIME THAT THE LORD JESUS WENT IN AND OUT AMONG US, 22 BEGINNING FROM THE BAPTISM OF JOHN UNTIL THE DAY WHEN HE WAS TAKEN UP FROM US—ONE OF THESE MEN MUST BECOME WITH US A WITNESS TO HIS RESURRECTION."**

That's a very restrictive pool to choose from. And that generation died out. So you can't very well use that as a paradigm for apostolic succession, since that disqualifies virtually member of the Roman episcopate! But I do appreciate you unwittingly disproving the Roman episcopate.

There is no category error here. Paul was an apostle and not a member of the 12.

Which proves my point: the Twelve and the Apostolate are not equivalent. Keep in mind that "apostle" is a term of art in NT usage. Sometimes it has a more specialized meaning, sometimes a more generic meaning.

The issue was whether an office could be transferred, and I substantiated that claim. We also know, historically, the apostles took as their mission to establish new Churches and ordain bishops, etc. So this idea that offices were not transferred, created, or established through the original 12 is just bizarre, frankly.

You're so blinded by traditional Catholic proof texting that you can't even think straight. You proof text is counterproductive to your thesis. At best, the appointment of Mathias would be an example of one apostle replacing another apostle.

But Catholics don't think there's a permanent apostolic office with successive incumbents. They don't think apostolic succession means one apostle succeeding another apostle. Rather, they think bishops in union with the pope are the true successors to the Apostolate. Therefore, Daniel's proof text either proves too much or too little.

Acts 1 involves replacement of the same kind whereas apostolic succession involves a shift from apostles to bishops. Different principle.

It is the replacement of an apostle that is the matter here.

Replacing one apostle with another apostle isn't any kind of precedent for replacing an apostle with a bishop. You persist

in your fallacious inference.

A difference, to be a difference, must make a difference

Reposting an exchange I recently had with a Catholic church historian on Facebook:

1. In my experience, when Catholic apologists attack the Protestant faith, they stress the certainties afforded by a Magisterium, but when Protestants attack the Catholic faith, Catholic apologists suddenly take refuge in uncertainties. Any evidence that might falsify Catholicism is relegated to something insufficiently authoritative. Certainty, which had been so accessible when attacking the Protestant faith becomes inaccessible when Protestants counterattack. Now you see it, now you don't. When Catholic apologists are on the offensive, they advertise certainty. When Catholic apologists are on the defensive, they play hide and seek.

2. You ask, what constitutes sufficient evidence? It depends. Sufficient for what?

Let's distinguish between reasonable belief and dutiful belief. I have many beliefs for which I have sufficient evidence to be justified or warranted in which I believe.

That, however, is different from the claim that God requires me to believe certain things. I can and do believe many things without having a divine obligation to believe them.

Catholicism takes the position that in addition to Biblical revelation, I'm duty-bound to believe Catholic dogmas. It is sinful to disbelieve them. Indeed, it may be a mortal sin. For instance:

We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful.

Hence, if anyone shall dare -- which God forbid! -- to think otherwise than as has been defined by us, let him know and understand that he is condemned by his own judgment; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has separated from the unity of the Church; and that, furthermore, by his own action he incurs the penalties established by law if he should dare to express in words or writing or by any other outward means the errors he think in his heart. "Ineffabilis Deus"

By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having

completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.

Hence if anyone, which God forbid, should dare willfully to deny or to call into doubt that which we have defined, let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith. It is forbidden to any man to change this, our declaration, pronouncement, and definition or, by rash attempt, to oppose and counter it. If any man should presume to make such an attempt, let him know that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul.

"Munificentissimus Deus."

What is sufficient evidence to justifiably believe something has a much lower threshold than what is sufficient evidence that I have a sacred duty to believe something, failing which I have sinned (perhaps a damnable sin, no less).

3. You said:

Just as you say that the "church of Rome" is a 'short-sighted, uninspired institution,' so many atheists insist that the Bible is nothing more than a collection of ancient books containing a

savage 'Iron Age' (or sometimes, less accurately, 'Bronze Age') view of the world.

i) One problem with that analogy is that unless the evidence for Catholicism is comparable to the evidence for Scripture, it's reasonable to make allowances for Scripture that I wouldn't or shouldn't make for Catholicism.

ii) Moreover, Another problem with your comparison is that when I interpret the Bible or defend the Bible, original intent is one of my hermeneutical principles. (Prophecy is a partial exception inasmuch as prophecies are forward-looking, so the perspective of the prophet isn't the only salient consideration. There's the timeframe of the prophet as well as the timeframe of the predicted event. So we have to take past and future viewpoints into account.)

By contrast, reinterpreting traditional positions is the opposite of original intent. So your comparison is disanalogous. You compared criticisms of Catholicism to criticisms of the Bible.

iii) Furthermore, it would be necessary for you to unpack that comparison in detail. Hypothetically speaking, the Bible (indeed, Christianity) is falsifiable. Take Paul's statement about the Resurrection.

Now, if (ex hypothesi) we discovered the bones of Jesus in the tomb, some theologians would say Christianity is still true. We just need to redefine the Resurrection. But Paul, for one, denies that Christianity is that flexible. Because it's

based on ostensible historical events, it can't remain true if the foundational events never happened.

I keep making this analogy because your complete dismissal of the unbeliever's perspective is one of the most consistent features of your posts. And, alas, even Jerry, who should know better, has been falling into the same error. You keep attacking Catholicism on grounds that logically refute Christianity as a whole.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm guessing that you're a theological moderate. You don't subscribe to the inerrancy of Scripture. You don't think Gen 1-11 is historical. You don't think the Exodus happened, or if it did, it was nothing like Biblical descriptions. I'm guessing you don't think the Gospels are consistently historical.

If so, your comparison is predicated a flexibility in your own position that's not analogous to my own position. The problem is with an ad hoc plasticity, which we impose on past events or past statements, rather than deriving from past events or past statements, whereby we make these adjustable to the perceived demands of modernity. Interjecting enough fudge factors that you can never say something was wrong or fundamentally wrong. It's an intellectual compromise that works for some people, but a

makeshift compromise that lacks any principle other than indefinite adaptability.

I keep making this analogy because your complete dismissal of the unbeliever's perspective is one of the most consistent features of your posts.

I don't simply "dismiss" the unbeliever's perspective. I go out of my way to find the best exponents of atheism, then present a detailed critique of their arguments.

4. I don't always need to reinvent the wheel. When I cite supporting material by, say, Cardinal Dulles, that's a sympathetic source. I'd add that on Facebook it's more convenient to cite online material. That's something readily accessible to readers in a way that print media is not.

Of course, Dulles isn't going to say the Magisterium falsified its claim to be a divine teaching office. As a Catholic prelate, he's committed to the system. So he and like-minded defenders will invoke escape clauses to show how these radical changes are someone consistent with essential continuity. Escape clauses invented on the spot for just that purpose.

But in the course of his historical overviews, he lays out evidence for drastic changes in traditional positions. If that's consistent with the divine guidance of the Magisterium, what would be inconsistent with divine guidance? Within Catholicism, with its ace in the hole

regarding gradations of authority, what would ever count as evidence against the system?

5. Another problem is that these reassessments of traditional theology are necessarily retrospective. No one living in the Middle Ages (say) would understand these positions the way they've been domesticated by modern Catholic theologians, popes, and bishops. As a result, everything in Catholic theology is up for grabs, since the standard of comparison is no longer the past or present, but the future. Not what is or has been, but what might be.

The church of Rome is like Neurath's ship, which undergoes constant remodeling after it leaves dry dock. You can no longer say what Catholicism is or means because that's subject to some unforeseeable future revision or reinterpretation. What is ever truly definitive? What is ever truly authoritative?

6. Let's begin with a principle. Gertrude Stein famously said "A difference, to be a difference, must make a difference."

One way of testing whether the church of Rome has a divine teaching office is to ask what difference the presence or absence of a divine teaching office would make in Catholic historical theology. There must be a discernible difference. Let's begin one example I cited, from Cardinal Dulles. Among other things, he says:

The views of Augustine and Fulgentius remained dominant in the Christian West throughout the Middle Ages. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) reaffirmed the formula "Outside the Church, no

salvation,” as did Pope Boniface VIII in 1302. At the end of the Middle Ages, the Council of Florence (1442) repeated the formulation of Fulgentius to the effect that no pagan, Jew, schismatic, or heretic could be saved.

A major theological development occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The voyages of discovery had by this time disclosed that there were large populations in North and South America, Africa, and Asia who had lived since the time of Christ and had never had access to the preaching of the gospel. The missionaries found no sign that even the most upright among these peoples had learned the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation by interior inspirations or angelic visitations.

Pope Pius IX incorporated some of their ideas in two important statements in 1854 and 1863. In the first, he said that, while no one can be saved outside the Church, God would not punish people for their ignorance of the true faith if their ignorance was invincible. In the second statement, Pius went further. He declared that persons invincibly ignorant of the Christian religion who

observed the natural law and were ready to obey God would be able to attain eternal life, thanks to the workings of divine grace within them.

<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/001-who-can-be-saved-8>

Paul Knitter makes the same point:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2005/05/from-nulla-salus-to-tota-salus.html>

i) That's not a development of doctrine, but a retraction of a traditional position that had been reaffirmed by two ecumenical councils and Pope Boniface VIII. That isn't "nuance". That's not a logical development of the principle. Rather, that's a radical departure from the principle.

ii) If, moreover, you maintain that it's somehow internally consistent, you can only do so by resorting to radical skepticism concerning how official church teaching can be understood. That's not how the principle was understood in the Middle Ages, at the highest levels of the Magisterium. If past Magisterial statements can be that drastically reinterpreted, then there's no presumption that our understanding of modern Magisterial statements is any more stable in light of some future reinterpretation.

iii) At best, it could be argued that this was an attempt to reconcile the traditional principle of "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus" with the belief of some Medieval theologians regarding God's universal salvific will. Yet that would mean

you had a tension in Catholic theology between the traditional position (*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*) and a newer, emerging position regarding the scope of God's salvific will.

But how would this outcome be any different if the Catholic church never had a divine teaching office in the first place? Indeed, isn't this logjam exactly what we'd expect from an organization that can't see ahead, and therefore stakes out untenable positions from which it must later extricate itself?

Even supposing that's consistent with a divine teaching office, it's equally consistent with no divine teaching office at all. What's your evidence to distinguish the effects of a divine teaching office from its absence? When modern Catholic theologians begin retrofitting Catholic theology in light of unforeseen contingencies like the discovery of pagans in the New World, how is that distinguishable from an organization that made the wrong call the first time around?

7. Let's take another example: What's the official ecclesiology in Vatican II? Is it the more collegial, conciliarist model that the majority of bishops voted for, or is it the more ultramontane model in the "explanatory note" of Paul VI?

Paul VI was clearly alarmed by what the bishops promulgated, so he overruled it with his explanatory note. Yet these two competing models of ecclesiology bump up against each other in the final edition. Both were codified at the same council.

If you think that train wreck is consistent with a divine teaching office, that's equally consistent with the absence of

a divine teaching office. What appreciable difference did the stipulated divine teaching office make to the results? Indeed, wouldn't we expect a divine teaching office to be able to head off that train wreck in advance, rather than letting the two trains collide, then leaving it to onlookers to decide which has the upper hand?

8. Here's another example:

Before Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was defined, all theological faculties in the world were consulted for their opinion. Our teachers' answer was emphatically negative... 'Tradition' was identified with what could be proved on the basis of texts. Altaner, the patrologist from Würzburg...had proven in a scientifically persuasive manner that the doctrine of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was unknown before the fifth century; this doctrine, therefore, he argued, could not belong to the 'apostolic tradition.' And this was his conclusion, which my teachers at Munich shared. This argument is compelling if you understand 'tradition' strictly as the handling down of fixed formulas and

texts...But if you conceive of 'tradition' as a living process whereby the Holy Spirit introduces us to the fullness of truth and teaches us how to understand what previously we could still not grasp (cf. Jn 16:12-13), then subsequent 'remembering' (cf. Jn 16:4, for instance) can come to recognize what it had not caught sight of previously and yet was handed down in the original
Word, Milestones (Ignatius, 1998), 58-59.

Notice that this involves a twofold theological innovation:

- i)** To begin with, the particular doctrine (Assumption of Mary) is a theological innovation. It was unknown before the 5C.
- ii)** In addition, the theory of development is a theological innovation. It represents a fundamental break with how the church of Rome used to define sacred tradition. Notice that the Assumption of Mary was promulgated despite unanimous opposition of Catholic theological faculties at the time. That's not just because the doctrine itself lacks traditional pedigree, but because the justification is yet another theology innovation.
- iii)** It will hardly suffice to say "Catholicism allows for theological development" when that, in itself, represents a repeal of the traditional criterion.

9. Or consider how Mark Daviau blew off the question of whether the Leonine-era strictures of the PBC regarding the historicity and traditional authorship of Scripture are still in force. He indicated that the PBC strictures regarding the Pentateuch and Isaiah are passé. He was less clear about the PBC strictures regarding the Gospels.

So there's another dilemma: were those pronouncements authoritative or not? If Magisterial teaching can become defunct in barely a century, what confidence should Catholics have in Magisterial teaching generally? What's the official status of the anti-modernist policies promulgated under Pius IX and Leo XIII? Has that been "developed" out of existence? If so, the evolution of Catholic theology is moving at light speed.

V. Convert Syndrome

Conversion continuum

I'd like to make a general observation about conversions to Catholicism. Conversions range along a continuum. Theological identities are packages. Some packages have far more in common than others.

Some conversions involve a minor adjustment in the convert's theology. Suppose a paedobaptist becomes a credobaptist or vice versa. That changes one variable, leaving pretty much the rest of his theology intact.

Suppose a Baptist becomes a Lutheran. He has to make many more adjustments to his overall theology.

But depending on the theological package, some variables are more central than others. The prophethood of Muhammad and Joseph Smith are cornerstones of Islam and Mormonism. If they were false prophets, then that falsifies the whole package. For the contents of the package depend on the authority of Muhammad or Joseph Smith.

A further consideration is that conversion often involves, not merely changing one or more of your theological positions, but changing your supporting arguments for or against the positions in question.

Take the case of Luis Dizon, who recently switched back to Roman Catholicism. I believe he was a Reformed Baptist. Moreover, he's a Christian apologist, so I assume he was used to arguing for his Reformed Baptist beliefs and arguing against Roman Catholicism. Let's compare some of the contents of each package.

I. Reformed Baptist

1. Sola Scriptura
2. The Protestant canon
3. Absolute predestination, unconditional election, reprobation
4. Definite atonement
5. Spiritual inability
6. Monergistic regeneration
7. Sola fide
8. Imputing Adam's demerit to his posterity, imputing the demerit of the elect to Christ, imputing the merit of Christ to the elect
9. Perseverance of the saints
10. Penal substitution
11. Believer's baptism
12. Exclusivism

II. Roman Catholicism

1. Apostolic succession
2. The pope as Christ's vicar on earth
3. The Magisterium as the authoritative interpreter of Scripture

4. The Catholic canon
5. Infused merit, congruent merit, supererogatory merit.
6. The priesthood
7. Seven sacraments
8. Baptismal regeneration/justification
9. Transubstantiation
10. Penance, auricular confession, absolution, indulgences
11. Indissolubility of marriage
12. Purgatory
13. Intercession and veneration of saints
14. Immaculate Conception
15. Assumption of Mary
16. Perpetual virginity of Mary (including in partu virginity)
17. Mary as Queen of Heaven, Mother of the Church, and Mediatrix
18. The Rosary
19. Renunciation of capital punishment
20. Inclusivism (Vatican II)

In each case, that's a sample. Compare the two packages. To convert from one to the other, he must now repudiate all the positions he used to believe and defend as a Reformed Baptist. Conversely, he must now believe and defend all the positions he used to repudiate.

What is more, he must now renounce all the arguments he used to deploy in defending the Reformed Baptist position and opposing Roman Catholicism. Conversely, he must now adopt most-all of the Catholic arguments he used to view as bogus.

Consider how artificial that is. Has he really vacated all the former arguments at one stroke? Did he eliminate them one by one? Did all the arguments he used to find convincing become unconvincing while most-all of the arguments he used to find unconvincing become convincing? Is it like reversing the domino effect, where all the dominos used to fall in one direction but now they all fall in the opposite direction?

Surely it must feel schizophrenic to change sides so that you find yourself arguing with your mirror image. You're now resorting to the same arguments whose weaknesses you used to recognize. Has your perception really undergone a complete gestalt shift?

BTW, these aren't symmetrical alternatives. An intellectual conversion from Catholicism to evangelicalism is a lot simpler because there was no direct evidence for many Catholic dogmas. Rather, that was contingent on the authority of the Magisterium to promulgate dogma. All it takes to drop out of Catholicism is to lose your conviction in the authority of the Magisterium. Pull that one cornerstone and the entire edifice crumbles in a heap of dust.

Catholic converts

There's a pecking order among Catholic converts/reverts. In some cases, the person may occupy more than one rung on the ladder:

1. Historical pivots

One of the most historically influential figures was Henri de Navarre. Raised Protestant, after assuming the French throne he sided with the Catholics. That had enormous impact on the religious history of France. To his partial credit, his regime tolerated Protestants.

2. Theological pivots

John Henry Newman is the most influential convert in modern times, maybe of all time. His theory of development was codified at Vatican II. He changed his adopted denomination. You might say he saved Catholicism by destroying traditional Catholicism. The theory of development gave Catholicism elbow room, but at the expense of an incurable identity crisis.

3. Pointy-heads

Figures influential among the Catholic intelligentsia. Their impact is limited and indirect, viz. Elizabeth Anscombe, Frederick Copleston, Cardinal Dulles, Peter Geach, Alasdair MacIntyre, Thomas Merton, Ed Feser, Thomas Joseph White.

4. Popularizers

Retail salesmen rather than wholesale thinkers, viz. Francis Beckwith, Chesterton, Graham Greene, Scott Hahn, Ed Feser, Thomas Merton, Malcolm Muggeridge, Richard John Neuhaus, Frank Sheed, Adrienne von Speyr, Evelyn Waugh, Thomas Joseph White.

5. Celebs

Public figures who convert to Catholicism, but don't have much religious influence, viz. Tony Blair, Robert Bork, Bobby Jindal, Robert Novak. They're Catholic trophies.

6. Has-beens

One-time players whose influence has waned with the passage of time, viz. Clare Boothe Luce, Cardinal Manning, Jacques Maritain, Malcolm Muggeridge, Frank Sheed.

7. Coincidental Catholics

Converts who don't spend much time plugging their newfound faith, viz. Michael Dummett, Bas van Fraassen, Nicholas Rescher. In this case, philosophers who happen to be Catholic rather than Catholic philosophers in the sense of philosophers whose Catholicism is central to their philosophical outlook or whose work significantly intersects with Catholicism from time to time. Their conversion is an intellectual accessory rather than an intellectual revolution.

8. Extras

Dime-a-dozen hucksters with shoestring "apostolates" who compete with each other for attention and donors.

The archetypal appeal of Catholicism

1. ARCHETYPES

Although I've probably done hundreds of posts on Roman Catholicism, there's a significant aspect of Catholicism that I've largely neglected (with a partial exception). And that's the archetypal appeal of Catholicism. Much of the popular or enduring appeal of works like Homer, Ovid, Dante, Beowulf, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Ray Bradbury (to name a few) lies in their ability to harness archetypes. And that extends to lowbrow writers like Stephen King. The role of archetypes has been explored by scholars and thinkers like Freud (e.g. *The Interpretation of Dreams*), Jung, Northrop Frye (mythos), Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell. The current fad for Jordan Peterson has revived popular interest in archetypes.

2. DEFINITIONS

Archetypes are recurrent patterns in literature and in life. These patterns can be images (such as light and darkness), character types such as the hero and the trickster) or plot motifs (such as the quest and the initiation). These recurrent patterns are the building blocks of the literary imagination. Writers could not avoid using them if they tried.

Archetypes are a universal language. We know what they mean simply by virtue of being humans in this world. We all know experiences of winter and hunger, sibling rivalry and tyrannical bullies. One scholar speaks of archetypes as "any of the immemorial patterns of response to the human

situation in its most permanent aspects," L. Ryken & M. L. Mead, *A Reader's Guide Through the Wardrobe* (IVP 2005), 41.

[Eliade] People want to abolish history, which reflects only appearances, to touch the underlying reality that it can only dimly manifest. By defining a sacred space or sacred acts, one can uncover or reveal the real...Sacred or liturgical calendars repeat the act of creation as the gods performed it...They are thus exemplary models, human acts through which one relives the myths that give meaning to religious life. Reliving the myth abolishes time and puts one in touch with the real; hence, it is a sacred act. Rituals, or archetypal acts, allow one periodically to deny history and change. Thus, we have myths that confer meaning on life. Ritual allows us to "contact" the reality to which the myth refers. We enact exemplary models in our archetypal acts... A sacred calendar repeats creation or the experiences of the gods. Mary Jo Meadow, "Archetypes and Patriarchy: Eliade and Jung," *Journal of Religion and Health* 31/3 (Fall 1992), 188.

My point is not to endorse every detail of Eliade's analysis. He may have been influenced by the concept of maya in Indian philosophy as well as the tragic history of his native Rumania. If your native land has a tragic history, there's a yearning to escape from time. But his analysis highlights the role of ritual and religious calendars, which has direct relevance to Roman Catholicism.

3. TAKING STOCK

i) An interesting feature of archetypes is that a mediocre movie or story may still have archetypal power. Despite the inept execution, the psychological power of the archetype is

independent of the shoddy execution. An otherwise forgettable story or movie may be memorable despite the maladroit execution because it contains an archetypal idea that resonates with the viewer or reader. As Lewis observes:

The pleasure of myth depends hardly at all on such usual narrative attractions as suspense or surprise...Sometimes, even from the first, there is hardly any narrative element... The Hesperides, with their apple-tree and dragon, are already a potent myth, without bringing in Herakles to steal the apples.

A man who first learns what is to him a great myth through a verbal account which is baldly or vulgarly or cacophonously written, discounts and ignores the bad writing and attends solely to the myth. He hardly minds about the writing. He is glad to have the myth on any terms...The value of myth is not a specifically literary value, or the appreciation of myth a specifically literary experience. He does not approach the words with the expectation or belief that they are good reading matter; they are merely information. their literary merits or faults do not count (for his main purpose) much more than those of a timetable or a cookery book. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Canto 1992), 43-44,46.

ii) A key feature of archetypes is how they operate at a subliminal level. Intellectual converts to Catholicism (and/or Catholic apologists) justify Catholicism by appeal to dry, rational arguments. And they may genuinely believe that's what drew them to Catholicism. But Catholicism encodes many archetypes, and archetypes have the ability to bypass the conscious mind. You can be under the influence by an archetype without being cognizant of how much that sways your impressions. In that regard, the compelling power of archetypes is seductive and subversive, by disarming the critical faculty. You may think the primary appeal of

Catholicism is grounded in reason and evidence while, in reality, Catholic archetypes slip behind the filter to manipulate the uncensored mind.

iii) That doesn't mean archetypes are automatically malign. But it's necessary to distinguish between factual and fictional archetypes. For instance, polytheism has great archetypal power because heathen gods exemplify archetypes. They personify natural forces (e.g. sun gods, moon goddesses, storm gods, volcanoes, the dawn [Aurora], cycles (the seasons, death), and things (e.g. wood nymphs, water nymphs, mountains, fire, animals)—as well as human social roles (sex/love goddesses, war gods, father gods, mother goddesses).

An archetype may be true to life, but false when that's misappropriated to lend specious credit to a false religion. You can be brainwashed by archetypes. Drugged by archetypes if you fail to recognize how it conditions your impressions. Once again, archetypes can be natural goods. The danger comes if you allow yourself to be controlled by the mythos.

iv) Apropos (iii), in this respect, the Catholic faith enjoys a competitive advantage over the Protestant faith. It has a richer and more immediate archetypal appeal than the Protestant faith. The archetypal dimension of the Protestant faith is deliberately spare compared to Catholicism. Protestants like Zwingli, Calvin, and the Puritans demythologize Catholicism. Sometime this was taken to a reactionary extreme.

In the Protestant faith, some of the archetypal dimension is deferred to the afterlife and the world to come. To that extent, the archetypal power of the Protestant faith is more eschatological.

4. BIBLICAL ARCHETYPES

Some of the archetypal power of Catholicism lies in the fact that it incorporates many biblical symbols and motifs. Bible history is archetypal. Cf. L. Ryken, J. Wilhoit, & T. Longman, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*.

But over and above all that are Catholic archetypes. Some of these overlap with Eastern Orthodoxy and Oriental Orthodoxy.

5. MOTHERHOOD

The cult of Mary makes Catholicism a woman-centered faith. It transposes religion to a feminine key. Mary becomes the paradigmatic mother. The universal mother. And that, of course, triggers profound emotional associations with human motherhood generally.

It stands to reason that this makes Catholicism especially appealing to women. They identify with Mary the way pagan women relate to a patron goddess.

However, the maternity of Mary has a twist because she's a sexless mother. In that respect, she might seem harder to relate to than a normal mother. But perhaps that, too, is appealing to many women. Consider how many mothers divorce their husbands but claim custody of the children. They'd rather be mothers than wives. They'd rather be able to circumvent procreation with a man. Have kids but cut men out of the equation.

6. FATHERHOOD

In addition to the dominant Marian mother figure is the father figure of the priest. Indeed, he's explicitly a father figure. That's his title. And that extends right up to the pope, who's the "Holy Father". The very word "pope" means "father".

The paternal side might seem to complement the maternal side, making Catholicism equally appealing to men, but there's a twist: just as Mary is a sexless mother, the priest is a sexless father. Admittedly, many priests are sexually active, but in religious symbolism what's paramount is what the priest *represents* rather than what he *is*.

Perhaps that, too, is appealing to women. A sexless father confessor is safe for women to be around—the way a eunuch is safe for women to be around.

Although they wouldn't admit it, I suspect many Catholic laymen don't take a priest seriously as a role-model of masculinity. There's a gentleman's agreement where they tolerate celibate priests on condition that laymen not only have marital sex, but premarital and extramarital sex, then confess it. And if it turns out that the priest has a mistress, that may actually raise the layman's respect for the priest. He's a real man after all.

7. PRIESTCRAFT

Through sacramental alchemy, a priest can change bread and wine into different substances. Likewise, he causes natural water to have a supernatural effect. In that regard, the priest reprises the role of a wizard. Wizards are archetypal figures. The mythos of magic is transcultural.

8. HOLY ORDERS

Apropos (7), consistent with the wizard paradigm, apostolic succession can't have any broken links. Before he dies, a wizard transfers his mojo to his apprentice. If he dies before he transfers his mojo to a successor, then his mojo dies with him. Transmission is wizard-to-wizard.

9. BAPTISM

Apropos (7), the symbolism of baptism isn't straightforward. Water is an open-textured metaphor because water has so many varied functions and connotations in human experience.

Catholicism settles on the connotation of birth/spiritual rebirth. And that taps into deep archetypical associations.

10. EUCHARIST

i) In evangelical theology, the eucharist is a symbol of the crucifixion. An emblem of Christ's redemptive death.

ii) But in Catholicism, the eucharist is an edible deity. That's a different paradigm. That's like Indian braves who consume bear meat, not just for food or primarily for food, but to absorb the spirit of the bear. You become one with what you eat. Indeed, you become what you eat. That's a primitive pagan archetype. Catholic sacramentalism operates on the same principle as sympathetic magic. Like sticking a needle in a voodoo doll.

11. EXORCISM

Apropos (7), the priest uses white magic to drive out black magic. Like the consecration of the communion elements,

the priest uses magic incantations to change the status quo. The power of word magic.

12. SIGN OF THE CROSS

In Catholic piety, laymen can wield a little bit of magic through this gesture, to ward off evil spirits. This gives laymen a piece of the action as junior wizards.

13. HARROWING OF HELL

The descent into hell and harrowing of hell have transparent roots in pagan stories about the netherworld. That includes trips by the living to the realm of the dead to rescue a departed loved one. That even gave rise to Orphic cults. This taps into a deep desire to make contact with the dearly departed or assist them.

14. CULT OF THE DEAD

This parallels (13). In a sense, recapitulating the descent into hell and harrowing of hell by Christ. It democratizes the harrowing of hell.

15. RELICS

In addition to the general notion of magical objects is the further notion of the mojo of a saint clings to his mortal remains.

16. CHURCH CALENDAR

Human experience is cyclical on multiple levels, and the church calendar piggybacks on the periodicity of human

experience.

17. CATHEDRAL

i) In addition to artistic religious symbolism that's engineered into Gothic architecture, which a medieval art historian can appreciate, Cathedrals encode a natural archetypal symbolism that evokes a response in viewers with no religious background at all. This involves the play of light and dark. Compare it to the effect of sunny glen in the forest. Or a cave, where the ceiling is underlie by daylight; or viewing light outside the cave from the darkened interior, as you face the entrance. The generally dim interior of a Gothic cathedral, offset by stain-glass windows, has a similar effect. The dark background provides a necessary point of contrast.

ii) In addition, candlelight and sunlight filtered through stained-glass windows represent light in motion. Electrical lighting is static. A steady beam. That's good for working, but hard on the eyes.

By contrast, natural lighting is gentler on the eyes. Moreover, natural light is "living" light in the sense that it changes. That's immediately observable in the case of flickering candlelight. In the case of stained-glass, there's a slow-motion effect as the light gradually but continually undergoes change, shifting with the motion of the sun from dawn to dusk.

To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant

To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant

Cardinal Newman's catchy one-liner is a popular slogan among Catholic apologists and evangelical converts to Rome. But I'd like to consider that slogan in context.

1. The oft-quoted slogan comes from his celebrated *Essay On the Development of Christian Doctrine*. That, however, was issued in two different editions (1845; 1878), 33 years apart. Newman revised his original essay, and it can be instructive to compare the two different editions. It would be a useful exercise for someone to display both editions in parallel columns, to facilitate comparison. For instance, unless I missed it, the slogan doesn't appear in the original edition of Newman's essay, but only in the revised edition.

2. One problem with Newman's claim is that he couldn't foresee the future. *His* past isn't *my* past. In the essay he boldly issued the following disclaimer:

Of course I do not deny the abstract possibility of extreme changes. The substitution is certainly, in idea, supposable of a counterfeit Christianity,

—superseding the original, by means of the adroit innovations of seasons, places, and persons, till, according to the familiar illustration, the "blade" and the "handle" are alternately renewed, and identity is lost without the loss of continuity. It is possible; but it must not be assumed. The onus probandi is with those who assert what it is unnatural to expect; to be just able to doubt is no warrant for disbelieving.

At the time he said it that was a throwaway concession, because he didn't feel threatened by that hypothetical defeater, since he was writing from a retrospective rather than prospective viewpoint. He knew church history up to his own time, so he felt safe about floating that "abstract possibility". But of course, my retrospective viewpoint begins at a later date than Newman's, and the Catholicism of the last 70 years makes Newman's statement about "substitution is certainly, in idea, supposable of a counterfeit Christianity,—superseding the original, by means of the adroit innovations of seasons, places, and persons" painfully prescient.

Mind you, I think as of 1845, and long before, the Roman church was a counterfeit. But at the moment I'm just considering Newman on his own terms. Since 1845, the

church of Rome has introduced many theological innovations and undergone radical change, viz, the Immaculate Conception (1854), Papal infallibility (1870) Assumption of Mary (1950), the historical-critical method (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, 1943), theistic evolution (*Humani generis*, 1950), Vatican II, hopeful universalism, pacifism, the Francis pontificate.

Likewise, modern Catholic church historians concede the historical fiction of a 1C monoepiscopate in Rome.

3. Then there's awkward the question of how objectively Newman interprets church history. As one scholar notes:

Newman's exemplars of Catholic truth in "Causes of Arianism" are no surprise. When explaining syncatabasis, he writes:

THIS DOCTRINE, EXPOUNDED BY ST. ATHANASIUS, CONFIRMED BY ST. AUGUSTINE AND ST. THOMAS, IS IN TONE AND DRIFT VERY UNLIKE ARIANISM, WHICH HAD NO SYMPATHY WITH THE MYSTICISM AND POETRY OF PLATO; BUT IT HAD A DIRECT RESEMBLANCE TO THE SEMI-ARIAN EDITION OF THE HERESY, AND, IF PUT FORWARD WITHOUT ITS NECESSARY SAFEGUARDS AND CORRECTIONS, AS WE FIND THEM IN THOSE GREAT DOCTORS, WAS LIKELY TO OPEN THE WAY TO IT. (TT 207).

Thanks to those doctors, spoken of as if they all say the same thing, Newman thought the danger of Platonic language was overcome. It is, however,

likely, that Athanasius had more in common with the Platonizing pre-Nicene Alexandrians who taught him than with later Latins who read (and misread) him.

In his criticisms of the first translation John Kaye uncovered Newman's Latinized (or Lateranized) depiction of the Trinity. However, during 1842-4, it was only in the annotations that Newman attempted to tidy up the differences between the Alexandrian East and Latin West. Only within the annotations could a composite Athanasius be seen. In 1881, within the translation itself, made with scholastic doctrines of God in mind, a confused Athanasius is seen.

A comparison of the latter translation with the earlier gives insight into the mind of a convert still after many years trying to explain himself to his adopted Church, as he did in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, but now with more confidence in Roman theology. In November 1876, when Newman was considering in what form to republish his Athanasius volume, Pusey wrote to him: "If you could have revised your translation and notes (not that I know that there is anything to revise) it

would have been pleasant to have printed them in common; but your authorities might not have like it" (LD xxviii.138n3). Here the Anglican Pusey misunderstands the Catholic Newman because he assumes "your authorities" would prevent Newman publishing jointly with Pusey. The authorities were at work on Newman's translation in ways Pusey did not understand, however, for his friend was aligning Athanasius with the Thomistic revival. This is the real irony: Newman, as a Catholic, maintained he was a historian not a theologian, yet, by the 1870s, he was less interested in the historical Athanasius than in Catholic theology. His revised translation exhibits what Gerald McCool has described, referring to Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), as "the serene confection of the nineteenth-century neo-Thomists that scholastic philosophy was a single metaphysical system, common to all the scholastic doctors, and that scholastic philosophy could gather up, preserve, and represent the essence of patristic thought which it has superseded". **B. King, *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers: Shaping Doctrine in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford 2009), 246-47.**

4. Returning to Newman's essay, here's a statement he made in the original edition:

That Protestantism, then, is not the Christianity of history, it is easy to determine; but there is a determination which is difficult. It is difficult to complete, to finish from history that picture of the divine religion which, even in its outlines, is sufficient to condemn Protestantism, though not sufficient to imprint upon our minds the living image of Christianity. Confused, inaccurate knowledge is no knowledge. It is the very fault we find with youths under education that they use words without meaning, that they are wanting in precision and distinction, that they are ignorant what they know and what they do not know. We account this a great defect of mind, which must be overcome. Now our difficulty lies in getting beyond this half knowledge of Christianity, if we make history our teacher; in obtaining

from it views serviceable, read, for belief and practice, whole views, definite answers to definite questions, critical decisions between truth and error, explanations of its own variations, measures of its meaning. History is not a creed or a catechism; it gives lessons rather than rules; it does not bring out clearly upon the canvass the details which were familiar to the ten thousand minds of whose combined movements and fortunes it treats. Such is it from its very nature; nor can the defect ever fully be remedied. This must be admitted: at the same time, principles may be laid down with considerable success as keys to its various notices, enabling us to arrange and reconcile them [1845 edition].

Compare that to what he says in the revised edition:

That Protestantism, then, is not the Christianity of history, it is easy to

determine, but to retort is a poor reply in controversy to a question of fact, and whatever be the violence or the exaggeration of writers like Chillingworth, if they have raised a real difficulty, it may claim a real answer, and we must determine whether on the one hand Christianity is still to represent to us a definite teaching from above, or whether on the other its utterances have been from time to time so strangely at variance, that we are necessarily thrown back on our own judgment individually to determine, what the revelation of God is, or rather if in fact there is, or has been, any revelation at all [1878 edition].

Notice how the Catholic Newman bowdlerized the Anglican Newman to expurgate the damaging admissions he made in the original edition. No more "**CONFUSED, INACCURATE KNOWLEDGE IS NO KNOWLEDGE...NOW OUR DIFFICULTY LIES IN GETTING BEYOND THIS HALF KNOWLEDGE OF CHRISTIANITY, IF WE MAKE HISTORY OUR TEACHER; IN OBTAINING FROM IT VIEWS SERVICEABLE, READ, FOR BELIEF AND PRACTICE, WHOLE VIEWS, DEFINITE ANSWERS TO DEFINITE QUESTIONS, CRITICAL DECISIONS**

BETWEEN TRUTH AND ERROR, EXPLANATIONS OF ITS OWN VARIATIONS, MEASURES OF ITS MEANING. HISTORY IS NOT A CREED OR A CATECHISM; IT GIVES LESSONS RATHER THAN RULES; IT DOES NOT BRING OUT CLEARLY UPON THE CANVASS THE DETAILS WHICH WERE FAMILIAR TO THE TEN THOUSAND MINDS OF WHOSE COMBINED MOVEMENTS AND FORTUNES IT TREATS. SUCH IS IT FROM ITS VERY NATURE; NOR CAN THE DEFECT EVER FULLY BE REMEDIED."

For someone who wishes to justify his position by appeal to church history, you can see how he'd have second thoughts about the unguarded candor of his initial formulation.

5. Here's Newman's slogan in a fuller setting:

And this one thing at least is certain; whatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism. If ever there were a safe truth, it is this...To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant...And this utter incongruity between Protestantism and historical Christianity is a plain fact, whether the latter be regarded in its earlier or in its later centuries.

Protestants can as little bear its Antenicene as its Post-tridentine period.

i) Different ways of wording the same allegation. However, one problem with the allegation is how it arbitrarily discounts Protestant church history, as if historical Christianity exists in a parallel universe where that never happened. Yet last year we commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Admittedly, Newman didn't pen his slogan in 2017, but Catholic apologists and converts to Rome continue to quote it and apply it to the contemporary scene.

Why isn't 500 years of church history part of historical Christianity? Imagine if we cut out the 500 years before the Reformation when writing about historical Christianity.

ii) Perhaps, though, the objection will be that Newman is talking about the past, not the future. If so, does this mean we should dismiss the history of Roman Catholicism from 1845 to 2018 and beyond?

6. In the same essay, Newman says:

Accordingly, some writers have gone on to give reasons from history for their refusing to appeal to history. They aver that, when they come to look into the documents and literature of Christianity in times past, they find its doctrines so

variously represented, and so inconsistently maintained by its professors, that, however natural it be à priori, it is useless, in fact, to seek in history the matter of that Revelation which has been vouchsafed to mankind; that they cannot be historical Christians if they would. They say, in the words of Chillingworth, "There are popes against popes, councils against councils, some fathers against others, the same fathers against themselves, a consent of fathers of one age against a consent of fathers of another age, the Church of one age against the Church of another age:" — Hence they are forced, whether they will or not, to fall back upon the Bible as the sole source of Revelation, and upon their own personal private judgment as the sole expounder of its doctrine. This is a fair argument, if it can be maintained, and it brings me at once to the subject of this Essay.

Yet Chillingworth's words seem as true or truer today than when he said that back in the 16C. Just compare the antimodernist papacy of Pius IX or Leo XIII to the developments between Pius XII and Francis.

7. Now consider Newman's slogan in contrast to other things he says in the course of the essay:

A second and more plausible hypothesis is that of the Anglican divines, who reconcile and bring into shape the exuberant phenomena under consideration, by cutting and casting away as corruptions all usages, ways, opinions, and tenets, which have not the sanction of primitive times. They maintain that history first presents to us a pure Christianity in East and West, and then a corrupt; and then of course their duty is to draw the line between what is corrupt and what is pure, and to determine the dates at which the various changes from good to bad were introduced. Such a principle of demarcation, available for the purpose, they consider they have found in the dictum of Vincent of Lerins, that revealed and Apostolic doctrine is "quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus," a principle infallibly separating, on the whole field of history, authoritative doctrine from opinion, rejecting what is faulty, and combining and

forming a theology. That "Christianity is what has been held always, everywhere, and by all," certainly promises a solution of the perplexities, an interpretation of the meaning, of history.

Such is the rule of historical interpretation which has been professed in the English school of divines; and it contains a majestic truth, and offers an intelligible principle, and wears a reasonable air. It is congenial, or, as it may be said, native to the Anglican mind, which takes up a middle position, neither discarding the Fathers nor acknowledging the Pope. It lays down a simple rule by which to measure the value of every historical fact, as it comes, and thereby it provides a bulwark against Rome, while it opens an assault upon Protestantism. Such is its promise; but its difficulty lies in applying it in particular cases. The rule is more serviceable in determining what is not, than what is Christianity; it is irresistible against Protestantism, and in one sense indeed it is irresistible against Rome also, but in the same sense it is irresistible against England. It strikes at Rome through England. It admits of being interpreted in one of two ways: if it be narrowed for

the purpose of disproving the catholicity {12} of the Creed of Pope Pius, it becomes also an objection to the Athanasian; and if it be relaxed to admit the doctrines retained by the English Church, it no longer excludes certain doctrines of Rome which that Church denies. It cannot at once condemn St. Thomas and St. Bernard, and defend St. Athanasius and St. Gregory Nazianzen.

This general defect in its serviceableness has been heretofore felt by those who appealed to it. It was said by one writer; "The Rule of Vincent is not of a mathematical or demonstrative character, but moral, and requires practical judgment and good sense to apply it. For instance, what is meant by being 'taught always'? does it mean in every century, or every year, or every month? Does 'everywhere' mean in every country, or in every diocese? and does 'the Consent of Fathers' require us to produce the direct testimony of every one of them? How many Fathers, how many places, how many instances, constitute a fulfilment of the test proposed? It is, then, from the nature of the case, a condition which never can be satisfied as fully as it might have been. It admits of various and unequal

application in various instances; and what degree of application is enough, must be decided by the same principles which guide us in the conduct of life, which determine us in politics, or trade, or war, which lead us to accept Revelation at all, (for which we have but probability to show at most,) nay, to believe in the existence of an intelligent Creator."

Notice that he rejects the Vincentian canon. He repudiates the threefold criterion of catholicity as a hyperbolic idealization. It's quite ironic that the man who said "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant" is the very same man whose appeal to historical theology flunks the triple test of antiquity, unanimity, and ecumenicity. Moral of the story: a Catholic convert or apologist has to choose between two divergent slogans: "To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant" or "What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all", for Vincentian continuity is antithetical to the theory of development. Case in point:

In this connection I would like to relate a small episode that I think can cast much light on the situation. Before Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was defined, all theological faculties in the world were consulted for their opinion. Our teachers' answer was emphatically

negative..." Tradition" was identified with what could be proved on the basis of texts. Altaner, the patrologist from Würzburg...had proven in a scientifically persuasive manner that the doctrine of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was unknown before the 5C; this doctrine, therefore, he argued, could not belong to the "apostolic tradition. And this was his conclusion, which my teachers at Munich shared. This argument is compelling if you understand "tradition" strictly as the handing down of fixed formulas and texts...But if you conceive of "tradition" as the living process whereby the Holy Spirit introduces us to the fullness of truth and teaches us how to understand what previously we could still not grasp (cf. [Jn 16:12-13](#)), then subsequent "remembering" (cf. [Jn 16:4](#), for instance) can come to recognize what it has not caught sight of previously and was already handed down in the original

Word,” J. Ratzinger, *Milestones* (Ignatius, n.d.), 58-59.

Weathercock apologetics

Recently I was reading two newer books on Catholicism, which I intend to comment on in the near future: Trent Horn: *The Case for Catholicism* and Thomas Joseph White, *The Light of Christ: An Introduction to Catholicism*.

I was curious to sample cutting edge Catholic theology and apologetics. I think Horn is considered by some to be the best of the up-and-coming generation of Catholic apologists. His book has endorsements by fellow apologists.

White moves in a higher orbit. He has a fancier education. His book carries endorsements by Bishop Barron, Bishop Chaput, Ed Feser, and papal biographer George Weigel.

In terms of the current crop, this seems to be as good as it gets. But more on that for later posts.

For now I'd like to make a general observation. One reason (among many) that I'm not Catholic is that a 21C Catholic apologist has to be like a lawyer: prepared to argue both sides of the case. That's because the Roman church makes dramatic midcourse changes.

When that happens, it nullifies the arguments for the status quo ante. A 19C Catholic apologist marshals arguments for what Catholicism represented in the 19C. But when the ground shifts in the 20-21C, that cancels out his arguments. A new set of arguments, contradicting the previous arguments, must be put forward to defend the latest "development" in Catholic theology.

To take a few examples, historically the Roman church supported capital punishment. But to my knowledge, John-

Paul II initiated a sharp left turn. That's been continued by his successors.

If you were a Catholic apologist c. 1970 or before, you'd dutifully marshal arguments in support of Rome's traditional position. But now we see the papacy pulling the rug out from under the status quo ante. So what's a Catholic apologist to do?

To take another example, traditionally, suicide was treated as a damnatory sin. According to the *Baltimore Catechism*: "It is a mortal sin to destroy one's own life or commit suicide, as this act is called, and persons who willfully and knowingly commit such an act die in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of Christian burial."

But the post-Vatican II *Catechism of the Catholic Church* introduces eventuating circumstances that mitigate the guilt of suicide.

By the same token, the 1917 code of canon law forbade Catholic funerals for suicides. But that was reversed in 1983.

Traditionally, suicides were denied burial in church graveyards. From what I've read, the rationale is that their presence defiles hallowed ground. By implication, it defiles the mortal remains of Catholics who were buried in good standing with the church.

Once again, a loyal 19C Catholic apologist would vigorously defend the stern policy of Rome. But his justifications have been mooted.

If you were to ask a Catholic apologist ten years ago about the admissibility of divorced Catholics to communion, you'd

get an unequivocal answer, along with an argument about how this was verboten as a matter of principle. But what's the answer today?

The upshot is that a Catholic apologist can't trust his own arguments. He will give the reader reasons in defense of current Catholic teaching, but he can't have any real confidence in his reasons since, when his denomination changes positions and policies, his reasons are defunct. Why should an evangelical reader have any more confidence in the supporting arguments a Catholic apologist provides than the apologist is in a position to abide in his own arguments?

Like a lawyer, the arguments shift according to the needs of the client. If the client is innocent, his attorney uses one set of arguments, but if the client is guilty, his attorney uses a divergent set of arguments. A Catholic apologist must be ready to turn on a dime, ditching all his carefully-honed arguments and inventing new arguments to defend the latest swerve in Catholic theology.

Who missed the memo?

I'll comment on some statements today by revert to Catholicism Luis Dizon:

@LuisDizon

However, I read enough of the Reformers' writings to know that Protestantism was birthed in polemics and acerbic reactions against Rome. To the extent that you emphasize your confessional standards, you partake of those polemics (including the whole Pope-as-Antichrist bit). . .

I know you're embarrassed when the more populist members of your own tradition make absurd claims about Church History, and condemning all of Christendom pre-Reformation. However, as a former Reformed apologist who argued against Catholics, I understand why they do it. . . .

Basically, as a Protestant, you have to justify the existence of your confessions. You have to justify your founders' anti-Catholic polemics. Most of all, you have to justify why you're not part of the

Catholic Church. These populists are attempting that justification . . .

In other words, you have to claim that the Church as a whole apostatized to justify your very existence. You have to claim a hermeneutic of discontinuity, rupture and reconstruction in your reading of church history. The alternative is to admit that the Reformation was a mistake.

Ultimately, Protestantism exists because of "reconstructionism" (the idea that the Church was ruined and needed to be rebuilt).

And yet somehow everyone from Iberia to Mesopotamia missed the memo for 1500 years. Imagine being Copt and keeping the faith for thousands of years in the face of Muslim oppression, only for some new sect tell you you're not Xian bc of some new idea you never heard of before.

1. Why should modern-day Protestants be embarrassed to own up to the fact that "Protestantism was birthed in polemics and acerbic reactions against Rome"? Given the state of Catholicism at the time, that was justified.

2. If you're a strict subscriptionist, then you must profess every jot and tittle of your confessional standards, including the pope as the Antichrist. However, it's not an all-or-nothing proposition. For instance, a Protestant can take the position that as Rome has mutated, the objections to Rome change. Many of the original objections may remain intact. But Catholicism is a moving target. Indeed, that's one of the problems with Catholicism. It's quite possible, even necessary, for modern-day Protestants to have some objections to modern-day Catholicism that our 16-17C forebears didn't have, because Catholicism is so fluid and unstable. It's not a case of just refighting all the same old battles, although some of those continue up to our own time.

3. Yes, Protestants have a burden of proof. We must justify our confessions, we must justify not belonging to the Roman Catholic sect. But we don't shoulder a unilateral burden of proof. Both sides have a burden of proof to justify their respective positions. The onus lies on Luis just as much as us.

4. Actually, we don't have to have a theory about church history. We can just compare biblical teaching to Roman Catholicism, to see how little they have in common, and conclude that something went terribly wrong with Roman Catholicism. That doesn't require us to postulate that "the whole church apostatized". For one thing, we don't think the church apostatized. Roman Catholicism never was "the Church". From our standpoint, "the church" never apostatized.

5. In addition, it isn't necessary to have an alternative interpretation of church history to know that something went wrong. For instance, Newtonian physics was consistent with all the observational data at the time it was formulated. But as instrumentation improved, discrepancies

emerged between Newtonian predictions and the observational data. At that juncture it became evident that something was off with Newtonian physics. You could know that just by comparing the theory to the observational data. You didn't have to have the theory of Relativity to explain why it went awry to know it needed to be replaced.

Likewise, it's not incumbent on Protestants to explain how the discrepancy between biblical revelation and Roman Catholicism came about to recognize irreconcilable discrepancies. It's not incumbent on us to propose a reading of church history to account for that development. The historical explanation is separate from what it's designed to explain.

6. Furthermore, there have always been divisions. Which side was right in the dispute between Cyprian and the pope? Who missed the memo? Which side was right in the dispute between Novatian, Donatus, and Rome? Who missed the memo? What about Tertullian? Did he miss the memo, too? Or consider the traditional post-schism view of Eastern Orthodoxy by Catholic representatives:

<https://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraErrGraecorum.htm>

Including the axiom that submission to the pope is necessary for salvation. Hence, the Eastern Orthodox are damned. I guess they missed the memo:

<https://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraErrGraecorum.htm#b38>

If Luis is going to cast the issue in terms of apostasy, then there have been many "apostasies" in the course of church history, starting with the ancient church. Pick a side. Which side was apostate? Luis operates with a traditional Catholic hermeneutic of discontinuity. He has his own list of "apostate" movements. A hermeneutic of discontinuity runs

through the length and breadth of Catholic history. There was no 1500 year-old memo. That's a historical fantasy.

7. His appeal to the Copts is counterproductive to his aims. According to traditional Catholicism, the Copts are heretics.

8. The ironic thing about his Catholicism is how conflicted it is. On the one hand, he's very hardline. It's very retrograde. Like he's trapped in the wrong century. A throwback to Counter-Reformation apologists. On the other hand, he's cool with Pope Francis. He's a team-player. He's not a RadTrad. So he suffers from split-personalty Catholicism.

Why are bright guys suckered by Catholicism?

There are some very smart converts to Catholicism (as well as some very smart cradle Catholics). What's the appeal? If Catholicism is gravely mistaken, why can't they see through it? In my observation, there are at least four factors—which doesn't mean every bright convert exemplifies all four motivations:

- 1.** Catholicism has a very rich, wide-ranging intellectual and artistic heritage that's naturally appealing to the religious-minded intelligentsia.
- 2.** Many Catholic intellectuals are Thomists. Thomism presents a much less inviting target for atheists than a Bible-centered faith. Thomism is abstract and abstruse. Most atheists know nothing or next to nothing about Thomism, so they have no line of attack. If, by contrast, you have a Bible-centered faith, that instantly gives them hundreds of openings since there's a cottage industry of stock objections to Scripture.
- 3.** Catholicism requires converts to make fewer accommodations to unfashionable beliefs. Take the facile way Bishop Barron relegates "problem passages" in the OT to pious fiction or allegory. They can leave "embarrassing" beliefs behind while retaining "respectable" beliefs they share in common with their secular counterparts. A Bible-centered faith doesn't have the same loopholes. It must stand and fight.
- 4.** Finally, if you're smart enough, you can defend almost anything, and you may revel the challenge. Here I think there's an element of divine irony or divine justice. High IQ confers a complete advantage, but that's offset by the fact

that it can also be a snare or a source of self-deception. The temptation to flex his ingenuity plays to his intellectual pride. Coming up with clever, erudite defenses of Roman Catholicism is an opportunity to indulge in self-flattering showmanship. I hasten to add that it's by no means confined to Catholicism. There's a special kind of folly that bright guys are prey to. Their strength is their weakness.

Someone might object that there's a certain tension between #4 and #'s 2-3. However, I think all these motivations are observable. People can be inconsistent. Psychology isn't logic. Moreover, as I said at the outset, a convert doesn't have to check all four boxes.

"Funny internal feelings"

I recently saw an interview with David Anders:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6u7YSnyNRk>

In particular, I watched the first 13 minutes where he tries to refute sola scriptura. He's an evangelical convert to Catholicism, and a charter member of Called to Communion. He has a BA from Wheaton, MA from TEDS, and a doctorate in Reformation history from Iowa U. A few general observations:

- 1.** He equivocates between Protestant tradition and Sacred Tradition. But when Protestants reject Sacred Tradition, that's consistent with Protestant epistemology. Sacred Tradition is a technical term in Catholic theology. It's not analogous to Protestant traditions. In Protestant theology, tradition is not intrinsically authoritative.
- 2.** He has the confused notion that sola scriptural is inconsistent with the role of inference in Protestant theology, as if only the "express" teaching of Scripture is authoritative. But that's a demonstrable straw man.
- 3.** He regurgitates the Catholic trope that sola scriptura is self-refuting. But as I pointed out recently, that depends on how sola scriptura is formulated. For instance:

i) Believe and obey divine revelation

ii) Don't elevate non-revelation to the status of divine revelation

iii) Disregard whatever is contrary to divine revelation

Scriptures teaches these propositions. That's sola Scriptura in a nutshell.

4. Apopos (3), sola scriptura is analogous to saying the Bible is our only infallible map. Would it make sense of a Catholic apologist to counter: "Where is the map on the map?"

But a map is not about itself. It makes no sense to say the map is defective because you can't find the map on the map. That's not the function of a map. A map is not self-referential. The purpose of a map is not to locate the map on the map, but to locate your destination on the map, and a route to your destination.

5. Where does his dismissive attitude towards "funny internal feelings" ("Holy Spirit vibrations", "God zaps them," "Holy Spirit Geiger counter") leave Catholic mystics like Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Bonaventure, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis de Sales, and Anne Catherine Emmerich? How did they know they were experiencing God in their mystical encounters? What did they have to go by apart from their "funny internal feelings"? So his objection discredits the religious epistemology of Catholic mysticism.

6. It's ironic that he never considers the illative sense, with its stress on the central role of intuition in human knowledge and Christian faith. Newman is the most influential Catholic thinker in modern times.

7. Protestant theology doesn't have a monolithic epistemology. And there's more than one line of evidence for the inspiration of Scripture as well as the canon of Scripture.

8. Many Christians simply find the Bible compelling on its own. And that's unavoidable. Most Christians don't have the aptitude or opportunity to formulate a strong philosophical or historical case for Scripture. So God must be able to cultivate faith by other means.

9. Then there's the problem with his alternative. Even if we grant Catholic assumptions, they face an insuperable dilemma. To climb the ladder to the "infallible magisterium," you have to start at the first rung of the ladder. But how do Catholics *inerrantly* determine that there is One True Church, and how do they *inerrantly* determine that it corresponds to the Roman Catholic denomination? They can't begin with the top rung of the ladder (the infallible magisterium). To reach the top rung, they must begin with their fallible judgment. But in that event they never put their fallible judgment behind them. It's inescapable.

10. Called to Communion resembles men sitting around a table in a burning church. Flames are licking the walls. Flames are licking the ceiling. Smoke is filling the sanctuary. Yet they sit with the backs to the fire, chatting with each other about the glorious architecture. The Catholic church is becoming engulfed in the conflagration of sodomy and modernism, yet they turn their backs to the raging fire that's consuming their adopted denomination, oblivious to the encroaching destruction all around them. The contrast between their hypothetical Catholicism and the pervasive reality is morbidly fascinating to the detached observer.

The appeal of Catholicism

I think the appeal of Catholicism for some cradle Catholics and converts to Catholicism is that you can lose yourself in Catholicism because it's so all-encompassing. There are Catholic philosophers, novelists, poets, painters, playwrights, composers, sculptors, filmmakers, mystics, architects, ethicists, &c. In that regard, Catholicism is one-stop shopping. There's a sense in which you could be intellectually and aesthetically fulfilled without ever leaving the Catholic compound, because there's Catholic everything. You'd never know what you were missing, because every slot has Catholic representation. So you never run out of Catholic trails to explore. You just keep going deeper into Catholicism. In a human lifespan, it's inexhaustible. Mind you, there are some problems with that:

i) It's quite possible for someone to be eclectic and cherry-pick the best from every culture. You can mix and match. You can like a lot of stuff by Catholics without any commitment to Catholic theology. We do that with ancient Greek and Roman art and literature, which is often pagan on the face of it.

ii) A very impressive edifice can be built on nonsense. If there's enough talent feeding into Catholicism, it will build an impressive edifice, even if the foundation is legendary embellishment.

For instance, I enjoy Poulenc's *Stabat Mater*. Especially the performance conducted by Georges Prêtre with Régine Crespin as soloist. From somebody with my musical sensibilities, it's a powerful experience. The tonal aura of a dying world. Yet the text he set to music is pious nonsense.

In principle, he could set a Buddhist poem to the same kind of music with the same elegiac effect.

iii) In addition, you can lose yourself in something to the point where you never find your way out of the forest. You keep walking in circles, impervious to correctives, because you stopped reading the critics. You just go ever-deeper into error.

The puppet church

Evangelical convert to Catholicism Bryan Cross harps on how Jesus founded a "visible" church. He complains that Protestants allegedly lack a visible church. Of course, he defines visibility in Roman Catholic terms, so his objection amounts to the circular argument that Protestant churches aren't Roman Catholic! Granted

But let's take a concrete test-case. If Bryan was a Chinese Catholic, what church would he attend? Until recently, there were two candidates for the Catholic church in Red China. There was the underground Catholic church. And then there was the puppet church.

Recently, Pope Francis signed a concordant with the communist gov't to certify the puppet church and decertify the underground church.

So in China, under the current pope, the Catholic church that enjoys official sanction from the Vatican is the puppet church, whose bishops are appointees of the Communist gov't.

According to Bryan's ecclesiology, that's the visible church in China. The church with puppet prelates and puppet priests. A mouthpiece of the atheist state.

So Bryan would boycott the underground Catholic church, shun the suffering church, turn his back on the persecuted church, and attend the puppet church, staffed by Communist apparatchiks—because that's the visible church founded by Jesus.

Bulverism

One not uncommon example of the bulverism fallacy is the argument (either made implicitly or explicitly) by Protestants that the reason the Catholic Church teaches what she teaches about justification, in contrast to the Reformed conception of sola fide, is that we (humans) have this desire for self-justification, and that at some point in the past we (Catholics) distorted the Gospel in order to make Catholic teaching concerning the Gospel conform to that desire. Bulverism is a kind of ad hominem (see #18 here). What is needed instead, to avoid the bulverism fallacy, is some actual historical evidence showing that the Gospel was distorted (and not developed) from sola fide in the early Church, to what the Council of Trent taught, rather than the just-so story that begs the question by presupposing that the Catholic Church distorted the Gospel

in this way, and that she did so in order to gratify a human desire for self-justification.

<https://www.calledtocommunion.com/2011/10/reformation-sunday-2011-how-would-protestants-know-when-to-return/?fbclid=IwAR2hn-Us1sDx4bZpnLDddyJG0YRKD51-5xQQw856mjtZJN-njY-Ter7xn4M#comment-215045>

In 2011 I addressed here a very similar criticism raised by H. Wayne House in his article titled “Returning to Rome: Should Evangelicals Abandon the Reformation.” House was himself drawing from Ralph MacKenzie, who like Scot Mcknight, had proposed three reasons why Evangelicals become Catholic, none of which were love for truth above all else. Those three reasons were: Catholicism is older, Evangelicalism lacks tradition, the Catholic liturgy has an aesthetic appeal, and House added a fourth reason: there is a security in the magisterial authority of the Catholic Church.

Now in 2019, Protestants Chris Castaldo and Brad Littlejohn of The Davenant Institute have engaged in this same sort of bulverism. They have done so in

three essays: “Why Protestants Convert, Pt. 1: Conversionitis,” “Why Protestants Convert, Pt. 2: The Psychology of Conversion,” and “Why Protestants Convert, Pt. 3: The Theology of Conversion.” In these three essays they claim that Protestants become Catholic because of a desire for authority, a desire for a sense of holiness, a desire to belong to something big and influential, a desire for certainty, a desire to be connected to history, and a desire for tangible grace. All these treat converts as operating within the paradigm of “ecclesial consumerism,” rather than loving the truth above all else, even if doing so requires sacrifice of many things they would otherwise desire.

<https://www.calledtocommunion.com/2011/10/reformation-sunday-2011-how-would-protestants-know-when-to-return/?fbclid=IwAR2hn-Us1sDx4bZpnLDddyJG0YRKD51-5xQQw856mjtZJN-njY-Ter7xn4M#comment-521945>

1. To begin with, does Bryan distinguish between the abusive ad hominem and circumstantial ad hominem? Does he consider both of them fallacies? Does he think the circumstantial ad hominem is necessarily fallacious?

2. Bryan is half-right in this sense: it's fallacious to discredit a claim by drawing attention to what motivates the claim.

3. That said, if ad hominem are necessarily fallacious, then that invalidates the genre of Catholic conversion stories at one stroke. There's a cottage industry of Catholic conversion stories, viz. *Surprised by Truth*, 1-3. Recent examples include Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018) & Brian Besong, ed. *Faith and Reason: Philosophers Explain Their Turn to Catholicism* (Ignatius Press 2019).

The Called to Communion site is a repository of conversion testimonies. They host conversion testimonies. All or most-all of the contributors have posted their conversion testimony.

At the risk of stating the obvious, conversion testimonies (as well as deconversion testimonies) are ad hominem. It's not just arguments for Catholicism and against evangelicalism, but an autobiographical narrative about their personal experience. They go into their personal motivations from converting from their original position (usually a variation on evangelicalism) to Catholicism. Bryan Cross did that himself in his contribution to *Faith and Reason: Philosophers Explain Their Turn to Catholicism* (Ignatius Press 2019). If ad hominem is bulverism, then the whole genre of Catholic conversion stories is bulverism.

This isn't primarily a Protestants characterization of what makes Catholic converts and reverts tick. This isn't a case of Protestant apologists imputing motives to Catholic converts and reverts. To the contrary, it's Catholic converts and reverts who showcase their personal motivations as justification for their switch to Catholicism.

So Bryan is telling us, with a straight face, that it's warrantable for Catholics to say what motivated their conversion, but it's unwarranted for Protestant apologists who evaluate the motivations which Catholics themselves advance to legitimate their conversion? Where's any semblance of consistency in his overall position?

Catholics and unitarians together

Here's something many Catholics and unitarians share in common: the NT doesn't teach the Trinity. The NT doesn't teach the deity of Christ.

Catholic apologists typically use a wedge tactic. Ever since the Counter-Reformation, Catholic apologists have deployed Pyrrhonian skepticism. Unless we have a living oracle (the Roman Magisterium), we have no reason to prefer one interpretation of Scripture over another. We have no reason to prefer the Gospel of John over the Gospel of Thomas. NT Christology is so embryonic and indefinite that it's consistent with Arianism. We need church councils to be a makeweight. We need the pope to be the referee.

So the standard Catholic apologetic takes the form of a dilemma: either be Catholic or cease to be Christian. There is no middle ground. No fallback option.

If you find that convincing, then you can relieve the dilemma by embracing either horn of the dilemma. If it's a package deal, if it's all contingent on the authority of Mother Church, and you lose faith in Mother Church, then the next stop is unitarianism or deism or atheism.

Many unitarians agree with Catholic apologists. "You're right. The only reason to be Trinitarian is if you believe your church has the authority to promulgate that dogma, but

since I don't believe your church has that authority, I'm unitarian."

Likewise, if you agree with a Catholic apologist that the NT canon is an arbitrary selection of books created by Mother Church, you can reverse the logic. "Since I don't believe in your church, I don't believe in the Bible. I can't even begin to believe in the Bible unless I first know which Bible I'm supposed to believe in."

By the same token, if you think sola Scriptura spawns hopeless interpretive pluralism, with no principled basis to prefer one interpretation over another, one reaction is to give up on Christianity altogether.

So the standard Catholic apologetic is a high-risk gambit. A game of chicken. There are people who find the Catholic dilemma persuasive, and they dare to call the bluff.

They find the dilemma persuasive, but they don't find Catholicism persuasive, so they embrace the other horn of the dilemma. They simply reverse the argument.

Under the Francis pontificate, we've seen many Catholic apologists impaled on the horns of their own dilemma. As their denomination moves increasingly to the left, they are trapped in the logic of their apologetic. If they have no alternative to Rome, then they must follow the lead of the pope even if the Catholic Church becomes indistinguishable from secularized, progressive denominations in a death spiral. Like having lead weights on their feet that drag them under water.

I'm not saying all-or-nothing arguments are always wrong. I keep pressing the nihilistic consequences of atheism. That's something I live by, and something I will die by. But a

dilemma cuts both ways. That's what makes it a dilemma. There are people who will accept the dilemma, but opt for the other horn of the dilemma.

Conversely, I recently read a good book on the historical Jesus by Brand Pitre. And he has two good chapters defending the deity of Christ straight from the Bible. Not coincidentally, he makes extensive use of the best Protestant scholarship in the course of his book. He's also coauthored a conservative OT introduction.

But ironically, his methodology, his direct approach to the evidence, circumvents and thereby subverts the necessity of the Magisterium.

"The holiness of beauty"

Some converts are drawn to Catholicism for aesthetic reasons. And I can understand that if you were raised in an aesthetically drab Protestant tradition, how that might have a siren-like appeal.

Artistically I'm high church but theologically I'm low church. And there's no tension between them.

To begin with, people who are overawed by Catholic aesthetics are cherry-picking the best examples. But there's lots of ugly Catholic churches with mediocre music.

In addition, there's a difference between impressive architecture and good taste. Impressive can simply be ostentatious. I suspect many people who are drawn to Catholicism for artistic reasons are indiscriminating in their taste. They just go for the wow effect.

On the musical side of things, I grew up with classical music, so I never felt religiously deprived in that respect. I didn't need to get it in church. And the best recordings are generally superior to all but the cream of what most churches can provide. Moreover, the greatest Protestant music (Anglican, Lutheran) is at least the equal of the greatest Catholic music. Likewise, there's great Anglican devotional poetry.

Just as Catholicism has some overwhelming religious architecture, so does Islam. When I was in Istanbul, I went to Santa Sophia and the Blue Mosque. Great religious architecture doesn't single out Catholicism. Even if architecture is your criterion, that doesn't select for Catholicism in particular. The finest mosques rival the finest

Catholic architecture. Likewise, there are some stupendous Buddhist temples.

Another problem is that Catholicism is like those magnificently carved marble sarcophagi. Impressive on the outside but what's on the inside?

Consider the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. That's an example of what taste and wealth can produce. Yet last Christmas, disgraced Cardinal Donald Wuerl celebrated Mass there.

So it's, at best, like a shell that's shapely and decorous on the outside, but morally and spiritually rotten or empty on the inside. Splendid architecture is just inanimate stuff. Stone. Glass. Candles. Shiny metal. Has nothing to do with God's presence.

Bryan's stalled chess game

Bryan Cross recently reviewed **Roman but Not Catholic: What Remains at Stake 500 Years after the Reformation, by Kenneth Collins & Jerry Walls, in Faith and Philosophy 35/4 (October 2018), 485-491.**

i) It's worth noting who didn't write the review. It wasn't written by a cradle Catholic. It wasn't written by a graduate of a Catholic seminary. It wasn't written by a Catholic Bible scholar or church historians at a Catholic seminary or pontifical university. It wasn't written by a Catholic theologian. It wasn't written by a priest, monsignor, or bishop. It wasn't written by the prefect for the CDF.

Rather, it was written by a Catholic layman and evangelical convert to Catholicism. It was written by a self-anointed spokesman for Catholicism. Whenever I read Bryan, I'm struck by how he presumes to pontificate (pun intended) for Catholic theology. But how representative are his views within the hierarchy or mainstream Catholic academia? Or is this an idealized abstraction that's out of step with official currents in Roman Catholicism?

ii) I've skimmed the book Bryan is reading. I read the parts that interested me. For purposes of this post, I'll assume that Bryan accurately represents the stated positions of Walls and Collins in the book. I won't go back to compare his representations with theirs. They can do that on their own if they choose to respond to him. I did reread their

section on the sufficiency and perspicuity of Scripture before writing this post.

iii) It's somewhat roundabout to review a review. I don't necessarily frame the issues in the same way as Collins and Walls. And Bryan wasn't responding to me, so he can't be faulted for failing to engage my arguments, since that wasn't his aim. So my response is orthogonal to this particular exchange. I speak as an interested third party, overhearing their exchange.

They claim that because there were Christians in Rome before St. Peter and St. Paul came to Rome, therefore St. Irenaeus is obviously mistaken in his claim that Sts. Peter and Paul founded the Church in Rome. But in the Catholic paradigm, there is no particular Church until it is established by an Apostle or an episcopal successor of the Apostles, even if Christians are present and meet regularly.

That takes it back to the presuppositional issue of ecclesiology. Although the dogma of apostolic succession may require Bryan to say that, it's striking to see him deny that 1C Christian communities weren't real churches unless and until they were "established by an Apostle or an episcopal successor of the Apostles." But apart from Catholic dogma, is there any reason to believe it?

Bryan operates with a priest-sacrament paradigm whereas I operate with a word-Spirit paradigm.

I'm not suggesting that the onus lies one-sidedly on Bryan to justify his Catholic paradigm. Both sides have a burden of proof. But I've never seen Bryan make anything like a full-blown case for why we should accept his paradigm. In my experience, his modus operandi consists of expounding the Catholic paradigm (as he construes it), comparing and contrasting the Catholic paradigm with the Protestant paradigm, then drawing attention to what he deems to be the unacceptable consequences of the Protestant paradigm—which are only unacceptable if you regard the Catholic paradigm as the lodestar. Yet that's the very issue in dispute. Maybe I missed it. Maybe there's somewhere Bryan makes a noncircular case for Roman Catholicism. In my experience, Bryan's M.O is to set up the chess pieces on the board, make a few opening moves, and that's it.

Similarly, in their claim that the Eucharist unavoidably implies that Christ has two bodies, and that the tabernacle in each Catholic sanctuary is not an appropriate place for Christ, they fail to recognize the significance of a concept in Catholic theology, namely, distinct modes of presence.

While it may be possible to save appearances by positing distinct modes of presence, where's the justification for supposing that metaphysical overlay is what Jn 6 or Lk 22:19 means?

As for their claim that the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception “in effect denies that Jesus was truly human simply because he was not born of a woman who was herself really human” (306), they presuppose something Catholic theology does not presuppose, namely, that being conceived with original sin is essential for being human.

On the face of it, that's a valid criticism. There are, however, some basic problems with the immaculate conception:

i) The logic is regressive. If the mother of Jesus must be immaculately conceived so that she doesn't transmit original sin to Jesus, then the same principle applies to the mother of Mary, and Mary's grandmother, and great-grandmother, &c. Conversely, if God can simply intervene to prevent the transmission of original sin, then Mary's immaculate conception is superfluous, because God could skip over Mary by to intervene one step further down the line at the conception of Jesus.

ii) Short of divine revelation, how would anyone be in a position to know that Mary was immaculately conceived? Where's the evidence that such a revelation was ever given? To whom? And if it wasn't given, it has no warrant. To all appearances, the immaculate conception is a legend that hardened into dogma.

And that would do injustice to the term “Theotokos” embraced by the Church in large part to protect orthodox Christology according to which Mary’s unique relation to Jesus is that of mother, not mere carrier or incubator.

Mary undoubtedly had a unique relationship to Jesus. Every mother has a unique relationship to their children. Each of us only has one mother.

In some cases their argumentation is ad hoc, as for example, in claiming that the pre-Reformation saints and history of the Church are theirs too, but then using the embarrassing parts of that same Church history as reasons to oppose the Catholic Church.

That's possibly but not necessarily inconsistent. Church history is not an all-or-nothing offer, where you either accept it in toto or chuck it. The appropriation of church history always calls for sifting. Roman Catholics are no exception. It's not unprincipled to distinguish between heroes and villains, saint and heretics in church history. That's only ac hoc if it lacks a consistent criterion.

Against biblicism they affirm the authority of tradition and the Church fathers, but then use their own interpretation of Scripture to determine what does and does not count as tradition, what are the essentials, and what counts as authentic development.

i) That may or may not reflect a point of tension or vicious circularity in their method. I'd have to go back and check the book. Ultimately it's up to Collins and Walls to respond for themselves.

ii) Speaking for myself, it's not a question of authority. On the one hand, some traditions, if they have good pedigree, might count as historical evidence for the claim. On the other hand, it's not a question of patristic opinion, but the quality of the arguments they adduce in support of their opinions. That doesn't require us to treat church fathers as authority figures. The question, rather, is whether their claims are well-reasoned.

Similarly they recognize the problematic character of theologically loaded methodology in the domain of Scripture scholarship, but make indiscriminate use of scholarship in Church history as if the latter is immune to such a possibility.

That may be a valid criticism, but what about Catholic church historians who agree with Protestant church historians that the traditional narrative of the Counter-Reformation apologetic is a historical fiction or retrojection? Bryan acts like this represents conflicting interpretations between the Catholic side and the Protestant, conveniently disregarding the fact that the Catholic side, among Catholic academics, has caught up with Protestant criticisms of the traditional Counter-Reformation narrative.

The primary weakness of the book is that it approaches the numerous Protestant-Catholic disagreements as if they are not paradigmatic, and therefore as if Catholic doctrines can be evaluated rightly as abstracted from the Catholic paradigm, and by way of the central principles of the Protestant paradigm. This leads to numerous cases where the authors' argumentation presupposes a point that is in question at a more fundamental level. I counted 178 such cases. Among the central

principles of the Protestant paradigm are notions of Scriptural perspicuity and sufficiency that are not part of the Catholic paradigm, whereas among the central principles in the Catholic paradigm are authoritative sacred tradition and magisterial authority. As a result, what gets counted as authoritative tradition is different in both paradigms, because what sometimes is rejected as unbiblical according to the Protestant paradigm is within the Catholic paradigm viewed as part of the authoritative Tradition that normatively guides the interpretation of Scripture. Likewise what within the Catholic paradigm is seen as definitive teaching by the Catholic Magisterium can be treated under the Protestant paradigm as unbiblical on the basis of a more fundamental disagreement regarding perspicuity. The disagreements at the level of soteriology, sacramentology, Mariology, ecclesiology, and what counts as authentic development of doctrine hang on these more fundamental disagreements. But in their approach to these questions the authors make use of a perspicuity criterion which is itself central to the difference in paradigms. For example, according to

the authors, to support sola Scriptura one need only show that it can be derived from

Scripture. However, since this derivation itself presupposes perspicuity, such an argument for sola Scriptura is question-begging. Similarly, the authors think “theological paradigms” have to be evaluated by whether they are “biblical.” But what goes into their idea of being “biblical” already includes a theological paradigm presupposing perspicuity.

i) Speaking for myself, a Protestant case against Catholicism doesn't require a commitment to the general perspicuity of Scripture. Suppose for argument's sake that Scripture is generally unclear. Suppose it's unclear on many things but clear on some other things.

Catholicism is a package deal. If even one Catholic essential is wrong, that falsifies the entire paradigm. To use a cliché metaphor, Catholicism is a house of cards in that regard.

If according to Scripture, just one Catholic essential is clearly wrong, then that's enough to disprove Catholicism. Even if Scripture wasn't generally perspicuous, as long as they overlap, so that one or more Catholic essentials are clearly at variance Scripture, then that's all you need. In theory, Scripture could be unclear much of the time, yet a Catholic essential might clearly be contrary to Scripture, on those occasions when a Catholic teaching collides with a lucid moment in biblical teaching. When Catholic teaching and biblical teaching intersect, if Biblical teaching happens

to be clear on that point, and if that runs counter to Catholic teaching, then the game is up. Even if it's just a coincidence that they occasionally overlap at points where Scripture is clear, and Catholic teaching unambiguously diverges from Scripture, that's the coup de grâce for Catholicism.

A priori commitment regarding the scope of biblical perspicuity is irrelevant so long as cases like that exist. A Protestant doesn't have to take a position in advance on the perspicuity of Scripture. It's enough to wait and see if in fact Catholic teaching sometimes conflicts with a clear teaching of Scripture.

ii) Then there's the issue of sufficiency. Even if a Catholic tradition is consistent with Scripture, in the sense that Scripture doesn't address that issue one way or the other, the extrabiblical Catholic teaching can easily be unwarranted if it suffers from a lack of proper extrabiblical evidence.

We believe many things not contained in Scripture. But we still require suitable evidence. To revert to the example of the immaculate conception, that's not based on good historical evidence but raw church authority. Indeed, an ecclesiastical fiat is a necessary makeweight to compensate for the lack of credible historical evidence.

The less and the lightest

Luis Dizon has reverted to Catholicism:

<https://eacanada.wordpress.com/2018/10/31/ive-changed-my-mind/>

Luis was an up-n-coming evangelical apologist with a knack for foreign languages.

Regarding the contemporary landscape, there aren't any converts to Catholicism. Rather, there are converts to multiple choice Catholicisms. They convert to Thomism. Or they convert to an idealized abstraction. Or they convert to a museum piece. Then you have the modernist Catholicism of Pope Francis, most of the hierarchy, most of the Bible scholars.

I wonder if Luis will still be Catholic 10-15-20 years from now if his denomination continues to liberalize. Does he have a fallback?

By contrast, Protestant converts to Catholicism tend to come from the best and the brightest—pastors, professional theologians, and graduates from top Protestant seminaries such as Westminster Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, Geneva College, and (in my case) Wycliffe College.

i) Even assuming that these are the best and the brightest, we have to examine the arguments. Aren't conversion stories to Catholicism pretty much interchangeable? The same canned arguments for Catholicism. The same canned arguments against the Protestant faith. Like a form letter.

ii) To my knowledge, Reformed seminaries don't generally have courses on how to respond to Catholic apologetics.

iii) What I find striking is the reverse situation. In my experience, the best and brightest minds in modern Catholicism don't make a case for Catholicism. They don't become Catholic apologists, or write extensively in defense of Catholicism. That task is demoted to the less and the lightest.

For instance, Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe were two of the very brightest converts, but I don't think either one ever made a sustained case for Roman Catholicism.

Alexander Pruss is arguably the smartest Catholic philosopher of his generation, but while he sometimes toys with ingenuous defenses of Transubstantiation, I haven't seen him defend Catholicism in general. Bas van Fraassen is a brilliant philosopher of science who takes some inept potshots at sola Scriptura in one of his books, but that's about it. Copleston debated Ayer and Russell on God's existence, but despite his prolific outlook I don't recall his writing a book or essay in defense of Roman Catholicism. Indeed, towards the end of his life he was quite skeptical.

Has Michael Dummett or Nicholas Rescher made a case for Roman Catholicism?

Cardinal Dulles was the product of a nominal Protestant upbringing. The retro Catholicism he converted to is

different from post-Vatican II Catholicism, and he documents the backpedaling in Catholic theology.

While not in the same league as Pruss, Ed Feser is a very smart convert. But to my knowledge, Feser spends most of his time defending Thomism. Moreover, he's currently at war with his adopted denomination over the death penalty.

Karl Rahner was the great Catholic theologian of the 20C. A superior mind. But he takes the truth of Catholicism for granted. His output is devoted to revising Catholicism in response to the challenges of modernity.

The brightest Catholic Bible scholars like Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, John Meier, and John Collins subvert traditional Catholic positions.

iv) Newman is an exception, but an ironic exception. Newman didn't really convert to Roman Catholicism. Rather, Newman converted (or subverted) Roman Catholicism to himself. He redefined tradition to bend Catholicism to his own predilections. He changed the thing he converted to, so that Newman's Catholicism is Newman's face in the mirror.

v) Here's another reverse situation. Alvin Plantinga and Peter van Inwagen are certainly two of the best and the brightest. They have precious few intellectual rivals. Plantinga taught at Notre Dame from 1982-2010 while Inwagen has been there since 1995. Don't you suppose they've heard all the best arguments for Catholicism from their Catholic colleagues and gifted students? Yet that hasn't swayed them to become Roman Catholic.

In fact, my intention from here on out is to continue to focus my efforts on combating and converting the adherents of these non-Christian ideologies and religions.

Given the creeping universalism in the Catholic hierarchy, what's the point? Vatican II already implied that you don't even have to be Christian, much less Catholic, to be saved. If these are different paths to the same God, why convert them to your pathway?

Six stages of Catholic denial

- 1.** The church of Rome is the Bride of Christ. Without the Roman Magisterium, we'd be lost in the wilderness, forced to fend for ourselves.
- 2.** The church of Rome can't be falsified by what the priesthood, hierarchy, or pope does, but only by what's officially taught.
- 3.** The church of Rome can't be falsified by what the pope happens to say, but only when speaking ex cathedra. All else is fallible.
- 4.** The church of Rome can't be falsified by heretical teaching in the Catechism of the Catholic Church because that's fallible.
- 5.** The church of Rome can't be falsified by heretical conciliar teaching because that just shows the council wasn't ecumenical. Even if a pope solemnly defined a heresy as irreformable doctrine, that can't falsify the church of Rome. A heretical pope is an antipope, not a true pope. Ex cathedra heresy is a contradiction in terms. So nothing in principle or practice, nothing in history, nothing on paper, can falsify the church of Rome.
- 6.** Dogma is our benchmark to sift de fide teaching from fallible or heretical teaching. We rely on magisterial teaching to know what's dogma and we rely on dogma to know what's magisterial teaching. The church of Rome is the One True Church® because it says it's the One True Church®. The Roman Catholic church is always right—except when it's wrong. And you can tell the difference by using dogma to winnow the Magisterium while simultaneously

using the Magisterium to winnow dogma. Dogma is the starting-point. Unless the Magisterium is the starting-point. When in doubt, flip a coin of St. Jude.

Turning to Catholicism-1

I plan to do a running commentary on Faith and Reason: Philosophers Explain Their Turn to Catholicism (Ignatius Press 2019), Brian Besong, ed. I'll begin with Bryan Cross's chapter. This will be a lengthy post in part because I'm quoting Bryan, then responding to him. The actual analysis is much shorter than the post overall. A few general observations before I engage the text directly:

i) One way to interpret Bryan's strategy is that he's using a process of elimination argument, where each phase in his theological evolution falsifies the prior stage. The Reformed paradigm falsified the Pentecostal paradigm, the Anglican paradigm falsified the Reformed paradigm, while the Catholic paradigm falsified Anglican theology. Put another way, he using each phase as the standard of comparison to assess the deficiencies of the prior phase.

A problem with that strategy, if that's his argument, is lack of continuity. He can't use the Anglican paradigm to measure the Reformed paradigm if he regards the Anglican paradigm as the wrong yardstick, and he can't use the Reformed paradigm to measure the Pentecostal paradigm if he regards the Reformed paradigm as the wrong yardstick. Ultimately he regards the Catholic paradigm as the right yardstick. Protestant alternatives fail to measure up by that yardstick, and not because they fail to measure up to different Protestant yardsticks. So the process of elimination argument fails unless there's some element of truth that carries through the Reformed and Anglican stages.

The process doesn't lead up to and culminate in Catholicism if each Protestant alternative is a blind alley. At best, he's eliminating the Protestant competition separately, on a

case-by-case basis. Yet the way he structures the presentation makes it seem like a cumulative case where these are logically interconnected stages. Where each stage builds on the previous stage. Although he denies that you can use one paradigm as the benchmark to assess another paradigm, that's precisely how he structures his presentation.

ii) Suppose I agree with him that the traditional Protestant formulation regarding the sufficiency of Scripture is deficient. Suppose I agree with him that he raises objections which demonstrate how the sufficiency of Scripture, traditionally formulated, can't be held to consistently. Assuming that's the case, is that a reason to abandon the Protestant paradigm for the Catholic paradigm—or is that a reason to modify the Protestant paradigm?

Suppose there are multiple reasons for me to think the Catholic paradigm is fatally flawed. Then that's not a viable fallback option. So the alternative is not the Catholic paradigm, but modifying the Protestant paradigm. There's a sense in which the Protestant paradigm can be modified in a way that the Catholic paradigm cannot. Although Catholicism can and does change, that has to receive official approval by the magisterium. By contrast, an individual Protestant is at liberty to propose a modification to the traditional Protestant paradigm. That may or may not win wider approval by fellow Protestants, but it's consistent with the individual Protestant's understanding of sufficiency.

iii) Of course, it shouldn't be an ad hoc modification. And it can't be such a radical modification that it ceases to be recognizably faithful to Protestant essentials.

But to take a comparison, in the history of philosophy, various positions undergo refinement in light of criticism. It's not necessarily ad hoc for philosophical positions to become increasingly sophisticated as they adapt to objections.

Over the next few years, I started reading books on the ethics of euthanasia and assisted suicide. I went to hear Dr. Jack Kevorkian (“Dr. Death”) give a talk near campus. He was in the prime of his publicity around that time, and the issues of euthanasia and assisted suicide were hot topics for that reason. To the best of my knowledge, nobody seemed to have good arguments against his positions. Most of the books I was reading that opposed euthanasia were written by Evangelical Christians. And these books generally approached ethical questions from the point of view of sola scriptura, which was the only Christian point of view I knew at the time. I noticed that the Christian authors whose arguments were more cogent and persuasive were incorporating

philosophical claims into their writing; they were not being fully consistent with sola scriptura, at least in the “sufficiency” sense of sola scriptura—namely, the notion that Scripture is sufficient in matters of faith and conduct. I could see that the merely sola scriptura approach was not sufficient to deal with moral questions about beginning and end-of-life issues, especially those involving medical technology—that is, those falling under the category of medical ethics.

i) This goes to what is meant by the sufficiency of Scripture. Suppose we can learn from Scripture that suicide and euthanasia are wrong, but Scripture doesn't provide a philosophical justification for its answers to those questions. Does that make Scripture insufficient? Yet there's a distinction between Scripture giving the right answers, and whether its answers are philosophically justifiable by Scripture alone. Why insist that sufficiency must cover both? Why can't sufficiency mean that from Scripture I learn that certain actions are right while other actions are wrong, but defending the answers requires the use of reason, over and above what Scripture says? That's only inconsistent with sufficiency if you define sufficiency to require, not simply finding the right answers in Scripture,

but finding the philosophical justification in Scripture. Yet I think that's a wholly unreasonable definition of sufficiency.

ii) Suppose I can know that suicide and euthanasia are wrong, both from Scripture and reason. Does that negate the sufficiency of Scripture? If so, how so? Assuming I can learn from Scripture that suicide and euthanasia are wrong, then Scripture is sufficient for someone who consults the Bible to find out whether or not suicide and euthanasia are wrong. That's not in competition with the possibility that I could reach the same conclusion through reason. I'll have more to say about this below.

iii) But suppose Scripture is "insufficient" to inform on about whether suicide and euthanasia are intrinsically wrong. Suppose I learn from Scripture that suicide and euthanasia are wrong under normal situations, but Scripture fails to address special situations. Does that mean Scripture is insufficient to provide necessary moral guidance?

That depends on what we mean by sufficiency. Sufficient for what? Suppose by sufficient we mean sufficient for what God requires of me. Sufficient to discharge my divinely-mandated duties.

Suppose there are ethical questions Scripture doesn't answer. Does that mean Scripture is insufficient? Or does that mean it's not my divinely-mandated duty to have answers to those questions? God doesn't hold me to that. God doesn't require that of me. (Incidentally, that's not just hypothetical—that's my own position.)

Suppose I make the wrong choice because I didn't know any better, but I don't know any better because God hasn't revealed his will in that matter. So I'm not responsible for

the choice I made, so long as I made a conscientious choice.

iv) It isn't necessary for Christians to get it all right in this life—because this life isn't all there is. I can make innocent mistakes in this life which will be rectified in the world to come. It's a nearsighted view of Christian experience and God's providence to imagine we need all the answers here and now.

v) I'd add that Bryan's alternative is artificial. Catholicism doesn't have instant answers to every serious moral issue. For instance, advances in medical science generate new situations for which, by definition, there can be no traditional answers inasmuch as those situations were not on the table in the past. And it's not as if the pope is making ex cathedra pronouncements on all the cutting-edge issues in bioethics. So it's just an illusion to think Catholicism is a solution to the perceived deficiency of the Protestant paradigm.

I also noticed that another problem with the sola scriptura approach is that in a democratic society in which the majority of citizens do not believe in the authority of Scripture, a sola scriptura Christian's only solution to the problem of the legalization of assisted suicide and abortion is evangelism—that is, conversion. It seemed to me at the time that in order to persuade in the public

square regarding such moral questions, the only recourse available to a sola scriptura Christian was to open the Bible and start pointing to verses. And if other people did not accept the Bible, the only recourse for a sola scriptura Christian was to convert them to Christianity so that they accepted the Bible as authoritative. But these problems did not cause me to doubt the doctrine of sola scriptura. At the time, they were merely difficulties, and I had no alternative paradigm.

i) That reflects a confused notion of sufficiency. To begin with, Scripture saying something is wrong doesn't make it wrong. Even God saying something is wrong doesn't make it wrong. Bryan fails to distinguish between moral epistemology and moral ontology. From Scripture we can learn that certain actions are right or wrong, but such truths don't depend on Scripture in a constitutive sense.

As such, we can sometimes provide supporting arguments for Biblical ethics by appeal to reason. That's not incompatible with the the sufficiency of Scripture.

ii) There are, however, cases where revelation may be our only source of knowledge for some ethical stances. It's not irrational to believe something is right or wrong on the

sheer authority of Scripture, even if you can't defend it by unaided reason. As Catholic philosopher Peter Geach has noted:

*An elder sister left in charge of her little brother may have to enforce certain restrictions on his behavior; her parents have told her that certain things are forbidden; and the parents, let us suppose, had good reason for their prohibitions. If the young brother now says "Why shouldn't I?" and argues the matter, the sister's attempt to find a rationale for the prohibitions may be a failure, and the young brother may be sharp enough to defect this; but he would be a young fool if on this account he decided to ignore the prohibitions. **The Virtues (Cambridge 1979), 141.***

iii) In addition, while some biblical norms are justifiable by reason, reason itself requires a theistic justification. The reliability of reason is not independent of God. Likewise, moral realism is not independent of God. Indeed, many secular thinkers admit that naturalism can't justify moral realism. Those are observations we can and should press when debating social ethics with unbelievers.

When we moved to St. Louis, we began attending a vibrant nondenominational charismatic church...On one particular Sunday morning not long after our son had died, a woman performed a voice solo at the church. She went up to the front of the church, was handed a microphone, and began to sing the traditional hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty". But from my point of view, she sang it as if she were in a night club, with a forced gravelly voice, and sensual, bodily motions. The poignant contradiction of form and content was too much for me. I had been growing more and more disturbed by the irreverence of the form of the worship, without being able to identify consciously what it was that was troubling me. Finally, during this song the contradiction was for me directly palpable and undeniable. As we left the service that day, I decided that I could not continue to worship there.

It's not as if contemporary Catholicism is tied to a traditional European worship style. What about black and Latino Catholics who have a more animated worship style?

Ironically, Bryan's provincial ethnocentrism reflects his unconscious "ecclesial consumerism". People are wired differently. What one person finds appealing another person finds unappealing, and vice versa. That's one reason for the variety of denominations that Bryan deplors. Yet he's blind to his own selective bias in that regard.

Prior to that, I was for theological reasons distrustful and suspicious of philosophy and of reason in general in any theological matters. This was in continuity from my Pentecostal tradition. From my point of view now as a Calvinist committed to total depravity, I had even more reason to believe that reason was fallen and untrustworthy.

That's confused. In Reformed theology, everyone doesn't suffer from total depravity. The reprobate and unregenerate suffer from total depravity, but the elect experience regeneration and sanctification, which renews the mind.

In my last year of seminary, I took a graduate philosophy class at Saint Louis University on the

metaphysics of St. Thomas Aquinas. Studying St. Thomas raised many questions regarding the Reformed tradition, particularly in those ways in which the Reformed tradition differed from the Catholic tradition. Although I could not answer those questions at the time, it was clear to me that there was at least a deep tension between the philosophical and theological positions and methods of the Reformers, and those of St. Thomas.

My belief as an early seminarian was that other Christian traditions did not agree with us (Presbyterians) primarily because they did not know exegesis (i.e., the interpretation of the text of the Bible) as well as we did. At the seminary, we believed that exegesis was on our side—that it was exegesis that validated our position over and against that of all the other Christian traditions. I had believed that a rigorous study of the biblical languages and Scripture would provide the means to resolve interpretive disagreements dividing the various Christian traditions. So I had poured myself into exegesis with that hope, so much so that at graduation the seminary faculty honored me with

the exegesis award awarded to one graduate each year.

i) That's so simplistic and naive. If you read academic commentaries on Scripture, they list interpretive options. The commentator then tries to narrow down the options to one best interpretation by sifting the evidence for each option. Oftentimes we can identify the best interpretation of a particular passage. But sometimes it's hard to choose between alternatives. That's the case when you read commentaries by modern Catholic commentators as well.

ii) Interpretive disagreements are sometimes due to the fact that readers may want the Bible to say more than it does. It doesn't settle some disputes because they want Scripture to speak to issues important to the reader which may not be so important to Scripture (or God). God leaves some things up in the air because it's not essential that we have a firm position on that question. Sometimes God has different priorities than the reader.

iii) Likewise, human beings are social creatures, so there's a powerful incentive to validate our sectarian religious conditioning. That doesn't mean Scripture is unclear, but psychological factors can override sound exegesis. And Catholics are hardly exempt.

But especially in my last year of seminary, I began to see the implicit but determinative role that philosophy was playing in our interpretation of Scripture.

We were calling what we were doing exegesis, as if it were an entirely objective activity, but we were tacitly importing many philosophical and theological assumptions into the process by which we arrived at our interpretations.

The basic philosophy of hermeneutics is to read the text in the way the original audience understood it. That's not unique to Scripture. That's true for just about any text from the past, or from a different culture.

Now I began to realize that the belief that exegesis was sufficient to resolve interpretive disagreements was protected and insulated by a prior sorting of persons into distinct groups that shared sufficiently similar interpretations. When the exegesis did not resolve the disagreement, one was supposed to have chosen another group that more closely matched one's theology, and one was supposed to leave the nonmatching group so as not to attempt to compel even subtly that

present group to accept one's personal interpretation of Scripture. In this way, the belief in the sufficiency of exegesis and the perspicuity of Scripture was insulated from falsification by a continual partitioning and sorting of persons on the basis of their theological beliefs. When I began to see the degree to which philosophy was playing an implicit role in our interpretation of Scripture, my belief that exegesis was a neutral objective science, and that it was sufficient to adjudicate interpretive disputes, began to weaken.

That's not "philosophy". Rather, that's social psychology, and Catholics are subject to the same prior sorting process. Consider how Catholic apologists read the church fathers compared to Protestant patriologists.

This conclusion was complemented by another experience, shortly thereafter. A few weeks after I graduated from seminary, some young Mormon missionaries came to our door. My wife invited them in, and we started talking. But we were just getting into the important questions when we ran

out of time. So we agreed to meet with them the following week. They ended up coming weekly for the rest of the summer. Since I had just completed four years of training in biblical theology, Greek and Hebrew, I was quite confident that I could persuade these teenage missionaries by exegetical arguments from Scripture that Mormonism is false and that the Gospel, as I understood it then, is true.

Over the course of our discussions with these Mormon missionaries, when I argued that their teachings were contrary to Scripture, they would counter by appealing to the Book of Mormon, and I would respond by saying that the Book of Mormon is contrary to Scripture. But they viewed Scripture through the Book of Mormon—that is, in light of the Book of Mormon. They claimed that very shortly after the death of the apostles (or maybe even before the death of the last apostle) the Church fell into utter apostasy, and that the true Gospel had been preserved in North America where Jesus had come to preach to certain peoples living here at that time. For that reason, according to the Mormons, the Bible had to be interpreted and understood in light of this additional revelation that

Joseph Smith had recovered, and not according to the teachings and practices of the early Church Fathers. That was because in their view the early Church Fathers had corrupted Christ's teaching by incorporating into it both Greek philosophy and pagan rites in syncretistic fashion. So our conversation at some point reached fundamental questions such as, "Why should we believe the Book of Mormon over the early Church Fathers?" and "How do you know that the Church Fathers corrupted Christ's teaching?"

I realized at the time that I too, as a Protestant, could not appeal to the early Church Fathers or the councils in a principled way to support my position against that of the Mormons. Of course, at that time I agreed with Nicene Trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology, but like the Mormons I too believed that shortly after the death of the apostles the Church had begun to fall into various errors, minor at first but progressively more serious. So in my mind, everything any Church Father said had to be tested against my own interpretation of Scripture.

i) But that's the wrong line of attack. Begin by discrediting Joseph Smith as a false prophet. A flimflam man. There's an abundance of evidence.

ii) Or discuss the fiasco of the Book of Abraham.

iii) Or discuss the lack of any archeological or genetic confirmation for human history in the New World according to the Book of Mormon.

Where did I think the early Church had gone wrong? I agreed with the Mormons that the early Church had been influenced by Greek philosophy. The Church had made use of Greek philosophy with terms such as homoousious, hypostasis, and physis to explain and defend the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Of course, I believed those doctrines to be true, but the use of such Greek notions worried me because it suggested an implicit syncretism. Protestants I respected had told me that they questioned or rejected parts of the Nicene Creed (e.g., saying that Christ was “eternally begotten”) as being both extrabiblical and based on Greek

philosophy. I knew that Greek philosophy had been quite influential in Alexandria, and I believed that this is where the allegorical method of interpretation was introduced. This was a method, in my mind, that was at least partly responsible for the Church's departure from the Gospel, and the subsequent need for the Reformation. From my sola scriptura point of view, there was no difference between bishop and elder, no basis for the papacy or even Roman primacy, not even a real distinction between clergy and laymen. So the whole hierarchical organization of the early Catholic Church seemed to me to be a corruption, a departure from what was taught in the New Testament.

Those are legitimate issues. Sometimes it is necessary to reexamine tradition.

Similarly, I believed that the Catholic liturgy, holy days, almost everything in the liturgical calendar, vestments for clergy, veneration of saints and their

relics and icons, prayers for the dead, and prayers to departed saints were all accretions from pagan holidays and practices. Even the idea that some Christians are saints in some greater way (with a capital "S") than that in which all Christians are saints was, in my opinion, a corruption, because I thought that egalitarianism followed from our being saved by grace. This was epitomized, in my view, by the Catholic Church's veneration of Mary, treating her as "Mother of God", and claiming that she remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus, as though marriage and sexual intercourse were in some way evil or tainted with evil.

From my point of view at that time, the early Church had somehow been led astray from the finished work of Christ and come to believe in what I thought was a magical conception of the sacraments, presumably also imported from paganism. This magical way of conceiving of the sacraments explained why the bishops who wrote the creeds treated baptism as forgiving sins, why at some point they came to believe that the bread and wine really became the Body and Blood of Christ, and why they transformed the agape love feast into

the “Eucharistic sacrifice”. That, along with their failure to adhere to sola scriptura, explained why they treated things like confirmation, marriage, penance, and ordination as sacraments. From the sola scriptura point of view, all these “additions”, like purgatory, the exaltation of celibacy, mysticism, monasticism, and asceticism, had to have come from paganism and were therefore a corruption of the purity of the Church and the Gospel, just as Israel of the Old Testament had played the harlot with the gods of the other nations.

Bryan was originally right. His theological peregrinations took him from greater truth to greater error.

As I saw it, the Church had started to deviate from orthodoxy by the second century, and the pace of that deviation only accelerated when, according to this narrative, Constantine legalized Christianity through the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 and Theodosius made Christianity the official state religion in A.D. 380. Christ had said that his kingdom was not of this world, but in my mind, the Catholic Church had tried to turn it into an earthly

kingdom with bishops and popes assuming monarchical prerogatives.

So when the Mormons claimed that a great apostasy had overcome the Church by the time of the death of the last apostle, I had no ground to stand on by which to refute that claim.

That's overstated. It's not an all-or-nothing proposition.

The Mormons believed that the true Gospel was recovered in the early nineteenth century by Joseph Smith. I believed, as a Reformed Protestant, that the true Gospel was recovered in the early sixteenth century by Martin Luther. But to my frustration, we both agreed that the early Church Fathers and the councils were suspect and not authoritative in their own right.

It's true that church fathers and church councils are not authoritative in their own right. Bryan was originally right.

Over the course of our meetings with the Mormon missionaries that summer, I realized that with respect to our treatment of the early Church Fathers and ecumenical councils, there was no principled difference between myself and the two young Mormon missionaries sitting in my living room.

Bryan suffers from such tunnel vision. It never occurs to him, even now, that he needed to reframe the issue. Mormonism is a target-rich environment.

What troubled me was something I had learned in my philosophy graduate seminar on St. Thomas Aquinas. In his arguments, St. Thomas continually appeals to the tradition of the Church and to the Church Fathers. I found myself frustrated by his theological method. I wanted him to be doing exegesis from Scripture when making theological arguments, not appealing to the Church Fathers. The professor teaching the seminar responded to my objections by

explaining that St. Thomas believed that divine providence guided the Church Fathers and the development of the Church. This professor pointed out that St. Thomas was not a deist about the Church (that is, God does not abandon the Church to her own devices). That short answer provoked me to do a great deal of reflecting, because I realized then that I did not share St. Thomas' nondeistic way of conceiving of the development of the Church. My position at the time regarding this particular point was again not different in principle from that of the Mormons.

What's so ironic is that Bryan started out Pentecostal. Charismatics also have a "nondeistic" view of divine providence. So what's the difference in principle between Bryan's hereditary paradigm and his adopted Catholic paradigm? Even if, at this stage, he was a Reformed cessationist, why go forward into Catholicism rather than back to Pentecostalism, or adopt Reformed continuationism? I'm not saying that's what he should have done. I'm just pointing out that given how he's casting the alternatives, choosing Catholicism is arbitrary. I'm responding to him on his own grounds.

Of course, I firmly believed in divine providence, but I distrusted all the Church Fathers to whom St. Thomas appealed. That is why, in my mind at the time, appeals to the Church Fathers did not establish anything at all, because if the Church were being corrupted and falling away from the purity of the Gospel, then appealing to the Fathers was like appealing to heretics.

Again, he seems to be treating the church fathers as authority figures rather than historical witnesses. But the church fathers are not all of a piece.

But for St. Thomas, if the Church Fathers taught something, especially if they were Doctors of the Church or if the claim in question was held and taught widely by the Church Fathers, that showed it to be authoritative for us as a kind of patrimony precisely because the Holy Spirit was unfailingly guiding the development of the Church into all truth.

What does Bryan mean by "development"? Is he anachronistically filtering Aquinas through Newman's lens?

On this point, I discovered a very deep difference between myself and St. Thomas. The more I studied his writings, the more the difference was noticeable to me. St. Thomas believed that faith in Christ necessarily involves trusting the Church, because Christ cannot fail to guide and protect the development of his Church.

Among other things, that assumes a particular ecclesiastical vehicle has a monopoly on God's providential guidance or protection. But what if denominations are just temporary vehicles? They serve a purpose for a time, but outlive their usefulness?

At the time, I could not have explained exactly what the problem was. Anglicanism and Catholicism were not even on my conceptual horizon. But as a graduate student studying major figures in the history of philosophy, especially figures such as St. Augustine, Boethius,

St. Anselm, and St. Thomas, I found that they far overshadowed the musings of any man who took the microphone on Sunday mornings.

For that matter, they far overshadow the musings of Pope Francis.

But even there what was being served intellectually and theologically fell far short of what I could be getting reading the medieval Christian philosophers and theologians. I knew that I did not want to go to church to hear any more “man-talk” — that is, opinions of human beings. If church were primarily about “man-talk”, I could go to the library and find much more erudite thinkers and writers. From what I was learning from the writings of ancient philosophers and medieval theologians, I found myself mentally challenging and even refuting Sunday sermons point-by-point as they were being delivered during every service, and I could sense that that kind

of disengaged cynical disposition was soul-destroying.

That's terribly egotistical and elitist. Of course a Christian intellectual may get less out of the sermon than other parishioners. But what about attending church for the fellowship, corporate prayer, and music? It's not custom-made for every particular worshiper.

That year a fellow graduate student suggested that I visit an Anglican church, so I did. I went by myself. The moment I walked in, I noticed a complete difference. It was quiet and reverent before the liturgy began. People were not talking before the service started. People were kneeling and praying silently, on kneelers. The liturgy itself was beautiful, rich, and meaningful. All the words of the service were already written down, as the liturgy, in this case the Book of Common Prayer, which is beautiful and reverent and drawn largely from Scripture. The liturgy is God's speech spoken back to him by his people or by one representing them. The only

occasion in which a person spoke his own opinion was the homily, and the homily was only about five minutes long, compared to the thirty-to forty-minute sermons with which I was familiar. Here for the first time I found freedom from “man-talk”. There was no human personality at the front of the church with a microphone saying whatever came into his mind at that moment. There was no speculative exegesis or theological argumentation that I could critically dismantle.

i) Once again, Bryan's unconscious "ecclesial consumerism" asserts itself. What he finds reverent many Christians find boring. He's using his own aesthetic sensibilities as a theological criterion.

ii) While liturgical prayer can be valuable, that has limitations. Consider this anecdote from John Ruskin's autobiography (*Praeterita*):

Although the poetical states of religious feeling taught me by George Herbert's rhymes, and the reading of formal petition, whether in the psalter or litany,

at morning and evening and on Sunday forenoon, were sincere enough in their fanciful or formal ways, no occasion of life had yet put me to any serious trial of direct prayer.

Ruskin was so conditioned by written prayer, corporate prayer, that he had no experience verbalizing a petitionary prayer for his own topical needs or the personal needs of other individuals. It was all generic.

The climax of the Anglican liturgy was what was referred to as “Holy Eucharist”. We walked forward between the choir, and received the bread and wine at the front of the church, while kneeling. The very form of worship communicated something altogether different from the way of taking communion I had previously known. I found God to be present there in the beauty, reverence, and silence of the liturgy. Here was something that went beyond men’s opinions. I could not be cynical about the liturgy or critique it. This was not “man-talk”. It was nonpropositional; it was sacramental—that is, the Gospel embodied. It did not lend itself to rational evaluation or refutation. In that respect, this sacrament almost bypassed my intellect and

went directly to my heart. In this sacrament, God was speaking to me not through words and propositions, but through a physical action, giving himself to me in a very intimate way. This was not something toward which I could take a critical, disengaged stance. I could only receive it and be grateful.

I realized that this is what my soul had been craving—to be fed on God. In the sacredness of the liturgy centered around the “Holy Eucharist”, my heart, which had been starved under a diet of mere propositions, was drawn anew toward God. The form of this aesthetic and liturgy clearly fit the serving of the bread of heaven. In the liturgy, my soul was drawn up to God by its majesty and beauty. When the priest said, “Lift up your hearts,” we replied, “We lift them up unto the Lord.” The form of the liturgy and the music helped us lift our hearts up to heaven.

i) Did he find God in the eucharist, or is that a projection of his own "cravings"? My point is not to assess the theology of the eucharist but to draw attention to Bryan's individualistic reaction. Certain experiences resonant with him that don't resonant with other Christians while certain experiences resonant with other Christians that don't

resonant with him. This is all fairly subjective and person-variable—which he equates with steppingstones to the One True Church.

ii) It also epitomizes the "grass is greener" outlook. On the one hand, people raised in nonliturgical churches sometimes feel they missed out. They gravitate to liturgical churches. But the traffic on the bridge moves in both directions. Liturgical churches have a high defection rate. Many people raised in liturgical churches find that too distant and formulaic. The deadening repetition and remoteness. They often gravitate to nonliturgical churches. So much of this is just a sociological truism about how what's familiar palls while what's unfamiliar is fresh.

iii) And even on a subjective level, compare Bryan's nearly ecstatic experience of Anglican worship with the letdown once he settled into his Catholicism:

Bryan Cross February 17, 2016

The ordinary Catholic life just is the long dark night of the soul, the experience of the "real absence of Christ," as you put it...I had to learn a very different way grounding and evaluating faith and growth. I had to give up seeking or expecting felt experiences.

<http://jasonstellman.com/2015/10/26/dont-love-god-love-world-instead/>

So part of what drew him to Catholicism via Anglicanism is something he left behind when he converted to Catholicism. His Catholic experience is the polar opposite of the Anglican experience he rhapsodized about at a prior stage of his theological evolution. He was seeking "felt experiences". He failed to find that in Presbyterianism, but he encountered that in Anglo-Catholicism. And that was a bridge to Catholicism. Yet crossing the bridge burned the "felt experiences" in Anglo-Catholicism that drew him Romeward.

To be clear, for me, in this case it was not fundamentally or primarily doctrine that moved me from the Presbyterian to the Anglican tradition; it was liturgy. Here again, as aesthetics had played a role in my move from charismatic to Presbyterian, so aesthetics again played an important role in my becoming Anglican. And yet philosophy played a role too, because it helped me see the implicit role philosophy played in the Calvinistic theology I had once held. And that removed, for me, that theology's apparent authority, allowing me to look openly, carefully, and sincerely outside the Calvinist model.

I'd just note that he's drawing a false dichotomy between "the Calvinist model" and the Anglican tradition. The Anglican tradition is entirely compatible with Calvinism. There are many Reformed Anglicans. It's more a distinction between Puritan Calvinism and Anglican Calvinism. However, "the Calvinist model" is in conflict with Anglo-Catholicism.

My Anglican bishop seemed to have almost no interest in dialogue with the local Catholic bishop with a view to eventual full communion with the bishop of Rome.

Notice the bias. Even if you think Christian reunion is an ideal to work towards, what makes "eventual full communion with the bishop of Rome" the goal? Why not the other way around? That Catholics should unite with Protestants by coming over to our side rather than vice versa? They should renounce their errors and become Protestant.

When I asked myself why I was following this Anglican bishop, rather than the successor of St. Peter, I did not have a good answer.

It's true that Anglo-Catholicism is a stopgap position.

How could we pick and choose from an ecumenical council, or from among ecumenical councils? Either we should treat them all as merely good advice, or we should accept them all as authoritative. Picking and choosing from them on the basis of our agreement or disagreement with them, and then saying that the ones we have chosen are authoritative, was to my mind self-deceiving, like shooting an arrow and then drawing a target around the embedded arrow.

But Catholicism itself doesn't treat everything stated by an ecumenical council as authoritative. There's a lot of sifting and sorting. For instance, the canons and decrees may be regarded as authoritative, but not all the other material.

By the middle of 2004 I was trying to determine what exactly was the referent of the line in the Creed: "We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church." I was wondering whether what we were meaning by that phrase was

what the early Church Fathers meant by that phrase. Finally, every Sunday while reciting the Creed, when we would get to the line “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church”, I discovered that I could not say this line. I had to remain silent when we said it, because I was concerned that I was being dishonest if I were to say the line. My conscience was telling me that we (as Anglicans) were not saying the word “one” with the same meaning that those bishops who wrote the Creed intended it. We were treating what was a collection of groups of particular churches not in full communion with one another, as though it were a true unity. But I had come to believe from studying the Church Fathers that this was not how the early Church conceived of the unity of the universal Church. True unity included full communion of the bishops of the particular churches. And this raised the question of how, in the event of a schism among the bishops, to determine which

group of bishops was the continuation of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and how Christ intended believers to know the answer to that question.

Here Bryan is operating within an Anglo-Catholic framework, but why cast the issue in terms of what the Nicene Creed means by "the church" rather than considering what the NT means by "the church"? Why make Nicene ecclesiology the benchmark rather than NT ecclesiology?

Of course, this question led to the consideration of the Catholic claim regarding the unique authority and role given to St. Peter and to the bishops of Rome in succession from St. Peter. Through study of the early Church Fathers, it became clear to me that they recognized the bishop of Rome to have a unique authority, not because Rome was the capital of the empire, but because they recognized that this unique authority entrusted to St. Peter, and the unique charism he had been given by

Christ, had been preserved in his successors in the Apostolic See. This became evident especially in studying the various schisms, such as the Novatian and Donatist schisms, and the writings of Church Fathers who addressed these schisms. In the event of a schism, the bishop of Rome served as the principium unitatis (principle of unity) by which to distinguish the continuation of the Church from schisms from the Church.

But notice how that begs the question. What makes someone a church father? Why are Tertullian, Novatian, and Donatus excluded from that category? What makes them schismatics? Why not take their viewpoint as a standard of comparison? Is Cyprian a church father or a schismatic?

The most important aspect of this Protestant-to-Catholic transition for me involved recognizing that the Protestant and Catholic traditions were rightly intelligible as “paradigms” — that is, as complete theological-conceptual

frameworks that must be considered all together as a whole in order to be understood rightly.

That's artificial. Theological paradigms are historical accidents. They're not logical packages in which everything is equally indispensable. Some elements of a theological paradigm are essential to the paradigm, but in other respects a theological paradigm may contain loosely-fitting elements that could be detached from one paradigm and attached to another. One of his blind spots is that as a philosopher, Bryan evaluates issues abstractly rather than historically. Too abstractly.

This understanding of the relation of paradigms or traditions can be seen in a 1977 work of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Here MacIntyre drew from Thomas Kuhn and Imre Lakatos to propose that Kuhn's solution to the problem of competing scientific paradigms be applied to competing ethical traditions in moral philosophy.

Notice how theologically innovative that is. How that differs from, say, Robert Bellarmine, the paradigm Counter-Reformation apologist.

Once that is clear, then an important conclusion follows. If we try to compare two paradigms by presupposing the truth of one of them, we are not authentically comparing them on their own terms. Criticisms of one paradigm on the basis of assumptions of the other paradigm are question-begging; that is, they are an exercise of circular reasoning, presupposing the very point in question—that is, which is the true paradigm...When one encounters other paradigms, one can come to see the same data from the point of view of those other paradigms. Seeing the data from different paradigms allows one to see weakness, failures, or problems internal to one's own paradigm, and to see explanations for those weaknesses and failures, from the point of view of another paradigm, according to criteria mutually accessible to the paradigms in question. This allows one to compare paradigms in a noncircular way.

What was Bryan mean by "mutually accessible criteria"? Does he mean overlapping criteria which two theological paradigms share in common? Or does he mean generic criteria independent of any particular paradigm? And what are the criteria he alludes to?

The Catholic paradigm includes the authoritative role of Sacred Tradition and the Church Fathers in the interpretation and understanding of Scripture. In this paradigm these are not derived from one's interpretation of Scripture, but established by Christ. Even the theological methodology between the paradigms is distinct. The Protestant paradigm seeks to resolve theological disagreements primarily by scholarly analysis of the text of Scripture. The Catholic paradigm turns to the Tradition and the magisterium. Moreover, the Catholic paradigm is incompatible with ecclesial deism and ecclesial consumerism. In the Catholic paradigm, what belongs to the articles of faith comes to us through the Church. That is how we know what to affirm by faith,

through what the Church delivers to us, just as the early Christians would have done by believing what the apostles taught them were the truths delivered to them from Christ and the Holy Spirit. Among the articles of faith are the four marks of the Church specified in the Creed, in contrast to the Reformed marks of Gospel, sacraments, and Church discipline. From the Catholic point of view, the Protestant move of making discipline a mark of the Church was an unauthorized addition to the four marks given in the Creed. So then from the Catholic point of view, the Protestant appeal to discipline as a mark of the Church, for example, used against the Catholic Church, presupposes the very point in question between the two paradigms—namely, the possession of the authority to establish the marks of the Church and determine how they are to be understood. This was especially made clear to me by St. Francis de Sales' *The Catholic Controversy*, which

allowed me to see the ideas and actions of the Protestant Reformers from the perspective of the Catholic paradigm.

Notice how in his appeal to the testimony of the church fathers, Bryan waves away all the historical challenges to his position. That's because his theological method is fundamentally a priori. He'd decided that because his paradigm must be true, the historical challenges must be reconcilable with his position, so he doesn't even need to get into the weeds. His paradigm can't be falsified by Scripture or church history because it isn't driven by Scripture or church history, but his preconceived ideal.

By the spring of 2005, I was coming to see, first, that every single one of my Protestant objections to the Catholic Church presupposed the Protestant paradigm, and thus was evidentially and argumentatively question-begging. These objections implicitly and paradigmatically presupposed the very point in question. I was also coming to see that the Catholic paradigm was able to incorporate the patristic data in a far more coherent way, without having to adopt an ecclesial deism, and without

thereby implicitly calling into question the divinity of Christ.

Notice how that disregards the painstaking exegetical spadework of Protestant scholars (e.g. Bauckham, Elledge, Fee, Heiser, Hurtado) who defend the deity of Christ exegetically. That's because Bryan's theological method is a priori and ahistorical rather than exegetical. Bryan is in love with his own mind.

The Catholic paradigm, unlike the Protestant paradigm, made schism intelligible and thus made intelligible what the Church Fathers said about schism. The Catholic paradigm made Christ's atonement compatible with God's justice. The Catholic paradigm made intelligible what the Church Fathers said about baptismal regeneration, about merit, about the distinction between mortal and venial sin, and about many other things. It was clearer to me that being in communion with the bishop of Rome was the default position, and that I needed some good (at least non-question-begging) reasons

*not to be in communion with the bishop
of Rome.*

It's not that the Protestant paradigm renders those examples unintelligible, but that it rejects his examples.

Turning to Catholicism-2

This is the second installment in my review of *Faith and Reason: Philosophers Explain Their Turn to Catholicism*:

1. One question is what's the motivation to read this book? Why would a Catholic or Protestant or wavering Catholic or wavering Protestant or atheist or None to pick up this book? What, if anything, sets it apart from so many other books for Catholicism?

Presumably, the selling-point of the book is that all the contributors are trained philosophers. So the question is whether the arguments from Catholicism get better the higher up you go. When you move up the ladder from Catholic Answers to Catholics with doctorates in philosophy, do you find new and better arguments? Do they provide a more rigorous formulation of stock arguments? Do they provide arguments that are different from the stock arguments for Catholicism?

When it comes to the chapters by Feser, Budziszewski, Cutter, Judisch, Kreeft, Gage, and the Clevelands, the answer is no. They recycle all the boilerplate arguments you encounter in Catholic apologists who are not trained philosophers.

The only exception is Bryan Cross, who offers an argument that's a variation on Kuhn's incommensurable paradigms. Vogler's chapter has no discernible argument for Catholicism—while the chapter by Koons is a narrowly framed comparison and contrast between Catholic and Lutheran theology. So that has no relevance to any reader who's not Lutheran, who doesn't use Lutheran theology as reference point.

The upshot, then, is that a reader gets nothing from this book that he can't find in the Catholic Answers apologetic. Except for Bryan Cross's unconventional argument, this book doesn't pose any new challenges to the Protestant faith. It doesn't improve on the standard fare that dime-a-dozen Catholic apologists churn out every year. It doesn't expose you to different arguments, or more sophisticated versions of traditional arguments. Instead, this is standard fare, marketed as "philosophers".

Ironically, then, the book is counterproductive. It's just another cliché-ridden case for Catholicism. The Catholic Answers apologetic is as good as it gets. Catholic philosophers have nothing to add to that. For Protestant readers already familiar with the hackneyed arguments for Catholicism, this is *déjà vu*. In that regard the book is an unwitting vindication of the Protestant faith. The contributors to this book don't have an ace in the hole. If a Protestant reader has answers to routine Catholic objections, then he will have the same response to what these contributors serve up. How often can you reheat leftovers before they become unsafe to eat?

2. The other thing I have to say is that some of the contributors find the doctrine of the real presence to be emotionally compelling. At that level, there's nothing to refute because it isn't based on reason, evidence, or exegesis, but felt-needs. Some people are drawn to Catholicism for temperamental reasons. People are wired differently. Some people have a deep yearning for things that other people don't yearn for. It's a personal, subjective preference—which is quite ironic given how Catholics attack Protestant "individualism".

Turning to Catholicism-3

This is the third installment in my review of Faith and Reason: Philosophers Explain Their Turn to Catholicism. Several contributors use variations on the same argument. For instance, Ed Feser says:

A book is merely the expression of the thoughts of the person who wrote the book. In order to know for sure what he intended as part of the book and what he meant by it, you have to ask him. Or you might ask someone who knows him, or someone he has given authority to represent him. The point is that you have to be able to ask, and you can't literally ask a book anything. You can only ask, and get answers from, something personal rather than impersonal...Now, when Christ was on earth, he could obviously be asked by his disciples about his revelation. After he departed, these disciples themselves could do the job for others who had questions. Unless these disciples themselves left successors, in each succeeding generation, with the

authority to do the same, those later generations would be unable to get an answer to the question of what is truly part of Christ's revelation and how to understand it...Where these persons disagree, the institution cannot function unless there is some chief executive with authority to break any deadlock. In short, divine revelation, to be effective, requires something like apostolic succession and a papacy—that is, of course, exactly what Catholicism maintains...Without such an institutional authority, whether to accept something as part of divine revelation, and how to interpret revelation, ultimately seem arbitrary, subjective, and fideistic... (49-50).

While Cutter says:

A living teaching authority is also, I think, a practical necessity for the spiritual life of the individual believer...If the Catholic Church did not have divine authority,

then there was no hope of gaining firm knowledge of much of anything in theology. I felt that if the Church of Rome could not be trusted, then the whole Christian theological project was hopelessly under-constrained (95; cf. 107-08; 230).

i) That's a standard Catholic tactic. It goes back to the Pyrrhonian skepticism of Counter-Reformation apologists. But such radical hermeneutical skepticism boomerangs on the Catholic apologist. To begin with, that makes it impossible to provide epistemic warrant for conversion to Catholicism. Take Catholic prooftexts from the Bible and the church fathers. But if interpreting a text is so hopelessly subjective and arbitrary, then the prooftexts can't be used to establish a "living teaching authority" in the first place. So conversion to Rome can never be justified.

ii) Apropos (i), how do Cutter and Feser know that Jesus founded a church? How do they know what he meant? How do they know he even existed? Given their radical doubt about communication, they can't appeal to the NT or the church fathers. They can't appeal to documentary evidence, since that must be interpreted. So what's their source of information? What's their frame of reference?

iii) Likewise, it isn't possible on their view to compare the Catholic alternative to Protestant theology. For instance, you can't compare and contrast Tridentine theology to the Westminster Confession if you think interpreting a text is so hopelessly subjective and arbitrary.

iv) By the same token, where does that leave The Catechism of the Catholic Church, or papal encyclicals? How many Catholic laymen can grill the pope what a particular sentence means in the Catechism or some papal encyclical?

v) Feser seems awfully confident about his grasp of Aquinas. Did he step into a time machine and consult Aquinas in person? Did he consult Reginald of Piperno?

vi) Feser is utterly convinced that Pope Francis is wrong about capital punishment. Feser is sure he can interpret church tradition regarding capital punishment independently of the pope and in defiance of the pope.

vii) How can a reader evaluate Hume's objections to miracles and theistic proofs given their radical hermeneutical skepticism? How can a Catholic apologist or prospective convert understand and evaluate Newman's Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine if a reader must be able to ask the author what he meant?

viii) The reason we have a Bible, the reason some things were committed to writing, was to provide a permanent record for posterity in the absence of Jesus, the apostles, and OT prophets. Since we didn't live by then, that's our referent point.

ix) In addition, some NT epistles were written with the express purpose of resolving a doctrinal dispute—in the absence of the writer. Imagine if the opponents of St. John or St. Paul resorted to the impious skepticism of Cutter and Feser? "That's just a text! It could mean anything! Unless I can personally quiz St. John (or St. Paul), I'm entitled to disregard their letter!"

Turning to Catholicism-5

This is the fifth and final installment in my review of Faith and Reason: Philosophers Explain Their Turn to Catholicism. Before commenting on excerpts, I'll make some general observations:

1. The format of the book is conversion testimonies. I assume the reason for the format is to make it more sales-worthy. Personal interest stories have popular appeal. But the format is a weakness:

i) You can plug anything into that format. Conversion from Christianity to atheism or atheism to Christianity or Islam to Christianity or Christianity to Islam or Calvinism to Arminianism or Arminianism to Calvinism, and so on and so forth. The convert comes to see the light, regardless of where he began or where he ended. So there's something relativistic about the format.

ii) Having to work through an autobiographical narrative is inefficient. Cut to the chase. I just want to hear their reasons for why they are Catholic. Cut the dead wood.

iii) But the greatest weakness of that format, given the philosophical slant of the book, is that what matters is the quality of their justification for Roman Catholicism: not the reasons they had for becoming Catholic but the reasons they have for being Catholic. The reasons that trigger conversion may not reflect a more mature assessment. Over the years, you may retain your position, but improve on or replace your initial reasons.

iv) Perhaps, though, their current reasons are identical with the reasons they had for converting. But that's a problem if you bill yourself as a philosopher. It's like the teenage atheist who, based on his vast research, concludes that Christianity is bunk, and maintains that position for the rest of his life based on that juvenile understanding.

There are converts who engage in critical self-reflection up to the moment of conversion, but once they convert they don't cease critical self-reflection. They don't engage in ongoing critical self-reflection. That's more understandable for the average layman, although many layman would benefit from being more reflective, but it's inexcusable for trained philosophers.

2. An unintended takeaway of the book is that having a doctorate in philosophy doesn't make you a smart person. The amount of intellectual flabbiness on display in this book is startling.

Before philosophy became a profession, the only qualification to be a philosopher was an analytical mind, a high capacity for abstract reason. Now it's about credentials. Degree programs. Buttering up mentors. Checking all the boxes for the philosophical fads du jour.

In general, the most gifted thinkers in any discipline are intellectual mavericks who have difficulty fitting in because they buck the system. They challenge the received wisdom. Ironically, that makes them poor students. They think outside the textbook. By the same token they tend to be poor teachers because they operate on their own wavelength.

The difference between a philosopher and a philosophy prof. is like the difference between a physicist and a physics prof.

Most physics profs. aren't physicists. They simply teach physics. They lack the probing, creative intelligence required to push the boundaries.

3. The way contributors to this book discount historical evidence that runs counter to Catholic claims parallels atheists who filter reported miracles through methodological naturalism. The Catholic contributors ultimately fall back on their a priori argument for Catholicism. God must have done it our way because the alternative has untoward consequences. It stands to reason that this is how God did it. Like methodological atheists, they install a screen so that counterevidence is never allowed to get through.

4. Because, with the partial exception of Bryan Cross's Kuhnian argument, the book repeats the same dogeared, flashcard arguments for Catholicism that Catholic apologists always use, I don't really need to comment on the specifics. I've been over this ground many times before. But to give people who haven't read the book a sample, I'll comment on some representative statements. In addition, I sometimes find something new to say even when commenting on a familiar issue.

I saw the logic of natural law arguments against contraception and was convinced by the historical arguments that Christianity had indeed condemned contraception from the beginning...By the end of the century, Protestants had essentially caved in completely on this

issue, and the Eastern Orthodox were increasingly wobbly (51).

i) Many Catholic philosophers and theologians find the natural law arguments against contraception decidedly illogical.

ii) In addition, Feser's statement is confused. Prescientific objections to contraception were bundled with objections to abortion because, before developments in 20C medical science, contraception and abortion were inseparable in principle and practice. So while prescientific Christian opposition to contraception was commendable, that's been overtaken by science. We can be more discriminating than our Christian forebears were.

Yet as we went on, we discovered that Anglicanism was dying and all but dead (72).

i) That's misleading. In context, Budziszewski is referring to the ECUSA in particular rather than Anglicanism in general.

ii) Actually, Anglicanism is self-renewing. That's true of Protestant theological packages in general (e.g. Baptist, Anabaptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian). There's a distinction between Protestant denominations and the faith-traditions they exemplify. Denominations come and go, but the next generation continues the tradition. Denominations are just vehicles for the faith-traditions they embody. Denominations die out, but the faith-traditions live on by

hopping on to a new vehicle. In that regard, the Protestant faith is constantly self-renewing. That's fundamentally different from Catholicism, where there's just one vehicle, even if the wheels are falling off.

The Reformation had led to tens of thousands of "denominations"...most of them drifting like the wreck of gale-struck ships. According to the Protestant idea, all of them together are the Church. But St. Paul called the Church the Body of Christ. A bloody arm here, a severed leg there, a torso floating in the river—no matter how many such things were added into the total, they could never make up his Body (73-74).

i) One issue is what Paul meant his metaphor to illustrate. You can't just seize a Bible writer's metaphor and redeploy it to illustrate your own theology. Was Paul using that in contrast to "schism"? Or was he using that to make the point that different Christians have different roles to play in the life of the church, all of which are important?

ii) In addition, the metaphor isn't simply a metaphor for unity but a metaphor for diversity as well. A body is both one and many. One head, many body parts and organs. So Budziszewski's appeal is arbitrarily lopsided. Paul doesn't prioritize unity over diversity, but holds these in balance.

...I thought it was clearly desirable to belong, in a substantial and meaningful way, to the historical Church. Somewhat more specifically, I thought that Christian practice should take place within a body that is reasonably continuous with the church of the apostles. The Catholic Church stands in clearly continuity with the church of the apostles in a way that no Protestant communion does (94).

What kind of "continuity"? Historical continuity or continuity in faith? Suppose a castaway is stranded on a desert island. Ransacking the derelict ship for anything useful, he finds a Bible. He never read the Bible before. He has no Christian background. He's a blank slate. But he has nothing else to read, nothing else to pass the time, so he constantly reads that Bible. He becomes a Christian by reading the Bible. He has no historical continuity with the apostolic church, but he shares the faith of the apostolic church. That's what they have in common.

Historical continuity is a mummified corpse. What's essential is continuity in faith. That transcends time and space.

...I was convinced that there is an urgent practical necessity for a magisterium, for a living teaching authority to resolve disputes that threaten the unity of the church. (We can look to the history of mainline Protestantism over the past few decades for an illustration of this practical necessity) [95].

If that's "an urgent practical necessity," why hasn't God provided compelling evidence? God could make that more convincing by making that more explicit.

The biblical case against Arianism, for example, is not cut-and-dried, nor is the biblical case in favor of Trinitarian dogma or the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's person (95).

If that's why you think, why the prior commitment to these dogmas? If they aren't revealed truths, why take them for granted?

I felt at the time that being a non-Catholic Christian would mean that nearly every theological question would

be up for grabs, and that in practice this would mean I would just make up my own theology from scratch (95-96).

That's dumb. We have 2000 years of historical theology. Begin by considering the theological paradigms already on the table.

There are of course many visible, this-worldly institutions called "churches", but the Church writ large is an invisible entity made up exclusively of individuals who have a personal relationship with the Lord...a kind of Gnostic ecclesiology (105).

Catholics have a schizoid ecclesiology. They bifurcate "the Church" into two divergent churches: on the one hand is the church that does all the bad stuff. The church with all the corruption, contradictions, and blunders. On the other hand is the spotless Bride of Christ. The pure, indefectible, infallible church.

They knew that in his High Priestly Prayer Christ's dying wish (as it were) was for the Church to be one as he and the Father were one, so that the world

might see their unity as a sign of divine legitimacy and come also to believe (Jn 17). So they took schism deadly seriously, in marked contrast to the apathetic, unruffled attitude displayed by most Evangelical Calvinism (106).

- i)** Is the kind of unity in the church of Rome the kind of unity Jesus was talking about?
- ii)** How does the church of Rome even remotely resemble the unity between the Father and the Son? That's a very damaging comparison if you think about it.
- iii)** Is that what the world actually perceives when it views the church of Rome?

I came to realize (gradually) that I was a heretic—that "I'm not religious but I'm spiritual" was Gnosticism, the oldest and most harmful heresy in Christian history. God never told us to be "spiritual"; he told us to be "holy" (132).

That's pretty rich coming from a sect with the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, including her in partu virginity. Not to mention the whole ascetic tradition. A body-

denigrating, world-denigrating piety. As a noted art historian observed:

The symbols by which early mediaeval art acknowledged the existence of natural objects bore unusually little relation to their actual appearance. But they satisfied the mediaeval mind. To some extent they were the outcome of mediaeval Christian philosophy. If our earthly life is no more than a brief and squalid interlude, then the surroundings in which it is lived need not absorb our attention. If ideas are Godlike and sensations debased, then our rendering of appearances must as far as possible be symbolic, and nature, which we perceive through our senses, becomes positively sinful. St. Anselm, writing at the beginning of the twelfth century, maintained that things were harmful in proportion to the number of senses which they delighted, and therefore rated it dangerous to sit in a garden where there are roses to satisfy the

senses of sight and smell, and songs and stories to please the ears. Kenneth Clark, Landscape Into Art (Harper and Row 1986), 3.

There's always been this tension in Catholic theology. On the one hand the cult of virginity and the ascetic ideal. On the other hand, the sensuous riot of Baroque and Rococo churches and music.

But then I confronted the historical fact that it was the Church (the apostles) that wrote the Bible (the NT), and I knew that there could not possibly be more in any effect than in its cause, so if they Church did not have infallibility, as Protestants maintained, then the Bible didn't either (134).

Ironic how Peter Kreeft commits the composition fallacy. Shouldn't a philosophy prof. be alert to such an elementary fallacy?

And how could we be sure that the four Gospels we had were true and the many

others (e.g. the Gospel of Thomas, or of Judas) were not (134)?

That's just so willfully obtuse. He doesn't even try to think through the issue. For starters, the Gospels of Thomas and Judas are necessarily spurious since they were written far too late to be authentic. Judas and Thomas had been dead for many decades. Does Kreeft bother to do the most rudimentary research? This is village atheist fare.

The doctrine that blew me away the most was the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Not a single Christian denied it for one thousand years...How could the Holy Spirit have fallen asleep so badly for 1500 years that he let all Christians commit this ridiculous and egregious idolatry (145)?

i) So we have polling data for what every single Christian believed for the first thousand years of church history. Where is that archived?

ii) Does the fact that Jews overwhelmingly reject Jesus mean the Holy Spirit has been napping? Does the fact that the real presence is widely rejected since the Reformation mean the Holy Spirit has been napping for the last 500 years?

In college, while already exploring things Catholic...I listened to the sacred music of Palestrina for the first time...Clearly, this could only have come from angels, not mortals (I mean that literally.) It was the music of heaven...I loved the old Protestant hymns and still do; they are good water for thirsty souls, but this-this was great wine (140).

i) So heaven has Palestrina. Where does that leave Black Gospel music? In Purgatory or hell?

ii) How is it honest to compare Palestrina to Protestant hymnody? What about comparing Palestrina to Bach, Handel, and Mendelssohn—among others?

A third Catholic surprise was reading my first Catholic saint. It was St. John of the Cross...I followed it up with the works by other Catholic saints: Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux; and Therese, the "little Flower"; as well as the classic Catholic works by Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection...Why don't we have saints and believers like that?(140-41).

So the standard for saintliness are monks and nuns. Not devout fathers and mothers, husbands and wives. Isn't that a "Gnostic" ideal of piety?

If the Catholics are wrong, then they've invented the most idiotic idolatry in history, worshipping wine and bowing down to bread as if it was God. That's an either-or as stark as Christ's claim to divinity: if it is false, it's fantastically false, and if it's true, it's terribly true. It's also like the Church's claim about herself: a tremendous truth if it's true and blatantly blasphemous if it's false. No other Christian church claims the infallibility and authority she does...The Catholic dogma about the Eucharist fit the same pattern (145-46).

That's a good way of putting it.

I quickly learned that the disputed books were present in the Septuagint manuscript tradition...This shocked me, since I knew the Septuagint was the OT

***of the apostles and early Christians...
(160-61).***

i) That's like saying the Bible of a missionary is the translation he uses.

ii) He commits a classic blunder by equating the books in a codex with the canon. For one corrective:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/06/codex-and-canon.html>

In a bootstrapping maneuver, many Christians claim that the Bible establishes its own canon (164).

How about the bootstrapping maneuver Catholics apologists use to establish "the Church"?

They can't use anything outside the canon itself lest they imply that it has authority over the canon (thus violating sola scriptura). [166]

When the disciples used their senses to recognize the Risen Lord, did that imply that sensory perception has authority over Jesus?

Jesus left us an institution—people filling offices with derived authority—rather than a book (166).

How does he know that. Did he read it somewhere? Which book would that be?

The Church teaches that Christ gave to the apostles an office that had powers that include the power to make Christ truly present in the Eucharist (236).

That's what his sect teaches. That's not what the NT teaches. There's nothing in the NT about the bread and wine changing into the body and blood of Christ.

Our Episcopal church in Waco used leavened bread for communion. One day, the bread was particularly dry, and so it was crumbling as people were receiving communion with crumbs falling on the ground. People ignored the crumbs that were accumulating on the ground; some crumbs may have even been walked on by people. The crumbs remained there

until the end of the service. After the service, Lindsay, a friend of ours, and I went up and picked up the crumbs. We weren't sure if Christ was really present in the full sense at that point, but we thought that if he was, then just leaving him on the ground to be walked on was irreverent. From this experience, I could see that the Anglican and Episcopal lack of clarity on the nature of the eucharist had important practical ramifications. I was, for that reason, attracted to the Catholic Church's claim that God has provided a clear teaching on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and a corresponding clear standard for how the Eucharist should be treated (237).

I commented on this before:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/07/quantum-transubstantiation.html>

Now I'd like to make a different point: the practical ramifications of transubstantiation include all the Jews who were murdered on charges of Host desecration.

The gingerbread house-part 1

1. I'll be doing a series of posts commenting on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018). This is another book in the genre of conversion testimonies about men and women who swim the Tiber. The book's selling-point is that unlike so many books of the same genre, these are testimonies by "public intellectuals". That's supposed to make it more impressive than your average convert.

And that, in turn, raises expectations. When "public intellectuals" convert to Catholicism, are the reasons they give an improvement over the usual reasons you encounter from converts who are not "public intellectuals"? Many of the stories have a personal interest appeal, but most contributors offer only the thinnest arguments for Catholicism, and nothing original at that.

2. The way the book is billed is somewhat deceptive because some of the contributors have fancy credentials while others are just filler to pad out the volume. The editors didn't have enough public intellectuals to compile a whole book, so some contributors are basically fluff. In some instances the editors needed a token woman to provide balance.

3. There's a certain irony in many Catholic conversion testimonies that's nicely captured by Rod Dreher:

I mostly read my way into Catholicism in the early 1990s, and was therefore truly

shocked to discover that the church of John Paul II, so to speak, was hard to find outside of books and my favorite religious magazines. Real parish life was way more like what we see today in Pope Francis.

<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/pope-francis-apocalypse-arturo-vasquez/>

So many Catholic conversion stories have a cerebral emphasis. In that regard they parallel deconversion stories by apostates.

Why do I say it's ironic? The appeal of Catholicism is like the gingerbread house in Hansel & Gretel. It presents a startling contrast between what's on the outside and what's on the inside. There's the yummy exterior, which is the bait—but once inside, there's the cannibalistic witch.

What's missing in the stereotypical Catholic conversion story is how they have it backwards. When was the last time you read a testimony that said "I converted to Catholicism after I began attending a Catholic church"? At least in the genre of published conversion stories, the convert reads himself into Catholicism. They convert to Catholicism before they experience Catholic parish life. Like the gingerbread house, this sets up a dichotomy between Catholicism on paper and the church on the ground.

They aren't converted to Roman Catholicism in its concrete form but its abstract form. They adopt a disembodied

theology.

How often have you read Catholic apologists say things like "The Bible is the Church's book. So you can't grasp Scripture properly unless you read it in community"? Yet the process of conversion typically occurs in reverse. They don't convert to Catholicism by experiencing Catholicism as a living faith, but by reading Catholic apologists and the church fathers. By posing questions they don't think evangelicalism can answer.

By comparison, there's nothing ironic about reading yourself into evangelicalism or Calvinism because, initially, the primary question is whether it's true. Protestant theology is separable from communal life in a way that is not supposed to be the case in reference to Catholicism. Catholic theology is inseparable from institutional religion and the community of faith. That's because the Catholic church is the source of dogma, and there's a one-to-one correspondence between Catholic theology and the denomination that sponsors it.

In that regard, converts who read themselves into Catholicism are like a cessationist who converts to Pentecostalism by reading Gordon Fee and Craig Keener, and not because he has a charismatic experience. Only afterwards does he begin attending charismatic churches. But that's incongruous inasmuch as charismatic theology, if true, will have concrete manifestations.

4. Another revealing feature of this particular book is the background of the converts. To begin with, some converts already had a background in liturgical churches (Lutheran, Anglican, Episcopalian). It comes as no surprise when they convert to Catholicism since their religious background predisposed them in that direction.

5. On a related note, several converts had a background that was irreligious or nominally religious or nominally Protestant. Once again, it comes as no surprise that their background makes them susceptible to Catholicism inasmuch as they never had a strong, intellectually well-informed evangelical standard of comparison. That's another parallel with deconversion testimonies, where the apostate was typically raised in a fideistic, anti-intellectual church. To quote some examples from the book:

[Bishop Conley] I was brought up nominally Christian. My parents were both Christian, but for a large portion of my youth, we didn't go to church. Then for a few years we went to the Presbyterian church, only because my mother liked the preacher. But my sister and I didn't have any formal religious instruction growing up. My parents were Christian in their outlook and instilled in us Christian values, but we really didn't worship together as a family. We would go to church sometimes on Christmas and Easter. During junior high we went to Sunday school on and off (2).

[Thomas Joseph White] I grew up in southeast Georgia as the only child of a Jewish father and a Presbyterian mother. My parents were nominally or moderately religious. My father could be characterized as a somewhat secularized Jew and my mother was a modestly practicing Presbyterian (63).

[Karin Oberg] I grew up in Sweden and my family still resides there. Like many Swedish families, my family was not very religious, but held on to many religious customs and morals. As a baby I was baptized in the Swedish Lutheran Church, the state church at the time, and later I went to weekly Christian pre-school. My only memory of the latter is the time when I rejected the image of God as male and consequently drew him as a woman. My father, a self-proclaimed atheist and stoic, was quite proud at this early sign of freethinking and questioning of religious authority. My

mother identifies as a Christian but does not go to church. Apart from brief evening prayers with her as a young child, I had little religious formation...I asked my Lutheran confirmation pastor whether I should be confirmed if I sort of believed in God and didn't believe in Jesus. She said it was okay, and I got confirmed (130-131; 133).

[Chad Pecknold] What he remembers of the religion in his childhood is—not much. Christmas was "a big deal," as were Sunday dinners. But why Sunday, why Christmas? These seem in retrospect to have been mere "residuals" of Christian life. His grandmother was a "very Catholic Quebecois" woman, and his grandfather, with a Church of Ireland background, agreed to raising their children Catholic. But as for the home his own parents made, "while we sometimes went to my mother's Presbyterian church for Easter, and I sometimes would go

with evangelical neighbors to Vacation Bible School, Christian faith was not integral to our life as a family. It was a "nice" thing but not a necessary thing. So while it was not an entirely secular upbringing, neither can I call it Christian (214).

[Douglas Beaumont] I was not raised in a religious environment. We did not attend church anywhere or read the Bible. I said nighttime prayers with my mom and she would take me to Vacation Bible School some summers though...However, between that and my eighteenth year there was simply no "input" as far as faith went. So it was not a lack in Evangelicalism, it was that I was simply not part of it (233).

The gingerbread house-part 2

Continuing my series on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018). Douglas Beaumont is a graduate of the late Norm Geisler's seminary. For several graduates, Geisler's Thomism was an expressway to Catholicism.

[Beaumont] One weakness is that it is easy for Catholics to get so caught up in all the ritual that they slack off on fellowship and discipleship. Many Evangelicals are adult converts; they became Evangelical in a very personal, usually powerful way and they carry that with them into their faith life. This is why they go to church even though there is no "pain of sin" if they skip out. This means that the average Evangelical church is likely to have many more fervent believers (234).

A significant source of the difficulty is that a given person can be legitimately categorized as a Catholic even if they are in complete disagreement with the Catholic Church. That is because one does not become Catholic simply by agreeing with Church dogma, but rather by baptism. Because baptism is indelible on the Catholic account, dissent does not change the person's identification as Catholic.

However, membership in most non-Catholic Christian groups is almost solely predicated on one's agreement with a given set of doctrinal affirmations. Consequently disagreement with a group's doctrine automatically removes them from that group. So to call someone a Calvinist who denies the doctrine of total depravity and perseverance of the saints would simply make no sense. However, calling someone a Catholic who affirms abortion and denies Christ's resurrection does make sense, but in a different way. I think this paradigmatic difference gives the appearance of strength to claims that are true in a sense but really cannot do the work they are meant to do in an argument. (235-36).

The gingerbread house-part 3

Continuing my series on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018).

(Joshua Charles) There are, in the Scripture itself, always two voices of authority: the authority of the Scripture and a living authority, where in the guise of Moses, the Judges of Israel, the priests, the prophets, King David and Solomon, and then finally Jesus and the Apostles. These stood side-by-side—Scripture and Living Authority—throughout the Bible (99).

- i)** Here he jumbles together civil authorities and religious figures.
- ii)** The office of kingship didn't confer infallibility on OT kings. Some kings might be inspired, but not by virtue of their kingship.
- iii)** The office of priesthood didn't confer infallibility on OT priests. Their job was to present offerings in the tabernacle and temple.

iv) There wasn't a continuous series of prophets, year after year.

If I was a 1C peasant and Jesus was speaking to me, was what he was saying authoritative? Of course...But that means something outside of Scripture is fully authoritative...Let's say I was hearing the Apostles preach outside the Temple in Acts. Is what they are saying authoritative to me?...Once again, something outside the Scripture had full divinely given authority (100).

i) That's a classic uncomprehending objection because sola scriptura takes effect after the era of public revelation.

ii) What Jesus and the Apostles orally taught is fully authoritative. My recollection of what they orally taught is not. There's an elementary difference between the inspired record of what they said and my fallible memory of what they said.

That gets us to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. This council delivered dogma...It was made up of the Apostles and the elders (e.g., non-Apostles). Thus,

non-Apostles, already in the very first few decades of the Church, are themselves somehow invested with binding, divine authority (100).

That's clearly fallacious because it's not an example of elders operating independently, apart from apostles taking the lead. So it provides no presumption or precedent for conciliar authority consisting of bishops without apostles participating and presiding. And James isn't an elder but a close relative of Jesus.

Scripture itself never says when this living voice of authority ceased (101).

i) To begin with, his objection is predicated on a false premise. As I already explained, his appeal to "a living authority" is equivocal, and, what is more, there wasn't a continuous, infallible authority side-by-side Scripture. It never ceased because it never existed. You don't need to be told when something ceased if there was nothing to cease in the first place.

ii) In addition, historical knowledge isn't generally based on being told that something ended. Rather, we infer that it ended because there's no evidence that it still exists. We don't need to be told that the Irish elk became extinct. The fact that there have been no confirmed sightings of the Irish elk for millennia is sufficient reason to believe it became extinct.

iii) Likewise, we don't need a mathematical cutoff to know that, as a rule, reports are less reliable as the interval between the report and the reported event increases beyond living memory. Normally, one qualification to be an apostle was to be an eyewitness of Jesus during his public ministry. And some Christians who weren't apostles met that criterion as well. But that runs out.

iv) We have no NT examples of apostles transferring their full authority to "successors". And even if we did, we have no NT examples of their immediate "successors" transferring full apostolic authority to "successors" of "successors" of apostles.

But if I adhered to sola scriptura, which says that the Bible is the sole infallible authority in the Church, then the idea of an infallible canon was simply no longer coherent, because by necessity, one would have to appeal to things outside of the Bible for the contents of that canon, as the Bible never defines it, either in the OT or NT. So the final question was: whom do I trust to get the canon correct? Who is the divinely ordained authority by which we may be certain that we have the correct canon? (102).

1. That's a loaded question. To see that, compare two different ways to frame the issue:

i) What's your authority for the canon?

ii) What's your evidence for the canon?

Why should a Christian frame the issue in terms of authority rather than evidence?

2. Constantly appealing to authority is regressive. If that's the criterion, then it doesn't stop with the church, for you must go outside the church to find some infallible yardstick to authorize the church. It's funny how many Catholic converts and apologists haven't caught on to the self-defeating logic of their own appeal.

3. Suppose, for argument's sake, we can't be certain of the canon. Suppose no one can be certain of the canon. Suppose God hasn't made it possible for Christians to be certain of the canon. What if we must settle for probable evidence?

Put another way, assuming for argument's sake that Protestants only have a fallible canon, it doesn't follow that Catholics have an infallible canon. A fallible Protestant canon doesn't entail an infallible alternative waiting in the wings. Notice how illogical the Catholic argument really is.

4. What's so great about infallibility, anyway? You don't have to be infallible to be right. We hold many fallible but true beliefs.

5. If your salvation hangs on whether or not 2 Peter is canonical, then certainty regarding the canon becomes all-

important, but what reason is there to think that God will damn you if you make an innocent mistake about a canonical candidate because the evidence is uncertain?

6. Then there's the mechanical Catholic trope about not having an inspired table of contents or infallible list. Catholic converts and apologists talk about the canon as if there's a room full of books to choose from, and there's nothing about the individual books that distinguishes one candidate from another. But that's an abstract, fact-free way of viewing the issue. To my knowledge we have fewer than 30 extant Christian writings from the 1C. Other than the NT documents, what other religious literature is early enough to have been written by the attributed or implied author? What other documents do we have from the lifetime of the apostles, or their younger contemporaries? Certainly not the Gospel of Peter, or Mary, or Thomas, &c. Besides 1 Clement, what else is there? The date of the Epistle of Barnabas is disputed, and in any case, the work is pseudepigraphal.

Clement, Papias, Polycarp, and Ignatius are third-generation Christians. At best they're disciples of disciples of Jesus. That's two steps removed from Jesus.

7. I haven't conceded that the Protestant canon is necessarily infallible.

i) One problem is that certainty and infallibility are distinct concepts. In addition, you don't have to be certain to be right.

ii) Catholic apologists operate with a model of certainty based on verbal guidance. The pope or church councils telling you what's true or false.

But that neglects or overlooks nonverbal guidance. Consider how God providentially guided Abraham's servant to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24). That involved nonverbal guidance rather than verbal guidance. Another example is how God directed the course of Joseph's life (Gen 37-50). Much of that is providential rather than propositional. God operating behind-the-scenes. God can providentially cause his people to form true beliefs without a living oracle to give explicit directives.

8. This brings us back to the issue of authority. For instance, Beaumont defines authority as "the right to compel agreement", **D. Beaumont, ed. Evangelical Exodus: Evangelical Seminarians and Their Paths to Rome (Ignatius 2016)**, 247.

Suppose we apply that concept to revelatory dreams in Scripture. Are they "authoritative"? In many cases, they contain no divine commands or prohibitions. Although many revelatory dreams provide divine guidance or even certainty regarding the future, that's nonverbal guidance. Showing rather than telling.

In principle, then, it's possible for the Protestant canon to be certain without being infallible (in the propositional sense). Likewise, it doesn't require authority to yield certainty. God can guide people into the truth through nonverbal means.

I was always disturbed by the idea that the Church got it wrong for 1500 years (i.e. the vast majority of its history), but

only 500 years ago, we suddenly got it right (103).

i) Whichever side you come down on, many professing Christians got it wrong. If that's disturbing, it's not disturbing for one faith-tradition rather than another. Rather, it means God protects some Christians or professing Christians from certain theological errors but doesn't protect others.

Indeed, from a Catholic standpoint, God doesn't protect the vast majority of Catholics from theological error. And he doesn't ordinarily protect popes and bishops from theological error. The "charism of infallibility" is very rare, even by Catholic standards.

ii) I'm not disturbed the the idea that "the Church" got it wrong. What would be disturbing is if the Bible got it wrong.

Why, I wonder, are there some who insist that reading the writings of those Church Fathers who both knew and were discipled by the Apostles (or their disciples) is somehow less reliable than reading Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the like, who lived 1,500 years later? Who would common sense dictate is more trustworthy in their doctrine? (105).

How could I take the words of Ignatius, who was disciplined by the Apostle John, or Clement of Rome, who is mentioned in the Bible, as seriously as some megachurch pastor, or some Protestant theologian thousands of years after the fact (108)?

i) Was Clement's proof of the Resurrection (i.e. the legend of the Phoenix) handed down to him by apostles who "discipled" him?

ii) I see Catholic converts and apologists make broad claims about the apostolic fathers, but when I compare their claims to the primary sources, there's a shortfall:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/12/the-apostolic-fathers.html>

(Vermeule) I eventually couldn't help but believe that the apostolic succession, through Peter as the designated leader and *primes inter pares*, is in some logical or theological sense prior to everything else—including even Scripture, whose formation was guided and completed by the apostles and their successors, themselves inspired by the Holy Spirit. A corollary is the very great evil of schism and private judgment, brought home to

*me when the Episcopal Church essentially decided to go its own way based on novel views...Ultimate I think with Newman—and with the Notre Dame historian Brad Gregory, whose brilliant book *The Unintended Reformation* crystallizes the idea—that there is no stable middle ground between Catholicism and atheist materialism. One must always be traveling, or slipping unintentionally, in one direction or the other (59-60).*

i) No books of the Bible were written by the "successors" to the apostles (as Vermeule defines apostolic succession). And some NT books weren't authored by apostles (i.e. Mark, Luke, Hebrews, Jude).

ii) Gregory's book may be impressive if you only read one side of the argument. For another side of the argument:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/rebel-ranks-martin-luther-brad-gregory/>

(Ward) I asked him how submission to the pope differed from submission to the leader of a cult. In becoming a Catholic,

wouldn't I be agreeing in advance to anything the pope might say? What if the pope told me, like Jim Jones told his disciples at Jonestown, to drink poisoned Kool-Aid? My friend, rather than dodging the term "cult leader," took it head on... The Christian cult was established by Jesus Christ with a particular constitution, an apostolic constitution, with Peter and his successors at its head, holding the keys, serving as prime minister to the king. "Whoever receives you receives me," Jesus said, to the Twelve. It is Christ's Church, but his authority is deputed to his apostles, the chief of whom is the holder of the Petrine office, Christ's particular vicar. Now, I had always said that I would follow Christ whoever he led, would obey Christ whatever he required of me, so I was evidently not adverse in principle to "agreeing in advance to whatever my cult leader asked." The question I was really struggling with, I began to see, was not about authority as such, but

about where that authority, Christ's authority, was located. If it wasn't to be found in a two-thousand-year tradition of magisterial teaching, headed by the pope, where was it? (189).

i) Jesus doesn't require Christians to agree in advance to whatever "the cult leader" demands. Our commitment to Biblical authority is retrospective, not prospective. That phase of redemptive history is behind us. We agree to it after the fact, not in advance of the fact. In a Bible-based faith, we know ahead of time what we're getting into.

Of course, that represents the Protestant perspective, not the Catholic perspective-but that's my point. At best, Ward's argument only goes through if you buy into Catholic ecclesiology. Otherwise, we're not signing a blank check.

ii) It's revealing that he never circles back around to answer his own question. If the pope ordered Catholics to drink poison, should they obey?

iii) "If it wasn't to be found in a two-thousand-year tradition of magisterial teaching, headed by the pope, where was it?" Try the Bible.

The gingerbread house-part 4

Continuing my series on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018).

(Beaumont) what history reveals is that Protestantism simply did not exist for the first 1,400 years after Jesus started his Church. What follows is that Protestantism isn't the Church Jesus started (230).

A variation on standard Catholic trope:

1. From a Protestant perspective, the Protestant faith is older than the Catholic faith. The Protestant faith existed in the 1C. It is represented by the Apostolic church. And Protestant theology existed in the Bible.

2. Over time, the church of Rome increasingly deviated from NT Christianity. We might compare it to the director's cut. Oftentimes, the theatrical cut differs from the director's cut because studio execs pressure the director to make the film shorter. The only version of the film the general public or film critics are aware of is the theatrical cut. But sometimes the uncut reel is discovered and restored.

Another example is *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Her father edited her diary for publication. When Anne Frank scholars got their hands on the original diary and made comparisons,

they discovered the omissions. It was then republished unabridged.

The fact that Roman Catholicism became the dominant theological paradigm in the West doesn't make it older or more authentic than the Protestant faith.

3. What does Beaumont mean by not existing? Does he mean the complete package of Protestant doctrines didn't exist in the pre-Reformation church? If so, that either proves too much or too little inasmuch as the complete package of post-Vatican II theology didn't exist in the pre-Reformation church. So by his own yardstick, what follows is that Roman Catholicism isn't the Church Jesus started.

4. Beaumont's claim also raises the question of what kind of church Jesus founded. What are the components of the church Jesus founded? From a Protestant perspective:

- The Biblical revelation as the norm for doctrine and ethics
- The Spirit gathering individuals into communities of faith through regeneration and sanctification
- Church office (elder, deacons). Charismatics include healers and prophets.
- New covenant rites (baptism, communion, possibly footwashing)

5. There's a necessary distinction between norms and application. The church has always deviated from the norm or standard in varying degrees. We can see this in the several NT epistles, where some churches planted and overseen by apostles nevertheless deviate from the

apostolic kerygma. Church history isn't a history of pure continuity or pure discontinuity. Rather, it ranges a long a spectrum of fidelity and infidelity.

In the end, to trust the Bible is to trust the Church that compiled it. D.

Beaumont, ed. Evangelical Exodus: Evangelical Seminarians and Their Paths to Rome (Ignatius 2016), 229.

Here I'm momentarily stepping outside the Mind, Heart, & Soul anthology to address another argument Beaumont proposes in a different book. This is a variation on another Catholic trope.

A basic problem is the artificial way in which he frames the issue. "The Church" didn't compile the Bible. We need to recover a more organic understanding of the canon:

- i)** To begin with, the church inherited a canon from the Jews. The NT supplemented and completed the canon of Scripture.
- ii)** NT writers authored documents to and for nascent growing Christian communities. There was a built-in constituency for these documents. The NT writers were known to some of the original recipients while some of the original recipients were known to NT writers.
- iii)** But the documents were also written with a view to further converts and future Christians.

iv) Christian scribes independently copied and disseminating these writings. That included growing collections of NT documents. Documents circulating in larger editions.

v) Around the mid-2C and beyond, apocryphal Gospels and other imitations of NT writings arose, but these are too late to be authentic. They aren't viable candidates for the NT canon. The attributed authors were long dead by then.

The gingerbread house-part 5

Continuing my series on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018).

(Adrian Vermeule) I was baptized and raised as an Episcopalian/Anglican; my first school was run by Anglican nuns and I later attended an historically Episcopalian boarding school. I fell away from the Episcopal Church in college, and when I returned in later life, it was a different place. There are many "small-O" orthodox Christians remaining within it, including dear friends, but they have lost control of the institution to heterodox forces (58-59).

(Oberg) Going to the Episcopal Church near Harvard pushed me over the edge. In Holland, I had a brilliant, passionate Anglican priest, who reminded me of C. S. Lewis. He was prolife, which upset many, and I suspected he had been exiled from a diocese in England because of this. With him as my shepherd, I felt no urgency to convert [to Catholicism]. That changed when I returned to America. People at the Episcopal Church I attended were very nice, but it became clear that it was not

my spiritual home. There was dissonance between the Nicene Creed they recited and what was actually believed that I could not comprehend (117).

(Fuller) ...part of what led to [my conversion] was the belief that if you're strongly committed to ecumenical reunion, the greater desire for that reunion lay with the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics.

One of the things that did bother me was that the Episcopal Church became an advocate of things like abortion, having begun by merely tolerating it... While the drift of the Episcopal Church, and of the worldwide Anglican communion of which it is a part, continued apace... (162, 165).

i) The irony is that the Catholic church is following the same trajectory as the Episcopal church. While this has accelerated under Pope Francis, modernism has been infiltrating the Catholic church at the highest levels since Pope Pius XII. So these converts are abandoning one sinking ship to board another sinking ship.

ii) I'm not committed to ecumenical reunion.

iii) To my knowledge, the Anglican communion in general is not adrift. The Anglican communion has three wings:

progressive, evangelical, and Anglo-Catholic. There's a very sizable and vibrant evangelical wing of the Anglican communion—unlike the dying progressive wing. The Catholic church has no counterpart to the evangelical wing of the Anglican communion. Moreover, there's an ongoing realignment to exclude representatives of the progressive wing, like the ECUSA. So for all its faults, Anglicanism is far healthier than Roman Catholicism.

The gingerbread house-part 6

Continuing my series on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018).

*Pecknold attended a magnet humanities school in Seattle, where a teacher introduced him to existentialist like Camus and behaviorists like B. F. Skinner. From Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus* he took away the message that life "is all meaningless, all I have is my friendships here, and that is it." And so one day in his teens, after a relationship with a girlfriend had broken up, he was suddenly struck, while driving somewhere, with the insignificance of our lives "on this tiny blue planet," and he had to pull the car over, simply shaking with the despair of it.*

It was shortly after that, in the darkness of his bedroom in his family's home, that Pecknold literally had a vision. "The room was illuminated, and the face of Christ came to me and said 'give me your life'...I think the face of Christ was very much like Eastern Orthodox icons (215).

I don't object in principle to modern-day visions of Jesus. But it's odd that a Christophany would have the appearance of a Byzantine icon. That's a stylized, unrealistic image of Jesus. If Jesus really appeared to Chad, why would he look like a work of art?

At Seattle Pacific University he encountered the countercultural side of evangelical Christianity, reading Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon's Resident Aliens...A NT professor at SPU named William Lane become a kind of mentor... (216).

After chapel, we'd meet to talk, get some breakfast, then go hear Earl Palmer, who was a Presbyterian pastor at the University [Presbyterian] church [near the University of Washington campus]....then we'd go for a big long hike, or do something big in the afternoon, and then we'd go to St. Mark's [Episcopal] Cathedral for Compline (216).

Those Earl Palmer sermons at University presbyterian Church, often invoking Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and C. S. Lewis, had their effect as well (217).

i) There's a twinge of nostalgia as I read these descriptions because his life crisscrosses mine. We were both students of Bill Lane. I used to attend concerts at UPres. A performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion lingers in memory. I used to listen to the compline service on radio, and I once attended the service. It was entertaining to hear Peter Hallock's florid recitation of 1 Pet 5:8. I drove past St. Marks hundreds of times.

ii) But with the partial exception of Bill Lane, Chad's Protestant experience was mainly progressive. Reading trendy theologians like Hauerwas, and sitting under PCUSA pastor Edwin Palmer, with his chic references to Barth, Bonhoeffer, Tolkien, and Lewis to impress university students.

But Chad kept coming back to the question of ecclesiology as primary, and with it the apostolic succession, which "mattered as something that God established to guard the deposit," something he did not see the Church of England doing. If the Church was indefectible, he increasingly thought, then somehow the papacy was too. "Papal claims are just extensions of ecclesial claims...If we want a really coherent Church, it has to have recourse to transcendent claims that govern it,

and that has to be Scripture and Tradition, and they have to be juridically enshrined and protected, and that has to be through councils and it has to be through popes, because those are the divine vehicles through which God governs" (220).

i) The church can be indefectible even though denominations are defectible, because the church is instantiated in different denominations at different times and places. When they outlive their usefulness, the church is then instantiated in newer denominations. There's a constant process of turnover—like the human body, which loses old cells and gains new cells. The body, the structure, remains, but the composition undergoes continuous change.

ii) Like many converts to Rome, Chad doesn't begin with the historical phenomena of the church but with an abstract, Platonic ideal. It has to be this way, even though there's a glaring mismatch between the paper theory and obstreperous reality.

Yet when we went into Memorial Chapel and approached the shrine to Mary to pray about the two jobs, suddenly he felt that the eyes of the icon of Mary were on him, staying with him as he moved (223).

It's hard to take that seriously. The impression that the eyes of a painting (or icon) follow the viewer is a common optical illusion. Nothing miraculous. It has a scientific explanation:

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2004/sep/22/arts.science>

And even if we didn't have a scientific explanation, it's still a naturally occurring phenomenon.

She stared me right in the eye, pierced me with her eye, and said, "I want you to go to Catholic University." (223).

How should we interpret his claim?

i) It could be a tall tale. That's not the first explanation I'd reach for.

ii) It could be a hallucination. I don't know enough about his state of mind at the time to have an informed opinion one way or the other.

iii) It could be supernatural but occultic. Notice the striking parallel between his purported experience and this:

14 Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded

by the sword and yet lived. 15 The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed (Rev 13:14-15).

From a Protestant perspective, an icon of Mary is equivalent to a pagan idol.

The gingerbread house-7

Continuing my series on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018).

(Arkes) The question was, "Do you believe in the Church as a truth-telling institution?" And I thought at once, "I do, I really do..."

Cardinal Law became a good friend, and he never relented in his interest in bringing me into the Church (152-53).

Arkes is a Jewish convert to Catholicism. He did yeoman work for the prolife movement. He seems like a good guy.

That said, it's striking how blind he is to the irony of these two statements, which he makes back-to-back in the interview. Was Cardinal Law a truth-teller about the clerical abuse scandal? Has the Catholic church been a truth-teller about the clerical abuse scandal? What about the False Decretals?

The gingerbread house-part 8

This is the final installment in my series on Robert George & R. J. Snell, eds., *Mind, Heart, and Soul: Intellectuals and the Path to Rome* (2018).

(Thomas Joseph White) the next semester I took a class on Early Christianity, thinking that if I studied the historical genesis of Christianity, I would figure out what it was at the beginning. In that class, we were exposed to authors like Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus and Augustine and Athanasius, including his important book On the Incarnation, and figures like John Chrysostom. As I read them, I had a rising instinct that whatever these authors were articulating, it was something very like Eastern Orthodoxy or Roman Catholicism, like what Newman means when he says that to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant (66).

What's striking about this is how, for him, the historical genesis of Christianity is subsequent to NT times. What it was like "at the beginning" means after it changed hands from the apostles and contemporaries of Jesus to the church fathers. He doesn't begin with the NT, or the OT, to see how NT faith is rooted in the OT.

(Matthew Schmitz) My faith is not shaken by what the pope [Francis] is doing, though I have a very negative view of it. Many would say the pope isn't compromising the Church's teaching on marriage. I don't think that. I think the pope's doing it, and that if he fully and finally succeeded, the Church would be shattered. The Catholic faith would be falsified...If one were prepared to become Catholic before but not after the regrettable events of 2016, one should

have given up on the Church much earlier (127).

A convert with a tipping-point. We'll see if he follows through on that.

VI. Development of Doctrine

No hard feelings, right?

One of my objections to the doctrine of development is that it's so flippant. To take a few examples:

1. The medieval papacy authorized the use of torture on "heretics":

http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/01p/1252-05-15,_SS_Innocentius_IV,_Bulla_%27Ad_Extirpanda%27,_EN.pdf

That's admitted in a roundabout way in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, but Rome now repudiates the traditional policy:

2298 In times past, cruel practices were commonly used by legitimate governments to maintain law and order, often without protest from the Pastors of the Church, who themselves adopted in their own tribunals the prescriptions of Roman law concerning torture. Regrettable as these facts are, the Church always taught the duty of clemency and mercy. She forbade clerics to shed blood. In recent times it has become evident that these cruel practices were neither necessary for

public order, nor in conformity with the legitimate rights of the human person. On the contrary, these practices led to ones even more degrading. It is necessary to work for their abolition. We must pray for the victims and their tormentors.

But what good does that do for all the victims of papal-sanctioned torture? How does that restore all the victims who died under papal-sanctioned torture—or survived, but were maimed, mutilated, and/or disabled, living in chronic pain or psychologically broken from the effects of torture?

We changed our mind. Sorry about that. No hard feelings, right?

2. For centuries, grieving parents were told that unbaptized babies went to Limbo rather than heaven. While that's better than hell, it also means the parents will be permanently separated from their deceased children. Even if the parents are ultimately saved, they occupy a different place than their children.

When you consider the number of miscarriages alone, that's a huge number of unbaptized babies who died in the womb. Not to mention unbaptized dying newborns and toddlers.

That centuries-old pastoral counseling has now been mothballed:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html

But what good does that do for all the bereaved who were indoctrinated in the traditional teaching? It's too late for them.

We changed our mind. Sorry about that. No hard feelings, right?

3. In traditional Catholic teaching, suicides were presumptively damned, denied a Catholic funeral service and consecrated burial in a Catholic churchyard. For instance:

Q. 1274. What sin is it to destroy one's own life, or commit suicide, as this act is called?

A. It is a mortal sin to destroy one's own life or commit suicide, as this act is called, and persons who willfully and knowingly commit such an act die in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of Christian burial.

<http://www.baltimore-catechism.com/lesson33.htm>

Until just a generation ago and for many centuries before, controversy over homilies delivered at the Catholic

funerals of suicides was unheard of for the simple reason that Church law forbade all funerals for suicides, so, no funeral homilies on suicide could have been preached. See 1917 CIC 1240 § 1, n. 3.

<https://canonlawblog.wordpress.com/2018/12/15/about-that-funeral-mass-homily-some-points/>

So grieving survivors had a doublewhammy: the suicide of their loved one and Mother Church shunning their loved one.

Yet the centuries-old policy has now been softened:

2282 Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.

2283 We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.

But once again, what good does that do for all the grieving survivors who lived under the traditional policy? It's too late for them.

We changed our mind. Sorry about that. No hard feelings, right?

My immediate point is not to evaluate the positions in question. I'm not commenting on whether I think the new positions mark an improvement over the traditional positions, or vice versa. The point, rather, is that here's a denomination which lays claim to unique divine guidance and protection from error.

Catholic apologists will counter that these changes go to show that the traditional teaching and practice never were infallible or irreformable. Yet these concern fundamental moral and pastoral issues. Not torturing religious opponents is hardly a marginal issue in social ethics.

Likewise, what's more important than not telling grief-stricken family and friends the wrong thing about the fate of suicides and dead babies? Religion is centrally concerned with what happens after we die.

If the Catholic church wasn't protected from error on such crucial issues, why believe it enjoys any special protection from error? Why trust it with your immortal soul?

I'm not suggesting that Christians are obligated to give confident answers if we don't know the answer. But that's not what Rome did. Rather, Rome came down firmly on both sides of the issue at different times. It changes its mind: "We were mistaken, but that's water under the bridge." That's so flippant and callous.

Cardinal Müller on Catholicism and Protestantism

This will be a long post. The length is mainly due to the fact that it's running commentary on some things that Cardinal Müller said in three recent articles. If you wish to expedite the reading process, you can just skip the quotes.

Cardinal Müller represents the conservative, intellectual wing of the hierarchy. So it's useful to see how he defends Catholicism and critiques Protestantism. I always like to study the best of the competition:

<https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/10/57446/>

His work on the development of dogma is, we can say, nothing short of genius. In it Newman developed principles for the historical continuity and identity of revelation under the conditions of finite, human knowing, within the believing Church, founded by Christ and preserved in—and attended ever more deeply into—truth by the Holy Spirit.

Actually, he developed principles that turn tradition into silly putty.

After this Newman could no longer shy away from the insight that it was the Catholic Church of the Roman pope (so disdained in England)—and not the Anglican national church, which had existed since the sixteenth century—which stood in real continuity with the Church of the apostles.

The Anglican church, considered as a package, only existed since the 16C. But by the same token, post-Vatican II Catholicism, considered as a package, only existed since the 1960s. Modern Catholicism has a combination of traditional elements and theological innovations. You won't find the package of post-Vatican II Catholicism in the ancient church. Indeed, that's why the theory of development was hustled in to paper over the divergence—which has becoming increasingly pronounced since Newman's day.

With his extraordinary knowledge of the Bible and of the Church fathers...

Did he have an extraordinary knowledge of the Bible?

...he could not escape the conclusion that the Catholic Church is located in full continuity of doctrine and Church polity

with the Church of the apostles, and that Protestant charges of corrupting the apostolic faith or of supplementing it with unbiblical elements of doctrine rather fall back on themselves. In his Apologia Newman wrote: “And as far as I know myself, my one paramount reason for contemplating a change is my deep, unvarying conviction that our Church is in schism...”

How can you be in schism in relation to another denomination (Catholicism) that's constantly reinventing itself? The 1C Roman church differs from the 5C church of Rome, which differs from the medieval church, which differs from the Tridentine church, which differs from the church under Pius IX, which differs from the church under Pius XII, which differs from the church under John-Paul II, which differs from the church under Francis? In relation to which church of Rome are you in schism?

...and that my salvation depends on my joining the Church of Rome.”

That's the traditional paradigm. To be saved you must be a communicant member of Rome, in submission to the pope. But surely Cardinal Müller doesn't believe that, even if

Newman did. So a basic premise of Newman's conversion has been posthumously retracted.

He also rejected that we could pragmatically settle for the splintering of Christendom with the notion that there are several branches on the Church's one tree.

How about this metaphor: Rome was a dying tree which disseminated seeds that took root to grow into new, vibrant, fruitful trees (many Protestant denominations).

Yet the plurality of communities around now cannot count as a partial realization of Christ's Church; the Church of Christ is indivisible. And indivisibility—which expresses itself visibly in the Church's unity of belief, its sacramental life, and its apostolic constitution—belongs inexorably to the essence of the Church. The goal of the ecumenical movement is not, then, a manmade merger of ecclesial confederations. It is rather the restoration of full communion in faith and of the bishops as successors to the

apostles, as it has been realized historically and continuously since the beginning in the Church, which “is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him” (Dominus Iesus 17).

Is the church indivisible? What does that mean? The church is certainly differentiable in time and space. It doesn't exist all at once or all in one place.

Let's play along with Newman's acorn-to-oak metaphor. An oak produces acorns. A fraction of the acorns germinate and become oak trees. Eventually the original oak tree dies. It predeceases them. They replace it. But they're the same kind of tree. So there's generational continuity between the original oak tree and its descendants. What about that as a model of the church?

Whoever takes seriously the incarnation must also take seriously the Church as the work of God and beware any manipulation by ideologically stubborn pressure groups.

Evangelicals don't deny that the church is the work of God—indeed, the ongoing work of God.

The visible Church is the concretization of the Word of God's incarnate presence in Jesus Christ.

It is in Catholic ecclesiology, but not in NT ecclesiology.

Because Israel bears a salvation history, because the incarnation happened, because Christ has really given up his life on the cross for the salvation of the world and has really risen again—thus there is also the concrete obligation faithfully to obey revelation, which makes present the confession of faith in the promise of salvation, in the sacraments, and in ecclesial authority of the apostles' successors in the episcopate. It is within the context of these confessions that Newman wants to be understood.

Because the visible, sacramental Church and the invisible community of the faithful belong together indissolubly, Newman had to pose the question: Which among the visible Christian communities now on offer can rightly lay claim to an identity of confession of faith and of historical continuity?

i) To begin with, the Catholic church can't rightly lay claim to an identity of confession of faith.

ii) In addition, Newman was operating with an Anglo-Catholic paradigm. But low-church evangelicals like me don't make that paradigm our frame of reference. Suppose we try a different paradigm. Since Newman likes an organic, botanical analogy, let's run with that. Trees have lifecycles. The parent tree disseminates the next generation. Then the parent tree dies. The next generation repeats the same cycle. So there's a lineage of trees, where each derives from a parent tree. And they're all the same kind of tree. That's a way to illustrate Protestant ecclesiology, using the same organic, botanical metaphor as Newman, but developing that in a different direction.

iii) A basic problem with the church of Rome is that it's not the same tree over the centuries. It becomes diseased and mutates.

The challenge to individuals to seek truth and to face up to their obligatory power had increased enormously since the days when European rulers could still determine the religion of their subjects.

That's worth pondering. Private judgment is more inescapable than ever.

Here again Newman is impressively relevant. The declaration Dominus Iesus rejected the so-called

pluralist theory of religion that relativizes Christ and the Church as irreconcilable with the fundamentals and substance of the Catholic faith. This theory about the equality and similarity of several forms of mediation and several mediators is based on epistemological relativism and skepticism. It assumes that every person can, with the help of his ancestral religion and culture, overcome his selfishness in order to engage his fellow human and to open himself to reality, which is always grander than anything we in our finitude can think or do. This is the salvation communicated to every religiously-minded person irrespective of whether he, before the ever-vanishing horizon of reality, imagines God as a personal God or an impersonal numinosum, or whether after death he anticipates a personal resurrection or a biological resuscitation of corpses, as unity with the one-and-all of being or else nothing beyond personal consciousness.

For Newman it was clear that the Christian confession of the universal salvific will of the one God and of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ's revelation (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4ff) does not denigrate pre-Christian religions by absolutizing a tradition

unique to the Christian West. Whoever debunks as unproven and indemonstrable the fundamental dogma of relativists, metaphysical skeptics, and agnostics for whom a historical self-revelation of God is impossible will also confess that God is already at work in the human pursuit of truth and in all religions' desire for salvation. Thus in Jesus Christ "all people are saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

The church of Rome has shifted from exclusivism to inclusivism. Indeed, it used to have a very austere version of inclusivism: you had to be in submission to the pope to be saved. You had to receive sacraments from Roman Catholic priests to be saved.

Now, however, Catholicism has switched to inclusivism. But where's the bright line between inclusivism and religious pluralism? In both, non-Christian religions can be a bridge to heaven.

The Church as sacrament means being taken up into the sonship of Christ, who as head makes the Church his body, uniting individual believers as a community and imparting to it all the

charisms and ministries to fulfill its mission of the world's salvation.

Even if we grant for argument's sake that the Church is a sacrament, how does that entail that the church is taken up into the sonship of Christ?

<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/01/by-what-authority>

Commissioning his apostles, Jesus also commissions their successors, that is, the bishops, together with the successor of Peter, the pope, as their head.

How does it follow that by commissioning the apostles, he commissions the post-apostolic generation? How does Jesus personally choosing the disciples vouch for bishops he never chose?

There is agreement among all Christians that Holy Scripture is the Word of God. But since this Word is conveyed in human language, it does not have the evidence (quoad se—in itself) that the Protestants want to attribute to it. Rather, there is need for a human interpretation on the part of the teachers of the faith whose

authority comes from the Holy Spirit. Toward those who hear the Word of God, these teachers represent God's own authority, making use of human words and decisions (quoad nos—to us). The task of authoritative teaching and governing cannot be left solely to the individual believer who in his or her conscience comes to accept a certain truth. After all, revelation has been entrusted to the Church as a whole. Therefore, the Magisterium is an essential part of the Church's mission.

i) It's unclear what he's saying. Is he saying the Bible lacks the evidence in itself for its own inspiration? If so, how is that an implication of the fact that revelation is expressed in human language? As it stands, the inference is invalid.

ii) Yes, Scripture needs to be interpreted, but is Cardinal Müller saying that anything in human language is so ambiguous that we can't ascertain what it probably means? But if he's that skeptical about human language, then that sabotages the teaching of the Catholic church, which is conveyed through human language. It's self-defeating for him to impute fatal equivocation to human language in general.

iii) Although there are many ambiguous statements in Scripture (at least for modern readers), that's offset by the redundancy of Biblical teaching.

iv) It's true that not all Bible readers are equally competent. The Protestant hermeneutic doesn't imply parity between all Bible readers. The interpretation of each individual is not on a par with every other individual. Some readers have far greater natural aptitude and expertise.

That's not the point of contrast with the Catholic alternative. The problem, rather, is that Rome claims the ability to bypass transparent, responsible methods of exegesis and substitutes the sheer ecclesiastical authority to posit the meaning. Interpretations not answerable to rational scrutiny. In Protestant exegesis, by contrast, interpretations must be justified by reason and evidence. We should go with the interpretation that has the best exegetical supporting arguments.

In our creed we profess our faith by making use of human words. These words are subject to a certain change, as far as the mode of expression is concerned. This is possible and indeed necessary, since, as St. Thomas clearly states, "the act of the believer does not terminate in a proposition, but in a thing" (STh II-II 1,2, ad 2). Inasmuch as the teaching of the apostles—and thus

the teaching of the Church—is the Word of God in the words of human beings, the Word of God takes shape and develops in the Church’s consciousness of her faith, quite analogously to the way each of the faithful undergoes a spiritual and historical development under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, the mission of the Holy Spirit does not consist in creating new doctrines, but in making present in the Church the fullness of the revelation of Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 16:13).

i) In exegesis, we should interpret words based on what they meant at the time of writing.

ii) Perhaps Cardinal Müller intends to say there's sometimes we need to update our formulations, or adapt them to different cultures. If so, that's not a point of contrast with Protestant theological method.

Of course, as a Catholic, one cannot ignore the developed doctrine of the Church in order to attend solely to the supposedly pure doctrine of Scripture. The parable of the prodigal son, for

example, does not give a catechetical instruction on the sacrament of repentance in its matter (repentance, confession, satisfaction) and form (absolution by the priest). If one were to look at Scripture alone, one could then conclude that, since the son did not actually get around to confessing his sins, neither do we need to do so. However, opposing Scripture against the Church in this way would mean completely to ignore the words of Christ, who entrusted the apostles—with Peter as their head—with the faithful preservation of the entire deposit of faith.

That's very revealing. So he thinks the parable of the prodigal son is a proof-text for auricular confession to a Roman Catholic priest! It's certainly understandable why you'd need the authority of the Magisterium to justify such a creative reinterpretation of the parable!

It is only through the power of God that Peter is able to preserve the whole Church in fidelity to Christ, even when

Satan shakes and sifts her, so that the wheat may be removed from the chaff. As Jesus says, “But I have prayed that your own faith may not fail” (Luke 22:32). In his supreme magisterium, the pope unites the whole Church and all its bishops in the same confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). And it is precisely in this confession that he is the rock on which the Lord Jesus continues to build his Church until the end of the world. It is, then, clear that the pope’s words are at the service of the whole Tradition of the Church, and not the other way around.

Traditional Catholic prooftexts that wildly overgeneralize.

One must keep in mind that doctrinal statements have varying degrees of authority. They require varying degrees of consent, as expressed by the so-called “theological notes.” The acceptance of a teaching with “divine and Catholic faith” is required only for dogmatic definitions.

i) And is there an infallible list of dogmatic definitions?

ii) Why are there varying degrees of authority? If Christ entrusted to the church of Rome a living teaching office, if the church of Rome enjoys special divine guidance and protection from error, why is it necessary to sift doctrinal statements? Why doesn't the Holy Spirit protect all doctrinal statements from error?

This does not mean that one may reduce the magisterium to a private opinion, so as to dispense oneself from the binding power of the authentic and defined teaching of the Church (cf. Lumen Gentium 37). It only means that one must understand well the precise meaning of authority in the Church in general and the role of Peter's ministry in particular. This is especially true when the conflict does not arise between the pope's teaching and one's own vision, but between the pope's teaching and a teaching of previous popes that is in accordance with the uninterrupted tradition of the Church.

Here he seems to be shadowboxing with Pope Francis. Ironically, his very public dispute with Pope Francis unwittingly demonstrates that Cardinal Müller's paradigm of ecclesial authority is just a paper theory that bursts into the flame the moment it comes into contact with the intransigent reality on the ground.

<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/02/development-or-corruption>

*In commenting on Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, some interpreters advance positions contrary to the constant teaching of the Catholic Church, by effectively denying that adultery is always a grave objective sin or by making the Church's entire sacramental economy exclusively dependent on people's subjective dispositions. They seek to justify their claims by insisting that through the ages there has been a development of doctrine under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a fact that the Church has always admitted. To substantiate their claims, they usually appeal to the writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman, and in particular to his famous *Essay on the**

Development of Christian Doctrine (1845).

Does the Catholic church have a "constant teaching"? That's elastic, both by "doctrinal statements with varying degrees of authority"—as well as the retroactive promotion of later teachings or demotion of earlier teachings by the almighty doctrine of development.

Newman was an expert in patristics, and he was at first suspicious of later teachings developed in the Middle Ages. It was these that for a long time kept him from converting to the Roman Church. They seemed to him incompatible with the basic principles of Christianity, or at least not derivable from Holy Scripture and the earliest tradition of the Fathers. For him the Catholic practice of venerating the Blessed Virgin and the saints appeared to contradict the idea that Christ is the only mediator between God and humanity. Other examples of teachings that Newman considered exclusive to Catholicism and not based on Scripture and the Fathers are the

following: papal primacy, the doctrine of transubstantiation, the sacrificial character of Holy Mass, purgatory, indulgences, religious vows, and the sacrament of Holy Orders. These were the main issues causing controversy during the Reformation.

So much for the "constant teaching" of the Catholic church.

At first Newman considered Anglicanism as a middle way (the "via media") between the Reformer's complete denial of tradition and—as he then saw it—the Catholic absolutization of tradition. However, his patristic studies made Newman realize that there had already been a development of doctrine during the time when Christianity was not yet divided. The need for such a development results from the nature of historical revelation. It is a consequence of the presence of the divine Word in our human words and understanding. The councils of the first eight centuries

formulated the Trinitarian dogma of the one God in three persons and the Christological dogma of the hypostatic union of Christ's two natures in his divine person. These definitions were the outcome of a long and difficult development of doctrine. Likewise, the dogmas of original sin and the absolute gratuity of grace resulted from the Church Fathers' great intellectual work, by which they successfully defended the Church from destructive heresies such as Modalism, Arianism, Monophysitism, and Pelagianism. Had these heresies won the day, all of Christianity would have been destroyed. Now the way to combat them was precisely to find new formulations of doctrine, such as, for instance, the pronouncement against Apollinarianism concerning the Incarnation and the assumption of all of human nature by the eternal Logos: "What is not assumed is not saved."

It's unclear how all that follows from divine revelation in human language.

As far as the substance of the articles of faith is concerned, it is impossible to add or subtract anything. In the Church's efforts to combat heresies and to come to a deeper understanding of revealed truths, there can, however, be an increase in the articles of faith. The filioque, for example—that is, the definition of faith that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son—does not add anything to the Trinitarian faith. This formulation merely gives a clearer expression of a truth that is already known, namely that the Spirit is not the second Son of God.

Yet that attempts to differentiate the persons of the Godhead by using a crude mechanical analogy. Like tiered fountains where a spout on top pours water into the first tier, which in turn overflows into the second tier. But why think the internal structure of the Godhead is remotely like that? Not to mention the dubious prooftexting?

The deepest reason for the identity of Revelation in its ecclesial continuity is given in the hypostatic union, i.e., in the unity of the human and divine natures in the one divine person of Jesus Christ. The many words he spoke, revealing God's plan to us through the medium of human language (cf. Joh 3:34; 6:68), are united in the hypostasis or person of the one Word that is God and has become flesh (cf. Joh 1:1, 14). The Word of God comes to us through the preaching of human beings (cf. 1 Thess 2:13); it is made present through human words, with their grammar and vocabulary. Therefore, it is possible and necessary to grow individually and communally in our understanding of the revelation that has been given to us once and for all in Christ. It is clear, then, that Catholic theology has always recognized the fact and necessity of the development of dogma. It is part of Christianity's essence as the religion of the incarnate Word—the religion of God's self-revelation in

history—to affirm the identity of the doctrine of the faith along a continuous process by which the Church comes to an ever more differentiated conceptual comprehension of faith’s mysteries.

There's a bait-n-switch. Astute evangelicals don't deny that our understanding of the Bible may improve over time. The problem with Catholicism is not that abstract idea, but the lack of substantive continuity—as well as biblical grounding—in so much Catholic teaching. Many doctrines or dogmas that aren't logical implications of biblical revelation—not to mention many reversals of traditional teaching.

This revelation is contained in the deposit of faith—that is, in the apostolic teaching—which in its truth and in its entirety has been entrusted to the Church to be faithfully preserved and interpreted. The proper method for interpreting revelation requires the joint workings of three principles, which are: Holy Scripture, Apostolic Tradition, and the Apostolic Succession of Catholic bishops. The Roman Church in general and her bishops in particular should be

the last to follow the Gnostic's suit by introducing a novel principle of interpretation by which to give a completely different direction to all of Church teaching.

Which assumes that Cardinal Müller's sect is the standard of comparison. Understandable from his point of view but hardly persuasive to evangelicals.

One may think here of the Protestant Reformation. Its new formal principle was Scripture alone. This new principle subjected the Catholic doctrine of the faith, as it had developed up to the sixteenth century, to a radical change. The fundamental understanding of Christianity turned into something completely different. Salvation was to be obtained by faith alone, so that the individual believer no longer required the help of ecclesial mediation. In consequence, the Reformers radically rejected the dogmas concerning the

seven sacraments and the episcopal and papal constitution of the Church.

i) The classic Protestant position isn't salvation by faith alone but justification by faith alone and salvation by grace alone.

ii) Depends on what you mean by "ecclesial mediation". Due to aptitude and training, some people have a better grasp of Scripture than others. So laymen ought to consult good Bible commentaries and systematic theologies. The problem is when representatives of the church claim to have the intrinsic, unaccountable authority to determine the meaning of Scripture. But the process of exegesis should always be open to rational scrutiny.

The Magisterium must seek to present a convincing case, showing how its presentation of the faith is in itself coherent and in continuity with the rest of Tradition. The authority of the papal Magisterium rests on its continuity with the teachings of previous popes. In fact, if a pope had the power to abolish the binding teachings of his predecessors, or if he had the authority even to reinterpret Holy Scripture against its evident meaning, then all his doctrinal

decisions could in turn be abolished by his successor, whose successor in turn could undo or redo everything as he pleased. In this case we would not be witnessing a development of doctrine, but the dire spectacle of the Bark of Peter stranded on a sandbank.

I did a separate post on that:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/11/standing-in-judgment-of-magisterium.html>

St. John Cardinal Newman

Cardinal Newman has been canonized. He may well be the most theologically influential convert to Catholicism.

Newman was a man of many parts. He has interesting things to say about the nature of miracles. And his illative sense made an important contribution to religious epistemology. He stressed the value of tacit knowledge. He objected to armchair epistemologies. He was interested in how people actually come to believe what they do, and the kinds of evidence that contribute to belief formation. An often unconscious process with a cumulative effect.

Newman was an original and independent thinker. Because he converted to Catholicism, he had a different approach than if he'd been a trained Catholic theologian. His center of gravity was patristic theology rather than Scholastic theology. And he represents an offshoot of British Empiricism.

There's nothing distinctive Catholic about the illative sense. That can be incorporated into a Protestant epistemology or secular epistemology.

As Benjamin King has documented in *Newman and the Alexandrian Fathers*, Newman is apt to use the church fathers as a mirror, where he's gazing at his own reflection. Newman resembles Luther inasmuch as both developed one-man belief-systems to resolve their personal religious quest. These are answers to *their* questions, which arise from their individual struggles.

Newman's primary impact on Catholic theology lies in his theory of development. Historically, Catholicism takes the

position that the era of public revelation terminated with the death of the Apostles. They left behind the deposit of faith. That's static. You can appeal to ancient tradition as a witness to the deposit of faith. But you can't add to the deposit of faith and you can't change dogma.

The theory of development was necessitated by the increasing strain between the appeal to tradition and innovations in Catholic theology. Innovations that lacked a documentable pedigree in primitive tradition.

Newman replaced the static concept of tradition with a fluid concept. No longer grounded in primitive tradition but "living" tradition. This would have remained an idiosyncratic curiosity except that it was adopted by Vatican II.

The increasing strain between tradition and innovation was like metastatic cancer. The theory of development was like cancer therapy. But there's a catch. Sometimes cancer therapy prevents a patient from dying of cancer: instead, the patient dies from complications due to cancer therapy. The therapy does so much damage that the cure kills the patient.

The theory of development solved one problem by creating another problem. It severed Catholic theology from any traditional moorings. Catholic theology is now adrift. It has no fixed center or boundaries. Catholic theology is now the theology of whoever the current pope happens to be. Like a chameleon, Catholic theology changes colors to match the shade of the current pope.

Erasing Catholic teaching

The teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church (here after CCC) has undergone substantive since its initial publication. I wonder how many Catholics compare different editions to register the changes. In addition, there's a distinction between print editions and electronic revisions. Nowadays the CCC can be revised or updated without formally issuing or announcing a third edition, fourth edition, &c..

The official edition is at the Vatican website. While it's convenient to be able to read the CCC online, a downside of the electronic version is that whenever it's revised, that erases the prior history of the CCC's teaching.

It's also becoming harder to check the online version against print editions because libraries are eliminating print books. They take up space and fewer borrowers check them out.

Another complication is that the "canonical" text is in Latin, so the wording of English translations may vary a bit. Likewise, when the Latin text is revised, there might be lag time to revise translations. All these factors make it harder to compare different editions of the CCC back-to-back. Unless you happen to own a print copies of the first and second editions, it's hard to make a direct comparison from the primary sources. Sometimes you can get the text from secondary sources that discuss changes to the CCC.

I see some Catholic apologists offer the face-saving explanation that the first edition was "provisional". But the first edition wasn't a draft copy. It was approved for publication by Pope John-Paul II and Cardinal Ratziger, then

Prefect for the CDF and chairman of the CCC committee. It contains the foreword ("Apostolic Constitution") by John-Paul II, where he declares it to be a sure norm for teaching the faith":

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/aposcons.htm

Let's compare two examples where the teaching of the CCC has undergone substantive alteration.

1. Lying

Original edition

2483 To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead into error someone who has a right to know the truth.

Revision:

2483 To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error.

2. Capital Punishment

Original edition:

2266 Preserving the common good of society requires rendering the aggressor

unable to inflict harm. For this reason the traditional teaching of the Church has acknowledged as well-founded the right and duty of legitimate public authority to punish malefactors by means of penalties commensurate with the gravity of the crime, not excluding, in cases of extreme gravity, the death penalty.

First revision (John-Paul II)

2266 The efforts of the state to curb the spread of behavior harmful to people's rights and to the basic rules of civil society correspond to the requirement of safeguarding the common good. Legitimate public authority has the right and the duty to inflict punishment proportionate to the gravity of the offense.

Second revision (Pope Francis)

2267. Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long

considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition, a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption.

Consequently, the Church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that “the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person”, [1] and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide.

3. Taking stock

In the case of lying, the revision eliminates the proviso: someone who has a right to know the truth

In the case of capital punishment, the first revision eliminates the proviso: not excluding, in cases of extreme

gravity, the death penalty.

While the second revision rules out capital punishment in principle.

These are fundamental issues in Catholic moral theology, so it's striking to see the teaching of the CCC undergo substantive change or reversal in the course of a few years.

4. For further reference:

Catechism of the Catholic Church (1995 print edition)

<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2010/11/what-counts-as-lie.html>

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/08/02/180802a.html>

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130312145145/http://old.usccb.org/sdwp/national/criminal/catechism.shtml>

The development of doctrine

I'd like to make one comment on this:

<http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2018/08/02/0556/01210.html#letteraing>

So the new position is classified as a development of doctrine. And that's justified by appeal to the teaching of John-Paul II and Benedict XVI. A couple of points:

i) Strictly speaking, doctrine is not supposed to develop. Rather, allowance is made for evolution in how doctrine is understood. So I assume "development of doctrine" is shorthand for developments in the understanding of doctrine.

ii) The frame of reference for the development of doctrine isn't supposed to be the teaching of the 20C pope, but the deposit of faith:

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develop in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. (5) For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. De Verbum 2.8.

The deposit of faith is apostolic tradition:

81 "And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit.

83 The Tradition here in question comes from the apostles and hands on what they received from Jesus' teaching and example and what they learned from the Holy Spirit.

84 The apostles entrusted the "Sacred deposit" of the faith (the depositum fidei),⁴⁵ contained in Sacred Scripture and Tradition, to the whole of the Church.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s1c2a2.htm

That's the benchmark. That's the point of departure. So the starting-point a development of doctrine isn't something a pope says, much less a 20C pope. Rather, that's supposed to trace all the way back to the deposit of faith. To justify the new position on capital punishment, it's necessary to demonstrate that this is a legitimate extension or extrapolation of apostolic tradition—and not a legitimate extension or extrapolation of John-Paul II's position on capital punishment.

But in reality, this is all about power. The pope has all the high cards, so he can impose it on his sect by papal fiat. Appeal to development is just a cosmetic cover.

Rome's clouded crystal ball

INTRODUCTION

After the introduction, I'm going to provide extensive documentation for major reversals in Catholic theology. But I'll anticipate a few objections:

- 1.** A Catholic might object that I'm burning a straw man. Sure, Catholic doctrine changes. No one disputes that. Some changes represent a development of doctrine. In other cases, the tradition wasn't infallible to begin with.
- 2.** I'm aware of those caveats. For starters, Unam Sanctam is as good a candidate for an infallible claimant as anything. The pope uses stock formulae for promulgating dogma. On top of that, his position was ratified by two ecumenical councils. So if that's not irreformable, there are no better candidates.
- 3.** Another problem with the caveat is that it renders the public teaching of the Catholic church untrustworthy. For centuries, Rome inculcated certain beliefs. Cultivated those beliefs in the minds of the faithful. If that can be set aside, then there's no reason for the faithful to have any confidence in the public teaching of the church. It's driving by means of the rearview mirror rather than the windshield.
- 4.** A Catholic might object that because there are sometimes multiple strands of Catholic tradition, a development may represent the development of a particular strand of transition.

And it's true that because Catholic tradition is so pluriform you can probably be consistent with Catholic tradition by selectively developing one particular tradition. Take modification of the extra Ecclesiam nulla salus principle by appeal to the tradition of invincible ignorance. Those who lack Christian faith through no fault of their own.

Problem is, that nullifies Unam Sanctam and its conciliar counterparts. It requires submission to the pope. It specifies pagans and Jews among the hellbound. It ties that to lack of access to the sacraments. You can't widen that by development. You can only recant it. Yet it has a stronger claim to dogma than invincible ignorance.

5. Some of these are issues of utmost consequence. Why should anyone trust a denomination that backpedals on such fundamental issues?

6. There are two ways Rome can annul a position. One is to formally revoke it. The other way is to let it lapse. Die of neglect. The latter strategy saves face, but the effect is the same. Invalidate the status quo ante in practice.

7. When Rome adopted Newman's theory of development, it substituted a different paradigm of tradition in midcourse. Like winning a game retroactively after you lost the game. You simply change the rules, then apply them retroactively. There were the rules going in. You lost. But you win by changing the rules after the fact.

The historic definition of tradition was a theological criterion. To change the criterion is cheating. A tacit admission that you didn't measure up by your own yardstick, so you replace it with a rubber ruler.

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Execution of Criminals

Another kind of lawful slaying belongs to the civil authorities, to whom is entrusted power of life and death, by the legal and judicious exercise of which they punish the guilty and protect the innocent. The just use of this power, far from involving the crime of murder, is an act of paramount obedience to this Commandment which prohibits murder. The end of the Commandment is the preservation and security of human life. Now the punishments inflicted by the civil authority, which is the legitimate avenger of crime, naturally tend to this end, since they give security to life by repressing outrage and violence. Hence these words of David: "in the morning I put to death all the wicked of the land, that I might cut off all the workers of iniquity from the city of the Lord." (Ps. 101.8)

Killing in a Just War

In like manner, the soldier is guiltless who, actuated not by motives of ambition or cruelty, but by a pure desire of serving the interests of his country, takes

away the life of an enemy in a just war. Furthermore, there are on record instances of carnage executed by the special command of God. The sons of Levi, who put to death so many thousands in one day, were guilty of no sin; when the slaughter had ceased, they were addressed by Moses in these words: "You have consecrated your hands this day to the Lord." (Ex. 32.29)

Killing in Self-Defense

If a man kill another in self-defense, having used every means consistent with his own safety to avoid the infliction of death, he evidently does not violate this Commandment.

The Catechism of the Council of Trent, pp426-28

2267 Recourse to the death penalty on the part of legitimate authority, following a fair trial, was long considered an appropriate response to the gravity of certain crimes and an acceptable, albeit extreme, means of safeguarding the common good.

Today, however, there is an increasing awareness that the dignity of the person is not lost even after the commission of very serious crimes. In addition,

a new understanding has emerged of the significance of penal sanctions imposed by the state. Lastly, more effective systems of detention have been developed, which ensure the due protection of citizens but, at the same time, do not definitively deprive the guilty of the possibility of redemption,” the new section continues.

Consequently, the church teaches, in the light of the Gospel, that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person,’ and she works with determination for its abolition worldwide. The Catechism of the Catholic Church.

THE FATE OF SUICIDES,

Q. 1274. What sin is it to destroy one's own life, or commit suicide, as this act is called?

A. It is a mortal sin to destroy one's own life or commit suicide, as this act is called, and persons who willfully and knowingly commit such an act die in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of Christian burial.

<http://www.baltimore-catechism.com/lesson33.htm>

2282 Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide.

2283 We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm

A canonical sign of this pastoral approach is the universal understanding of 1983 CIC 1184 § 3 to allow ecclesiastical funerals to be accorded those committing suicide, a change from 1917 CIC 1240 § 1, n. 3, that expressly prohibited such funerals (although the

older law was applied more leniently than it read).

<https://canonlawblog.wordpress.com/2013/01/14/canonical-consequences-for-suicide/>

CREMATION

Rome reversing its traditional ban on cremation:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160815_ad-resurgendum-cum-christo_en.html

REBOOTING TRADITION

If anyone says that

it is possible that at some time, given the advancement of knowledge, a sense may be assigned to the dogmas propounded by the church which is different from that which the church has understood and understands:

let him be anathema.

(Vatican I)

In this connection I would like to relate a small episode that I think can cast much light on the situation. Before Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was defined, all theological faculties in the world were consulted for their opinion. Our teachers' answer was emphatically negative..." Tradition" was identified with what could be proved on the basis of texts. Altaner, the patrologist from Würzburg...had proven in a scientifically persuasive manner that the doctrine of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was unknown before the 5C; this doctrine, therefore, he argued, could not belong to the "apostolic tradition. And this was his conclusion, which my teachers at Munich shared. This argument is compelling if you understand "tradition" strictly as the handing down of fixed formulas and texts...But if you conceive of "tradition" as the living process whereby the Holy Spirit introduces us to the fullness of truth and teaches us how to understand what previously we could still not grasp (cf. Jn 16:12-13), then subsequent "remembering" (cf. Jn 16:4, for instance) can come to recognize what it has not caught sight of previously and was already handed

down in the original Word,” J. Ratzinger, Milestones (Ignatius, n.d.), 58-59.

LIMBO

When the question of infants who die without baptism was first taken up in the history of Christian thought, it is possible that the doctrinal nature of the question or its implications were not fully understood. Only when seen in light of the historical development of theology over the course of time until Vatican II does this specific question find its proper context within Catholic doctrine.

This theory, elaborated by theologians beginning in the Middle Ages, never entered into the dogmatic definitions of the Magisterium, even if that same Magisterium did at times mention the theory in its ordinary teaching up until the Second Vatican Council.

3. The idea of Limbo, which the Church has used for many centuries to designate the destiny of infants who die without Baptism, has no clear foundation in revelation, even though it has long been used in

traditional theological teaching. Moreover, the notion that infants who die without Baptism are deprived of the beatific vision, which has for so long been regarded as the common doctrine of the Church, gives rise to numerous pastoral problems, so much so that many pastors of souls have asked for a deeper reflection on the ways of salvation.

19. The Council of Carthage of 418 rejected the teaching of Pelagius. It condemned the opinion that infants “do not contract from Adam any trace of original sin, which must be expiated by the bath of regeneration that leads to eternal life”. Positively, this council taught that “even children who of themselves cannot have yet committed any sin are truly baptised for the remission of sins, so that by regeneration they may be cleansed from what they contracted through generation”. [40] It was also added that there is no “intermediate or other happy dwelling place for children who have left this life without Baptism, without which they cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, that is, eternal life”

20. So great was Augustine's authority in the West, however, that the Latin Fathers (e.g., Jerome, Fulgentius, Avitus of Vienne, and Gregory the

Great) did adopt his opinion. Gregory the Great asserts that God condemns even those with only original sin on their souls; even infants who have never sinned by their own will must go to “everlasting torments”. He cites Job 14:4-5 (LXX), John 3:5, and Ephesians 2:3 on our condition at birth as “children of wrath”.[42]

21. Augustine was the point of reference for Latin theologians throughout the Middle Ages on this matter. Anselm of Canterbury is a good example: he believes that little children who die without Baptism are damned on account of original sin and in keeping with God's justice.[43] The common doctrine was summarized by Hugh of St. Victor: infants who die unbaptised cannot be saved because (1) they have not received the sacrament, and (2) they cannot make a personal act of faith that would supply for the sacrament.[44] This doctrine implies that one needs to be justified during one's earthly life in order to enter eternal life after death. Death puts an end to the possibility of choosing to accept or reject grace, that is, to adhere to God or turn away from him; after death, a

person's fundamental dispositions before God receive no further modification.

This present text was...submitted to its President, Cardinal William Levada who, upon receiving the approval of the Holy Father in an audience granted on January 19, 2007, approved the text for publication.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html

PURGATORY

Purgatory basically means that God can put the pieces back together. That he can cleanse us in such a way that we are able to be with him and can stand there in the fullness of life.

*As far as the Buddhists are concerned...even here, though in a quite different way of looking at things- is to be found something like a hope for an ultimate rightness of being. Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World* (Ignatius 2002), 129-30.*

WHO'S IN HELL

We declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff. Unam Sanctam

There is but one universal Church of the faithful, outside which no one at all is saved. (Pope Innocent III, Fourth Lateran Council, 1215.)

The most Holy Roman Church firmly believes, professes and preaches that none of those existing outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and schismatics, can have a share in life eternal; but that they will go into the eternal fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels, unless before death they are joined with Her; and that so important is the unity of this ecclesiastical body that only those remaining within this unity can profit by the sacraments of the Church unto salvation, and they alone can receive an eternal recompense for their fasts, their almsgivings, their other works of Christian piety and the duties of a Christian soldier. No one, let his

almsgiving be as great as it may, no one, even if he pour out his blood for the Name of Christ, can be saved, unless he remain within the bosom and the unity of the Catholic Church. Council of Florence (1442).

17. Good hope at least is to be entertained of the eternal salvation of all those who are not at all in the true Church of Christ. — Encyclical “Quanto conficiamur,” Aug. 10, 1863, etc. Pius IX, The Syllabus of Errors.

841 "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day." Catechism of Catholic Church.

3. The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth,(5) who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking

itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion.
NOSTRA AETATE, Vatican II.

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind. Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things,(127) and as Saviour wills that all men be saved.(128) Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.(19) Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life.*

Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.(20*) She knows that it is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life. Lumen Gentium 16.

THE ADMISSION OF DIVORCED CATHOLICS TO COMMUNION

Amoris Laetitia (305): For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in “irregular” situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings, “sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families”. Along these same lines, the International Theological Commission has noted that “natural law could not be presented as an already established set of rules that impose themselves a priori on the moral subject; rather, it is a source of objective inspiration for the deeply personal process of making decisions”. Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is

*possible that in an objective situation of sin—which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such—a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end. 351**

Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that “a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties”. The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality.

(Footnote 351): In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Hence, “I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord’s mercy” (Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium [24 November 2013], 44: AAS 105 [2013], 1038). I would also point out that the Eucharist “is not a

prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” (ibid., 47: 1039).

THE TRADITIONAL AUTHORSHIP, INERRANCY, HISTORICITY, AND PRESCIENCE OF SCRIPTURE

Pope Pius X, Motu Proprio Praeestantia Scripturae, 18 Nov. 1907 (ASS [1907] 724ff; EB nn. 278f; Dz 2113f): “We now declare and expressly enjoin that all Without exception are bound by an obligation of conscience to submit to the decisions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, whether already issued or to be issued hereafter, exactly as to the decrees of the Sacred Congregations which are on matters of doctrine and approved by the Pope; nor can anyone who by word or writing attacks the said decrees avoid the note both of disobedience and of rashness or be therefore without grave fault.”

ON THE MOSAIC AUTHORSHIP OF THE PENTATEUCH

June 27, 1906 (ASS 39 [1906-07] 377f; EB 174ff; Dz 1997ff)

I: Are the arguments gathered by critics to impugn the Mosaic authorship of the sacred books designated by the name of the Pentateuch of such weight in spite of the cumulative evidence of many passages of both Testaments, the unbroken unanimity of the Jewish people, and furthermore of the constant tradition of the Church besides the internal indications furnished by the text itself, as to justify the statement that these books are not of Mosaic authorship but were put together from sources mostly of post-Mosaic date?

Answer: In the negative.

CONCERNING THE HISTORICAL CHARACTER OF THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS OF GENESIS

June 30, 1909 (AAS 1 [1909] 567ff; EB 332ff; Dz 2121ff)

I: Do the various exegetical systems excogitated and defended under the guise of science to exclude the

literal historical sense of the first three chapters of Genesis rest on a solid foundation?

Answer: In the negative.

II: Notwithstanding the historical character and form of Genesis, the special connection of the first three chapters with one another and with the following chapters, the manifold testimonies of the Scriptures both of the Old and of the New Testaments, the almost unanimous opinion of the holy Fathers and the traditional view which the people of Israel also has handed on and the Church has always held, may it be taught that: the aforesaid three chapters of Genesis contain not accounts of actual events, accounts, that is, which correspond to objective reality and historical truth, but, either fables derived from the mythologies and cosmogonies of ancient peoples and accommodated by the sacred writer to monotheistic doctrine after the expurgation of any polytheistic error; or allegories and symbols without any foundation in objective reality proposed under the form of history to inculcate religious and philosophical truths; or finally legends in part historical and in part fictitious freely

composed with a view to instruction and edification?

Answer: In the negative to both parts.

III: In particular may the literal historical sense be called in doubt in the case of facts narrated in the same chapters which touch the foundations of the Christian religion: as are, among others, the creation of all things by God in the beginning of time; the special creation of man; the formation of the first woman from the first man; the unity of the human race; the original felicity of our first parents in the state of justice, integrity, and immortality; the command given by God to man to test his obedience; the transgression of the divine command at the instigation of the devil under the form of a serpent; the degradation of our first parents from that primeval state of innocence; and the promise of a future Redeemer?

Answer: In the negative.

CONCERNING THE AUTHORS AND DATE OF THE PSALMS

May 1, 1910 (AAS II [1910] 354f; EB 340ff; Dz 2129ff)

III: Can the aforesaid titles of the psalms, witnesses of Jewish tradition, be prudently called in doubt when there is no serious reason against their being genuine?

Answer: In the negative.

V: In particular is it right to deny the Davidic origin of those psalms which are explicitly cited under David's name in the Old or New Testament, among which are to be mentioned more especially psalm 2 Quare fremuerunt gentes; psalm 15 Conserva me, Domine; psalm 17 Diligam te, Domine, fortitudo mea; psalm 31 Beati quorum remissae sunt iniquitates; psalm 68 Salvum me fac, Deus; psalm 509 Dixit Dominus Domino meo?

Answer: In the negative.

VII: Is it possible to maintain as probable the opinion of those more recent writers who, relying on purely internal indications or an incorrect interpretation of the sacred text, have attempted to show that not a few psalms were composed after

the times of Esdras and Nehemias and even in the Maccabean age?

Answer: In the negative.

VIII: On the authority of the manifold witness of the sacred books of the New Testament and the unanimous agreement of the Fathers in harmony with the acknowledgement of Jewish writers, is it necessary to admit a number of prophetic and Messianic psalms, which foretold the future Saviour's coming, kingdom, priesthood, passion, death, and resurrection; and consequently is it necessary to reject altogether the opinion of those who pervert the prophetic and Messianic character of the psalms and limit these oracles about Christ merely to the foretelling of the future lot of the chosen people?

Answer: In the affirmative to both parts.

CONCERNING THE CHARACTER AND AUTHOR OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAS

June 29, 1908 (ASS 41 [1908] 613f; EB 287ff; Dz 2115 ff)

I: May it be taught that the predictions read in the Book of Isaias-and throughout the Scriptures- are not predictions properly so called, but either narrations put together after the event, or, if anything has to be acknowledged as foretold before the event, that the prophet foretold it not in accordance with a supernatural revelation of God who foreknows future events, but by conjectures formed felicitously and shrewdly by natural sharpness of mind on the basis of previous experience?

Answer : In the negative.

II: Can the opinion that Isaias and the other prophets did not put forth predictions except about events that were to happen in the immediate future or after no long space of time, be reconciled with the predictions, in particular Messianic and eschatological, certainly put forth by the same prophets concerning the distant future, and also with the common opinion of the holy Fathers who unanimously assert that the prophets also made prophecies that were to be fulfilled after many centuries?

Answer: In the negative.

III: May it be admitted that the prophets, not only as correctors of human depravity and preachers of the divine word for the benefit of their hearers, but also as foretellers of future events, must consistently have addressed, not future, but present contemporary hearers in such a manner that they could be clearly understood by them; and that in consequence the second part of the Book of Isaias (chapters 40-66), in which the prophet addresses and consoles, not the Jewish contemporaries of Isaias, but as if living among them, the Jews mourning in the Babylonian exile, could not have Isaias, long since dead, for its author, but must be ascribed to some unknown prophet living among the exiles?

Answer: In the negative.

IV: Should the philological argument drawn from language and style to impugn identity of authorship throughout the Book of Isaias be deemed of such force as to compel a man of sound judgement with competent knowledge of Hebrew

and of the art of criticism to recognize several authors in the same book?

Answer: In the negative.

V: Do there exist arguments which even when taken together avail to demonstrate that the Book of Isaias must be attributed not to Isaias himself alone, but to two or even several authors?

Answer: In the negative.

CONCERNING THE AUTHOR, THE DATE, AND THE HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

June 19, 1911 (AAS 3 [1911] 294ff; EB 401ff; Dz 2148 ff)

I: Having regard to the universal and unwavering agreement of the Church ever since the first centuries, an agreement clearly attested by the express witness of the Fathers, by the titles of the Gospel manuscripts, the most ancient versions of the sacred books and the lists handed on by the holy Fathers, by ecclesiastical writers, by Popes and Councils, and finally by the liturgical use of the

Church in the East and in the West, may and should it be affirmed as certain that Matthew, the Apostle of Christ, was in fact the author of the Gospel current under his name?

Answer: In the affirmative.

III: Can the composition of this original text be postponed till after the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, so that the prophecies it contains about that destruction were written after the event ; or should the oft-quoted text of Irenaeus (Ads. Haer. Lib. 3, cap. 1, n. 2), of uncertain and controverted interpretation, be considered to have such weight as to impose the rejection of the opinion more in harmony with tradition according to which the composition of the Gospel was completed even before the arrival of Paul in Rome?

Answer: In the negative to both parts.

IV: Can even probable arguments be given in support of that opinion of certain recent writers according to which Matthew did not write a Gospel properly and strictly so-called, such as has been handed down to us, but merely a collection of the sayings or discourses of Christ which were drawn on

by another anonymous author, whom they make the editor of the Gospel itself?

Answer: In the negative.

VII: In particular ought it to be held that there is no solid foundation to the opinions of those who call in doubt the historical authenticity of the first two chapters, in which an account is given of the genealogy and infancy of Christ, as also of certain passages of great dogmatic importance, such as are those which concern the primacy of Peter (16:17-19), the form of baptism entrusted to the Apostles together with the mission of preaching everywhere (28:19f), the Apostles' profession of faith in the divinity of Christ (14:33), and other similar matters which are found in a special form in Matthew?

Answer: In the affirmative.

CONCERNING THE AUTHORS, DATES, AND HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE GOSPELS ACCORDING TO MARK AND LUKE

June 26, 1912 (AAS 4 [1912] 463ff; EB 408ff; Dz 2155ff)

I: Does the clear verdict of tradition showing extraordinary unanimity from the beginnings of the Church and confirmed by manifold evidence, namely the explicit attestations of the holy Fathers and ecclesiastical writers, the quotations and allusions occurring in their writings, the use made by ancient heretics, the versions of the books of the New Testament, almost all the manuscripts including the most ancient, and also internal reasons drawn from the text of the sacred books impose the definite affirmation that Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, and Luke, the doctor, the assistant and companion of Paul, were really the authors of the Gospels that are attributed to them respectively?

Answer: In the affirmative.

II: Are the reasons by which certain critics strive to prove that the last twelve verses of the Gospel of Mark (16:9-20) were not written by Mark himself but were added by another hand, of such a character as to justify the statement that they are not to be accepted as inspired and canonical? Or do they prove at least that Mark was not the author of the said verses?

Answer: In the negative to both parts.

III: Similarly is it lawful to doubt the inspiration and canonicity of Luke's accounts of the infancy of Christ (chapters 1 and 2); or of the apparition of the Angel strengthening Jesus and the sweat of blood (22:43f)? Or can it at any rate be shown by solid reasons-a view preferred by ancient heretics and favoured also by certain modern critics-that the said accounts do not belong to the genuine Gospel of Luke?

Answer: In the negative to both parts.

VI: Is it lawful to postpone the date of composition of the Gospels of Mark and Luke till after the destruction of the city of Jerusalem? Or, on the ground that our Lord's prophecy concerning the destruction of that city appears more detailed in Luke, can it be maintained that his Gospel at least was written after the siege had begun?

Answer: In the negative to both parts.

**CONCERNING THE AUTHOR AND HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE
FOURTH GOSPEL**

May 29, 1907 (ASS 40 [1907] 383f; EB 180ff; Dz 2110)

I: Does the constant, universal, and solemn tradition of the Church dating back to the second century and witnessed to principally : (a) by the holy Fathers, by ecclesiastical writers, and even by heretics, whose testimonies and allusions must have been derived from the disciples or first successors of the Apostles and so be linked with the very origin of the book; (b) by the name of the author of the fourth Gospel having been at all times and places in the canon and lists of the sacred books; (c) by the most ancient manuscripts of those books and the various versions; (d) by public liturgical use in the whole world from the very beginnings of the Church; prove that John the Apostle and no other is to be acknowledged as the author of the fourth Gospel, and that by an historical argument so firmly established (without reference to theological considerations) that the reasons adduced by critics to the contrary in no way weaken this tradition?

Answer: In the affirmative.

II: Should, further, internal reasons derived from the text of the fourth Gospel considered by itself, from the witness of the writer and the manifest relationship of the Gospel itself to the first Epistle of John the Apostle, be judged to confirm the tradition that unhesitatingly attributes the fourth Gospel to the same Apostle? And can the difficulties which arise from a comparison of the same Gospel with the other three, in view of the differences of time, aim, and hearers, for whom or against whom the author wrote, be given reasonable solutions, as has been done by the holy Fathers and Catholic exegetes in various works?

Answer: In the affirmative to both parts.

III: Notwithstanding the practice which has flourished consistently in the whole Church from the earliest times, of arguing from the fourth Gospel as from a strictly historical document, and in consideration no less of the special character of the same Gospel and the manifest intention of the author to illustrate and vindicate the divinity of Christ from the very acts and discourses of our Lord, may it be said that the facts narrated in the fourth Gospel were invented wholly or in part, as

allegories or doctrinal symbols and that the discourses of our Lord are not properly and truly the discourses of our Lord himself but the theological compositions of the writer though placed in the mouth of our Lord?

Answer: In the negative.

CONCERNING THE AUTHOR, THE DATE, AND THE HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

June 12, 1913 (AAS 5 [1913] 291f; EB 419ff; Dz 2166ff)

I: In view especially of the tradition of the whole Church dating back to the earliest ecclesiastical writers, and in consideration of the internal characteristics of the book of Acts whether considered in itself or in its relation to the third Gospel, and especially of the mutual affinity and connection of both prologues (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1f), should it be held as certain that the volume with the title Actus Apostolorum or Praxeis Apostolon had the Evangelist Luke for its author?

Answer : In the affirmative.

V: If consideration be given both to the frequent and easy intercourse that without doubt Luke had with the first and chief founders of the Church in Palestine and with Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles, whom he helped in his preaching of the Gospel and accompanied on his journeys, and to his habitual industry and diligence in seeking witnesses and in personal observation of events, and finally to the frequently obvious and remarkable agreement of the Acts with Paul's own Epistles and with the more exact historical records, should it be held for certain that Luke had at his disposal entirely trustworthy sources and used them carefully, honestly, and faithfully, so that he rightly claims for himself full authority as an historian?

Answer: In the affirmative.

VI: Are the difficulties commonly raised both from the supernatural facts narrated by Luke, and from the report of certain discourses, which on account of their brevity are thought to be invented and adapted to circumstances, and from certain passages in at least apparent disagreement with history, whether profane or biblical, and finally from certain narrations in apparent conflict either

with the author of Acts himself or with other sacred authors, of such a nature as to throw doubt on or at least in some measure to diminish the historical authority of Acts?

Answer: In the negative.

CONCERNING THE AUTHOR, THE INTEGRITY, AND THE DATE OF THE PASTORAL EPISTLES OF ST PAUL

June 12, 1913 (AAS 5 [1913] 292f; EB 425ff; Dz 2172ff)

I: In view of the tradition of the Church universally and firmly maintained from the beginning, as is witnessed in many ways by ancient ecclesiastical records, should it be held as certain that the Pastoral Epistles, the two, namely, to Timothy and another to Titus, notwithstanding the effrontery of certain heretics, who without giving any reason expunged them from the number of Pauline Epistles as being opposed to their tenets, were written by the Apostle Paul himself and were always listed among the genuine and canonical Epistles?

Answer: In the affirmative.

III: Do the difficulties commonly alleged on many grounds, either on account of the style and language of the author, or of the errors, especially of the Gnostics, described as already then current, or of the presupposition that the ecclesiastical hierarchy was in an already developed state, and other similar arguments to the contrary, in any way weaken the opinion that holds the genuineness of the Pastoral Epistles to be established and certain?

Answer: In the negative.

**THE REPLIES OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION ON
QUESTIONS OF SACRED SCRIPTURE**

Translated by E. F. Sutcliffe, S.J.

7. The prophecies and miracles set forth and recorded in the Sacred Scriptures are the fiction of poets, and the mysteries of the Christian faith the result of philosophical investigations. In the books of the Old and the New Testament there are contained mythical inventions, and Jesus Christ is Himself a myth. Pius IX, The Syllabus of Errors.

Any memory of old theories of verbal inspiration was to be omitted, and hence any form of an impersonal, mechanistic interpretation of the origin of Scripture... But this little word veritas that intruded here proved to be a living cell that continued to grow. But what did it mean? Only, "religious" or even "secular" truth, to use the language of the 1962 schema? This was the real problem that now had to be taken up with full force both inside and outside the conciliar discussion. This did not happen, and new suggestions

for the solution of the inerrancy question, as modern research posed it, could be made only hesitantly. Form F was worked out in the third session of the Council. The first change that strikes us is in the title of Article 11: "Statuitur factum inspirationis et veritatis S. Scripturae." Inerrantia is replaced by the positive term veritas, which is notably extended in the text. In the course of the discussion on the schema in the autumn of 1964, various fathers from the Eastern and the Western Churches made important speeches on the necessity of an interpretation of the inerrancy of Scripture

that would be in harmony with the latest findings of exegesis. It was variously pointed out that the doctrine of inerrancy received its particular and narrower formulation in the 19th century, at a time when the means of secular historical research and criticism were used to investigate the secular historical accuracy of Scripture, and this was more or less denied - which had inevitable consequences for its theological validity. The teaching office of the Church sought to concentrate its defense at the point of immediate attack: i.e. to defend the inerrancy of Scripture even in the *veritates profanae* generally defending the claim of the Bible and of Christianity to be revelation. To defend scriptural inerrancy in this sphere of secular truths various theories were employed which sought to prove the absolute inerrancy of Scripture on the basis of these conditions and attitudes. Because of the apologetical viewpoint from which they started, they were in danger of producing a narrowness and a false accentuation⁷ in the doctrine of inerrancy. Also in the area of the interpretation of Scripture and the rules pertaining to this we can see a similar phenomenon, which the Council observed in different spheres of theology and endeavoured to

nullify: namely, the tendency to an apologetical isolation and the claim to absolutism of a partial view. With this kind of motivation for the defense of the inerrancy of Scripture in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, there was a weakening of the awareness that Scripture as the inspired, written word of God is supposed above all to serve the preservation and expansion of the saving revelation and reality given through Christ in the world. Of course it was always realized that this was the real purpose of Scripture. In the question of inerrancy, however, the emphasis was placed on the one-sided and isolated accentuation of the veritates profanae. This tended to create uncertainty rather than a joyful confidence that God's truth and salvation remain present

in the world in an unfalsified and permanent form--namely through the inspired word. It was necessary to reawaken this awareness. The doctrine of inerrancy needed its own centre and the right accentuation.

In this respect the most important contribution was undoubtedly the speech by Cardinal Koenig on 2 October 1964. Several other fathers who took part

in the discussion from 2 to 6 October either verbally or in writing came back to this point. The Cardinal first of all pointed out the new situation that exists in relation to the question of inerrancy. As a result of intensive Oriental studies our picture of the *veritas historica* and the *fides historica* of Scripture has been clarified. Many of the 19th century objections to the Old Testament in particular and its reliability as an account of historical fact are now irrelevant. But Oriental studies have also produced another finding: “. . . *laudata scientia rerum orientalium insuper demonstrat in Bibliis Sacris notitias historicas et notitias scientiae naturalis a veritate quandoque deficere.*” Thus Cardinal Koenig admitted that not all the difficulties could be solved. On the contrary, in certain cases they have an urgency that is borne out by scientific research. His speech mentioned a few examples: according to Mk 2: 26 David had entered the house of God under the high priest Abiathar and eaten the bread of the Presence. In fact, however, according to 1 Sam 21: 1 ff. it was not under Abiathar, but under his father Abimelech. In Mt 27:9 we read that in the fate of Judas a prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled. In fact it is Zech 11: 12f. that is quoted. In Dan 1: 1

we read that King Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in the third year of King Jehoiakim, i.e. 607 B.C., but from the authentic chronicle of King Nebuchadnezzar that has been discovered we know that the siege can only have taken place three years later. Other geographical and chronological points could be quoted in this connection.

The fact that this speech could be held in a plenary session without any protest being made is surely significant... Thus Cardinal Koenig implicitly gives up that premise that comes from the aprioristic and unhistorical thinking that has dominated teaching on inerrancy since the age of the Fathers: if one admits that a sacred writer has made a mistake, then one is necessarily admitting that God has made a mistake with the human author. The actual aim of inspiration allows us to find a better solution: one can still maintain the true influence of God on the human authors without making him responsible for their weaknesses. These relate only to the form or the outer garment of the Gospel, and not the latter itself, however much the two might be inwardly connected- indeed, without this genuine humanity, with all its limitations, Scripture

would appear like a foreign body in our world. But God speaks to us in this way, in our language, from out of our midst.

*A number of Council fathers followed the example of Cardinal Koenig and refer to him as an authority: others, admittedly in the minority, produced the traditional statements, without, however, dealing with the new points raised by Cardinal Koenig. H. Vorgrimler, ed. **Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II** (Herder & Herder, 1969), 3:204-207.*

The development of ecclesiastical doctrine

The Development of Ecclesiastical Doctrine

Anthony Kenny

The development of doctrine is not itself a doctrine of the Catholic Church. From the beginning, the Church has taught, not that its dogmas develop, but that its faith is immutable. St Paul told the Galatians: 'Even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preach to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed' (Galatians, 1, 8). Quoting those words 400 years later, Pope Simplicius wrote 'One and the same norm of apostolic doctrine continues in the apostles' successors'. The Council of Trent, in its preamble, asserted that the Gospel truth is to be found in the written books, and unwritten traditions, which were received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ, or dictated to them by the Holy Spirit; which have been handed down to us and preserved by continuous succession in the Catholic Church. Pius IX, writing against Günther in 1857, spoke of the 'perennial immutability of the faith' which he contrasted with 'philosophy and human sciences which are neither self-consistent nor free from errors of many kinds'. The Syllabus of 1864 condemned the view that divine revelation was imperfect and might progress in step with the progress of human reason. The Vatican Council repeated this. 'The doctrine of faith which God has revealed is not, like a philosophical theory, something for human ingenuity to perfect; but rather divine deposit from Christ to his bride, to be faithfully preserved and infallibly explained.' The immutability of dogma is not a matter of words only but of meaning also: 'That sense is always to be given to sacred dogmas which holy mother Church has once explained; it is

never to be given up under the pretext of a more profound understanding.'¹

The only mention of the development of doctrine in official ecclesiastical documents occurs in the unflattering context of the modernist crisis. The encyclical *Lamentabili* attributes to the modernists the following view: 'The objects of religious sensibility, since it is coextensive with the Absolute, has infinitely many aspects, of which one may be clear at one moment, and another at the next. In a similar manner, the condition of believers is not always and everywhere the same. It follows that the formulae which we call dogmas must be subject to the same vicissitudes, and therefore must be capable of alteration. Thus there is nothing to prevent an intrinsic evolution of doctrine.' Such a view was described by Pius X as an unending tissue of sophistries, which wrecks and ruins all religion.

Many of the condemned modernist propositions were concerned with the development of doctrine. Two of the most interesting read as follows. (1) The revelation which constitutes the object of Catholic belief was not completed with the Apostles. (2) The principal articles of the Apostles' Creed did not have the same meaning for the early Christians as they have for Christians of the present day.²

Against this array of pronouncements hostile to the notion of development two passages must be set. The first is a text of Vincent of Lerins quoted at the Vatican: 'May the understanding, knowledge, and wisdom of all and each, of the individual and of the Church, grow and progress mightily as the years and ages pass, but always in the same doctrine, in the same sense, and in the same belief.' The second is a letter of Pius X written in 1908 which said that the condemnations of modernism were not directed against the Cardinal Newman who was and remains the most

distinguished Catholic exponent of the notion of doctrinal development.³

It is clear from the texts which I have cited that when we speak of the development of doctrine we are not referring to some doctrine, or meta-doctrine, of the Church concerning its own teaching. Rather we are alluding to a theory, or set of theories, to account for certain general and obvious facts about the Church's doctrine; and in particular to reconcile the course of the Church's history with the dogma of the immutability of faith. To deny flatly that dogma develops would not necessarily be heretical; it would merely argue great ignorance of history.

It is first of all obvious that the number of defined dogmas has grown constantly since the earliest Councils. Beliefs whose acceptance is now a condition of membership of the Church were formerly rejected by men who retained the communion and favour of the Apostolic See. It is well known that St Clement of Alexandria held views upon the Eucharist, and St John Chrysostom upon Predestination, and St Thomas Aquinas on the Immaculate Conception, which, if expressed in 1870, would have made it impossible for any of them to take part in the deliberations of the Vatican Council. At that Council there was defined a doctrine whose definitions many of the attending bishops opposed until the last moment; and in our own day Pope Pius XII proclaimed, for the first time under the sanction of an anathema, the doctrine of the Assumption of Mary.

The multiplication of definitions does not, merely in itself, raise any problem concerning the immutability of faith. The avowed purpose of the majority of conciliar and papal definitions has not been to make change or addition to the beliefs of orthodox Christians, but rather to provide a legal instrument for the reform or expulsion of heretics alleged to have denied an article of faith hitherto an unquestioned part

of the Christian patrimony of belief. It has never, so far as I know, been officially defined that Jesus was a man — a male, and not a woman — because there has never been a feminist heresy to deny this truth. But if a group began to propound such a heresy, and it was condemned under anathema, the Pope could scarcely be reproached with altering, or adding to, the faith handed down from the Apostles.

It is impossible, however, to produce an actual case of a definition on any major topic which can be seen beyond all possibility of cavil to be merely a reaffirmation of a belief held unanimously by Christians until the appearance of the heresy which provoked the anathema. Theologians sometimes quote with approval the dictum of St Vincent of Lerins, that the object of faith is what has been believed at all times and in all places by all Christians: *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. Taken seriously, this dictum would rule out all articles of faith except those contained in the Apostle's Creed, and perhaps some of those. There is an ambiguity, of course, in the phrase 'ab omnibus'. Does this mean 'by all who have claimed to be Christians'? If so, then the dictum is patently false of the corpus of doctrine which is now imposed under pain of excommunication. Does it mean 'by all orthodox Christians'? Here again, we must distinguish. If 'orthodox Christians' means 'orthodox by the defined standards of the time in which they lived' then again the dictum is false. If it means 'orthodox by the defined standards of the present day' then it is true; but trivially so, and only at the cost of making heretics of a large number of Fathers, Saints, and Doctors of the Church. For there has been scarcely any major definition of Pope or Council which has not contradicted the recorded views of one or other of the bishops and theologians of the early centuries of the Church.

To illustrate the difficulties against the doctrine of the immutability of dogma, I shall mention four dogmas of the Christian faith, each defined under anathema at different periods of history: the dogma of the Blessed Trinity, the teaching concerning the particular judgement and the beatific vision before the resurrection, the prohibition of usury, and the definition of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven.

The dogma of the Trinity was defined early in the history of the Church, and its expression has remained stable for many centuries. On such a cardinal doctrine, if anywhere, one would expect to find a unanimous testimony from the beginning to the faith which we now recognize as orthodox. But it is not so. Let me quote Newman on the difficulty of securing a consensus of ante-Nicene divines to the doctrine defined at Nicea and later councils,

The Catholic truth in question is made up of a number of separate propositions, each of which, if maintained to the exclusion of the rest, is a heresy. In order then to prove that all the ante-Nicene writers taught the dogma of the Holy Trinity, it is not enough to prove that each has gone far enough to be a heretic — not enough to prove that one has held that the Son is God (for so did the Sabellian, so did the Macedonian), and another that the Father is not the Son (for so did the Arian) and another that the Son is equal to the Father (for so did the Tritheist), and another that there is but one God (for so did the Unitarian) . . . but we must show that all these statements at once, and others too, are laid down by as many separate testimonies as many fairly be taken to constitute a consensus of doctors.

Newman went on to summarize the evidence. The Creeds of the period make no mention in their letter of the Catholic doctrine. The only great Council of ante-Nicene times condemned, or at least withdrew, the use of the word

'homoousion' to express the relation of the Son to the Father: the word which, after Nicea, was the criterion of orthodoxy. He writes:

The six great bishops and saints of the ante-Nicene Church were St Irenaeus, St Hippolytus, St Cyprian, St Gregory Thaumaturgus, St Dionysius of Alexandria and St Methodius. Of these St Dionysius is accused by St Basil of having sown the first seeds of Arianism; and St Gregory is allowed by the same learned father to have used language concerning our Lord, which he only defends on the plea of an economical object in the writer. St Hippolytus speaks as if he were ignorant of Our Lord's eternal Sonship, St Methodius speaks incorrectly at least upon the Incarnation; and St Cyprian does not treat of theology at all. Such is the incompleteness of the extant teaching of these true saints, and, in their day, faithful witnesses of the eternal Son.⁴

Newman's purpose in writing thus was neither to propose difficulties against the doctrine of the immutability of faith nor to impugn the orthodoxy of the fathers of the first centuries. Rather he wished to suggest to his fellow-Anglicans that if they accepted the Nicene formulae in face of such incomplete evidence in their favour from the primitive Church, they had no reason for rejecting the primacy of the Roman See about which, he claimed, the surviving records were considerably more eloquent. None the less, the case which he presents raises an obvious problem for the doctrine which we are considering; a problem which scholarship since Newman's day has done little to mitigate and something to aggravate.

A millennium after Nicea, Pope Benedict XII defined as a truth of faith that the souls of the faithful departed, once they have been purified from sin if necessary, are taken to heaven and there enjoy, before the resurrection of their bodies, the beatific vision of God. The circumstances which

led to the definition of this now so familiar doctrine are well known. Pope Benedict's predecessor John XXII had preached, and had retracted only on his deathbed, the doctrine that the Saints would begin to enjoy the vision of God only after the resurrection and the general judgement. They were meanwhile, he had maintained, in a state of imperfect happiness, blessed with the company of Christ's human nature, but not yet in the joy of the Lord.

These circumstances are well known. What is perhaps less well known, is that the view put forward by John XXII seems, on the evidence we have, to have been the common one before the time of the great scholastics. The New Testament has little to say about the fate of the soul between death and the return of Christ: what little it says — e.g. St Paul's wish to 'be away from the body and at home with the Lord' — is as compatible with the heresy of Pope John as with the orthodoxy of Pope Benedict. The prayer of the Mass that the faithful departed may be received into a place of rest and light and peace, seems a rather cool and unenthusiastic description for the beatific vision. A letter of St Ambrose is a good example of the eschatological picture current in his time. The apostles and the martyrs, he thought, already enjoyed the beatific vision; but the rest of men had not yet entered into their everlasting destiny. Their souls were housed in spiritual warehouses, sorted but not yet despatched, in three groups. The wicked were being punished, but not yet in Hell; run-of-the-mill sinners were to be tried by fire after the last judgement; the just enjoy a certain rest, but suffer still as they wait for the number of the elect to be filled up. Similar views, though not so quaintly explicit, are to be found in St Augustine and St Gregory. As late as the twelfth century St Bernard preached that the faithful departed, though 'at their ease, being freed from the confining flesh' still 'await a perfection which will come only from the resurrection of the body' and are not

yet 'with the angels' nor enjoying 'the satisfaction of glory'. It was to St Bernard that Pope John XXII appealed in his ill-starred sermon at Avignon.⁵

The condemnation as heretical of the opinion that usury is not a sin took place in the lifetime of Pope John XXII. Here the case is reversed: it is not the prehistory of a defined doctrine which presents a difficulty but rather the subsequent attitude of official Catholicism. For centuries before and after the Council of Vienne it was taught, with every possible emphasis, that it was a sin to charge interest on money lent. The condemnation of usury in the Middle Ages were more formal and more grievously sanctioned than any condemnation of artificial contraception in our own day. No-one could say that detestation of usury was nowadays a notable mark of a church whose bishops impose on their clergy an obligation of fruitful investment of ecclesiastical moneys and who are sometimes inclined to see the capitalist societies of the West as Godsent champions of the right against the evils of Communism. This change is comparatively recent. As late as 1745 it was taught, in the encyclical *Vix Pervenit*, that it was a sin to ask for more money back than one had lent; any money however little, demanded over and above the return of the principal, was illicitly acquired. The encyclical admitted that there might be legitimate grounds other than that of the loan itself on which a consideration might be demanded beyond the principal; but it concluded: 'It must be carefully noted that anyone who says that there are always such grounds attached to a loan would be rashly persuading himself of falsehood.' Compare this with the brief statement of an approved modern manual of moral theology. 'The lender may not, as a rule, require a remuneration for the thing lent. For extrinsic reasons, however, which nowadays are always verified, in case money is lent, a just rate of interest may be charged.'

Consider finally the dogma of the Assumption. Pope Pius XII declared in 1950 that it was dogma divinely revealed, and to be believed under pain of anathema, that the Blessed Virgin Mary at the end of her earthly life, was raised body and soul to heavenly glory. His predecessor, Pius X, had declared that the revelation which constituted the object of Christian faith was complete with last Apostle. It follows that the doctrine of the Assumption must have been revealed before the death of the last Apostle. Yet the records which we have show no trace of a belief in the Assumption before the end of the fourth century; a gap as wide as that which separates us from Queen Elizabeth's death. The first references to the belief occur either in spurious and legendary treatises or in hesitant passages in genuine sermons. Only with the liturgical establishment of the feast of the Dormition on 15 August (c. 650) have we, in the collect and office of the day, a clear witness to the doctrine. There could hardly be a clearer example of the difficulties attendant on the doctrine of the immutability of the faith and of the nature of the phenomena to be explained by any theory of the development of doctrine.

Various explanations have been offered by Catholics of these problematic cases. Sometimes, we are told, doctrines held implicitly are only later explicitly formulated. Other dogmas are deductions from the reading of Scripture. Some variations between ancient and modern teaching may be due to a degree of corruption. Many doctrines may have been believed for centuries without leaving any written record. I will examine how far these explanations can account for the phenomena of development.

1. Formulation. It is often said that we believe the same as the first Christians, only they believed implicitly what we believed explicitly. In support of this theory reference is sometimes made to S.T.

IIa, IIae 1, 7 where St Thomas asserts that whatever more recent people have believed was contained in the faith of the fathers who proceeded them, but implicitly. St Thomas, however, was considering the relation not between the faith of later and earlier Christians, but between the faith of Christians and the Hebrew patriarchs. Since revelation continued between the age of the patriarchs and the time of the Apostles, it will not suffice to say that modern Catholics have the same faith as St Peter in the same sense in which St Peter had the same faith as Abraham. Even for the purpose which he had in mind, St Thomas's use of 'implicitly' seems very strained. He says that belief e.g. in the Virgin Birth is contained implicitly in belief in God's providence. To clarify this he compares it to the way in which all other principles are contained in the principle of contradiction. It is difficult to make any credible sense of this Aristotelian dictum which is at all helpful in connection with the development of dogma.

The notion of implicit belief is, of course, a valid one, and has many applications in the history of dogma. If it is the case that being a perfect human being involves possessing adrenal glands, then it is quite natural to say that the fathers of Chalcedon believed implicitly that Christ possessed adrenal glands. But it is a different matter to say that St Irenaeus believed implicitly in the Immaculate Conception because he compared our Lady to Eve, or to say that ante-Nicene writers, whose words explicitly contradict the teaching of the Council, implicitly believed in Nicene orthodoxy.

2. Deduction. There are certainly some dogmas which are, and are put forward as, deductions from other dogmas or from Scripture; as the doctrine that

Christ had two wills follows from the doctrine that he had two natures. But the relation of some dogmas to the Scriptures seems not to be that of conclusion to premisses, but rather that of hypothesis to data: I mean that a dogma such as the Nicene and Constantinopolitan formulation of the Trinity seems to supply a set of premisses from which the Scriptural statements about the Father, Son and Holy Ghost may be derived as conclusions, rather than a set of conclusions which may be derived from the words of Scripture as premisses. This pattern seems to apply particularly to those now defined dogmas each of which is first recorded as one among a number of competing theological theories to account for the data of revelation; I am thinking particularly of the definitions concerning justification, from Orange to the Synod of Pistoia. It is certain that heresies are condemned normally not because they do not follow from Scripture, nor even because they contradict something which follows from Scripture, but rather because from them there follows something which contradicts Scripture.

But there are some doctrines, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, which do not seem to be in a deductive relationship to scripture any more than does the canonization of a particular Saint. The difficulty here has led some writers on development to dangerous sophistry; saying that the development of doctrine 'occurs in conformity with a logic which is rigorous and unescapable' but that 'the process by which a truth of the faith is derived from one that precedes it takes place wholly in the night of faith' according to a 'logic of God' which is 'above ours' and which 'goes beyond the purely rational expression which we instinctively try to give it'.

3. Corruption. Since the Reformation, it has been a commonplace outside the Roman communion to account for the variations between Catholic teaching at different periods by regarding recently defined doctrines as Romish corruptions. Such a course is naturally not open to a Catholic; but Catholics concede that the charism of infallibility guarantees only that the Church's official magisterium will not teach anything which it ought not to teach; not that it will teach everything which it ought to teach at any given period of its history. A further question can be raised concerning the limits of infallibility. Is it possible that a Pope might be mistaken in thinking that he was speaking *ex cathedra*? The charism extends only to matters concerning faith and morals. Would it be possible for a Pope to believe mistakenly that a certain belief was necessary to salvation, and therefore within his competence to define? If not, then is there no criterion of what pertains to the deposit of faith independent of what Popes have said, or may say, in their definitions? If so, then how is it known that — e.g. in defining the Assumption — the Pope did not perhaps go beyond his competence and was therefore deprived of the charism of infallibility and perhaps erred?
4. Unrecorded belief. The decree of the Council of Trent quoted earlier is quite naturally read as implying that the Gospel truth is contained partly in the written records which make up Scripture and partly in unrecorded beliefs which have been orally transmitted from generation to generation. Theologians, faced with the task of accounting for the emergence of an apparently new doctrine, have sometimes solved their difficulties by claiming that

the doctrine had always been explicitly believed since the time of the Apostles, but that no record of such a belief had survived. The absence of records in such cases is sometimes shrugged off as the result of chance, sometimes accounted for by appeal to a *disciplina arcani* or deliberate concealment of esoteric doctrines by the early Christians.

Now there is nothing inconceivable in the faithful transmission, over long periods, of a piece of oral tradition. In the nature of the case, one cannot produce a conclusive proof of its possibility by pointing to the present existence of an accurate record of a remote event which has been transmitted purely orally. But there are many pieces of lore which, though they may be found in print at various times, are almost always acquired by hearing and passed on by word of mouth. Examples are nursery rhymes, bawdy songs and jokes, the way to tie complicated knots, and simple and staple prayers. Monsignor Knox has pointed out that the Lord's Prayer has been transmitted from the time of the Apostles almost entirely by word of mouth: most of those who have known it have been illiterate and almost all of us learnt it at an age when we were too young to read. The unimportance of written, as compared with oral, influence here may be gauged by the surprise with which Catholics make the discovery — if they ever do — that the Douay version reads 'Our Father which art in heaven . . .' Iona and Peter Opie, in *The Lore and Language of School Children* (Oxford, 1959), give some striking examples of the transmission from child to child, over centuries, of beliefs which though recorded in books were not written in any place where a child would be likely to read them. Such are the beliefs that a cut between thumb and forefinger causes lockjaw, that dock-leaves cure nettle stings

(mentioned by Chaucer), that finding a four-leaved clover brings luck (recorded in 1620) and that stepping on two flagstones at once brings disaster (a belief which Dr Johnson never grew out of). (Ibid. pp. 1, 62, 221, 223.)

If the existence of an oral tradition independent of the Scriptures is not inconceivable, it is not, on the other hand, an item of Catholic faith. For the fathers and the great Scholastics all the truths which are necessary to salvation are contained in the Scriptures; 'tradition' means the handing on and interpreting of the Scriptures, not a set of beliefs side by side with them. The suggestion that there are some Catholic truths which have been derived from the Apostles by oral transmission was first made, it seems, by Ockham. This view was taken up by fifteenth-century theologians, and became naturally popular with anti-Lutheran polemicists. It was the view held by the majority of the fathers present at the Council of Trent, but it was not defined by the Council, as has recently been brilliantly shown by George Tavard. The original draft of the decree on tradition, championed by the Papal Legate, and using language derived, oddly enough, from King Henry VI II, spoke of the Gospel truth as being 'contained partly in written books, partly in unwritten traditions'. A vociferous minority, including the Bishop of Worcester and Cardinal Pole, opposed the draft. Typical of their attitude was the statement of Angelo Bonuti, the general of the Servites, 'I consider that all evangelical truth is in Scripture, not therefore partly'. To secure unanimity, the words 'partim . . . partim . . .' were dropped from the final decree, which thus deliberately left room for the classical, but by then unpopular, conception of tradition

as an interpreter of, rather than a supplement to, Scripture.⁶

It is obvious, and we are told expressly by the Gospel writers, that while men lived who remembered Jesus, there were many facts about his life and teaching which were known but which were never committed to writing. It does not follow from this, however, that any of these facts were still known and repeated some generations later, after the formation and circulation of the canonical scriptures. That by the fifth century there were still current reliable oral traditions of this kind seems unlikely for the following reasons.

It is rare today to find stories circulating concerning persons who lived or events which happened much more than 100 years ago which can plausibly claim both to be reliable and to have been transmitted only by word of mouth. The examples of oral tradition mentioned earlier all concern frequently repeated formulae, or are connected with often repeated actions. Fidelity of transmission is much more credible in such contexts than in the case of a narrative of a particular event which there is not frequent reason to repeat or of a statement of abstruse theory.

Since the institution of the feast of 15 August, and especially since the rosary became popular, the doctrine of the Assumption has belonged precisely to that class of beliefs whose oral propagation is most credible: even today, probably far more Catholics first heard of the Assumption in connection with the holiday of obligation or of learning to tell their beads rather than through the reading of pious books or catechisms. But this does not yet make it credible that the belief was transmitted orally from the time of the death of St Mary until the period at which it is first recorded.

It may be argued that the parallel with the present day does not hold; first because we live in a much more literate age, and secondly because we do not know that there were not written records of the belief, say from the second century, which have been lost. This is so: but there are particular as well as general reasons for doubting the survival of oral tradition concerning evangelical events after the second century. Christian writers in the third and later centuries never make appeal to such traditions, other than liturgical ones, and write as if the canonical scriptures contained all the information which had survived about the life of our Lord and his circle. Origen, for example, writing about the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews, cannot appeal to any reliable tradition on this point: he bases his guess about the Epistle's composition on its style and content. The manifestly legendary elements in the apocryphal gospels suggest that the gaps in the life of our Lord left by the scriptures were filled up rather by imagination than by an extra-scriptural tradition, and the circulation of such untrustworthy narratives must soon have made it impossible to place reliance on any story which was current but unvouched for by the canonical writers. Tradition is appealed to by the Fathers for the reception and interpretation of the Scriptures, not as source of information and saving truth flowing side by side with them.

By itself, therefore, the postulation of unrecorded beliefs does not provide a satisfactory solution of the problems connected with the development of dogma. If this is so in the case of the Assumption, where the phenomenon to be explained is merely the silence of early writing concerning a later defined dogma, it is much more so in the case of other examples of development, where early writings give testimony of

the existence of beliefs contrary to, or difficult to reconcile with, the finally defined orthodoxy.⁷

[Footnotes]

1 See H. Denzinger and C. Bannwart, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 25 edn, pp. 783, 1795, 1800, 1817.

2 *Ibid.*, 2021, 2060ff.

3 *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1, 200f.

4 The two passages quoted are from *The Development of Doctrine* (London, 1960, pp. 11-12).

5 St Ambrose, Ep. 35, 7 (J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, series latiba, henceforth. P. L., pp. 16, 1125); St Bernard, *Sermons* (P. L., pp. 183, 325, 528, 698). See H. Rondet, S. J., *Do Dogmas Change?* (London, 1962), pp. 22-35.

6 *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, (London, 1963), ch. 12.

7 I am indebted to Prof. G. E. M. Anscombe for criticism of this paper when presented in 1964.

VII. Hermeneutics

Catholic prooftexts

Over the years I've commented on stock prooftexts for Catholicism. In this post I'm going to collate my various responses. To a great extent this will repeat what I've said before, but it's useful to consolidate my interpretations in one place.

There are two kinds of Catholic prooftexts. One set concerns prooftexts for specific Catholic doctrines, viz. apocrypha, synergism, transubstantiation, baptismal regeneration, cult of the saints, relics, auricular confession, absolution, Purgatory, indulgences, indissolubility of marriage, Marian dogmas, contraception, lying.

Although I've discussed many of those issues before, I won't rehearse them in this post. For one thing, it would make it too long. That covers many of the loci of systematic theology and Christian ethics, with complex historical and hermeneutical arguments.

In addition, some of these beliefs aren't that distinctive to Catholicism. In theory, Catholicism could be right about baptismal regeneration or the real presence but still be false. Catholicism is a take-it-or-leave-it package. So it isn't necessary to disprove every Catholic essential or distinctive to disprove Catholicism. While it's useful to attack Catholicism on multiple fronts, that's overkill.

The other set concerns prooftexts for the authority structure of Catholicism. This post will focus on that set. Many Catholic doctrines aren't derivable from Scripture. They require the deus ex machina of the magisterium to validate them. So a decapitation strike is more efficient than blow-

by-blow rebuttal (which, however, is valuable in its own right).

MATTHEW 16:18-19

This is the classic prooftexts for the papacy.

1. Let's begin with some programmatic questions:

i) What does the "rock" refer to?

ii) Does Hades refer to the realm of the dead or the realm of the demonic?

iii) Does binding/loosing have independent meaning, or is that simply an alternative metaphor for keys, and derives its meaning from whatever the keys represent?

iv) Are the gates of hell and the keys of heaven mutually interpretive, or does the latter have an independent meaning?

2. Now I propose answer my own questions:

i) Caesarea Philippi is situated on a rocky terrace at the base of Mt. Hermon. As such, it's natural to suppose the rocky metaphor was suggested by the immediate surroundings. Jesus was standing on rocky ground, and standing in the shadow of Mt. Hermon, at the time he made his statement.

This may also goes to a difference between the written word and the spoken word. Consider the demonstrative pronoun: "this". In that setting, it's easy to imagine him pointing to an actual rocky object. "I will build my church on this!"–

accompanied by an illustrative gesture. The repetition of "rock" may well include a reference to Simon, but the double reference may also include a reference to the rocky surroundings. Indeed, that may be primary.

"Rock" is probably a double entendre, both for Peter and especially the emblematic location. "Rocky" is a pun in honor of Peter's insightful confession, but what the church is built on is what the location symbolizes.

ii) In Revelation, the Netherworld is subdivided into a realm of the dead (Rev 20:13-14) and a realm of the demonic (9:1-11; 11:17; 17:8). And keys are associated with each (Rev 1:18; 9:1-2.; cf. 20:1-3). My point is not to use Revelation to interpret Mt 16 directly. Rather, this seems to be stock imagery that was in circulation in Jewish circles.

iii) Caesarea Philippi was pagan territory. In OT times, it may well have been a site of Baal-worship. Later on, it was a shrine for the Greek god Pan. So it would have demonic associations.

iv) Although Matthew doesn't fill in the details, the implicit imagery involves a parallel between hades and heaven, where they stand in contrast. Gates imply keys and keys imply gates. If we mentally flesh it out, the reader should visualize both heaven and hades as gated locations.

Since these two images occur back-to-back, not to mention the intrinsically related imagery, it stands to reason that these are mutually interpretive, picturesque metaphors. And it would be jarring if binding/loosing had a different import.

v) Gates can be used to lock people out or keep people from escaping. A form of authorized access and/or

confinement. The porter is a sentinel who guards the site. No one can enter or leave unless he unlocks the gate.

vi) Given the associations with heathen idolatry, I think hades more likely connotes the realm of the demonic in this evocative setting. Jesus may be boldly saying he will build his church on top of hellmouth. The gates of heaven and hades may not be two separate gates, but a single gate separating the church from the demonic realm. And the function of the gate may be to block the demonic realm from storming the church. It's daring to build the church right over hell, but that's an example of God subjugating his enemies. A variation on making his enemies his footstool. Rather than building his church at a safe distance, he builds his church right behind enemy lines to demonstrate God's invincibility. The church survive and thrives in the face of the enemy.

3. Catholic apologists typically allege that v19 is an allusion to Isa 22:22, then imports the entire Isaian context into v19. However, the related metaphors of keys, gates, and doors are stock imagery (e.g. Mt 23:13; 25:10; Lk 11:52; Jn 10:9; Acts 14:27; 1 Cor 16:9; Col 4:3; Rev 1:18; 3:7-8,20; 9:1; 20:1), so it doesn't require any special explanation, in terms of literary dependence, to account for the imagery.

The opening and shutting metaphor isn't additional to the key metaphor, but a variation on the same metaphor. Keys, doors, open, shutting.

Moreover, binding and loosing are absent from Isa 22:22. That's a different metaphor.

And even if it was an allusion to Isa 22:22, it doesn't follow that Jesus is reproducing the entire context of Isa 22, rather

than mining the passage for picturesque metaphors or theological motifs.

4. To ascribe certain prerogatives to Peter does not imply that he alone has these prerogatives. Mt 16 doesn't contrast Peter with what is said about the other disciples in the Gospel. It doesn't say Peter had these prerogatives to the exclusion of the other disciples. It's illogical to infer that what is said about one person can't therefore be said about someone else.

5. Catholic apologists sometimes say binding and loosing is a rabbinical concept. Well, that's one possible meaning. But the binding/loosing metaphor needs to be related to the keys metaphor. And is it coincidental that we have a back-to-back comparison between the "gates of hell" (v18) and the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" (v19)? Isn't that a clue?

6. When Catholic apologists point to NT statements about "the church" in Matthew and elsewhere, there's the danger of committing the illegitimate totality transfer fallacy, where they read a theological construct, based on all the varied occurrences of "the church" in NT usage, back into any particular occurrence. We need to avoid making "church" a loaded word wherever it occurs in the NT.

When a modern reader sees "the church" in the NT, he has the entire NT at his fingertips, as well as 2000 years of church history behind him, in addition to his personal experience with whatever denominations he's attended. But the original audience for Matthew didn't have that frame of reference. For them, "the church" didn't trigger all those associations. When we read the NT, we need to screen all the anachronistic connotations of "the church" which that word evokes for a modern reader.

7. Jesus singles out Peter on that occasion because Peter answered the question. Peter is often the first to speak or act.

However, that sometimes gets him into trouble because he has a tendency to say or do foolish things. He sometimes takes the lead when he should keep his mouth shut. He speaks without thinking. Blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. Acts rashly. Indeed, in the very next pericope, Jesus accuses Peter of Satanic misunderstanding (v23).

8. The fact that Peter is incidentally singled out on that occasion is confirmed by the fact that in Mt 18:18-20, the same authority conferred on Peter is conferred on local churches.

9. It's not at all clear that the "rock" on which the church is built refers to Peter. In that regard, John Nolland, in his commentary, makes two significant points:

There is no straightforward antecedent for taute ('this') since petra ('rock') has not been used previously" (669).

Therefore, the syntax and usage don't select for Peter as the object of the demonstrative pronoun. Nolland goes onto say:

The very fact of the choice of different words suggests that in this case some

difference of meaning is intended (petros in both places would have served better for the sense: 'You are Peter, and on this rock/stone [which you are] I will build my church')...The change of words encourages the linking of taute ('this') not to the immediately preceding Petros ('Peter'), but back via v17 to the confession of v16 (669).

Robert Gundry, in his commentary (p334, 2nd ed.), has argued that this refers back to the parable in Mt 7:24-27. Jesus is quoting himself:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock ([Mt 7:24](#)).

In that event, the "rock" refers to building on the foundation Christ's teaching.

10. But even if Peter is the "rock" in both occurrences in Mt 16, these "rocky," foundational metaphors aren't confined to Peter—but include the Apostolate in general (e.g. Rev 21:14).

[MATTHEW 23:2-3](#)

1. This passage says nothing about church officers, much less the papacy or Roman episcopate.

2. It's quite likely that Christ's statement is sarcastic. Throughout this very Gospel, he's routinely at loggerheads with the scribes and Pharisees (Mt 12:1-14; 15:1-20; 16:5-12; 19:3-9). And in this very chapter, he mercilessly lampoons the scribes and Pharisees. It would sabotage Christ's own messianic claims to issue the scribes and Pharisees a blank check when they were his theological opponents.

3. However, even assuming we should take his statement at face-value, which is improbable, it may only mean:

the scribes and Pharisees occupy a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are not plentiful. Since Jesus' disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribes and Pharisees to know what Moses said.

*We might say that the scribes and Pharisees were walking copies of the Law. What they did with it might be suspect, but not their knowledge of it. They would be relied on to report the Law of Moses with care and accuracy. J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2006), 923.*

4. Unlike the Levitical priesthood, the Pharisees were not lineal successors to Moses (or Aaron). You didn't need to be a priest to be a Pharisee. Indeed, many or most of the Pharisees were layman.

Same thing with the scribes. You didn't need to be a priest to be a scribe. A layman could be a scribe.

5. Ironically, Catholic apologist unwittingly ascribing an authoritative teaching office to mere laymen. If anything, this passage is a prooftext for the right of private judgment. Not in the sense that every individual is equally competent to expound the Scriptures. But some men are competent to expound the Scriptures. And when it singles out two group of able teachers, it doesn't draw the line between the laity and the clergy. That's not what distinguishes a fit teacher from an unfit teacher. Indeed, the text implicitly attributes teaching ability to a class of men, many or most of whom were laymen.

Assuming that it's not sarcastic, this is a prooftext for a low-church ecclesiology, not a high-church ecclesiology. So the Catholic appeal generates a dilemma for Catholicism.

LUKE 22:32

1. To begin with, this passage says nothing about the papacy or the pope strengthening the Roman episcopate. It's not a promise to the papacy. It's not a general promise. It's very topical.

2. Peter is singled out, not because he outranks the other disciples, but because he will betray Jesus. The prayer anticipates his denial. Jesus prays for Peter's restoration in advance of his betrayal.

3. As a matter of faith, Peter's faith did fail. He lost his nerve and publicly renounced Jesus. That's a paradigmatic act of infidelity.

In context, the meaning of the statement is not that his faith will be unwavering, but that his failure won't be permanent. Jesus prays that Peter won't abandon the cause. Having betrayed Jesus, he will repent of his betrayal and renew his commitment.

4. The text doesn't say how Peter will strengthen his fellow. The most immediate explanation, in context, is that the example of Peter's restoration will strengthen the other disciples. The source of encouragement is not something Peter will do, but something Jesus did for Peter. If even Peter can be forgiven and restored, after publicly disowning Jesus, that's an encouragement to the other disciples, as they face persecution in the years ahead. Indeed, one reason Jesus tells Peter, in the presence of the other disciples, that he has prayed for him, is so that when Peter is contrite and rejoins the movement, that outcome will be attributed to the prescient and efficacious intercession of Jesus rather than Peter's fortitude naturally rebounding.

5. Finally, there's the fallacy of inferring that if Peter is said to strengthen the other disciples, this carries the implication that the other disciples won't strengthen each other. Catholic apologists act as though statements like this imply a contrast, where affirming something in reference to one person disaffirms the same thing in reference to anyone else. But the statement is not logically exclusive, as if only Peter can play that role. What makes Peter special in this passage is not his leadership but his failure of leadership. He buckled under pressure and set bad example. The

proleptic prayer of Christ is to rectify Peter's dereliction, not to promote him.

JOHN 16:13

1. Catholic apologists routinely "quote" this verse as a promise to "the Church". But that's not what the text says. At best, that's reading apostolic succession back into Jn 16:13. This verse is a promise to the Eleven, not to "the Church".

2. Moreover, the promise isn't made to Peter, much less the pope, but to the 11 remaining disciples in the upper room. Peter isn't singled out. And the papacy is nowhere in sight.

3. And even if, for the sake of argument, this is a promise to "the church", there's nothing in the text or context or entire Gospel to index that promise to the Roman Catholic church.

JOHN 17:21

1. The context of Jn 17:21 isn't ecclesiastical, but Trinitarian. In Jn 14-17, as well as 1 Jn 1:1-4, there's a threefold unity. There's the intra-Trinitarian fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit. Then there's Christians in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Spirit. Indeed, they wouldn't even be Christian apart from that. Then there's the mutual fellowship of Christians by virtue of their fellowship with the Father, Son, and Spirit. In Johannine theology, the unity of Christians is grounded in their participation in the paradigmatic unity of the Triune God. To be one with God is to be one with each other. That's the source. It has no connection with "the sacramental hierarchy, in communion

with the successor of Peter"—which is completely absent from Johannine theology.

2. It's striking that the NT never says there is "one church". The NT uses the metaphor of the temple. The significance of this metaphor is that what makes a building a temple is the divine presence within the temple. As Paul adapts this metaphor, a Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit. That, however, means whoever has the Spirit ipso facto belongs to the church.

Another corporate metaphor is a flock of sheep. That isn't called the "church". Rather, it's a collective metaphor for Christians. But if we use it as a synonym for the church, then whoever has Jesus as their shepherd belongs to the church.

Finally, Paul uses the "body" as a metaphor for the church. And he says there is "one body." That's the closest you get to a "one church" formula in the NT. If there's one body, and the body is a synonym for the church, doesn't that mean there's one church?

i) In a sense. However, this is a flexible metaphor which Paul uses to illustrate diversity as well as unity or unicity. He alternates between the one and the many.

ii) In addition, Paul says:

so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another (Rom 12:5).

To be in Christ makes you a member of his body. That's the constitutive relationship. That's what makes all believers

belong to one and the same body. Christians have a corporate identity by virtue of their incorporation in Christ.

But in that event, each and every Christian already belongs to the "one church" in virtue of their union with Christ.

JOHN 20:22-23

i) How should we interpret this statement? It's in a Gospel, not a church history. So it doesn't explicitly show us how that was understood and implemented in the church. For that our best source is the Book of Acts. It's not that the disciples personally absolve sin. Indeed, you don't find that in Acts. Rather, they provide the means for the remission of sin by evangelizing the lost.

ii) How were the Eleven in a position to be father confessors to thousands of converts? That's quite unrealistic. So it doesn't envision auricular confession and absolution. God does the forgiving. The Eleven are simply intermediaries of forgiveness by preaching the Gospel. Their role is indirect rather than direct. That's further reinforced by the fact that there's no rite of confession to a priest and sacerdotal absolution in the NT epistles. Catholicism is a different religion.

iii) Finally, in the context of John's Gospel, passages like Jn 3:16-18 offer a clue about how 20:22-23 was meant to be understood. The basis for forgiveness and damnation isn't confession to a Roman Catholic priest and absolution from his lips but by having faith in Jesus or refusing to have faith in Jesus.

JOHN 21:15-17

Peter was an apostle. He had pastoral responsibilities. So did other apostles. Indeed, one doesn't need to be an apostle to discharge pastoral duties. Shepherding the flock is not a uniquely Petrine or even uniquely apostolic distinction. Cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:1-2. Catholic apologists commit the elementary fallacy by acting as if something said about Peter is said in contrast to everyone else.

Jn 21 concerns his restoration to the status quo ante, not his elevation. Jn 21 is not a promotion. It's a reinstatement after Peter's betrayal.

Acts 1:21-26

Catholic apologists cite this as precedent for apostolic succession. However:

1. It's about maintaining the symbolism of the Twelve after Judas defected. Which disproves the Catholic appeal, since that means there can't be more or less than Twelve at a time. There were originally 12 disciples, corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel, and when Judas defected, he was replaced to maintain that numerically closed unit.

The Twelve is a closed number. Judas was replaced to maintain the symbolism. By definition, you can't extrapolate from a closed number (the Twelve) to an indefinite number beyond twelve at a time. The Twelve constitute a self-contained unit. There can only be changes within that unit.

2. There's no transfer of office. To the contrary, the Twelve is, in the nature of the case, a self-enclosed numerical unit. You can't legitimately expand from that to more than twelve

at a time. So this Catholic prooftext disproves the Catholic contention.

3. Catholic apologists play a shell game by switching from that to apostles appointing elders, as if that flows out of the appointment of Mathias. But that's categorically different. At best, the appointment of Mathias would be an example of one apostle replacing another apostle.

But Catholics don't think there's a permanent apostolic office with successive incumbents. They don't think apostolic succession means one apostle succeeding another apostle. Rather, they think bishops in union with the pope are the true successors to the Apostolate. Therefore, Daniel's prooftext either proves too much or too little.

Acts 1 involves replacement of the same kind whereas apostolic succession involves a shift from apostles to bishops. Different principle. Replacing one apostle with another apostle isn't any kind of precedent for replacing an apostle with a bishop.

4. Consider the qualifications:

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us— one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.

That's a very restrictive pool to choose from. And that generation died out. So you can't very well use that as a

paradigm for apostolic succession, since that disqualifies virtually member of the Roman episcopate!

Acts 15

1. Even assuming we classify the event in Acts 15 as a church council, that's a pastoral council rather than dogmatic council. The policy they hammer out is pragmatic compromise. Due to missionary concerns, they avoid giving Jews unnecessary offense. So this "council" isn't precedent for "the Church" to promulgate doctrine.

2. Peter didn't convene the "council" and he didn't preside at the "council."

3. He's one of three delegates to the "council." He speaks with no more or less authority at the "council" than Paul and Barnabas. And Peter isn't speaking for the council. He is speaking to the council. Speaking before the council. Not speaking on behalf of the council.

4. Indeed, he's a defendant. He must explain and justify his actions before the assembly of apostles and elders. They sit in judgment of his actions. It's more like a heresy trial than a council.

5. Finally, it is James who hands down the verdict.

6. Peter doesn't have jurisdiction over Paul's ministry. Rather, they have separate jurisdictions (Gal 2:8-9). Peter is not Paul's religious superior. Peter doesn't have universal jurisdiction.

None of this is consistent with Peter as the head of the Christian church.

What we have in Acts 15 is a get-together in which leaders in the early church came to a mutual agreement. They discussed the issue as equals. Very collegial. They talked the issue over with one another and came to a meeting of minds.

EPHESIANS 4:3-5

1. The source of basis of unity isn't the church, the papacy, the magisterium, but the Holy Spirit. Of course, Catholics will say that's channeled through the magisterium, but they can't get that from this text (or any text!)

2. Even in the mid-1C, when this letter was written, there were many local churches, so a plurality of churches is consistent with "one body".

In addition, the unity stands in contrast to pre-Christian divisions. Ancient tribal and ethnic rivalries and animosities. The 1C church was geographically and demographically diverse. Christians in Israel, Syria, Greece, Rome, &c. Jews, Gentiles, patricians, plebeians, slaves, men, women, &c. The Christian faith incorporated these disparate and competitive people-groups and social classes into the family of faith.

3. "One Lord" refers to Jesus. All Christians have the same Lord. Incidentally, "One Lord" applies the Shema to Jesus. A proof-text for the deity of Christ.

4. "One faith" could either denote objective faith or subjective faith. If the former, it refers to the apostolic kerygma. All Christians share that common frame of reference.

If the latter, it refers to the exercise of faith. But there's not much practical difference between the two inasmuch as the object of faith is the apostolic kerygma.

5. "Baptism" is ambiguous. It could denote water baptism. But unlike the Gospels and Acts, where the narrative setting clarifies the reference to water baptism, passages about "baptism" in the epistles usually lack that context.

It might denote Spirit-baptism (e.g. 1 Cor 12:13). That's something all Christians share in common.

Or it could be a metaphor (e.g. 1 Cor 10:2). At this early stage in Christian theology, we should guard against the anachronistic assumption that "baptism" was already a technical term for the rite of initiation. Usage may not have hardened yet.

So there's nothing in these passages that's at odds with Protestant theology or denominations.

6. There's the final irony of Catholics quoting a letter to the church of Ephesus to prooftext the claims of the Roman church.

Catholic apologists might complain that this is just my private interpretation, and the ambiguities of the passage, which give rise to multiple interpretive options, demonstrate the need for a divine teaching office. To that I'd say two things:

i) Assuming the magisterium, you could, in theory, appeal to the magisterium to resolve these ambiguities—but it's premature at this stage of the argument to invoke the magisterium when this is supposed to be a prooftext for the

magisterium. It would be viciously circular for a Catholic apologist to appeal to magisterial authority at this preliminary juncture when he's using this text to establish magisterial authority in the first place.

ii) To my knowledge, Rome has never even purported to present an official interpretation of this passage.

2 THESSALONIANS 2:15

Catholic apologists quote this to prove the authority of Sacred Tradition. However:

1. In this verse, Paul points to his own firsthand teaching, and not some free-floating paradosis.

2. This is a command...to whom? To Christians in general? Did Paul address 1 Thessalonians to modern-day Christians? No. Did he speak to us personally? No. Was a modern reader in the audience when he spoke? No.

Is Paul enjoining us to adhere to the written and oral traditions which he (Paul) taught us by his spoken word or earlier letter? No. False on both counts.

Is Paul enjoining us to follow a 5C bishop of Thessalonica—or 8C bishop of Constantinople, or 18C bishop of Moscow—who claims to be handing down an oral Pauline tradition? No. Since the text never says that, it can't very well mean what it never said.

Rather, the verse is directed to mid-1C members of the church of Thessalonica. It's not referring to Christians in general. It's not referring to apostolic succession. It's not

referring to subapostolic oral traditions allegedly of Pauline origin.

That's what it says. That's all it says. It can't mean more than it says. No contortions. Couldn't be more straightforward.

3. Indeed, it has an expected expiration date. Paul is telling people who have face-to-face knowledge of his teaching to hold fast to what they heard from his own mouth. You can't legitimately extrapolate from that to situations far removed from face-to-face knowledge, as if Paul is vouching for traditions in the indefinite future.

4. Keep in mind that this occurs in correspondence where Paul warns about forgeries. That's why he signs his letters. So even at that stage there's a concern about spurious apostolic traditions.

The Thessalonians should hold to the oral preaching which they heard direct from the lips of Paul himself. It doesn't extend to allegedly apostolic tradition from some thirdhand source (or worse). To the contrary, this very epistle warns the reader to be wary of spurious apostolic communications (2:2; 3:17). That's the point of 2 Thes 2:15. It's the polar opposite of a blanket endorsement of allegedly apostolic traditions.

5. Of course, there are commands in Scripture which do apply beyond their immediate audience. But there's no automatic presumption that any or every divine command is binding on all Christians at all times and places. That, rather, depends on the nature of the command, the wording of the command, and/or the context in which it's given. You've taken a verse of Scripture, stripped it of its historical

context, and then reapplied it willy-nilly to your denomination of choice.

6. Paul isn't appealing to apostolic tradition, in the customary sense of tradition. The concept of tradition connotes a chain of transmission with links in the chain. But that's not what Paul is describing. He's explicitly referring to direct oral teaching, from Paul to his immediate audience. There are no intervening links. Not what Paul taught a second person who passed it along to a third person who passed it along to a fourth person. That's not what Paul has in view. Rather, hold fast to what Paul taught you in person. Face-to-face transmission from an apostle to a Christian. The principle is restricted to Christians with firsthand knowledge of Paul's oral teaching.

That doesn't necessarily invalidate a chain of custody. Some historical traditions are reliable. But 2 Thes 2:15 isn't making that claim.

1 TIMOTHY 3:15

Catholic apologists quote this passage to prove the infallibility of their sect. However.

1. A basic problem is quoting the verse out of context. A pitfall of chapter and verse division is that Christians sometimes read a particular verse while failing to place that verse in the flow of argument. They don't consider what comes before or after.

Catholic apologists say, "See, Paul doesn't say "Scripture" is a pillar of truth, but "the Church". Yet they completely ignore the preceding verse. Paul is directing Timothy to what he wrote. Look at what I just wrote you!

2. Moreover, he wrote Timothy so that Timothy would know how to conduct himself in church, based on Paul's written instructions. If, however, the church is the source of truth, then that's superfluous. Yet Paul points Timothy to Paul's explicit, written directives. That's the benchmark.

Catholic apologists quote v15 but disregard the preceding verse. Yet we need to back up one verse to get the overall thrust: "14 I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God..."

3. Syntactically, v14 refers back to the preceding section (2:1-3:13). But the principle extends to the rest of the letter. Since Paul can't instruct Timothy and the congregation in person, the letter is a stand-in, which serves that purpose.

4. By Paul's own admission, his letter takes the place of Paul's face-to-face teaching. Catholic apologists claim we need a "living voice". An infallible interpreter. Yet the function of an apostolic letter is to instruct the faithful in the apostle's absence (cf. 2 Cor 13:10).

It would be insubordinate to say, that's only a text, so we can't know what Paul really meant. That's why we have apostolic successors like Timothy, to infallibly expound the deposit of faith.

Yet Paul takes for granted that his written instructions should suffice in his absence. And even if we anachronistically classify Timothy as a bishop, Timothy has no independent authority. Timothy can't say, by virtue of his "office", how Christians are supposed to behave in church. That's based, not on Timothy's teaching authority, but on

Paul's teaching authority, in written form. Timothy simply transmits what he was taught by Paul. There's nothing here about the necessity of an infallible teaching office to interpret the deposit of faith, even though Paul is nearing the end of his career. He will soon pass from the scene. He will have to hand off the work to the next Christian generation.

5. Even if Timothy received oral instruction from Paul in the past, the letter is an aid to memory.

6. In addition, it's funny when Roman Catholics quote Bible verses about "the Church," because, for them, "the Church" instantly shrinks down to the papacy or current pope or so-called ecumenical councils. But, of course, Paul didn't say anything about the pope or papacy or a episcopal council in 1 Tim 3:15.

Notice what Paul doesn't say. He doesn't say the papacy is a pillar and foundation of truth. He doesn't say the Roman episcopate under the Roman pontiff is the pillar and foundation of truth. He doesn't say church councils ratified by the pope constitute a pillar and foundation of truth.

When Catholic apologists read this verse, they mentally substitute something it doesn't say in place of what it actually says.

Timothy was one of his handpicked deputies. Once again, you can't legitimately extrapolate from that to claimants centuries after the fact.

In this verse there's no lay/clerical dichotomy. No doubt Paul thought pastors should be guardians of doctrinal truth, but he doesn't drive a wedge between pastors and laymen in that regard.

Most of his letters are addressed to the entire congregation. To be read aloud in church. Christians in general are supposed to uphold the Gospel truth. It's not as if he thinks pastors are supposed to safeguard the truth while laymen are not supposed to safeguard the truth. When Paul says "the church" in 1 Tim 3:15, he's not excluding the congregation, as if elders and deacons are the church, but the congregation is not. As a Catholic prooftext, this verse either proves too much or too little.

7. In Pauline ecclesiology, the church is the people of God. Christians. Hence, Christians have a duty to uphold the truth.

So, for instance, you had mid-1C churches planted by Paul. It was incumbent on individual members comprising the congregation to uphold what Paul taught them. They received the truth from St. Paul. Their duty was to remain faithful to what he taught them—or in some cases his handpicked deputies.

8. Moreover, Paul doesn't say the church is the source of truth. And he doesn't say the church has the authority or prerogative to determine the truth. Rather, the church is tasked with the responsibility of upholding the truth.

For that matter, "determine" is ambiguous. That can mean "ascertain" or "arbitrate". Those are two very different concepts. To ascertain is an act of understanding. To arbitrate is an act of authority. To obligate other people.

9. The NT doesn't command blind submission to church leaders. After all, some church leaders were false teachers. The NT warns Christians to be on the lookout for false teachers. That means Christians have to exercise some

degree of independent judgment, using the Bible as their standard.

10. A Catholic apologist just decide for himself what it means (1 Tim 3:15). His denomination can't very well determine that for him, because he must to know if it's even applicable to his denomination. Unless it refers to his church, or includes his church, then his church isn't a ground and pillar of truth. In which case it isn't qualified to interpret that passage on his behalf.

That's a Catholic conundrum. You can't rely on your denomination to determine what is true before you determine that your denomination is a rightful candidate for that distinction.

11. Did Paul consider "the church" to be infallible? Paul didn't even regard Pauline churches as infallible. Would he call the church of Corinth a "pillar and foundation of truth"? Would he call the Galatian churches "a pillar and foundation of truth"? Even churches he planted and supervised were prone to moral and doctrinal aberrations.

12. A Catholic apologist might object that God doesn't protect individual congregations from falling into heresy. But this means Catholic theologians must add qualifications to 1 Tim 3:15 that are conspicuously absent from the text.

1 TIMOTHY 4:14/2 TIMOTHY 1:6-7

Catholic apologists quote this to prove holy orders.
However:

1. There's a semantic fallacy, which equates the meaning of Greek words, with the concept of episcopacy in Roman

Catholic theology. That's reading later theological developments back into ordinary 1C Greek usage.

2. "Succession" in the sense of church office is not equivalent to succession in the sense of apostolic succession. Apostles had very specific prerogatives. The fact that they appointed church officers to carry on their work hardly carries the implication that their specific apostolic prerogatives are perpetual. It just means that having planted churches, other people need to maintain what they started. Like the difference between an architect and a custodian.

3. The argument either proves too much or too little. In Catholicism, apostolic succession is funneled through the papacy, but there's nothing distinctively Petrine about these examples.

4. If Catholic bishops possess apostolic prerogatives, why don't they perform miracles the way Peter and Paul did?

5. If Catholic bishops possess apostolic prerogatives, why is the era of public revelation over? It's ad hoc to claim apostolic succession, on the one hand, then say the era of public revelation is over, on the other hand.

6. Timothy and Titus weren't bishops. So there's this studied equivocation when you claim that Timothy and Titus were "bishops". That's a loaded word with connotations based on centuries of theological development subsequent to the Pastorals.

There is no fixed definition of "bishop" in church history, even in reference to Roman Catholicism. And it's ridiculous to quote early church fathers, as if they are prospectively vouching for subsequent developments in Roman

ecclesiology, many centuries later. The church fathers weren't prophets. They were men of their times, adapting to the challenges of their day.

The episcopal office has been under continuous evolution in Roman Catholicism. In fact, you have two competing theories of the episcopate in Vatican II, one given by the majority of the bishops, and one given by Pope Paul VI. And currently, Pope Francis is attempting to decentralize the church of Rome.

7. In the pastorals, elders aren't "bishops" in the Catholic sense. They don't oversee a diocese. At most, they are pastors or troubleshooters for one local church at a time.

8. For that matter, notice that the qualifications for elders in the Pastoral epistles omit to say anything about sacerdotal functions. There's no priesthood in the Pastorals.

9. The fact that apostles appointed elders doesn't entail apostolic succession in the sense of how Roman Catholic theology defines the role of the episcopate. The Pastorals don't ascribe distinctive episcopal functions to church officers. Indeed, they don't even ascribe sacerdotal functions to church officers. Rather, it's just pastoral duties.

You can't develop the concept of the Roman episcopate and priesthood from the Pastorals, for the distinctive concepts aren't present to develop.

10 The imposition of hands has various functions in Scripture. That doesn't imply "succession" in the technical sense that you are using it.

11. There's an equivocation over the meaning of "tradition". Naturally some Christians were orally taught by Apostles

when Apostles were still alive. That hardly justifies appeal to Sacred Tradition centuries after their demise.

12. St. Paul mentions many different spiritual gifts in his letters. What makes a Catholic apologist presume the gift in 1 Tim 4:14 & 2 Tim 1:6-7 corresponds to the "charism" of the priesthood or episcopate?

13. Suppose, for argument's sake, we agree that the ceremony conferred a "charism" on Timothy. But Paul officiated at that ceremony. So that provides no precedent for "bishops" who aren't handpicked deputies of the apostles. For "bishops" on whom apostles did not lay hands.

14. Moreover, Paul isn't Peter. At best, the case of Timothy establishes Pauline succession, not Petrine succession. So that's hardly precedent for the papacy. Indeed, that's at odds with the exclusive claims of the papacy. That example is counterproductive to Catholic claims.

15. The key principle isn't structural continuity but doctrinal continuity. To faithfully transmit public apostolic teaching: **"2 and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also."**

2 PETER 3:15-16

1. Ironically, Catholic apologists quote this passage to delegitimize private interpretation, yet they rely on their private interpretation of this verse is the same breath as they denounce private interpretation. Where has Rome provided the official, approved interpretation of 2 Pet 3:15-16?

2. It doesn't refer to how a reader or listener interprets prophecy, but how the prophet interprets his dreams and visions. It's about the divine origin of prophecy.

It stands in contrast to false prophecy. In that regard, the papacy is a fine example of the very thing 2 Pet 1:20-21 admonishes. Popes are like false prophets who presume to speak in God's name when God hasn't spoken to them or given them words to speak. As one commentator notes:

*A major divide exists among scholars on the precise understanding of *idias epiluseos* ["from an individual's own interpretation," or "by the will of man"]. Some, such as Kelly, assert that this verse forbids the private interpretation of Scripture by the reader (or hearer) outside of an authority such as the church. Thus, *idias*, "from an individual's own," would refer to any reader of Scripture, rather than to the prophet who authored Scripture. Along with *epiluseos*, "interpretation," these two words would pertain to any person's unauthorized, illegitimate interpretation of written Scripture.*

*However, that understanding of *idias epiluseos* does not make sense in the present context. In 2 Pet 1:16-18, Peter addressed the divine origin of the apostolic message. 2 Pet*

2:21 addresses the same issue of origin regarding Scripture in general. Moreover, 2 Pet 1:21 includes the explanatory gar, "for," which draws close connection between 2 Pet 1:21 and 2 Pet 1:20, implying that Peter's further declarations about the inspiration of Scripture in 2 Pet 1:21 are intended to elaborate upon his statements in 2 Pet 1:20. Thus, 2 Pet 1:20 too must be about the origin and inspiration of Scripture, not about its later interpretation by readers. Since the context of 2 Pet 1:20 addresses Scripture's divine origin, and since idias epilueos ["by the will of man"] in 2 Pet 1:20 supports this topic if taken to refer to a prophetic author (rather than a later reader), the best conclusion is that 2 Pet 1:20 speaks of the divine origin of Scripture as well. C. Giese, 2 Peter and Jude (Concordia 2012), 93-94.

Reading Scripture in community

1. A popular Catholic trope is that, contrary to sola Scriptura, Scripture was meant to be read in community. It can't be properly understood apart from the interpretive community of faith.

To flesh out the argument: the Bible is the Church's book. Scripture was written to and for the Church. The Church promulgated the Bible by deciding which books are canonical.

To understand the Bible, you must read it from the viewpoint of the interpretive community. You can't understand the Bible as an outside observer, but only as an insider.

You must experience the Bible as a member of the community. That's not something you can get just from reading the church fathers or papal encyclicals. Community is something you must experience firsthand. There's a difference between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. To experience community is different from reading Catholic expositors, with the critical detachment of an outsider.

Compare watching a movie at home alone with watching the same movie in a movie theater. Watching a movie in a movie theater is a collective experience. There's a social dynamic. Crowd psychology kicks in. The reaction of the audience has an influence on how individual members of the audience experience the film.

2. There's a grain of truth to that. Christian identity has a corporate dimension as well as an individual dimension.

Christians belong to the family of God. We worship together. And the Bible is a common reference point. But the Catholic trope suffers from some basic problems:

i) What's their reference class for the interpretive community? For instance, suppose everyone in the Christian community reads Rom 4, then the ten most popular interpretations are collected, then a vote is taken. The winning interpretation represents a communal reading.

But, of course, that's not what Catholic apologists mean by communal interpretation. They mean church councils, church fathers, papal encyclicals. But a papal interpretation is individual rather than communal.

ii) By the logic of the Catholic trope, the only way to be Catholic is to be born into the community. It's not possible to become Catholic because an outsider can't break into the hermeneutical circle of the community. Unless he's already a member of the community, he can't experience the Bible in community. As an outsider, he can't know what the Bible means to an insider. He can never compare the two perspectives, for if he's one he's not the other. So that precludes conversion.

iii) By the same token, suppose a Muslim says the Quran was meant to be read in community. You can't properly understand the Quran unless you share the communal experience of the ummah. A Mormon or Swedenborgian could deploy the same argument.

So a Catholic can't say the Quran, or Book of Mormon, or Arcana Coelestia, is false—because a communal reading requires privileged access. But if a Catholic can't say what is false, then he can't say what is true. He can't say Catholicism is true without a point of contrast. Catholicism

and Gnosticism can't both be true if Catholicism represents orthodoxy while Gnosticism represents heresy. What about reading the Westminster Confession in community?

The Bible and the Church

One of the cliches in Catholic apologetics is that the Bible belongs to "the Church". "The Church" produced the Bible (so we're told), so only "the Church" has the right to interpret the Bible. The Bible can only be understood by the community of faith, within the community of faith.

This is set in contrast to Protestant "individualism," "pervasive interpretive pluralism," and "30,000" denominations.

However, the fallacy of shifting to a communal emphasis is that if "individualism" and "interpretive pluralism" are such a problem, then that that simply relocates the same problem. The "30,000" denominations aren't 30,000 individual interpreters or voices, but 30,000 interpretive communities. So they, too, can lay claim to the same slogan. They don't interpret the Bible "individualistically" but "communally". Appealing to a communal standard of comparison does nothing to solve or mitigate the perceived problem, for "interpretive pluralism" is just as much a communal phenomenon as an individual phenomenon. The Catholic church is just one more religious community among thousands.

In addition, the contrast between individuals and communities is often deceptive, for communities can be and often are characterized by possessive and aggressive groupthink. Their like-mindedness codifies a particular individual interpretation. Within religious communities, powerful, influential individuals vie for supremacy, to make their particular vision the dominant vision. Indeed, the larger the community, the greater the perceived need to impose unity through topdown structures and peer

pressure. Conformity to the outlook of the reigning individual or oligarchy at the top of the pyramid. That's a highly selective, elitist individualism, which is then magnified the herd instinct.

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pressure. Conformity to the outlook of the reigning individual or oligarchy at the top of the pyramid. That's a highly selective, elitist individualism, which is then magnified the herd instinct.

Communal reading

A stock objection to the Protestant faith is that Scripture should be read in community. But what does that even mean? Reading in community is a euphemism for reading the text according to a particular theological and hermeneutical tradition.

I read the Bible in community when I consult Bible commentaries (and exegetical monographs). Not only do the commentators reflect a theological perspective, but they often summarize a variety of interpretations from different viewpoints. For those of us who can, it's important to compare our own impressions of what a Bible passage means with the impressions of other readers. That alerts us to interpretations we might overlook. That helps to undercut bias.

Ironically, Catholic apologists mean just the opposite. By communal reading, they mean filtering the text through the exclusive tinted lens of Roman Catholic tradition.

The problem with the Catholic slogan is that when it comes to reading Scripture in community, there's no one community. Communal reading is just as Protestant as it is Catholic. When I read commentaries or other exegetical works by Arminians, Calvinists, Lutherans, Baptists, Anabaptists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Dispensationalists, charismatics, et al., I'm reading the Bible in community. This gives me a chance to compare and contrast sometimes competing interpretations.

A danger of communal reading is the development of ingrown interpretations that become detached from the original meaning, and take on a life of their own. And when

a particular community is absolutized, there's no way to challenge entrenched tradition, even if that represents a misreading of Scripture.

In addition, Protestant exegesis is communal. It considers what the sacred text meant to the original audience. To read the text through the eyes of the original audience. And that's also how modern-day Catholic Bible scholars operate.

In Catholicism, moreover, it isn't truly communal. Rather, it's the Magisterium dictating to the laity what the text means. Their role is to listen and obey.

The apostolic fathers

Catholic apologists appeal to the apostolic fathers. The inference is that since the apostolic fathers were disciples of the apostles, their theology replicates the theology of the apostles. I'm not a patrologist, so I could be mistaken in what I'm about to say, but most Catholic apologists have no professional expertise in patristics, either. I'll make some general observations before commenting on specific figures:

- 1.** The "apostolic fathers" are an academic construct. The list is somewhat arbitrary.
- 2.** There were some reliable historical traditions floating around the early church. Conversely, there were legends floating around the early church. So sifting is required.
- 3.** There's a big difference between an apostolic father attributing his information to an apostle and a Catholic apologist attributing his information to an apostle just because he was (allegedly) a disciple of one or more apostles.
- 4.** You can know someone but have little knowledge or recollection of what they believe. How many of us remember what the pastor said in his sermon last Sunday? Or the sermon a month ago? Or the sermon a year ago? How many of you remember what the pastor said when you were a teenager?

Take public school, K-12. In elementary school, I had the same teacher for a full school year. In junior high and high school, I had particular teachers for particular courses. That still meant listening the same teacher 5 days a week for a

semester. And sometimes I had the same teacher for multiple courses.

Despite that extensive and intensive exposure, I only remember a few things my teachers said over the years. Most of what they said is forgotten.

There are degrees of familiarity, from a passing acquaintance to saturation exposure. Likewise, comprehension and recollection depends on the age at which we knew someone.

5. We need to distinguish:

i) An eyewitness of Jesus

ii) An eyewitness of an eyewitness of Jesus

iii) An eyewitness of an eyewitness of an eyewitness of Jesus

The evidentiary chain-of-custody thins out.

I. CLEMENT OF ROME

According to Irenaeus:

He had seen the blessed apostles, and had been conversant with them.

Given his presumed DOB (c. 35) and his location in the Roman capital, it's plausible that Clement was an

eyewitness to one or more apostles. But does that mean, for instance, that his appeal to the Phoenix reflects apostolic tradition?

II. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Although Catholic apologists routinely make the unsourced claim he was a disciple of John, I haven't seen the documentation. What's the earliest Christian writing that makes that claim?

III. PAPIAS

1. Irenaeus says:

These things are borne witness to in writing by Papias, the hearer of John, and a companion of Polycarp.

Eusebius says:

Irenæus makes mention of these as the only works written by him, in the following words: "These things are attested by Papias, an ancient man who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp, in his fourth book. For five books have been written by him." These are the words of Irenæus.

But Papias himself in the preface to his discourses by no means declares that he was himself a hearer and eyewitness of the holy apostles, but he shows by the words which he uses that he received the doctrines of the faith from those who were their friends.

So Eusebius says Irenaeus claims more for Papias than Papias claims for himself. Perhaps Eusebius is right. Or it may be open to interpretation. Or perhaps Irenaeus draws on personal knowledge of Papias.

2. The DOB for Papias is generally estimated to be around 70 AD. And Papias would have to be old enough to understand and remember what he heard. So that narrows the window of opportunity to the 80s at the earliest. But that might still give Papias time to be an eyewitness to John, if John died in the 90s.

3. Eusebius goes on to say:

That Philip the apostle dwelt at Hierapolis with his daughters has been already stated. But it must be noted here that Papias, their contemporary, says that he heard a wonderful tale from the daughters of Philip.

If true, Philip was well-connected. Knew several apostles. Probably knew other eyewitnesses to Jesus. May have been an eyewitness to Jesus in his own right. And his daughters became custodians of family lore. Nevertheless, knowing the daughters of Philip is a step removed from being an eyewitness of one or more apostles. At best, that's knowing someone who knew someone who knew Jesus.

IV. POLYCARP

According to Irenaeus:

Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia.

From what I've read, the estimated DOB for Polycarp is around 69-70. And he'd have to be old enough to understand and remember what he heard. How many apostles were still alive by the 80s? Were there any surviving candidates other than John?

According to Tertullian:

For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John.

Tertullian is referring to a local tradition. That could be true, although there's the danger of a self-serving legend,

inasmuch as that's a prestigious claim for a church to make about itself.

V. THE DIDACHE

Hard to date. Raymond Brown think its polity is pre-Ignatian—which is self-defeating for a Catholic apologist.

VI. THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS

2C. Unknown author. Allegorical. Jewish influence.

VII. THE SHEPHERD OF HERMAS

Mid-2C by former slave and visionary.

So you think you're smarter than the church fathers?

One Catholic objection to the Protestant faith goes like this: "So you think you're smarter than the church fathers?"

Rhetorically it's meant to be a no-win question. If you answer, yes, then that just goes to show how conceited and arrogant you must be.

But not all the church fathers are equally intelligent or outstanding. I reckon that Origen, Augustine, and Philoponus are the intellectual cream of the church fathers. We might add Boethius. And technically, only Augustine is a church father.

It's not as if the ancient church cornered the market on brilliance or genius. There are Protestant scholars and theologians as gifted or more gifted than most church fathers. And even if they're not smarter than the very smartest church fathers, they may well be as smart.

Suppose you could ask the church fathers if they think they're smarter than every Protestant scholar or theologian. If they answered, yes, why would that be conceited and arrogant?

If you answer, no, then that just goes to show that you ought to submit to their superior wisdom. But that doesn't follow.

A physics major doesn't have to be as smart as Newton to have a far better understanding of physics than Newton. The physics major may not even be on the same IQ

continuum as Newton. He only needs to be smart enough to learn what the great minds in modern physics discovered.

Since, moreover, the church of Rome increasingly diverges from the church fathers, we could turn the question around.

"The priority of tradition"

I'm going to comment on an article by Steven Nemes:

<https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/j/opth.2017.3.issue-1/opth-2017-0022/opth-2017-0022.pdf>

Notice what follows from this: if the biblical texts only had human authors who are now long dead, inaccessible as such to those who do not consort with witches, it would follow that the interpretation of the biblical texts is also at best only ever probable and thus subject to the same kind of fundamentally nonreligious hermeneutical pragmatism.

A glaring problem with this statement is that it's basically self-refuting. Look at all the dead authors that Nemes quotes in his article to support his thesis. A century from now, Nemes will be dead. So his skepticism about the written medium, or dead authors, sabotages his appeal to the writings of dead writers—whose company he himself will join in due time.

The direction of the dialectic until this point naturally leads to the following question: given the intrinsic uncertainty and danger of reading the biblical texts, what “mechanism” has Christ established for the perpetuation of the true teachings of the Scriptures? What abiding bridge has He constructed for enabling readers to traverse the gap between the biblical text and the Scriptures?

His answer will be "the Church". But one problem with that appeal is that when Jesus talks about building his ecclesia (Mt 16:18), that word, and traditional translations thereof (e.g. "church"), has acquired connotations that it didn't have at the time Matthew published his Gospel, much less when Jesus originally made his statement. Catholics, Orthodox, and other high-churchmen treat the "church" in NT usage as a cipher for models of ecclesiology that only evolved centuries later. Indeed, in the case of Roman Catholicism, the nature of "the Church" is still undergoing theological development.

Similar considerations apply to the suggestion of some kind of inward activity of the Holy Spirit: so long as no objective means by which the Spirit leads

the interpretation of the Church is specified, anybody with any proposed interpretation can claim the Holy Spirit as her guide.

The presence of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, as Teacher of the Church, is therefore extended through the apostles to those who would succeed them, who in turn would exercise a particular authority in the presentation and interpretation of that doctrine which is imprinted on their hearts.

Notice that Nemes is oblivious to the tensions in his own appeal. Indeed, "anybody with any proposed interpretation can claim the Holy Spirit as her guide." But that applies perforce to popes, medieval mystics, and ecumenical councils as well as laymen or modern-day "prophets". That applies perforce to religious movements and institutions as well as individuals.

Or, as St. Ignatius of Antioch put it, the bishops are the mind of Christ throughout the world, just as Christ is to Christians the mind of the Father (Letter to the Ephesians 3:2).

i) Yet Ignatius is one of those dead writers. So how can Nemes be so confident that he's able to ascertain what

Ignatius meant?

ii) What bishops are the mind of Christ? There were Arian bishops. Are they the mind of Christ? Roman Catholic bishops? Eastern Orthodox bishops? Oriental bishops? Anglican bishops? Lutheran bishops? Methodist bishops? John Spong? Cardinal Kasper?

Rather, Scripture and Tradition are simply the one “deposit of the word of God” (Dei Verbum II, §10) which is approached by different means.

The Christian Tradition is a continuation and further embodiment of the “mind of Christ,” who interprets the Old Testament with a unique authority (Matt 7:28-9).

In all these ways and more, the New Testament is quite obviously an instantiation or embodiment of the antecedently existent Christian Tradition, a “mode of tradition and objectification of tradition.

Notice the equivocal and contradictory use of the term "tradition". If tradition is a "deposit", then it lies in the past. That's a static, one-time deliverance.

Conversely, if tradition is a "continuation and further embodiment" of the "mind of Christ," then that's a fluid, dynamic, evolving theology.

And if the NT is "an instantiation or embodiment of the antecedently existent Christian Tradition," then tradition is the oral history or living memory of Christ's public ministry. What eyewitnesses saw and recall.

Nemes jumbles together these disparate definitions of tradition, in his incoherent mishmash.

To suppose that the texts of the New Testament themselves serve this purpose is an obvious nonstarter, since they are as much subject to interpretation as the Old Testament texts.

i) Yet there was no divinely-appointed "mechanism" to adjudicate theological disputes in Judaism. So why is that indispensable in the church age?

ii) Moreover, OT texts must be sufficiently clear to attest the messiahship of Jesus to establish "the Church" in the first place. So you can't invoke the interpretive authority of "the Church" at that stage of the argument on pain of vicious circularity.

Thus He can say that the acceptance or rejection of His apostles is altogether equal to the acceptance or rejection of Christ and of God the Father Himself (Matt 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 13:20). A

person consequently cannot become a disciple of Christ except by becoming a disciple of the apostles and welcoming them into her life, a lesson which the first generation of Christians appreciated well: upon conversion and baptism, they devoted themselves to the teaching and fellowship of the apostles (Acts 2:42), being taught by them and spending time with them.

But in context, those passages refer to living apostles. Apostolic missionaries. Face-to-face communication. After they die, all we have left is whatever they wrote for posterity.

This point was well made by St. Vincent of Lérins, who appealed to Tradition as a proper authority for controlling the interpretation of various passages:

But here some one perhaps will ask, Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not

accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation (Commonitorium §5).

- i)** Another appeal to another dead writer. Notice his arbitrarily selective skepticism about dead writers. We're supposed to be skeptical about how to interpret Bible writers, but we can confidently interpret church fathers, medieval theologians, Catholic mystics, &c.
- ii)** What criterion does Nemes propose to determine that Origen, Isaac the Syrian, and Catherine of Siena channel the mind of Christ while Donatus and Novatian are illegitimate representatives?
- iii)** So what does Nemes mean by "the Church"? Christians en masse? The laity? Popes? Bishops? Greek Fathers? Latin Fathers? "Saints"? Nemes is highly eclectic about the

religious authorities he invokes. About the only thing he excludes from his list of ecclesiastical witnesses are Protestants, except for ecumenical Protestants like Torrance.

iv) On his blog, Nemes tells us that:

My favorite theologians, by whom I have been the most influenced, are Joseph Ratzinger, Isaac the Syrian, Catherine of Siena, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, John of Damascus, Dumitru Stăniloae, Thomas Aquinas, T.F. Torrance, and Athanasius. Notice, no Augustine or John Calvin.

So what makes the figures in the first sentence the authentic voice of the church, but Calvin and Augustine don't speak for the "the Church"? What makes Aquinas or Origen spokesmen for the church, but Cranmer, Roger Nicole, Don Carson, F. F. Bruce, Tom Schreiner, and Darrell Bock don't make the cut?

I don't see any consistent principle or selection criteria. Rather, it just seems to be the case that some writers resonate with Nemes while others don't.

Secret tradition

Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church, some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us "in a mystery" by the tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have these same force...We are not, as is well known, content with what the Apostles or the Gospel has recorded, but both in preface and conclusion we add other words as being of great importance to the validity of the ministry, and these we derive from unwritten tradition...Does not this come from that unpublished and secret teaching which our fathers guarded in a silence out of the reach of curious meddling investigation?...What the uninitiated are not even allowed: to look at was hardly likely to be publicly paraded about in written documents?...In

the same manner the Apostles and Fathers who laid down laws for the Church from the beginning thus guarded the awful dignity of the mysteries in secrecy and silence...This is the reason for our tradition of unwritten precepts and practices, that the knowledge of our dogmas may not become neglected and contemned by the multitude through familiarity (§66). On the Holy Spirit: St. Basil the Great (Popular Patristics Series Volume 42), Stephen M. Hildebrand, trans. (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2013), 133-136.

This presents an alternative to sola Scriptura. What's striking about it is Basil's explicit appeal to secret tradition. His justification of secret tradition. Traditions that are transmitted through covert channels. Only church authorities are privy to that "mystery".

But an obvious problem with sub rosa tradition, with a process that's deliberately shielded to public scrutiny, is the fact that there's no check on fabricated dominical or apostolic traditions, or legendary embellishment. Imagine the unbridled power that confers on church authorities. They can stipulate dominical or apostolic pedigree for a particular tradition, and if you refuse to credit that tradition, then you are rebelling against God himself.

Compare that to Scripture, which is a public record. In the early church, moreover, there was no controlled transmission of Scripture. Christian scribes informally produced copies of the Bible. It wasn't possible for church authorities to modify Scripture, to slip a fabricated dominical or apostolic tradition into the text of Scripture, for the chain of custody was in the public domain. The early church didn't have the centralized command and control to alter the record of Scripture. Individuals might attempt that, but would be unable to universalize their additions. Scripture presents a common frame of reference, precisely because that was in writing, and the transmission wasn't coordinated.

To take a comparison, suppose you were a 1C Christian member of a church in Asia Minor that St. John planted. Suppose you sat under his teaching. You'd have a duty to remain faithful to what he taught you, to the best of your recollection.

Now, to change the hypothetical, suppose somebody tells you, "This is God's will!" And you ask, "How do I know that's God's will?" And he says, "I sat at the feet of St. John, and here's what he said!"

That's a very different situation. If you submit to his claim, that person has absolute power over you. He's virtually God's mouthpiece, via his claim to be reproducing St. John's teaching.

But, of course, it would be very convenient for a heretic to adopt that imposture. By contrast, 1 John supplies a public frame of reference. That's available to Christians generally. Indeed, St. John wrote it for popular consumption. Every

Christian with access to 1 John has the same standard of comparison.

VIII. Canonics

Like chapters in a book

Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy

Joshua

Judges

Ruth

1-2 Samuel

1-2 Kings

1-2 Chronicles

Ezra

Nehemiah

Esther

Job

Psalms

Proverbs

Ecclesiastes

Song of Solomon

Isaiah

Jeremiah

Lamentations

Ezekiel

Daniel

Hosea

Joel

Amos

Obadiah

Jonah

Micah

Nahum

Habakkuk

Zephaniah

Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts
Romans
1-2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1-2 Thessalonians
1-2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James
1-2 Peter
1-3 John
Jude
Revelation

1. Above is the Protestant canon of Scripture. One problem with Catholicism is that because Catholics think "the Church" gave us the Bible, they don't consider how the books of Scripture go together.

There's a certain logic to the arrangement in the Protestant canon. The OT canon is roughly chronological and topical.

However, it's somewhat arbitrary because there's more than one logical way to arrange them. For instance, the lives of

the prophets overlap the Historical Books. And the Psalter spans the entire history of OT Israel.

In principle, you could splice sections of the prophets and Psalter into parallel columns with sections of the Historical Books. And that would be illuminating.

The NT begins with historical narratives. And these are chronological: the life of Jesus followed by apostolic church history. Then there are letters grouped by authorship, capped by Revelation.

It's logical but someone arbitrary. Luke/Acts could be grouped together. John's Gospel and 1-3 John could be grouped together.

2. In a way, books of the Bible are like chapters of one book. There's an overarching plot or storyline with subplots or intermezzi.

Now, if you never read the Bible, and some books were missing, you might not notice the gaps. But if other books were missing, it would be very choppy.

In addition, if you were very familiar with the complete canon, then some books were removed, you'd notice gaps even if you wouldn't notice the same gaps in case you never read the Bible. And not just because you remembered the missing books, but because, having read through the entire canon on multiple occasions, you have a sense of flow that would be disrupted if certain otherwise "dispensable" books were removed. You might not notice their absence if you never read the Bible before, but having read the Bible with those books, they fill in many background details. Although some of them can be removed without disrupting the overall

plot or storyline, they make a subtle, felt contribution to the flow.

3. Put another way, a journey has a linear continuity to it. But sometimes the traveler stays in certain locations along the way for extended periods. It's not just a place to eat and sleep, then resume the journey the next day. Maybe winter's approaching, and he has to make camp before he can cross the mountains in the spring. Or maybe some locations are especially scenic, so he lives there for a few weeks or months to take it in.

Likewise, the Bible isn't just a journey through time and space. The pilgrims settle down here and there to reflect on what they've experienced thus far and what lies ahead. They take stock of where they are, where they've been. The obstacles they overcame. Losses along the way. It's not a nonstop journey. Some books of the Bible provide depth of field. It's not just about moving forward in a straight line, but taking a breather to savor the present moment and give thanks for past deliverance. Striking a balance between the here-and-now as well as the hereafter. Each day isn't just a steppingstone but of value in its own right.

4. You could rearrange some chapters, and it would still make sense. A different kind of sense. Continuity isn't everything. Take nonlinear narration, like flashbacks. Those are different ways to tell the same story. Both foresight and hindsight provide insight.

Traveling by car or train

The process [of canonization] was more "bottom up" via local churches, than "top down" from a big Church council. P. Helm, Just Words? Special Revelation and the Bible (Evangelical Press 2018), 40.

This points to a basic difference Catholicism and evangelicalism. Both believe there's an interplay between providential and supernatural factors with respect to divine activity in the world, but there's disagreement on the extent. Catholics imagine that their denomination enjoys special divine guidance and protection from error. And that includes conciliar or papal pronouncements. That's a topdown view of divine agency.

Evangelicals don't deny that God sometimes uses a topdown approach. The paradigm example is biblical revelation.

To change metaphors, the topdown approach is like handing a driver a roadmap. It's up to the driver to read the map, comparing the map to what he sees through the windshield.

The bottom-up approach is like putting somebody on a train. So long as they're on the right train, that will take them to the destination. All they have to do is board the right train, and the train takes care off the rest.

Metaphors are flexible, so it's possible to develop the same figurative illustration in different ways. However, the point of my comparison is that on the Catholic paradigm, God provides direct verbal guidance throughout the church age. The Magisterium is a living oracle. It gives Catholics up-to-date answers. So that's analogous to having to drive your to your destination, but using a street map or roadmap as an aid.

By contrast, in the Protestant paradigm, especially in Calvinism, divine guidance (over and above Scripture) is usually oblique and providential. God directs our steps by ordering the circumstances of our lives. We're not generally conscious of divine guidance, because it's not direct, topical communication. Rather, one thing leads to another. That's analogous to taking a train, where the medium convenes you to your destination.

Codex and canon

i) On occasion I've discussed how ancient Greek MSS are a neglected evidence for the NT canon. Here's some documentation in that regard:

<https://larryhurtado.wordpress.com/2019/05/13/text-collections-and-an-emergent-nt-canon/>

<http://jbtc.org/v23/TC-2018-Dormandy.pdf>

ii) Catholic apologists try to dilute this evidence by pointing out that a few MSS contain non-canonical books. But Dormandy explains how that's a misleading comparison. To begin with, it's a rare phenomenon. In addition, the noncanonical books are appended at the end, which differentiates them from the canonical books.

iii) Finally, the basic job of a scribe is to copy preexisting material. So these MSS provide evidence that books of the NT were already circulating in collections. It wasn't the scribe who combined these writings; rather, he copied multiple works onto the same MS because they were already grouped that way in the exemplar he transcribed.

Making a map

Catholic apologists generally frame everything in terms of authority. What's your authority for the canon of Scripture? What's your interpretive authority?

Now, there are situations in which that's a legitimate question, but it can't be universal. Is it a general principle that we can't know anything or be justified in what we believe unless we have it on authority?

What's my authority for knowing that I had a dog when I was a boy? What's my authority for knowing I saw a lunar eclipse? What's my authority for knowing I have blue eyes?

If you ask me by what authority I believe those things, the answer is zip. I don't have it on good authority. Rather, these are things I simply know—from experience.

So the demand for authority needs to be more qualified. Otherwise, it backfires. Do we necessarily or even usually need authority to interpret a text? Do Catholics need authority to interpret the Catechism of the Catholic Church? Do they need authority to interpret books by Joseph Ratzinger? Do they need authority to interpret the church fathers?

To take a comparison, you can't always begin with a map. Someone has to make the map. There has to be a first map. Before the map, someone had to find their way without a map. An explorer may draw the map as he goes along. As he discovers what lies over the next hill, what lies around the next bend, he adds that to the map. The map is a work in progress.

The NT canon wasn't originally a product of ecclesiastical authority. It didn't begin with a canonical map, but a canonical landscape, as NT writings were produced. The map was drawn from the canonical landscape.

They had different geographical points of origin or destinations. The first readers shared them with other readers. Readers copied them. So they fanned out from separate points of origin, spreading over the Roman Empire. A steady, unbroken process of dissemination. Regional churches would have local lore about the pedigree of NT letters written to them, or Gospels written when the author was living there. Christians didn't start out with a bunch of books to choose from. Rather, they started with the books of the NT canon.

Around the mid-2C (give or take), forgeries began to appear. Moreover, as time went on, regional churches far removed from where a NT writing originated, might not know the provenance of the document. So later on a sorting process took place. But that was about excluding pseudepigrapha which began to arise in the 2C. In addition, in the far-flung Roman Empire, not every regional church was privy to the pedigree of a NT writing. But the notion of an evolving canon or evolving canonical consciousness has it backwards. The NT canon evolved in the sense that NT documents were written at different times, so it was incremental. But the period of composition shouldn't be confounded with the notion that the NT canon was the product of "the Church" in the 4C. That's a basic equivocation.

Collecting the books of the NT is different from listing them. If a NT document was written in one place or sent to another, it would have to be copied and recopied before it was in general circulation throughout the ancient church.

There's the distribution phase. The parts of the NT canon were always recognized by parts of the church. The parts of the church in which or to which they were written. If St. John was living in Asia Minor when he wrote his Gospel, then Christian communities in Asia Minor might be the initial recipients. Yet Christians moved around. Consider the peregrinations of Priscilla and Aquila. Likewise, Luke had a literary patron. But in addition, Luke had access to the Pauline churches. It just takes a little imagination to consider how regional churches shared NT writings with other regional churches, in a developing network.

The NT writings would be the best-known and most-widely known because they were the earliest. They had been around the longest. They had been in use, with a chain-of-custody. Later apocryphal works would be suspect for the opposite reasons.

An inspired table of contents

1. A stock objection to sola Scriptura is that Scripture, or the NT in particular, lacks an inspired table of contents. That's trivially true. However, that's the framing fallacy, where a disputant tries to frame an issue in artificially narrow terms. If you can't meet the objection on his terms, the disputant acts like you failed. But there can be equivalent ways to meet the condition, even assuming it's a reasonable demand.

2. In addition, the objection commits the straw man fallacy. Sola scriptura doesn't rule out the use of supplementary extrabiblical information to identify the canon. That's no more inconsistent with sola Scriptura than eyewitnesses to Jesus using their fallible senses to I.D. Jesus.

3. Apropos (2), the "traditions" we use to help establish the canon are not for the most part Roman Catholic traditions. For instance, how many of the church fathers were Roman Catholic? Was Papias? Ignatius? Justin Martyr? Tertullian? Athanasius? Eusebius? Basil? Origen? Irenaeus? Ephrem? Chrysostom?

Was Ambrose Roman Catholic? Did the pope make Ambrose a bishop? Did the pope make Cyprian a bishop?

To the extent that Protestant scholars cite patristic testimony to supplement their case for the NT canon, that doesn't imply any commitment to Roman Catholicism. Most-all of the patristic testimony for the NT is independent of the Roman Catholic church.

4. That said, what do the books of the NT say about themselves? To what extent is it possible to compile an inspired table of contents from the authorial attribution in the text of the NT documents? Look at how NT books are introduced:

According to Matthew

According to Mark

According to Luke

According to John

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2 until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God [Acts]

It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus [Luke's Gospel].

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle...To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus...To the church of God that is in Corinth [1 Cor].

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia [2 Cor]

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father...To the churches of Galatia.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...To the saints who are in Ephesus.

Paul...To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi.

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.

Paul...To the church of the Thessalonians [1 Thes].

Paul...To the church of the Thessalonians [2 Thes].

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope...To Timothy

[1 Tim]

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus...To Timothy [2 Tim].

Paul, a servant[a] of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ...To Titus.

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus...To Philemon.

You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon [Hebrews]

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia [1 Pet].

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ [2 Pet].

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.

5. In addition, the NT provides further background information about the stated authors to assist in the process of identification , viz.

Mt 10:2-4

Mt 13:55

Mk 3:17-18

Mk 6:3

Lk 6:14-16

Acts 1:13

Acts 12:12

Acts 12:25

Gal 1:19

Gal 2:9

Col 4:10

Col 4:14

2 Tim 4:11

Philemon 1:24

6. Taking stock, most of the NT writings identify the author in the text. Although Hebrews is formally anonymous, **Heb 13:23** flags the author as a member of the Pauline circle.

1-John are formally anonymous. But in terms of content, they're demonstrably by the same hand as the author of the Fourth Gospel.

Scholars like Hengel and Bauckham have presented solid arguments for the originality of the Gospel titles.

There's some dispute about whether the destination in Ephesians reflects the original text. That's defended by commentators like Hoehner and Baugh. But even if it's a scribal addition, the original text still states the authorship of the letter.

So when we tally the internal evidence for the NT canon, it's pretty easy to compile an inspired table of contents.

8. A Catholic apologist might object that this relies on the authenticity of the self-attributions. That, however, is shifting the goal post. He asked for an inspired table of contents. Since, by his own admission, the NT writings in question are divinely inspired, if we can derive a table of contents from the self-attributions, then that amounts to an inspired table of contents. His challenge was met.

While it's relevant to consider evidence for the authenticity of the self-attributions, that's a different issue. And there's evidence for that.

9. Some OT books are anonymous. But the NT vouches for many OT books. And, once again, sola Scriptura doesn't preclude the use of Jewish tradition to supplement the Biblical attestations.

10. A Catholic apologist might object that apocryphal works (e.g. The Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas) lay claim to apostolic authorship. But once again, that's moving the goal post. Since he doesn't think apocryphal works are inspired, their existence isn't comparable to the NT. Moreover, the apocryphal works are too late to be written by the purported authors.

Dodo bird Catholicism

1. I'm going to comment on key sections in Robert Bellarmine's *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae Fidei adversus hujus temporis hereticos* (1586–93). I'll quote/refer to this edition: Kenneth Barker (trans), *Controversies of the Christian Faith* (Keep The Faith, Inc; 2016).

Bellarmino has quite a Catholic résumé, as a saint, Cardinal, and Doctor of the Church. His *Disputationes* is the classic exposition and defense of Counter-Reformation theology. It became the foil for many Protestant theologians.

Nowadays, the value of his work lies in documenting the hiatus between Counter-Reformation theology and post-Vatican II theology. Bellarmine is the staunch defender of an organization that no longer exists. The Roman Catholic church he passionately defends became an endangered species during the papacy of Pius XII and went extinct after Vatican II. If successful, his arguments falsify the modern Catholic church.

2. I'll be very selective about what I comment on. I'll ignore his section on translations of the Bible because that's terribly dated. He has a 100-page section on whether the pope is the Antichrist, which is historically interesting, but peripheral to my concerns. He has a very long historical defense of Roman/papal primacy which I'll ignore because it's very dated. I'm going to skip the section on Christology.

I'm going to focus on the sections about canonicity and sola scriptura (necessity, sufficiency, perspicuity of Scripture). I'm not sure how much I wish to say about his exegetical case for the papacy. For one thing, I have a post on Catholic prooftexts. In addition, some of his arguments are so

ludicrous that they really don't require comment: to quote them is to refute them.

3. Some of his arguments are circular. For instance, he often quotes from church fathers or even popes to establish his position. But that begs the question when engaging the Protestant position since we don't regard the church fathers as authority figures—much less the pope. So that's an illicit argument from authority.

However, he may include this material because he's writing for the benefit of Catholic missionaries, so the supporting material from popes and church fathers is for their own benefit. They consider that authoritative even though Protestants do not.

4. Bellarmine was responding to 16C Protestants like Calvin, Luther, and Chemnitz. As a 21C Protestant, I have my own ways of defending Protestant theology. I think there are times when he has the better of the argument. That doesn't mean he's right. That just means there's a better argument for the position he's opposing. In the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, both sides had to think on the fly. Protestant apologists can defend classic Protestant theology without repristinating all the apologetic strategies of 16C Protestant theologians. Sometimes we can improve on the arguments. There a difference between traditional positions and traditional arguments for traditional positions.

5. He says the Catholic rule of faith must be certain; if it is not certain, it won't even be a rule (24).

It's unclear what he means by "certain". Even if his case for Catholicism was successful, it would be a probable argument falling short of certainty.

6. He offers several lines of evidence for the inspiration of Scripture:

i) The unity of Scripture, despite the fact that it's an anthology of different books by different authors written at different times, places, occasions, and languages (24).

The problem with that argument from a Catholic standpoint is that modern mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship denies the unity of Scripture.

ii) The argument from prophecy (25).

The problem with that argument from a Catholic standpoint is that modern mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship takes the position that many biblical prophecies are prophecies after the fact, or failed prophecies, or short-term prophecies about ancient Israel which NT writers took out of context.

iii) The argument from miracles (25).

a) I don't have a problem with Catholic miracles, per se. But reports need to be carefully sifted.

b) In any event, there are well-documented non-Catholic miracles, so the argument from miracles fails to single out Roman Catholicism.

7. He defends the Book of Job as a historical narrative (35-36). The problem with that argument from a Catholic standpoint is that I doubt modern mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship shares his viewpoint.

He defends the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes (36-37). The problem with that argument from a Catholic standpoint is that modern mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship denies it.

He defends the predictive character of Daniel (38-39). The problem with that argument from a Catholic standpoint is

that modern mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship denies it.

8. He defends the traditional authorship of the NT (40). He defends the Pauline authorship of Hebrews (82-88). He defends the Petrine authorship of 2 Peter, the apostolic authorship of James, and the apostolic authorship of Jude (89-94).

i) The problem with that argument from a Catholic standpoint is that modern mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship denies it.

ii) Why does Bellarmine deny that James and Jude were written by relatives of Jesus? Is that due to an a priori commitment to the proposition that NT must be written by apostles? Or is it based on the view that if James and Jude were merely stepbrothers of Jesus, they lack the requisite qualifications?

9. He defends the authenticity of the long ending of Mark, the Pericope Adulterae, and the Johannine Comma (80-81). The problem with that argument from a Catholic standpoint is that modern mainstream Catholic Bible scholarship regards those passages to be scribal interpolations.

This is an example of how Catholicism gets locked into an indefensible position, based on dated scholarship.

10. Regarding (6-8), a contemporary Catholic apologist might object that the positions of modern mainstream Catholic scholarship carry no authority.

The problem, though, is that the modern Catholic church doesn't require Catholics to profess or assent to traditional positions on the authorship of Scripture, historicity of Scripture, and prophecies of Scripture. That's top to

bottom. It's not required for clergy or laity. Not required for priests, bishops, cardinals, or popes. Not required for seminary professors or Pontifical university professors. So that's no longer a presupposition of Roman Catholicism. The foundation has shifted.

11. Regarding the perspicuity of Scripture, he says:

Are the divine Scriptures by themselves easily and clearly understood, or do they need some interpretation?

For, if Scripture were so clear, as they say, why did Luther and the Lutherans write so many commentaries?...Where do so many interpretations of Scripture come from, if Scripture is so easy and clear? Why do they fight with each other so intensely over this matter (174,77).

i) We need to avoid the opposite extremes of exaggerating the obscurity of Scripture and the clarity of Scripture. Bellarmine's tactic is self-defeating, because he will try to proof-text the Magisterium from Scripture. But at that stage of the argument he can't use Magisterial interpretation to prove the Magisterium, for he's using Scripture to establish the Magisterium in the first place. If, however, he can proof-text Catholicism without reliance on Magisterial interpretation, then the Magisterium is unnecessary. That's his intractable dilemma.

ii) On the one hand a particular book of the Bible might be clearer to the original audience than a later audience. On the other hand, Scripture as a whole might be clearer to a later audience because we have the entire Bible to supply a larger interpretive frame of reference.

iii) Scripture isn't uniformly clear or obscure. Many statements in Scripture are self-explanatory. For instance, biblical narratives have an accessible plot that readers with no special background can easily follow. The gist of Scripture is often accessible to readers with no special background. In addition, there's redundancy to biblical teaching, so that you don't need to understand every passage to figure out what Scripture teaches.

Sometimes a text has a subtextual meaning that eludes the average reader. However, that's not a case of misinterpreting the passage, but missing some of what it means. The understanding of the average reader may still be right, even if it suffers from limitations.

iv) Commentaries on particular passages are sometimes necessary, not because the passage is ambiguous, but to correct misinterpretations by readers who come to the text with a theological agenda or prior commitments that require them to discount an interpretation that runs counter to their agenda or prior commitments.

v) A misinterpretation may seem to be obviously right if the reader is conditioned by a particular theological filter. Alternative interpretations may not even occur to him.

vi) Readers often have emotional investments which they bring to the text. They belong to religious communities. Sociological factors influence interpretation. To belong to a certain religious community, you must profess the terms of membership. So there's a motivation to assimilate to the views of your peer group.

vii) The fact that Christians disagree on the meaning of Scripture doesn't point to the Magisterium as the solution. Life is messy. God put us in a messy world.

It's analogous to the problem of evil. God could intervene more often to prevent evil, but he doesn't. He has reasons for allowing evil. By the same token, the fact that Christians disagree on the meaning of Scripture carries no presumption that God has intervened by instituting the Magisterium to clear that up.

viii) The Magisterium doesn't operate by persuasion. It doesn't show how a particular interpretation is superior. There's nothing convincing about Magisterial interpretations, compared to rival interpretations. Rather, the Magisterium arbitrarily stipulates that a particular interpretation is right, and demands submission—even though there's nothing in the text or context to prefer that interpretation.

12. Bellarmine says:

Certainly the words in Mt 26:26, "This is my body," seem to us to be so clear that the Evangelist could not have spoken more clearly. But to the Zwinglians they seem obscure and figurative (181).

False dichotomy. To say a statement is figurative doesn't mean it's obscure. Is "I am the vine" or "See! The lamb of God" obscure because those statements are figurative?

13. Bellarmine says:

Since it has already been established that Scripture is obscure and needs an interpreter, that fact gives rise to another question: Whether the interpretation of Scripture should be sought from one visible and common judge, or should it be left to the choice of each individual (184).

i) As I already explained, it's simplistic to say Scripture is obscure.

ii) The fact that Scripture sometimes needs interpreters doesn't mean every reader is equally competent to interpret Scripture. Some readers have better qualifications, in terms of aptitude and training.

13. Bellarmine then distinguishes between different senses of Scripture: literal/historical, spiritual/mystical, twofold literal sense, allegorical, topological, anagogical (184-5).

Of course, if we grant that Scripture has so many different senses, that would certainly obscure the meaning of Scripture. But Bellarmine is creating an artificial problem to solve.

14. Bellarmine says:

Therefore this whole question comes down to where the Spirit is. For, we think that this Spirit, although he is often conferred on many individual persons, nevertheless is certainly found in the Church, that is, in a Council of the Bishops confirmed by the Sovereign Pontiff of the whole Church, or in the Sovereign Pontiff together with a council of the other Pastors...But all the heretics of this time teach that the Holy Spirit is the interpreter of Scripture...and therefore that each person would be the judge, either by following his own spirit if he has the gift of interpreting, or by following someone else whom he sees is endowed with this same gift (186-7).

I reject the premise. Normally, the Spirit doesn't give us the interpretation of Scripture. (Bible writers, OT prophets, apostles, NT prophets are an exception.)

Exegesis isn't a charismatic exercise, but an intellectual exercise. For the most part, biblical hermeneutics is the

same as exegeting an uninspired text. There are some differences. Scripture is infallible and prescient, so that has some bearing on exegesis. But in general, it's a question of grammatico-historical exegesis.

15. Bellarmine says:

I cannot judge which is the true Church, unless I first judge which opinion is in agreement with the word of God (187).

That's a fatal concession. How can the church be the interpreter unless you first identify "the true Church". Unless you are able to identify "the true Church"? But you can't use "the true church" to identify which candidate is "the true church" before you figure out which candidate is the true interpreter. Only after you already established the identity of "the true church" can you then rely on "the true church" as your interpreter. So you have to be your own interpreter to kickstart the process. But if you can make that crucial interpretive judgment without the aid of "the true church," then the interpretation of the church is secondary to your own judgment. So the Bible can never be evidence for the Magisterium.

16. Bellarmine then tries to proof-text the necessity of Magisterial interpretation from Mt 16:19, 18:17, 23:2, Lk 22:31; Jn 21:16, Acts 15:6ff.; Gal 2:off; 1 Cor 12:8-10, and 1 Jn 4:1 (pp192-95). But the dilemma this poses is that

if he succeeds, he fails. If he can successfully proof-text the necessity of Magisterial interpretation without recourse to Magisterial interpretation, then he disproves the necessity of Magisterial interpretation. At this stage of the argument he must be able to interpret his proof-texts for the Magisterium without the aid of the Magisterium since he's attempting to establish from Scripture that the Magisterium has the interpretive authority he imputes to it. But if the first step of the argument is independent of the Magisterium, then the conclusion nullifies the necessity of the Magisterium. Ultimately, magisterial interpretation takes a backseat to his own interpretive judgment.

17. In addition, his interpretations are strained. For instance, he says that in Mt 18:17 "the church" must be understood to mean "Prelate" (192). But that has no textual basis.

He imagines that "**the Roman Pontiff, teaching ex cathedra, cannot err**" is deducible from Lk 22:31 (p193). But that has no textual basis.

He says Peter "presided" at the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), which is demonstrably false.

He appeals to 1 Cor 12:8-10 (p194), but the spiritual gifts aren't indexed to church office in that passage.

He says Peter is the "master of the house" in Acts 1 (p695). But there's no evidence that Peter was the homeowner. More likely, it was the house of Mark's mother.

18. Bellarmine says:

It is proved finally by reason. God was not ignorant of the fact that many difficulties would arise in the Church concerning the Faith. Therefore he had to provide a judge for the Church (205).

i) The papacy is, in itself, a source of constant controversy and dissension. At best, that creates as many problems as it (supposedly) solves.

ii) There's the problem of winnowing true popes from antipopes. There's the problem of harmonizing what one pope says with another pope. So you need a third interpreter, over and above the papacy, to harmonize the teaching of different popes.

19. Bellarmine says:

Since the [revealing] spirit, which is in you, is neither seen nor heard by me, then a judge should be seen and heard by both litigating parties (205).

But the same objection can be leveled against the papacy or church councils. An outside observer can't see or hear if the Spirit is speaking to or through a pope or church council. So that's unverifiable.

20. Bellarmine says:

A judge must have effective authority, otherwise his judgment will mean nothing (205).

i) The pope only has effective authority for people who believe in the papacy. But many Christians find arguments for the papacy unconvincing. He has no effective authority for them since they aren't persuaded that he is what he claims to be. Hence, the appeal fails on its own grounds.

ii) At best, then, papal authority would only be effective if it relies on coercion rather than persuasion. And, indeed, that's how it use to operate.

21. Commenting on Acts 17:10ff., Bellarmine says:

Even though Paul was an Apostle, and could not preach false doctrine, nevertheless in the beginning the Bereans were not certain and they were bound to believe immediately, unless they first saw miracles or other probable reasons for believing. Therefore, when Paul proved to them that Christ was the fulfillment of the oracles of the Prophets,

rightly did they search the Scriptures to see whether that was true. But Christians, who are certain that the Church cannot err in explaining the doctrine of the Faith, are bound to receive it and not to have doubts about whether or not it is true.

I add also that, although a heretic sins by doubting the authority of the Church...the condition of a heretic, who at one time professed the Faith, is not the same as that of the Jew or pagan who never was a Christian; nevertheless, given this doubt and this sin, he does not act badly by searching and examining to see whether the places of Scripture and of the Fathers quoted by the Council of Trent really are convincing, provided that he does it with the intention of finding the truth (209).

i) Here Bellarmine makes a crucial concession. He admits that at the preliminary stage of the investigation, a seeker must rely on his own judgment. Which presumes that private judgment can be reliable. Yet that's in tension with Bellarmine's objection elsewhere that given the obscurity of Scripture, we require a papal interpreter.

But in that event, we can't initiate the process. If, on the one hand, the starting-point requires independent judgment while, on the other hand, Scripture is too obscure to

interpret without the aid of the papal interpreter, then there's no way for someone who's not already in the charmed circle to break into the circle. And if you're already in the circle, there's no way to verify it, since Magisterial interpretation takes the Magisterium for granted.

The dilemma can be resolved if unaided reason is sufficiently reliable, and Scripture is sufficiently clear, to check the claims of Rome against the Bible. But that moots the necessity of the Magisterium. Conversely, if unaided reason is too unreliable, and Scripture is too obscure, then Scripture can't be used to validate the Magisterium.

ii) Perhaps a Catholic apologist would say that once unaided reason is convinced that Roman Catholicism is true, it thereafter submits to the Magisterium.

Problem with that response is that such submission can only be provisional, since that's the product of unaided reason. A convert to Catholicism might conclude on further reflection that his conversion was premature, and Roman Catholicism is false. What reason gives, reason can take away. If Catholicism had to clear the bar of reason, then the bar of reason remains the ultimate criterion.

22. Commenting on 1 Jn 2:27, Bellarmine says:

He is speaking only of those teachings that they have already received from the Apostles, and with the help of the Holy Spirit they have learned and believed (211).

For once I agree with him.

23. Bellarmine says:

For, we do not know for certain what God has revealed, unless it is from the testimony of the Church (212).

So the church is not in itself a revealed truth?

24. Bellarmine says:

This argument, which is often made by the heretics [i.e. Protestants], is involved totally in an equivocation. For, that the Church judges the Scriptures can be understood in two ways: in one way, that she judges whether what the Scriptures teach is true or false. In the other way, once given as a certain foundation that the words of Scripture are true, she judges what the true interpretation of

them is. Actually, if the Church were to judge in the first way, she would truly be over the Scripture, but we do not say this...But in the second way in which we do say that the Church of the Pontiff passes judgment concerning the Scriptures, it is not that the church is over the Scriptures, but over the judgments of private persons. For the Church does not judge concerning the truth of Scripture, but its understanding by you and by me, and by others (212).

That's an interesting distinction, but deceptively simple:

- i)** The Catholic church does presume to determine what is and is not Scripture. Which candidates for Scripture are canonical. And it claims divine authority in that exercise.
- ii)** In addition, it presumes to be the gatekeeper of what Scripture means. So there is no direct access to Scripture. The meaning of Scripture isn't independent of the Magisterium. Rather, it means whatever the Magisterium means.

Hence, the Catholic church presumes to be the final arbiter and the divine arbiter regarding the locus of Scripture as well as the locus of meaning. That fundamentally subordinates the authority of Scripture to the authority of

the Magisterium, both ontologically (what Scripture is) and epistemologically (what Scripture means).

iii) By contrast, evangelicals don't claim that their assessments have divine authority. So reason is not a rival to the divine authority of Scripture. Ironically, the alleged weakness of the Protestant position is a strength. We don't claim to be divinely authoritative arbiters of the canon or divinely authoritative interpreters of Scripture. We don't deify our judgments as the mouthpiece of God. So we, unlike Rome, remain subordinate to the authority of Scripture.

25. Bellarmine says:

The baptizing of infants is called an unwritten apostolic Tradition, because it is not found written in any apostolic book... (215).

It is necessary to believe, and the Lutherans and Calvinists do believe with us against the Anabaptists, that the baptism of infants is valid, but neither Catholics nor Lutherans can in any way prove this from the Scriptures alone (227).

i) Baptists and Anabaptists appreciate Bellarmine's candid admission.

ii) Because 16C Anabaptists had so little standing, Bellarmine could use that as a wedge tactic when responding to Lutherans and Reformed paedobaptists. Back then, Anabaptists didn't have a seat at the table. They were disowned by mainstream Protestants as well as Catholics.

But of course, in the 21C (indeed, well before then), Baptists are major players on the theological scene, so their position can't be sidelined in that sophisticated manner.

26. Bellarmine says:

It must be believed that Blessed Mary was always a virgin, contrary to the error of Helvidius, as the whole Church has always believed; however, there is no testimony of this matter in the Scriptures (227).

I appreciate his candid admission. Bellarmine seems to be using a wedge tactic to prove the necessity of tradition. But the logic is reversible. If there's no biblical evidence for those things, then there's no obligation to believe them.

27. Bellarmine says:

Acts 1:3...But the Evangelists have written only a very few things about the deeds and words of the Lord after the resurrection. However it is in no way credible that the Apostles, who saw and heard those things, did not hand them on to the Church (228).

The Apostolic Traditions properly are said to be those which were established by the Apostles, but not without the assistance the Holy Spirit, and still they are not found to be written in their letters, such as fasting during Lent, the Ember Days... (215).

It must be believed in the NT that Easter is to be celebrated on Sunday; for, the Quartadecimani were considered to be heretics by the ancient Church; nevertheless, there is absolutely nothing about this in the Scriptures (227).

But Catholics rightly think that he [Paul] not only directed what pertained to rites and ceremonies, but that he also gave more important directions, like things concerning the Ordination of ministers, the sacrifice of the altar, the matter and form of the

other Sacraments; and the heretics cannot in any way prove the contrary (229).

There are many mysteries concerning Baptism, which are preserved in the Church from the unwritten Traditions of the Apostles, like exorcism, breathing upon, anointing, &c. (230).

There are many unwritten things preserved in the whole world, like the feasts of the Nativity, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, as St. Augustine teaches in letter 118 (p230).

i) It doesn't occur to Bellarmine that what Jesus told the disciples between the Resurrection and Ascension was incorporated into the sermons in Acts and general epistles. In addition, that can also be reflected in the Gospels, when the narrator says or indicates that something Jesus did fulfills the OT.

ii) Apparently, Bellarmine honestly believes that Jesus dictated the Catholic church calendar to the disciples. He really thinks all these holy days and dates go right back to Jesus. I wonder how many contemporary Catholic church historians take that seriously.

iii) No doubt the apostles taught some things that were never recorded. That just means it wasn't necessary for the universal church.

iv) As for inability to prove the contrary, the onus is not on Protestants to disprove something for which there's no evidence.

28. Bellarmine says:

For the word of God is not such, nor does it have any authority because written down on sheets of paper, but because it has been uttered by God, either immediately like the sermons of the Lord, or by the mediation of the Apostles (216).

True, but misleading:

i) If the written word is our only source for the word of God.

ii) The written word of God is more reliable than the spoken word of God in the sense that speech is more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of memory. We generally lack verbatim recall. At best, we remember the gist of what was said, especially if it's lengthy or we only heard it once. By contrast, a written source can be repeatedly consulted.

Now if the authority of an Apostle prescribing orally is no less than what he commands in writing, certainly it is not audacious to make something unwritten equal to the written word (218).

That suffers from the same difficulty just noted (see above). In addition, it's necessary to establish a chain-of-custody for a reputed apostolic tradition, to distinguish it from an ecclesiastical legend or pseudonymous attribution.

29. Bellarmine says:

The Scriptures without Tradition were neither simply necessary nor sufficient... For, from Adam to Moses the Church of God was in the world, and men worshipped God with Faith, Hope, and Charity, and with external rites, as is clear from Genesis, where Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Melchizedek, and other just men are introduced...Therefore, the religion was preserved for two thousand years by Tradition alone; so Scripture simply is not necessary. For just as that

ancient religion could be preserved for fifteen hundred years without Scripture, so the doctrine of Christ could be preserved for fifteen hundred years without Scripture (222).

That's misleading. In the early stages of redemption, there was less to know, less to remember, because God hadn't done as much. But the history of redemption is cumulative. A lot more is said and done as time goes on. Imagine trying to remember and transmit the details of OT history and NT history without a written record to refer to.

Then from Moses until Christ through another two thousand years, the Scriptures did indeed exist, but they existed only among the Jews, while the other nations, in which the true religion, and Faith, existed in a few people, used only the unwritten Tradition (222).

The OT has an extremely dismal view of pagan piety.

And in the people of God, although they had the Scriptures, still the Jews used Tradition more than Scripture, as is clear from Exod 13:8, Deut 32:7, Ps 44:1, Ps 78:5-6 (p222).

i) Given how many Jews participated in the Exodus and wilderness wandering, there was bound to be lots of family lore. Many independent streams of information about that past event. In that respect, OT Jews had both biblical and extrabiblical sources of information which ran in tandem. And that provided corroborative evidence.

ii) But there's also the duty of parents to transmit the faith to the next generation. And that's different from institutional religion. Rather, that's domestic religion. Not priests or popes but parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles.

iii) Exod 13:8 is about the feast of unleavened bread as a ritual reenactment of the original event, in which worshipers imaginatively retroject themselves into the situation of the original participants.

Moreover, after the coming of Christ for many years the Church was without Scriptures (223).

i) That's overstated. There was a one-to-many relation where copies of Scripture were read aloud in church (e.g. 1 Thes 5:27; Rev 1:3). The public reading of Scripture. You didn't have to own a Bible or read a Bible to hear the Bible.

ii) The reason we have the NT today is thanks to Christian scribes. There were many private copies in circulation.

iii) Bellarmine's objection cuts both ways. The dissemination of Catholic theology requires documentary transmission. Papal encyclicals, conciliar creeds and canons,

the writings of the church fathers, scholastic theologians, &c. Catholicism is of necessity a literate rather than oral culture.

Finally, they [i.e. Protestants] clearly say that the whole canon is necessary so that sufficient doctrine may be had. But that is not true. For, many truly sacred and canonical books have perished [e.g. Mt 2:23; 1 Chron 29:29; 2 Chron 9:29; 1 Kgs 4:32; Col 4:16; 1 Cor 5:9] (223).

- i)** It's idiosyncratic to say canonical books have perished.
- ii)** Actually, it isn't necessary to have the entire canon. That's ideal, but due to the redundancy of Scripture, the basics are multiply-attested.

30. Bellarmine says:

It is necessary to know that there are some divine books, which certainly can in no way be known from the Scriptures themselves. For, even if Scripture said that the books of the Prophets and Apostles are divine, still I cannot believe that for certain unless I already know that the Scripture

which says this is divine. For, we also read here and there in the Koran of Mohammed that the Koran was sent by God from heaven, still we do not believe it. Therefore this very necessary dogma, namely, that there is a divine Scripture, cannot be proved sufficiently from Scripture alone.

It is not enough to know that there is a divine Scripture, but it is necessary to know what it is—and this is something that cannot be had from the Scriptures. For how do we decide from Scripture that the Gospels of Mark and Luke are true, but those of Thomas and Bartholomew are false? Because reason dictates that one should put more faith in a book prefaced with the title of an Apostle, than in one by a non-Apostle?

And from what source do I know that the letter to the Romans is truly by Paul, but that the letter to the Laodiceans, which is now being circulated, is not by Paul? Since both are entitled by Paul, and since Paul in Col 4:16 says that he wrote to the Laodiceans, but says nowhere that he wrote to the Romans.

It is also necessary to know not only which books are sacred but also to know in particular that these, which are in my hands, are the same. For, it is not enough to believe that the Gospel of Mark is true, that the Gospel of Thomas is not true, but it is necessary also to believe that his Gospel, which is now read in the name of Mark, is the true and incorrupt one that Mark wrote. That certainly cannot be known from the Scriptures alone. For, how can I gather from Scripture that this Gospel is not a counterfeit...or certainly wholly corrupted? (225).

We know which sacred books are included in it, from no other source but unwritten Traditions. Thus, in [Eusebius, Church History], Serapion rejects certain writings falsely attributed to Peter, because he had learned from Tradition that Peter had not written such things (226).

Finally, this Tradition is either the word of God, or it is not; if it is not, then we do not have Faith, because Faith is based on the word of God (226).

i) Here Bellarmine is challenging sola scriptura, or the sufficiency of Scripture in particular.

ii) A basic problem is his grasp of the issue. If sola scripture rules out extrabiblical evidence for the authorship, authenticity, and canon of Scripture, then it's self-refuting. But why think that's what is meant by sola scripture? Why think that's what sola scripture entails?

The basic principle or rationale for sola scriptura is the primacy of revelation. Public, propositional revelation is the supreme source and standard of doctrine and ethics. Nothing else could be better. Nothing else could be on a par with that.

The next question is where to find it. If public, propositional revelation terminated around the end of the 1C, then we must look to past sources. If that's only preserved in the Scripture, then by default, Scripture outranks all other sources of knowledge.

There's nothing ad hoc about sola scriptura. It derives from the identity of Christianity as a revealed religion, and the fact that public, propositional revelation isn't continuous.

iii) That doesn't rule out extrabiblical lines of evidence to verify revelatory claimants. To take a comparison, 1C observers saw, heard, and touched Jesus. The fact that they relied on sense knowledge doesn't mean sensory perception is more authoritative than Jesus, or equally authoritative.

In redemptive history generally, natural and supernatural means alternate. Miracles don't rule out ordinary providence or vice versa.

iv) That said, Bellarmine neglects the extensive internal evidence for the canon, authorship, and authenticity. Something I and others have documented.

v) He fails to distinguish between historical evidence and the argument from authority. Some church fathers and other early Christian sources are useful historical witnesses.

That's different than treating them as authority figures. For instance, Eusebius has no intrinsic authority. The value of his church history derives from the quality of his source material (in some cases).

vi) Bellarmine's argument is regressive and self-defeating. There are many ecclesiastical legends and forgeries. You can't just appeal to "tradition" to settle that, for tradition must be sifted.

vii) We have Christian scribes to thank for the NT as it came down to us. But they worked independently. There was no curia in the early church to stage-manage the transcription and transmission of Scripture. The papacy doesn't get credit for that.

The witness of the manuscripts

There are different lines of evidence for the canon. External evidence includes Jewish testimony, the church fathers, the Muratorian canon.

There's extensive internal evidence in terms of the intertextuality of the Bible.

Also the fact that some books of the Bible naturally comprise literary units (e.g. Pentateuch, Psalter, Luke-Acts, Pauline Epistles, John/1-3 John).

However, I'd like to highlight a neglected line of evidence. That's the very fact that we have editions of Scripture, and we can trace that process back in time. The manuscripts are evidence.

For instance, Christian scribes don't just copy individual NT books, but groups of books, like the Gospels, or the Gospels and Acts, Pauline Epistles, or Pauline epistles plus Hebrews, or general epistles. Christian scribes transmit anthologies of NT documents. Take some of the Chester Beatty papyri.

And that's interesting because, at the time, Christian scribes were operating independently of each other. There was no central agency coordinating their activities. So that's a historical, but decentralized witness to the NT canon. Not simply that Christian scribes copied NT books, but copied collections of NT books in larger and smaller units.

Although the external evidence is a kind of tradition, it's not an official exercise of "the Church", but many individuals who independently bear witness to the canon.

The canon question

I've been asked to comment on this post:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/01/the-canon-question/>

1. Before delving into the details, I'll make some general observations. Brown chooses a few foils. Primarily Luther, Calvin, R. C. Sproul, Laird Harris, Herman Ridderbos, and F. F. Bruce. But there are significant defenses of the Protestant canon which Brown fails to engage. For instance:

DEMPSTER, STEPHEN. G. "THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON, JOSEPHUS AND COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENT," IN THE ENDURING AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES, ED. D. A. CARSON, (ZONDERVAN, 2016), 321-361.

ELLIS, E. E. THE MAKING OF THE NEW TESTAMENT DOCUMENTS (BRILL 2002).

GATHERCOLE, SIMON, 'THE TITLES OF THE GOSPELS IN THE EARLIEST NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS', ZNW 104.1 (2013), 33-76.

_____, "E PLURIBUS UNUM? APOSTOLIC UNITY AND EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE," D. A. CARSON, ED. THE ENDURING AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES (EERDMANS 2016), 407-55.

HESS, R. S. THE OLD TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL, CRITICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL INTRODUCTION. BAKER, 2016, 4-9.

HILL, C. E., WHO CHOSE THE GOSPELS? PROBING THE GREAT GOSPEL CONSPIRACY (OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2010)

PORTER, S. 'PAUL AND THE PROCESS OF CANONIZATION.' EXPLORING THE ORIGINS OF THE BIBLE: CANON FORMATION IN HISTORICAL, LITERARY, AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE. ACADIA STUDIES IN BIBLE AND THEOLOGY. ED. CRAIG A. EVANS AND EMANUEL TOV. GRAND RAPIDS: BAKER, 2008: 173-202.

STEINMANN, ANDREW. E. THE ORACLES OF GOD: THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON (CONCORDIA 1999).

TROBISCH, DAVID. THE FIRST EDITION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT (OXFORD 2000).

It might be objected that some of these were published after Brown's post. However, Brown's post is a web document which he can update at any time.

2. There's always an air of unreality in how Catholic apologists approach the canon. They operate with a theological ideal. But how does that correspond to reality? For instance, if God guided the Tridentine bishops in their canonical deliberations, what would we expect the result to be? According to Metzger:

Finally on 8 April 1546, by a vote of 24 to 15, with 16 abstentions, the Council issued a decree (De Canonicis Scripturis) in which, for the first time in the history of the Church, the question of the contents of the Bible was made an absolute article of faith and confirmed by anathema. The Canon of the New Testament (Oxford 1987), 246.

But if God illuminated the minds of the Tridentine bishops to discern the true canon, why did God see fit to leave the majority of the bishops in darkness? Why did he only illumine the mind of 24 bishops, while the other 31 either abstained or voted for the mistaken alternative? So the Catholic ideal seems wholly artificial when you compare it to the facts on the ground. A pretty paper theory.

But this answer, that we know saving truth from the Bible, pushes the question back. What is the Bible?...“By what

critterion do we know which texts comprise the Bible?” This is an essential question all Christians should be able to answer, but, in my experience in discussing this with other believers, it is to many a foreign subject matter. Without understanding why we believe the Gospel of Mark, or the Epistle of James, or the book of Esther to be among those writings inspired by the Holy Spirit, we cannot give a principled reason why we believe these books to be Scripture. Without any principled reason why we believe these books to be Scripture, we have no principled reason or basis for knowing what is the deposit of faith, and thus cannot give an answer to ‘everyone who asks us to give a reason for the hope we have.’⁴

That raises many issues:

i) I hardly think it's incumbent on every Christian to be able to make a case for the canon. The church has many members. Different Christians have different duties according to their aptitude and opportunities.

ii) Then there's the methodological issue of the proper starting-point. That's a philosophically vexed question. According to one view, you begin with criteria. And there's a necessary place for criteria to assess or warrant a particular position. But the question is whether you can begin with criteria, for that's regressive. A Catholic apologist asks, "By what authority did you decide the canon"? He answers, "By the authority of the church". So "the church" (i.e. Roman Magisterium) is his criterion. But it doesn't take much imagination to realize how that answer only pushes the question by a step. For a Protestant can easily counter, "By what authority did you decide that your denomination is the true claimant? By what authority did you decide that your sect has the authority you imputed to it?"

In other words, a Catholic apologist uses Rome as his criterion, but by what criterion does he verify the claims of Rome? If criteria are the starting-point, then he needs a standard independent of Rome to establish at the outset that Rome ought to be the arbiter.

iii) Another approach is to begin with paradigm examples rather than criteria. Suppose you ask me how I recognize a watermelon. Well, that kind of melon is always labeled as a watermelon. I know what it looks like. I know what it tastes like. Every store I go to has the same thing. The starting-point is a broad-based sample.

Now, it would be possible for a botanist to offer scientific criteria to distinguish watermelons from other types of melons. If necessary, that might be used to complement the inductive approach.

In many cases, we don't begin with criteria. We begin with examples. We begin with experience. We begin with where we actually begin. The historical and epistemic situation in

which we find ourselves. We may then deploy criteria to confirm or disconfirm the normativity of our experience.

iv) Apropos (iii), most Jews inherited the canon from their forebears. They found themselves in possession of the scriptures. There was a chain of custody. God spoke to and through the prophets. Their oracles were committed to writing, copied, and disseminated. Initially, copies were kept in the ark of the covenant. Later in the Temple archives. Synagogues had copies. Retroactive criteria can be brought to bear to justify the result. But that's not the starting-point.

They can be summarized as follows: the Old Testament canon is that set of Hebrew texts that were canonized by Jewish leaders of Jerusalem around the time of Christ;

That's one theory. However, the OT didn't need to be formally canonized. The cutoff was the intertestamental period. You might say the scriptures are canonical by default. The end of public revelation marks the end of the canon. The termination of prophecy terminated the canon. It then resumed during the NT era.

Given the Reformed assumption that whatever authoritatively testifies to the canonicity of Scripture must be more authoritative than Scripture, each of

them necessarily places extra-biblical evidence above Scripture in its effort to objectively identify the canon.

That's rhetorical trickery by casting the issue in terms of whatever authoritatively testifies to the canonicity of Scripture. But that's a category mistake. Evidence isn't the same thing as an argument from authority. Indeed, authority and evidence are contrary (though not necessarily contradictory) principles.

Take an expert witness. I may defer to his authority because I lack the competence to evaluate the evidence on my own. Conversely, if I have direct evidence for a claim, and I'm competent to assess it on my own, then I don't need to fall back on the argument from authority.

But as Dr. Flesseman-van Leer has rightly observed, those who accept the traditional canon of Scripture today cannot legitimately defend it with arguments that played no part in its original formation.⁷ Post hoc rationalization of such a critical point as the formation of the canon would be like painting a target around one's arrow that is already embedded in the wall.

i) Brown makes that assertion as if it's self-evidently true. If anything, his assertion is self-evidently false.

To begin with, the way in which we come to know something or believe something may be quite different than how we attempt to philosophically justify what we know or believe. For instance, I know some things by virtue of firsthand experience. If, however, I was proving what I know to a second party, who lacks my personal experience, then I'll resort to evidence in the public domain. I know what schools I attended for the simple reason that I attended them. I was there. If, however, I had to prove to somewhat else that I attended a particular school, I might point to public records.

ii) Suppose I'm initially a Christian believer because I was raised in a Christian home. That by itself isn't a reliable yardstick. After all, if I was raised in a Muslim home or Buddhist home I might not be Christian.

When I reach a certain age, it's proper for me to consider the reasons for Christianity. Although those formed no part in my initial faith, they may corroborate what I came to believe on other grounds.

Suppose I become a Christian apologist. As I discover new arguments for Christianity as well as objections to Christianity, that may effect a sifting process in which I discard weak reasons I use to have and replace them with better reasons. That's entirely legitimate. My justification for the Christian faith at 60 might well be and ought be very different from my justification at 15. I should have a more sophisticated rationale.

iii) Finally, this sabotages his own position. Books of the Catholic Bible were canonized under the assumption of

traditional authorship. That's no longer a given in modern Catholicism. Indeed, that's routinely denied in mainstream Catholic scholarship. Therefore, by Brown's own logic, the Catholic canon was finalized under false pretenses.

Self-Attestation and the Testimony of the Holy Spirit

1. It's necessary to disambiguate these principles. The witness of the Spirit is a psychological process. Equivalent to regeneration, which makes the reader's mind receptive to revealed truths. The regenerate find the Bible believable in a way that the unregenerate do not. That's insufficiently discriminating to be a criterion of canonicity, but it does intersect with canonicity.

2. Self-attestation concerns internal evidence for the canon and/or divine inspiration of Scripture. This can take different forms, viz.

i) Authorial attributions. That may include implicit authorship.

ii) Common authorship. If two or more biblical documents are by the same author, they don't require separate attestation.

iii) Intertextuality. The Bible contains a great deal of cross attestation. Later OT authors quote earlier OT authors. Successive historical books pick up where the preceding book left off. Samuel, Kings, Chronicles refer to many OT writers. NT authors quote OT authors. The Gospels, Acts, and Epistles often reference the same cast of characters. The Synoptic Gospels corroborate each other. And so on. Much of the evidence for the canon of Scripture derives from the self-witness of Scripture.

We have evidence that many early Church figures, including St. Augustine himself, supported the inclusion of the deuterocanonical texts within the canon.

Some church fathers quote the Sibylline oracles. Augustine thought Virgil's Fourth Eclogue was a messianic prophecy. So Brown's appeal proves too little or too much.

As an initial matter, Calvin misstates the Catholic position by stating that, according to the Catholic Church, Scripture has its authoritative weight accorded to it by the Church. Rather, the Catholic position is that Scripture has divine authority because it is God-breathed, the Holy Spirit having inspired the texts' authors. That is, Scripture has divine authority because of its divine author, not because of the role of God's Church in producing it. As the Catholic Church decreed during the First Vatican Council...This belief is reflected also in the dogmatic work Dei Verbum, written by Pope Paul VI in 1965.

That's unintentionally comical. Calvin is remarking on the state of Catholicism in the 16C. For Brown to "correct" Calvin by appealing to Vatican I and Vatican II is grossly anachronistic.

As St. Augustine said, "I would not have believed the gospel, unless the authority of the Church had induced me."

So much the worse for Augustine, in that regard. Many people have come to believe the Bible by just reading the Bible.

In this context, Ridderbos uses a priori to mean knowledge that has nothing but the canon as its starting point. His claim, then, is that if any part of a canon test depends on something outside of the canon (what he calls "a posteriori" elements)-for example, on the consensus of the Church-this explanation has placed some extra-Biblical authority "above" the canon. Within the framework of sola scriptura, this is a commendably logical observation. If Scripture is the sole infallible authority of

the faith, and everything else is subordinate in authority to Scripture, then the basis for determining the canon cannot be any authority but Scripture. The working principle here is that an authority is only as authoritative as that on which it is founded...Here is Ridderbos's riddle then, which he believes Calvin's view has solved: how can we determine the canon, which does not fall from Heaven, without relying on extra-canonical evidence? Ridderbos sees the need to avoid the use of extra-canonical evidence, because doing so would, under the Calvinist assumption, place the confirming evidence over the canon, which would violate sola scriptura.

i) Once again, Brown repeats his blunder by confounding evidence with authority. Compare his confusion with a statement by Catholic philosopher and professional logician Peter Geach:

A man who decides to rely on an authority is indeed making a judgment

about that authority; but in so doing he is not assuming the position of a judge, not setting himself up as a higher authority In recommending someone as a good lawyer or doctor, I am not claiming to be myself an even better lawyer or doctor. P. T.

Geach, Reason and Argument (Blackwell 1976), 24.

To expand on Geach's observation, if I'm looking for a good cardiologist, I might consult Best Doctors. I might consider a physician's credentials. Did he graduate from an Ivy League med school? Does he practice at prestigious hospitals? Does he teach at Ivy League med schools?

I'm researching evidence for a good cardiologist. That doesn't promote me to an authority-figure.

ii) Because the Bible makes claims about the world, it doesn't subordinate Scripture to the world to consider extrabiblical evidence, for Scripture itself points outside itself to the world around us. Scripture refers to historical events. That refers to a world outside the text. The text is not the world.

But prior to Calvin, the Church never used this method to recognize a book as belonging to the canon. The Church

recognized books as canonical on the basis of their having been inspired by the Holy Spirit.³⁰ In its process of identifying which books possessed this quality, the Church never employed a private, individualistic means. Instead, it relied upon councils of the Church confirmed by the Bishop of Rome.³¹ Again, as one cannot legitimately defend the canon with arguments which played no part in its original formation.

Somehow I doubt Greek Orthodox church historians agree with Brown on the role of the pope.

Today's average Protestant does not study why he has the Protestant 66-book canon, and does not independently decide if the Bible handed to him is correct. Rather, he accepts as an a priori of his Protestant faith that the 66-book canon is correct.

i) True. Most Protestant laymen inherit the canon. Once again, every Christian isn't a Bible scholar or church

historian.

ii) The average Catholic doesn't do any better.

iii) The question at issue isn't whether the average evangelical layman is competent to defend the Protestant canon, but whether that case can and has been made by those who are.

iv) One way in which God commonly cultivates saving faith is to providentially place the elect in churches of sufficient orthodoxy that they are exposed to the Gospel. That's a reliable belief-forming process. God intends that outcome. God provides the means.

With Ridderbos's answer to the Canon Question, we have no way of knowing whether the Holy Spirit is permitting a reader to recognize a text as canonical, or is simply permitting a reader falsely to perceive it as Scripture. We cannot tell since we would necessarily have to appeal to Ridderbos's subjective element in order to know which of these actions the Holy Spirit is engaged in when, for example, He permits Catholics to recognize the deuterocanonical texts as Divine. If the Holy Spirit is simply permitting Catholics falsely to perceive

them as Scripture, as Protestants must maintain, then Protestants have no objective criteria by which to distinguish this act of the Holy Spirit from cases in which He is permitting readers to recognize a text as canonical.

i) That reflects a limitation on appeals to the testimony of the Spirit. The justification of the canon requires more.

ii) However, the fact that I can't compare my experience to your experience is not in itself reason to doubt my experience. Someone who's high on LSD perceives the world very differently from me, but that's hardly reason for me to think I'm the one who's deluded—rather than the acidhead.

The renowned 20th-century Reformed theologian F. F. Bruce

He was a renowned NT scholar, not a renowned theologian.

A test of canonicity that relies on such extra-Biblical evidence as what the Jews of A.D. 200 (or any other time) accepted as canonical falls subject to the critique of Ridderbos, noted above.⁴⁵ Without

biblical warrant to craft such a test, it remains extra-Biblical. Therefore, its application would be a canon above the canon and thus violate sola scriptura according to Ridderbos's criteria. A major problem with this canon theory is that it grants to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day an authority which, it claims, if possessed by the Church, would undermine the authority of Scripture. But it would be ad hoc to allow a Jewish magisterial authority to determine the canon while claiming that a determination of the canon by way of Catholic magisterial authority would undermine the authority of Scripture.

i) Once again, authority and evidence are two different things.

ii) Brown thinks the Jews didn't settle on the canon until the Christian era. And he imputes that to Protestants. But many scholars think the OT canon was settled long before the Christian era.

First, there is no historical basis to conclude that any one Jewish group had

the authority to pronounce and close the canon for other Jewish groups, or that any one of them could conclude the canon for Christianity.

Once more, the case for the Protestant canon doesn't require that assumption.

The Diaspora Jews, on the other hand, used the Greek Septuagint, which included the deuterocanonical texts as well as some apocryphal texts.

Brown suffers from an anachronistic and monolithic view of the LXX. For one corrective:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmpnJ1cgh58>

Harris's third point about the Septuagintal canon is that, with the advent of the codex (i.e., bound book) replacing the scroll, early Christians found the need to fill up the scores of empty pages of valuable paper in their bound Bibles. To do this, Harris argues, they "[n]aturally" would "fill it with

helpful devotional material.” 58 This, he concludes, led to a conflation of helpful books with scared books. The extent of Harris’s historical evidence for his view is that it seems to him the only plausible explanation for these texts’ survival in spite of a lack of support from the early Church Fathers.

Brown seems unaware of what Christian codices actually contain. To take a few examples, Codex Alexandrinus includes the Odes of Solomon, Ps 151, 3-4 Maccabees, & 1-2 Clement. Codex Sinaiticus includes 4 Maccabees, the Epistle of Pseudo-Barnabas, & the Shepherd of Hermas. None of that's canonical by Catholic standards.

No authority within Scripture, and no argument from reason, requires Christians to abide by the speculative conclusions of the first-century Pharisaic leaders from Jerusalem, some of the very ones who had Christ put to death.

Notice how Brown is so blinkered by his own view that he lacks the critical detachment to distinguish his view from Protestant views. He keeps acting as though evangelicals assume the case for the Protestant canon hinges on Jamnia.

He's so conditioned by that way of thinking that he can't get it out of his mind.

The definitive reason why the Septuagint was accepted by the Church is because it was accepted by the Apostles.

As Nolland documents, in his commentary, Matthew frequently translates straight from the Hebrew text. Cf. **J. NOLLAND, THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW (ERDMANS 2005), 29-33.**

These Christians' use of the Septuagint indicates their conviction that it was authentically divine, and therefore authoritative.

i) That's counterproductive to Brown's thesis. To begin with, the OT was written in Hebrew (with a few Aramaic sections), not Greek. The LXX is just a translation. And it's a very uneven translation.

ii) More to the point, if Brown thinks the LXX is authentically divine, and therefore authoritative, then Trent was in error when it made the Vulgate, translated straight from the Hebrew, the standard of comparison.

This speculation or hypothesis has no more support than the deistic assumption of the Holy Spirit's non-intervention upon which it is based.

How very droll! What about Brown's deistic assumption regarding the Holy Spirit's non-intervention in the Protestant faith?

Rather, the Septuagintal texts' early appearance in the Church, oppositionless acceptance, and widespread propagation by Christians lead to the conclusion that these very Jewish books had been in use by Alexandrian Jews.

Early on, there was a tragic split between the church and the synagogue, which opened the door to a looser view of the canon.

The second reason that the 'original Hebrew canon' theory fails to answer the Canon Question is that it simply pushes back the question. By what criterion was the original Hebrew canon determined? Unless the answer to this deeper

question can objectively produce a complete list of books belonging to the Old Testament canon, the 'original Hebrew canon' theory cannot be our criterion for determining the Old Testament canon.

There are multiple lines of internal and external evidence for the Hebrew canon.

But if this is our defense of the canon, we are left once again relying on Jewish tradition in the formation of canon. And if we are relying on Jewish tradition, then we have no reason not to accept the tradition of the Alexandrian Jews who accepted the deuterocanonical texts.

Brown seems to be totally ignorant of evidence to the contrary. For instance:

“No two Septuagint codices contain the same apocrypha, and no uniform Septuagint ‘Bible’ was ever the subject of discussion in the patristic church. In view of these facts the Septuagint codices appear

*to have been originally intended more as service books than as a defined and normative canon of Scripture,” E. E. Ellis, **The Old Testament in Early Christianity (Baker 1992), 34-35.***

*“As we have seen, manuscripts of anything like the capacity of Codex Alexandrinus were not used in the first centuries of the Christian era, and since, in the second century AD, the Jews seem largely to have discarded the Septuagint...there can be no real doubt that the comprehensive codices of the Septuagint, which start appearing in the fourth century AD, are all of Christian origin,” R. Beckwith, **The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church (Eerdmans 1986), 382.***

“Nor is there agreement between the codices which of the Apocrypha t include. Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus all include Tobit, Judith, Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus, and integrate them into the body of the Old Testament, rather than appending them at the end; but Codex Vaticanus, unlike the other two, totally excludes the Books of Maccabees. Moreover, all three codices, according to Kenyon, were produced in Egypt, yet the contemporary Christian lists of the biblical

books drawn up in Egypt by Athanasius and (very likely) pseudo-Athanasius are much more critical, excluding all apocryphal books from the canon, and putting them in a separate appendix. It seems, therefore, that the codices, with their less strict approach, do not reflect a definite canon so much as variable reading-habits; and the reading-habits would in the nature of the case be those of fourth and fifth-century Christians, which might not agree with those of first-century Jews,” ibid. 383.

“At this point we encounter the Greek Old Testament in the three great codices of the fourth and fifth centuries: Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus...All exceeded the scope of the Hebrew Bible...In Vaticanus, however, all four of the books of Maccabees are missing and in Sinaiticus, 2 and 3 Macabees, as well as 1 Ezra, Baruch and Letter of Jeremiah—presumably only the result of lacunae in the text. Codex Alexandrinus, approximately one century younger, is, in contrast, much more extensive; it includes the LXX as we know it in Rahlfs’ edition, with all four books of Maccabees and the fourteen Odes appended to Psalms. The Odes also include the Prayer of Manasseh,

previously attested only in the Syria Didaskalia and the Apostolic Constitutions,” Robert Hanhart, "Introduction: Problems in the History of the LXX Text from Its Beginnings to Origen," M. Hengel, The Septuagint as Christian Scripture (Baker 2004), 57-58.

“It should be considered, further, that the Odes (sometimes varied in number), attested from the fifth century in all Greek Psalm manuscripts, contain three New Testament ‘psalms’: the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Nunc Dimittis from Luke’s birth narrative, and the conclusion of the hymn that begins with the ‘Gloria in Excelsis.’ This underlines the fact that the LXX, although, itself consisting of a collection of Jewish documents, wishes to be a Christian book. The relative openness of the Old Testament portion of these oldest codices also corresponds to that of its ‘New Testament’: Sinaiticus contains Barnabas and Hermas, Alexandrinus 1 and 2 Clement,” ibid. 59.

“The name ‘Septuagint’ denotes both the first Greek translation of the Bible and the collection of Jewish-Greek Scripture, containing inter alia this translation. The latter usage is imprecise because

this collection contains also late revisions of the original translation and books that were originally written in Greek. In order to distinguish between the two usages of the word, the collection of Jewish-Greek Scripture is generally called the 'Septuagint,' while the first translation of the Bible is often named 'the Old Greek (translation),'
Emanuel Tov, "The Septuagint," M. Mulder & H. Sysling, eds., Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading & Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism & Early Christianity (Hendrickson 2004), 161.

*A fifth persistent factor that has clouded this discussion is the concept of an "Alexandrian Jewish canon" of Scripture that was broader than the Palestinian Jewish canon. This is based on a lack of clarity about the meaning of the term "Septuagint".*¹⁰⁰

The author of this quotation has assumed that the "Septuagint" in the sense of that collection of texts known from Codices Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, and Vaticanus (or in the sense of the critical editions available today) was the "Septuagint" of the Jewish community of the third century B.C.E. This is,

however, a grave misstep, because the work undertaken in the third century B.C.E. in Alexandria involved only the Greek translation of the Pentateuch (clearly the scope envisioned by Letter of Aristeas). Moreover, the quotation involves its author in a paradox: it would be impossible for the third-century-B.C.E. version of the Septuagint to contain the Apocrypha books, since they were all written between 185 B.C.E. and 10 C.E. (with the possible exception of Tobit, which may predate the second century B.C.E.)! Also, telling in the argument against the Alexandrian Jewish canon is that Philo, the Jewish commentator in Alexandria par excellence, never quotes from the Apocrypha (Beckwith 1985: 384).¹⁰¹

The “Septuagint” codices mentioned above cannot be used as evidence for an Alexandrian Jewish canon that included the Apocrypha. These manuscripts are fourth- and fifth-century Christian works, fail to agree on the extent of the extra books, and seem to have been compiled more with convenience of reference in mind than as the standards of canonical versus noncanonical books (the fact that one even contained, at one point,

Psalms of Solomon strongly suggests this). D. DeSilva, Introducing the Apocrypha (Baker 2004), 29-30.

Back to Brown:

Finally, Harris says, we can use the New Testament itself as historical evidence of what texts should be in the Old Testament canon.⁹⁰ He argues that the books of the Old Testament were referenced in the New by Christ and the Apostles, and thus we can be certain of their canonicity: “Christ and the apostles have authenticated for us the thirty-nine Old Testament books and strictly avoided the seven Apocrypha.”⁹¹ Harris supports this claim by noting that the New Testament “cites almost all of the Old Testament books, often by name.”⁹²

One problem with that claim is that the New Testament also cites “scripture” whose referent we cannot even identify. To give an example, “[w]e have no idea what ‘the scripture’ is which says, according to James 4:5, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us.’”⁹³ If the criterion of the Old Testament canon is ‘that

which the New Testament treats as Scripture,' then we have here a grave problem, for in that case our Old Testament canon is incomplete.

It's true that the witness of the NT is insufficient to document every OT book. But we don't require a single line of evidence.

Also, the New Testament is full of themes and even direct phraseology from the deuterocanon.

Putting aside Brown's exaggeration, his claim is confused. Mere allusions were never proof that the documented alluded to is Scripture. That depends on other considerations, like the prior reputation of the document, or how the document functions in the argument of the NT writer. Is he alluding to that material to cinch an argument? Does he regard that material as authoritative? Is he resorting to an ad hominem appeal?

While there are dozens of these uses, here are two short examples.⁹⁴ The mention in Revelation 1:4 of the seven angels petitioning before the Throne in Heaven is a reference to Tobit 12:15: "I am Raphael, one of the seven angels

who enter and serve before the Glory of the Lord.”

But Tobit 12:15 is secondary. As Fitzmyer explains:

The idea of "seven angels" is probably derived from Zech 4:10: the seven eyes of the Lord that roam the earth. J. Fitzmyer, Tobit (Walter de Gruyter 2003), 296.

This is a problem when converts like Brown rely on pop Catholic websites rather than mainstream Catholic scholarship.

In addition to the New Testament citation of “scripture” that is now lost, and the many references from the New Testament to deuterocanonical texts, the ‘adopted by the New Testament’ canon criterion faces one other major flaw. Judges, Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs are not cited in the New Testament, and so would fail to satisfy

this criterion of canonicity and drop from our canon.

i) Once again, the evidence for the Protestant canon isn't confined to internal evidence.

ii) That said, a book like Judges doesn't exist in a vacuum but a continuum. It's part of an interconnected history. Joshua feeds into Judges, which feeds into Ruth, which feeds into 1-2 Samuel, and so on.

Another proposed canon test, this one tailored for the New Testament texts, maintains that the proper test for canonizing the New Testament is apostolic authorship, or at least apostolic origin. But Harris and Bruce both argue that Apostolic authorship is a necessary criterion of New Testament canonicity.

I disagree. Apostolic authorship is (generally) a sufficient condition for the canonicity of books by apostles. If a book is by an apostle, then it rates inclusion in the canon. (Mind you, that's limited to extant apostolic writings. If God didn't see fit to preserve an apostolic writing, because it was too ephemeral, then it's not in play.)

But to say apostolicity entails the canonicity of apostolic writings doesn't entail that non-apostolic writings can't be

canonical. The common denominator would be inspiration.

Because there is no God-given list of “inspired authors” just as there is no God-given list of the New Testament books, the Protestant can only reach the conclusion that the twelve Apostles were inspired authors through the use of reason or extra-Biblical sources.

That's simplistic. It's a combination of internal and external attestation.

Second, this position, that Christ gave a list of inspired authors who wrote out the Word, must be able to prove Paul’s actual apostolicity in order to defend his epistles as having apostolic authorship. But Paul’s apostolicity cannot be settled without resort to Tradition. This position also must defend the ultimate apostolic origin of Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, James, and Jude, books whose apostolic authorship is known only through Tradition.

i) Brown is using "Tradition" as a tendentious synonym for evidence.

ii) The apostolicity of the Pauline correspondence is in the body of the text.

iii) I deny that Mark, Luke, Acts, Hebrews, James, and Jude require apostolic origins.

But from the absence of evidence that 2 Peter was not written by Peter, we cannot reach the conclusion that 2 Peter was written by Peter, unless we resort to reliance upon Tradition. If Harris means to rely upon Tradition, as his words about the eventual conviction of the ancient Church imply, then without being ad hoc, he would also need to accept the deuterocanonical books. This is because the ancient Church eventually came to the conviction that the deuterocanonical books were canonical, as shown by the determinations of the Councils of Hippo and Carthage, already discussed above.

i) I seriously doubt there's any mainstream Catholic Bible scholar who defends the apostolic authorship of 2 Peter.

ii) Why is Brown appealing to local church councils? Even on Catholic grounds, they're not infallible. They don't presume to speak to or for the universal church.

It is striking that Harris would look to the eventual conviction of the ancient Church. If the ancient Church did not have a conviction about 2 Peter's canonicity at the point in time closest to that epistle's composition, then its later-reached conclusions would only become less reliable with the passage of time. Memories of actual authorship would have faded, and opportunities for the inclusion of 'urban legend' would have expanded exponentially. That is, the Church's Traditions would have become less reliable unless the Holy Spirit gave a special grace to the Church to be preserved from error.

That's a valid point, but it undercuts the theory of development.

But the very act of answering the Canon Question inherently involves an extra-Biblical fallible human judgment, unless one is preserved from error by the Holy Spirit. This fallible human judgment, by defining the criterion of canon, exercises power over the canon itself.

If Protestants see the Catholic Church as placing herself 'over' Scripture simply by articulating the canon of Scripture, so too they should see answers to the Canon Question culled from human reason or extra-Biblical evidence as being 'over' Scripture.

The Catholic or Orthodox Christian will point to the work of the Holy Spirit in the visible Church as the basis for his articulation of the canon, which work is seen in sacred tradition.

In the fallible judgment of a convert to Catholicism like Brown, one can point to the Spirit's guidance in the Roman Church. But that's just a projection of his fallible perception.

In other words, we can have no more confidence in the infallibility of the

content included than we have in the process by which it was included.

What a self-defeating objection! Brown is a convert to Catholicism. He believes the Roman church is protected from heresy. But of course, Brown arrived at that conclusion by exercising his fallible judgment. So he can have no more confidence in the infallibility of the Roman church than the fallible process by which he came to that conclusion.

But in the Protestant scheme, because the process which yielded the canon is fallible, Protestantism cannot have complete confidence in the content of its canon. A fallible collection of infallible books cannot function as a binding authority.

1. To begin with, Sproul's position is simplistic. The internal evidence for the canon is infallible. The self-witness of Scripture is infallible. That may not suffice to cover the entire canon, but it's infallible with respect to what is covered.

2. Is it true that a fallible process necessarily yields a fallible result? Consider some biblical examples:

i) How did Joseph ascend to the prime ministership of Egypt? He became the victim of attempted murder; then he

was enslaved; then he was imprisoned on a false accusation of rape; then he interpreted the dreams of some imprisoned courtiers; then he interpreted some dreams by Pharaoh.

Normally that would be a highly unreliable strategy for a Jew to become prime minister of Egypt. It worked out that way not because the method is reliable, but because God directed the process.

ii) By process of elimination, the culprit is identified by casting lots (Josh 7).

Normally, that's a highly unreliable method to identify the culprit. On this occasion it worked because God was directing the lots.

iii) Trial by ordeal (Num 5:11-31).

Normally, that's a highly unreliable method to determine infidelity. It only works in that case because God directs the process.

iv) Revelatory dreams

Normally dreams are a highly unreliable method for making decisions or discerning God's will. It only works in that case because God directs the process.

v) To take a hypothetical example, it's generally prudent to read both sides of an argument. If I only read one side of an argument, I may read the wrong side, but find that persuasive because it suppresses evidence to the contrary. Suppose I only read one side of the argument, but I happen to read the right side. So I arrive at the correct position by default, even though the process was fallible.

I finish with a challenge, and one I offer with a heart longing for Christian unity. Approach your pastor, or the most knowledgeable Reformed teacher or theologian you know, and ask him how he is certain that the Protestant canon is correct.

i) I just gave examples in which an intrinsically uncertain process can be a basis for certainty, due to God's overruling process. So even if the process by which evangelicals arrive at the canon is fallible, if God intends for evangelicals to discover the true canon by such means, the conclusion can be fully warranted despite the fallibility of the methods.

ii) But suppose, for argument's sake, that the Protestant canon might be mistaken in some particulars. If we're doing the best we can with the information God has put at our disposal, that's an innocent mistake. Unless God will punish us for error through no fault of our own, what's the big deal?

iii) That's only defective if Catholicism offers a superior alternative. But if the Catholic alternative is just a pipe dream, then that's not a real alternative.

iv) What kind of certainty does Brown have in mind? Cartesian certainty, viz. impossibility of error? The ability to disprove skeptical thought-experiments? If that's where Brown places the bar, then it's out of reach for Catholics as well as Protestants.

Maccabean martyrs

Heb 11:35 describes a group of people in the OT period who "were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they may rise again to a better life". The only record of this is found in 2 Mac 7, which describes brothers who accept torture at the hands of the Seleucides instead of eating pork and violating Jewish law. Since the context of Heb 11 includes "the men of old [who] received divine approval" (v2), it follows that the books describing the Maccabean martyrs were part of the OT that was used by the author of the letter to the Hebrews", T. Horn, The Case for Catholicism (Ignatius 2017), 66.

Several holes in Horn's argument:

- i)** The Maccabean revolt took place during intertestamental history rather than OT history.
- ii)** It's true, as commentators note, that 11:35 probably alludes to the type of situation described in 2 Mac 7.

However, commentators also draw attention to literary allusions to 4 Maccabees. But that's not part of the Catholic canon. So Horn's argument either proves too much or too little for his cause.

In addition, v38 apparently refers to Jewish legends about the martyrdom of Isaiah. But again, those sources aren't canonical by Catholic standards. So Horn's appeal is a double-edge sword.

iii) At the time Hebrews was written, the Maccabean revolt was recent history. It only happened about a century prior to Hebrews. Therefore, I think there's no presumption that the author of Hebrews was dependent on 2 Maccabees for his information. We'd expect lots of traditions about the Maccabean revolt to be in circulation a hundred years later. Many Jews had ancestors who participated in that revolt. There'd be family lore about it.

We need to distinguish between an event and a source. The fact that 2 Mac describes the Maccabean martyrs doesn't entail that that document is the only source of information regarding that event. Consider multiple source material for the American Civil War or WWII. The fact that 2 & 4 Maccabees may be the only extent record for modern readers hardly implies that the 1C Jewish author was limited to the same sources we are.

iv) The author is cataloguing inspirational Jewish heroes and heroines. He goes back to the earliest recorded history (Genesis), then moves forward. He goes beyond OT history to include intertestamental history because that evokes religious patriotism, which is germane to his theme. We'd expect him to include that illustration, since that would resonant with his Jewish readers. That no more implies the canonicity of 2 Maccabees than a church historian who

begins with NT history, but then proceeds to quote the church fathers.

The formation of the OT canon

A possible model for the formation of the Hebrew canon may be suggested here in broad outline. [Deut 31:26](#) records that the "book of the law" (presumably Deuteronomy or a text similar to it) was to be placed in the most holy place of the tabernacle. As the Word of God was being written, it continued to be collected and preserved in the Jerusalem temple, where it could be read and copied by others who were interested in its contents. By 586 BC copies would have been taken by the exiles out of the country, while other copies may have been hidden near Jerusalem. Even if copies were not already present at Jerusalem, Ezra returned with the books of the Law (the Pentateuch). He and others may have brought back various books of the Bible to Jerusalem. In any case, a collection in the temple allowed the priesthood to regulate what they considered as Scripture and what they did not. At some point prophecy was regarded as having ceased, and the final scrolls came into the collection [Thus [1 Macc 4:46](#), "Until a prophet should come," suggests the absence of prophecy]. After that, as far as the sources attest [1 & 2 Maccabees, as well as sources cited above that attest to major divisions and the number of books in the Hebrew Scriptures], no further scrolls were added to the Hebrew Bible as preserved in the Jerusalem temple. As noted above, these were the thirty-nine books that came to be known as the Old Testament. The rabbis recognized the authority of these texts after the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

R. HESS, THE OLD TESTAMENT: A HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL, AND CRITICAL INTRODUCTION (BAKER 2016), 8-9.

The Catholic canon

Catholic apologists regard the Protestant canon as an Achilles heel of Protestant theology. While the canon is a legitimate issue, that's a two-sided issue. What about the Catholic canon?

What's the basis of the Tridentine canon? Is it evidence? Was the evidence sufficient to favor the Tridentine canon?

But Catholics and Protestants have access to the same evidence. It's not like the Tridentine Fathers had an extra cache of evidence from the secret Vatican archives that tilted the scales in favor of the Tridentine canon. Protestants are looking at the same evidence as Catholics.

Or is the contention that the evidence is inconclusive, so that must be supplemented by the authority of Rome. The Tridentine canon enjoys a level of certainty that goes beyond the evidence, due to ecclesiastical authority. According to that paradigm, raw ecclesiastical authority is the makeweight which closes the gap between the evidence and certainty.

But in that case, certainty is detached from evidence. In principle, there could be direct certainty with no evidence whatsoever. Certainty by sheer ecclesiastical fiat. Yet Catholic apologists typically argue for the Tridentine canon based on the evidence, as they see it.

If, on the one hand, evidence is sufficient to settle the canon, then the magisterium is superfluous. If, on the other hand, evidence is insufficient to settle the canon, ecclesiastical authority conjures certainty out of thin air,

with nothing corresponding to back it up. That's the dilemma.

Canon revisited

In this post I'll discuss some aspects of the Catholic/Protestant debate over the canon.

1. What, exactly, is the nature of the Catholic claim? Is it an ontological claim regarding the nature of Scripture? Is the claim that there's no intrinsic difference between what counts as Scripture and what doesn't? Is it that an ecumenical council could just as well vote the Gospel of John out of the canon and vote the Gospel of Thomas into the canon? Does it come down to raw, arbitrary ecclesiastical authority?

2. Is it an epistemological argument regarding the certainty or uncertainty of the canon? Catholic apologists appeal to the "infallible church" as a shortcut. But does that work, or does that just push the same questions back a step? Consider Karl Keating's spiral argument:

On the first level we argue to the reliability of the Bible insofar as it is history. From that we conclude that an infallible Church was founded. And then we take the word of that infallible Church that the Bible is inspired. This is not a circular argument because the final conclusion (the Bible is inspired) is not simply a restatement of its initial finding (the Bible is historically reliable), and its

initial finding (the Bible is historically reliable) is in no way based on the final conclusion (the Bible is inspired). What we have demonstrated is that without the existence of the Church, we could never know whether the Bible is inspired.

This seems to be a Catholic version of an argument by John Warwick Montgomery. There are some basic problems with Keating's argument:

i) It takes the canon for granted as a starting-point rather than end-point. You can only argue for and from the reliability of Scripture if you know where to find Scripture.

ii) Even if his argument was successful, it yields probability rather than certainty because the conclusion can't be more certain than what's feeding into the conclusion. Even if the Bible bears witness to an infallible church, the Bible that does that, in Keating's argument, is a fallible Bible. At best, that's a fallible testimony to an infallible church.

iii) Protestants find Catholic prooftexts for the infallible church of Rome specious.

But in that event, the Catholic church doesn't offer certainty on the canon. It doesn't solve the problem it poses for itself. It doesn't provide a superior alternative to the epistemic situation of Protestants.

3. The OT Apocrypha is an arbitrarily selective corpus. There's no essential difference between the OT Apocrypha

and the OT pseudepigrapha. It's the same kind of intertestamental literature. It's just the inertia of unreflective tradition that differentiates the OT Apocrypha from the OT pseudepigrapha. What makes Tobit or Bel and the Dragon more fitting candidates for canonicity than 1 Enoch, the Assumption/Testament of Moses, or the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs? It's just a historical accident that Trent canonized some intertestamental books rather than others.

If the Vatican was starting from scratch, based on the assumptions of the historical-critical method, which is mainstream in contemporary Catholic scholarship, are we to believe they'd come up with the same list? Books were canonized based on traditional authorship, which is routinely rejected by mainstream Catholic scholarship. By contemporary Catholic standards, they were canonized under false pretenses.

4. Of course, critical scholars regard Daniel as a pseudepigraphal work from the intertestamental period. However, the status of Daniel is inseparable from the NT. From a NT perspective, the inspiration of Daniel is nonnegotiable, given how the prophecies of Daniel figure in NT eschatology.

5. Debates over the canon are often artificial because it depends on the availability of viable alternative candidates. But there's little else to choose from. Ironically, both OT and NT pseudepigrapha bear witness to the termination of the OT and NT canon. The use of pseudonymity is a wedge tactic to reopen the canon by backdating newer compositions to OT and NT times.

6. Consider the "apostolic fathers", viz. Papias, 1 Clement, The Didache, The Epistle of Barnabas, The Epistle of

Polycarp, The Shepherd of Hermas, the letters of Ignatius. Are they candidates for canonicity? Unless continuous public revelation is the norm, resulting in an open-ended canon, there may well be some writings after the termination of the canon by contemporaries of the waning apostolic age.

From a Jewish perspective, the intertestamental period is a misnomer. Public revelation and canonical inspiration simply ended with some postexilic books. There's nothing else on the horizon. And that's analogous to the interadventual age.

7. Catholic apologists appeal to the (allegedly) larger canon of the LXX. But was there ever a monolithic LXX? As Peter Williams, Warden of Tyndale House, has noted:

I'm not against the idea of a unity of a corpus of pre-Christian Greek translations. My point is that this needs to be demonstrated rather than assumed. I currently have not seen any compelling reason to suppose that a first century Christian (for instance) would have certainly thought that the Greek version of Isaiah used in his or her synagogue was part of a unified translation corpus with the Pentateuch.

<http://evangelicaltextualcriticism.blogspot.com/2015/05/why-pete-williams-does-not-believe-in.html?showComment=1479127123327#c7731979635102780395>

8. Suppose for argument's sake that the Protestant canon might mistakenly include a book that ought to be excluded or exclude a book that ought to be included. Suppose it isn't possible to be certain. But if we're mistaken through no fault of our own, because the evidence is inconclusive, is that something we should fret over? Unless God is going to punish Christians for unavoidable mistakes, how is that our responsibility?

The NT has a very large core canon. Hardly any NT books are open to serious dispute. Likewise, the OT has a very large core canon.

9. Because the Jews were the original recipients of Yahweh's revelation, that made them informal custodians of the OT. Those are the books they copied. Those are the books they stored in the tabernacle, temple, synagogues. They'd also know which books originate during the intertestamental period.

Appealing to Jewish testimony isn't an argument from authority. The appeal is *de facto* rather than *de jure*.

To take a comparison, consider family correspondence. Grown children may save letters that relatives wrote to them. To that extent they become custodians of family correspondence. When they die, their children may inherit that correspondence. So there was an informal chain of custody, where this material was passed down through family members. Where relatives become *de facto* custodians of family correspondence, simply by saving

letters as well as inheriting their personal effects. That's ordinary providence at work.

We can think of the Jewish witness to the OT along similar lines. As the original recipients, they were in possession of the books. They became the de facto custodians. It was copied from one generation to the next. All they have to do is to hang onto the documents. Transmit the documents to the next generation, through transcription and catechesis. And, of course, we'd expect special providence to be in play regarding the OT scriptures.

10. It's evangelical scholars rather than Catholic scholars who move the heavy mental lumber in defending the historicity and authenticity of the Bible. To take some fairly recent examples:

STEPHEN DEMPSTER, "THE OLD TESTAMENT CANON, JOSEPHUS AND COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENT," IN THE ENDURING AUTHORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES, ED. D. A. CARSON, (ZONDERVAN, 2016), 321-361.

SIMON GATHERCOLE, "THE TITLES OF THE GOSPELS IN THE EARLIEST NEW TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS", ZNW 104.1 (2013), PP. 33-76.

C. E. HILL, WHO CHOSE THE GOSPELS? (OXFORD 2012).

TIMOTHY J. STONE, THE COMPILATIONAL HISTORY OF THE MEGILLOTH: CANON, CONTOURED INTERTEXTUALITY AND

**MEANING IN THE WRITINGS (TÜBINGEN: MOHR SIEBECK,
2013).**

Is the canon a fallible list of infallible books?

To put it briefly, Rome believes that the New Testament is an infallible collection of infallible books...The historic Protestant position shared by Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and so on, has been that the canon of Scripture is a fallible collection of infallible books...Also there was the issue of authority, and the principle that emerged among Protestants was that of sola scriptura, which means that Scripture alone has the authority to bind our conscience. Scripture alone is infallible because God is infallible. The church receives the Scripture as God's Word, and the church is not infallible. That is the view of all Protestant churches.

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/we-talk-bible-being-inspired-word-god-would-men-wh/>

i) I believe this distinction originated with Sproul's mentor, John Gerstner, which Sproul popularized. But it's unclear what that distinction really means. If each and every book in the collection is infallible, then in what sense is the collection still fallible? Presumably, Gerstner/Sproul don't think the canon is actually in error, for if it mistakenly included one or more fallible books, then it wouldn't be a collection of infallible books.

ii) Someone might object that I've committed the composition fallacy. But that depends. It's invalid to infer that if every engine part weighs less than 50 lbs, then the entire engine weighs less than 50 lbs, but it's valid to infer that if every engine part is metal, then the entire engine is metal.

iii) In theory, a fallible canon might mistakenly omit one or more infallible books. Every canonical book would be infallible, but not every infallible book would be canonical. Yet that doesn't seem to be what Gerstner/Sproul have in mind.

iv) Rather, they seem to mean it's possible that the canon is in error. But in that event, it's possible that the canon contains one or more fallible books.

v) I think what they're trying to say that while the canon might be mistaken, there's a high probability that the canon is correct. The canon is possibly in error, but not actually in error. And there's sufficient evidence to be confident about the canon.

vi) It's not uncommon for Protestants to believe that God providentially guided Christians to canonize the right books. But if that's the case, then is the canon still a fallible collection of books?

vii) In addition, the locus of alleged fallibility is ambiguous. Is the canon said to be fallible because the evidence for the canon, while adequate, is less than conclusive or rationally compelling? Or is the canon said to be fallible because any uninspired human judgment is fallible no matter how conclusive the evidence?

viii) Furthermore, does the fallibility of the canon have reference to internal or external attestation? If a canonical book is inspired, and if it contains internal evidence regarding its own inspiration, or if an inspired book cross-attests the inspiration of another book, then is the canonicity of that book merely fallible?

I think the Gerstner/Sproul formulation is too equivocal to be useful.

Suppose the church gave us the Bible?

A common Catholic objection against evangelicalism goes like this: Why do you trust the Church to give you the Bible when you don't trust the Church to interpret the Bible?

Of course, that's a loaded question:

i) The church didn't give us the OT—Jews gave us the OT.

ii) We don't accept the Tridentine canon of the OT.

iii) The ancient church disagreed on the scope of the OT canon.

iv) *Which* church gave us the Bible? The Catholic church? The Orthodox church? These can't both be the One True Church®

v) It would be more accurate to say Jewish and Christian scribes gave us the Bible.

That said, I'd like to consider the claim for the sake of argument. Suppose "the Church" *did* give us the Bible. Would it be arbitrary for evangelicals to trust "the Church" in that regard but not in regard to the interpretation of Scripture? Put another way, assuming (ex hypothesi) that God infallibly guided the ancient church to canonize the right books, is it arbitrary to deny that God infallibly guides the church in other respects?

It's customary to distinguish between miracle and providence. The fact that God performs miracles is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It's not a binary choice between

believing that God always performs miracles or never performs miracles. In general, God performs miracles less often than not. Events typically occur according to ordinary providence rather than miraculously.

So even assuming, for discussion purposes, that God supernaturally guided the ancient church to give Christians the right Bible, this carries no presumption that God supernaturally guides the church in other respects, or that God continuously guides the church. In principle, it wouldn't be arbitrary for evangelicals to grant that God supernaturally guided the ancient church to give us the Bible, but doesn't supernaturally guide the church in general. For we routinely distinguish between miracle and providence. The fact that God sometimes performs miracles carries no presumption that God constantly performs miracles. The fact that God inspires some writers and speakers doesn't presume or imply that he inspires every writer and speaker. Most folks are uninspired.

Suppose for the sake of argument that it was necessary for God to supernaturally guide the ancient church concerning the canon. That doesn't entail that it's necessary for God to supernaturally guide the church in other respects, or to supernaturally guide the church on a regular basis. The ordinary course of nature is the default *modus operandi*. Miracles are rather exceptional.

Even on its own terms, Catholic theology is very selective about when the church speaks infallibly. It doesn't treat inspiration as an all-or-nothing proposition. It allows popes, bishops, and priests to be in error in much of what they say.

The gates of hell shall not prevail

I will comment on the Peter Williams webinar:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p7ACbpMfv3o&feature=youtu.be>

1. One issue is whether his exposition is representative of contemporary Catholic theology. Like so many Catholic apologists, Williams is a layman. Not a Catholic theologian like Karl Rahner or Gerhard Ludwig Müller. Not a graduate of a Catholic seminary.

What we're getting from him is the usual version of Catholicism presented by lay Catholic apologists. An idealized, retro version of Catholicism. A version of Catholicism that's well to the right of mainstream Catholic scholarship (e.g. Bible scholars, church historians). Well to the right of the contemporary hierarchy.

2. He's concerned with definitions, such as defining the sufficiency of Scripture. Up to a point, there's value in that. But should that be the starting-point?

To begin with, you can defend the content of Protestant theology without having to defend all the classic formulations. Suppose "sufficiency" isn't the best word to capture the principle. So what? It's unlikely that a single word will be adequate to represent a complex concept. Moreover, it should be possible to express an idea using more than one particular word. Just because the issue is traditionally framed in terms of "sufficiency" doesn't mean

we have to use that particular word to expound and defend sola Scriptura.

3. Apropos (2), when Protestants speak of sola Scriptura and the sufficiency of Scripture, what does Scripture represent? From a Protestant perspective, "Scripture" (or the Bible) is the inspired record of God's public, propositional revelation. By "public", I mean a revelation that's normative at every time and place—unlike a topical private revelation to provide guidance to a particular individual in a particular situation. This is a somewhat roughhewn definition. It could be further refined, but I think it's adequate for immediate purposes.

4. This, in turn, goes to the burden of proof. Is the onus on Protestants to directly prove the sufficiency of Scripture? Likewise, must Protestants begin with a precise definition of Scriptural "sufficiency"?

Not necessarily. If there is no viable or comparable alternative to Scripture (as defined), then by process of elimination, sola Scriptura is the only remaining option. In that respect, the sufficiency of Scripture is defined by contrast to the alternatives. They are insufficient. Indeed, they are false alternatives. You don't have to prove sola Scriptura or the sufficiency of Scripture directly; rather, you only have to disprove rival paradigms.

If Scripture is the only source of God's public, propositional revelation, then it naturally enjoys a certain primacy in relation to other sources of information or belief. Divine revelation is normative in a way that nonrevelatory sources or putative candidates are not.

That doesn't mean Protestants have no burden of proof, but I'm just framing the issue. Where to locate the burden of

proof. And, of course, Catholics have their own burden of proof.

5. Williams says Scripture cannot be sufficient because we can't establish the canon from Scripture alone. We can't answer the canonicity of Hebrews by looking to the scriptures. We can't prove from Scripture that Jude is inspired. Scripture has no inspired table of contents or index. The canon is not implicitly materially within Scripture.

There are, however, some basic problems with his objection. To say Scripture is insufficient because Scripture is insufficient to give us the canon of Scripture is an eccentric definition. That's not what Protestants mean by Scriptural sufficiency.

In fairness, Williams may say the Protestant definition is arbitrarily restrictive.

However, the sufficiency of Scripture doesn't rule out the necessity of extrabiblical evidence to identify Scripture and interpret Scripture. For the point of contrast involves the distinction between what is revelation and what is not revelation. The fact that we need some knowledge of history, some knowledge of the world, to identify revelation and interpret revelation doesn't nullify the unique authority of revelation to determine our duties to God and man. If the Lord has verbally expressed his will regarding our duties to God and man, how could any nonrevelatory source of information function as an equally authoritative source and standard of guidance?

In fact, Catholic apologists concede this principle by appealing to ongoing revelation when they claim the Holy Spirit guides the Roman Catholic church into all truth. They

themselves regard revelation, or the functional equivalent (the extraordinary magisterium) as a higher source and standard of guidance than nonrevelatory sources of information. So where the dispute comes to a head is (i) if there is ongoing public revelation, and (ii) the church of Rome is the organ of that revelation.

6. Another distinction. The sufficiency of Scripture stands in contrast, not to extrabiblical sources of evidence, but to an illicit argument from authority. Appeal to reason and evidence is very different from appeal to the Roman Magisterium or a Roman Catholic census fidelium. It's equivocal to say that when Protestants rely on extrabiblical evidence, that's a concession to, or equivalent to, "tradition" in the technical Roman Catholic sense of the word. Appeal to extrabiblical evidence is not an argument from ecclesiastical authority.

This is a problem with Williams contention that we need to go by "tradition" to establish the canon. But that's a loaded word. In Catholicism, "sacred tradition" or "living tradition" is hardly synonymous with evidence. Rather, it's a very selective view of what constitutes the relevant evidence.

7. Williams talks about "the Church hearing the Holy Spirit's voice", but in ancient debates over the canonicity of certain books, the appeal wasn't to detecting the Holy Spirit speaking to the church, but questions of authorship and evidence for authorship.

8. Williams neglects or underestimates the internal evidence for the canon. Underestimates internal evidence for the authorship of many biblical books. Overlooks the cross-attestation between many biblical books. Many biblical books naturally group together. You don't need separate attestation for the five books of the Pentateuch. They form

a literary unit. You don't need separate attestation for Luke-Acts.

The historical books for a continuous history. Each succeeding book takes up where the preceding book left off. There's overlap between the historical books and the prophets. There's overlap between Acts and the NT epistles.

Books sharing common authorship go together. The Synoptic Gospels are interconnected. Later books frequently refer back to incidents recorded in earlier books. The phenomenon of "undesigned coincidences" is another example.

The fact that the case for the canon may need to be supplemented by external evidence doesn't reduce the canon to a random anthology of writings, as if we could just as well produce a different collection.

9. In prooftexting the Roman Magisterium from Mt 16, Williams makes the standard move of assuming that v19 is an allusion to Isa 22:22, then imports the entire Isaian context into v19. However, the related metaphors of keys, gates, and doors are stock imagery (e.g. Mt 23:13; 25:10; Lk 11:52; Jn 10:9; Acts 14:27; 1 Cor 16:9; Col 4:3; Rev 1:18; 3:7-8,20; 9:1; 20:1), so it doesn't require any special explanation, in terms of literary dependence, to account for the imagery. And even if it was an allusion to Isa 22:22, it doesn't follow that Jesus is reproducing the entire context of Isa 22, rather than mining the passage for picturesque metaphors or theological motifs.

10. To ascribe certain prerogatives to Peter does not imply that he alone has these prerogatives. Mt 16 doesn't contrast Peter with what is said about the other disciples in the Gospel. It doesn't say Peter had these prerogatives to the exclusion of the other disciples. It's illogical to infer that what is said about one person can't therefore be said about someone else.

11. Williams confidently says binding and loosing is a rabbinical concept. Well, that's one possible meaning. But the binding/loosing metaphor needs to be related to the keys metaphor. And is it coincidental that we have a back-to-back comparison between the "gates of hell" (v18) and the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" (v19)? Isn't that a clue?

12. When Catholic apologists like Williams quote statements about "the church" in Matthew and elsewhere, there's the danger of committing the illegitimate totality transfer fallacy, where they read a theological construct, based on all the varied occurrences of "the church" in NT usage, back into any particular occurrence. We need to avoid making "church" a loaded word wherever it occurs in the NT.

13. Williams initially says Jn 16:13 is a promise to the apostles, but later he reverts to the standard Catholic substitution when he says the Holy Spirit guides "the church" into all truth. But that's not what the text says. At best, that's reading apostolic succession back into Jn 16:13.

And even if, for the sake of argument, we suppose Jn 16:13 is a promise to "the church", there's nothing in the

text or context or entire Gospel to index that to the Roman Catholic church.

14. He says Trent simply formalized the *sensus fidelium* regarding the scope of the canon, yet there was no consensus when the Tridentine Fathers met. Rather, two opposing camps were represented: the Jewish canon championed by Jerome and the wider canon championed by Augustine. Moreover, the final vote wasn't unanimous, or even a majority, but merely a plurality: "by a vote of 24-15, with 16 abstentions, the Council issued a decree (*De Canonicis Scripturis*)" B. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford, 1987), 246.

15. Williams emphasized the infallibility of the ordinary magisterium, represented by the *sensus fidelium*. In my extensive experience, Catholic apologists routinely attack *sola Scriptura* and "private interpretation" on the grounds that you can't interpret the Bible on your own.

16. There's abundant evidence that the Roman Magisterium is not what it aspires to be. Abundant evidence that the church of Rome performs just like you'd expect from an all-too-human organization that lacks foresight, that's improvising on the fly, that can't anticipate future developments, and must therefore reinvent itself periodically. Like other Catholic apologists, Williams is offering us a winsome paper theory that bursts into flame when put in contact with the realities of church history.

What to do with Jude

9 But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you" (Jude 9).

14 It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, 15 to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him" (Jude 14-15).

Over the years I've discussed Jude's use of apocryphal sources. I find both conventionally conservative and liberal explanations implausible. I'll take another stab at the issue. Before offering my proposal, I'll put the issue in a larger context.

1. The prima facie problem is that, on the one hand, it's unquestionable that Jude thought Adam, Enoch, Moses, the Devil, and the Archangel Michael were real people. On the other hand, his sources are apocryphal, in both the technical and informal sense of the word. To our knowledge, they were never part of the Jewish canon. And they are

pious fiction. Seems like special pleading to suggest these two excerpts just happen to be historical, while everything else is fictional.

2. One explanation was the Jude was gullible in his use of source material. If so, that would have far-reaching theological ramifications. It would mean God didn't protect Bible writers from error. If he didn't protect Jude from error, there's no presumption that he protected other Bible writers from error. Where does that leave, let us say, the historicity of the Gospels?

3. Another related explanation is that it was a mistake to canonize Jude. If so, that, too, would have far-reaching theological ramifications. If that was a mistake, it's not confined to just one denomination or theological tradition. All the major theological traditions (e.g. Protestant, Anglican, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox) include Jude in the canon. That leaves no one off the hook. That means God allowed Christians en masse to be in error on this issue. And if Jude's canonical status is spurious, what about other canonical books? (In fairness, some books of the Bible have more corroborative evidence than others.)

4. Let's consider some genres. Take the historical genre. What makes an account historical?

i) Based on real events

ii) Faithful representation of real events

In a sense, any account of the past will deviate from the past because an account of the past is not the event in itself, but a representation of the event. In that respect, no historical account exactly corresponds to what happened. Rather, it approximates what happened.

Take a documentary with dramatic recreations. The actors aren't the original agents. They may not even look or sound like the original agents, even if they are quoting them verbatim. We allow a director to take a degree of artistic license.

Or consider a movie adaptation of the Exodus or the life of Christ. Suppose the director uses CGI to show the miracles. Obviously, the original event didn't happen just like the director visualizes the original event, since he wasn't there. But it's historical in the sense that he's attempting to be faithful to that kind of event.

5. Some novels, short stories, movies, dramas, and characters attain culturally iconic status. They may become part of the national or cultural mythos. People quote them or refer to them and the audience is expected to recognize the allusion—even if they haven't seen it or read it. Depending on the culture and the social class, examples include Star Wars, Star Trek, Moby-Dick, Dracula, The Matrix, The Terminator, The Wizard of Oz, Carrie, Casablanca, Sophie's Choice, Night of the Living Dead, Superman, the Arthurian legend, Brave New World, Alice in Wonderland, and the plays of Shakespeare.

6. Between history and fiction is the intermediate category of historical fiction. These are based on a true story, but they include imaginary elements. Examples are legion. Consider movies like Tombstone, Patton, Beckett, Miracle, Dunkirk, Hacksaw Ridge, Ike: Countdown to D-Day, The Scarlet and the Black, A Man for All Seasons, or plays like Richard III, Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra.

A variation on this is **John le Carré's** spy novel, *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. That's a political allegory of the Cambridge spy ring.

In historical fiction, it's necessary to distinguish between the historical Doc Holliday, Patton, Herb Brooks, Julius Caesar et al. and the literary or cinematic Doc Holliday, Patton, Herb Brooks, Julius Caesar. Although these refer to historical figures, the literary or cinematic adaptation may take considerable artistic liberties. Write lines for a character which he never spoke in real life. Put him in imaginary situations.

It's possible as well as commonplace to refer to actual figures through a fictional medium. And there are situations where the target audience is expected to know the difference. At least the audience is supposed to know the difference. Perhaps that's what's going on in the case of *Jude 9, 14-15*.

The historical Enoch

Because Jude quotes from 1 Enoch (Jude 14-15), this raises the question of whether the church either made a mistake by canonizing Jude or by not canonizing 1 Enoch. I've discussed 1 Enoch in various occasions, but I'd like to make some additional points:

i) Because Jude is such a short document, there's no context to judge how he personally views 1 Enoch. To take a comparison, Christian missionaries and apologists sometimes quote from the Koran, the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, &c. That's not because they believe in the Muslim or Mormon scriptures. They might use the Koran as a bridge. Or they might use the Koran or the Mormon scriptures as a wedge tactic. Using their own sacred literature against them.

So the mere fact that Jude quotes 1 Enoch doesn't indicate endorsement. It might be a tu quoque maneuver.

ii) There was no document called 1 Enoch in Jude's time. That's a later editorial title. Our copies of 1 Enoch overlap with whatever document Jude was quoting from, but we have no idea what the boundaries of whatever edition he was quoting were.

iii) The historical Enoch was an antediluvian. Even assuming he was a seer, what are the odds that his oracles suddenly surfaced in the 2C BC? No one ever heard of it before. No chain of custody.

Did Noah bring a copy onto the ark? Was it passed down in secret, like an esoteric *Disciplina Arcani*? Was it a lost book

that some rediscovered in the 2C BC? Where was it hidden? Seems an awful lot like Joseph Smith and the golden tablets.

How likely is it that authentic oracles of a antediluvian appeared out of thin air in the 2C BC? Is it not far more plausible than some Jews during the intertestamental period composed pious fiction which they put on the lips of this enigmatic antediluvian, rather than believing that this appeared out of the blue in the 2C BC, without a trace of their prior existence in Jewish lore?

iv) For that matter, even if the historical Enoch was a seer, he certainly didn't speak in the late Biblical Hebrew of the Persian period. Who knows what his original language was. It might not even be cognate with Hebrew. Might be a non-Semitic language. So this would be, at best, a translation of what he originally said.

The formation of the Jewish canon

Here's an important review of a fairly recent book on the OT canon:

http://www.jhsonline.org/reviews/reviews_new/review755.htm

By the end of the first century, he [Lim] concludes, there is a rabbinical canon of the Pharisees, which is not closed until sometime between 150–250 c.e..

Building on a theory first proposed by John Collins about two decades ago, Lim argues that the canon represents a political triumph of the main sect within Judaism that survived the tumultuous post-70 c.e. years within Palestine. The Pharisaic party represented the majority of Jewish survivors from the Roman holocaust and as a result their collection of authoritative texts became the canon. Other collections of authoritative literature simply perished since the sects or groups associated with them did not survive. The resulting canon was that of the victors.

This raises several issues:

i) We need to distinguish between the date at which that collection became the standard canon for the Pharisees, and the date at which that collection became the standard canon for Jews in general. Even if we grant that the Pharisaic canon only became the official canon of rabbinical Judaism in the 2-3C AD, that canon antedates 70 AD. The Pharisaic canon preexists its dominance. Its origins go back to an earlier time. So the date of the Pharisaic canon is much older than the date at which it became dominant—even on Lim's construction.

ii) According to Lim, the Pharisaic canon became the official canon by default. It was the last man standing after the dust settled (as it were). The rival canons of rival Jewish sects perished when the sects that sponsored them perished.

Whether you think that's a problem depends, in part, on whether you think the canon is just a sociological phenomenon or historical accident. In other words, if methodological atheism is your frame of reference, then which canon won or lost is the luck of the draw. The victorious canon has no intrinsic authority in contrast to rival collections. It isn't special, isn't more deserving, than rival canons that perished.

If, on the other hand, you believe in divine providence, then might be God was using the historical process to winnow the wheat from the chaff.

iii) There's some ambiguity in referring to other collections that perished. If they weren't preserved, then how do we know that they differed from the Pharisaic canon? How do you determine the content of a collection that didn't survive?

iv) There's nothing necessarily suspect or unsettling about the existence of rival canons. For instance, in church history you have heretical groups that produce their own canon (e.g. Gnostics, Mormons, Swedenborgians, Christian Science). They may not reject the received canon outright. Rather, their sectarian literature supplies a filter that reinterprets the received canon.

That's no reason to doubt the legitimacy of the received canon, or the illegitimacy of competing canons. Rather, that's to be expected. There's a perennial tug of war between truth and error, orthodoxy and heresy.

Moreover, the only reason that this Pharisaic canon remains open is because there remained a question about the authority of certain books. But there have always remained questions about canonical books and this need not imply an open canon.

That point is often overlooked in discussions of canonicity. The fact that every book in the received canon aren't equally well attested doesn't mean the canon is open. The closure of the canon creates a boundary between books inside the canon and books outside the canon. But that doesn't mean all books inside the canon enjoy the same level of evidence or theological significance. The canon can have "border" states. Yet documents outside the canon may have even weaker claims than the weakest claimants inside the canon.

This evidence confirms the essential thesis, but it needs to be emphasized that from the various collections there was no unilinear progress from the many collections to the one canon. “Rather, there were the many collections and then there was the majority canon. Once sectarianism disappeared, so did the variety of collections” (p. 186).

In other words, you don't have a general evolution towards official collections. Rather, certain collections are already in place early on. It's just a question of which collection or whose collection. As OT books were being composed, you'd have a growing canon. Collections of collections, as a later collection incorporated the former collection, but updated that collection to include newer books. But once all the "OT" books were written, that process would naturally come to a halt.

The reviewer then makes a number of other worthwhile observations:

If Scripture itself is used to help determine the authority of biblical books, why not at least consider some other evidence within the text itself, e.g., that Chronicles begins with Adam, who

initiates Genesis, and ends with a quotation at the beginning of Nehemiah, thus comprehending the entire canon in summary form.[1] Moreover, many scholars now recognize the extent of canon-conscious editing of the biblical text, in which superscriptions have been added to books stressing divine authority,[2] and also editorial additions which organize collections of books.[3]

I am left with some other misgivings about the book. First, Lim claims that there is no evidence for a temple library or archive, which would have contained a collection of canonical books. But there is no question that sacred space in the Hebrew Bible itself was a location for sacred texts. Lim's description of the scroll during Josiah's time as a book of reform and not a canonical book is questionable (pp. 32–33). Would a book of reform cause the king to rip his clothes in grief? The fact that this book was used to institute widespread reform in Judah shows its authority. Moreover, the fact that “canonical books” were not popular or were abandoned or lost may say something more about the people at the time than the books. On the other hand, in times of spiritual renewal, I find

it difficult to accept that a religion which revered the holy words of God would not have had a special place for the creation, preservation, and transmission of divinely inspired documents in its holiest sanctuary. The books which later made up the Hebrew Bible itself cry out for such an explanation. Where else would there be the necessary infrastructure for their production and their preservation? In this regard, a recent important work by Tim Stone notes the coincidence of lists of canonical books after the destruction of the temple. There was no need for listing them before since enumeration and order were assumed. [5]

Second, what might be said about the evidence of biblical manuscripts from Qumran? The majority of them are proto-MT manuscripts. How does one explain this? Where does this tradition come from which reflects the text type of the majority canon—the canon of the winners? Emmanuel Tov has argued in the past that such a text type probably derives from scribal circles associated with the temple, and this of course implies canon. This makes a lot of sense. Lim questions why a rabbinic

tradition which mentions the authoritative function of standard Torah scrolls in the temple for establishing readings for the Torah might infer canonization. He concludes that “in establishing a standardized text, they were not fixing the extent of the scriptural collection” (p. 34). But this is to confuse the effect with the cause. Why would temple scribes be concerned with text-critical matters for these books? Probably because there already was a scriptural collection. Moreover, what about pre-first century c.e. Greek manuscripts which have been corrected to the MT? Does this not reflect the importance of a particular text type, which itself implies canon?

Finally, it is worth observing that in early Christian conflicts with Judaism there is never any debate about the extent and the content of the canon, only its meaning. In my judgment this is telling.

Feser fizzles

Ed Feser attempted a final refutation of Andrew Fulford's defense of sola scriptura. Feser's post is clogged by a repeated, lengthy comparison with empiricism. I'll try to cut the dead wood and address the key contentions:

<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.ca/2015/07/empiricism-and-sola-scriptura-redux.html>

First, why on earth should anyone take seriously the sola scriptura criterion in the first place? Why should we affirm “scripture alone” as opposed to “Paul’s epistles alone” or “John 3:16 alone” or “the Gospels alone” or “scripture plus the Church Fathers alone” or “scripture plus the first seven ecumenical councils alone” or “scripture plus the councils plus the teachings of the first ten popes alone” or “scripture plus the letters of Ignatius alone” -- or any of a number of other possible ways of gerrymandering the various sources of authority that the Church had traditionally recognized prior to Luther? And even if we did affirm “scripture alone,” why confine ourselves

to the list of scriptural texts as Protestants would draw it up, rather than the canonical list as Catholics would draw it up? Just as Humean empiricists have no non-question-begging way of explaining why we should confine ourselves to “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact,” sola scriptura advocates have no non-question begging way of explaining why we should confine ourselves to exactly the texts they say are “scriptural,” rather than to more texts or fewer texts or other texts entirely.

One obvious problem with this objection is that boomerangs on Feser. What's his noncircular defense of the Roman Magisterium? Why should we affirm the pope alone rather than the pope and laity? Or the laity alone?

Second, just as the Humean empiricist makes use of knowledge for which his principle cannot account (namely the truths of logic and metaphysics), so too does the sola scriptura advocate make use of knowledge for which his principle

cannot account. For example, scripture alone does not give you a list of exactly which books count as scripture.

This illustrates the motto that he who frames the debate wins the debate. Feser asserts that a Protestant must make use of knowledge which his principle (sola scriptura) cannot account for. And he cites the canon as an example.

But suppose, for the sake of argument, that a Protestant can't generate a (complete) list of canonical books using Scripture alone. How does that violate his principle? Feser doesn't bother to explain. He just takes that as self-evident. How does the principle of sola scripture imply that you can't use any extrabiblical evidence to attest which books count as scripture? From what I can tell, Feser's argument is purely semantic. It's based on a verbal slogan, a two-word phrase "scripture only" or "scripture alone." Therefore, if you can't generate that list from scripture alone, the principle is self-refuting.

i) If that's his unspoken argument, then it's fallacious, because you can't infer the principle from a label. "Sola scriptura" is simply a label to designate a position or principle. But you can't extract the conceptual content of the position from a two-word verbal label.

ii) Another one of his unspoken assumptions seems to be that you need revelation to identify revelation. There's the initial revelation itself. Then there's the additional revelation to identify or verify what counts as revelation. Say, there's a prophet who reveals the word of God. But over and above

the prophet it is necessary to have yet another revelation to identify the speaker as a prophet.

If that's what Feser has in the back of his mind, it generates an infinite regress. You need a second revelation to attest the first revelation, a third revelation to attest the second revelation, and so forth. You need a revelation to attest the revealer, going back ad infinitum.

But surely that principle wreaks havoc with Feser's alternative. You need a revelation to attest the pope. And another revelation to confirm the first revelation attesting the pope. And so on and so forth.

iii) Why assume it requires revelation to identify or verify revelation? Why assume it must be the same kind of thing in both cases? For one thing, doesn't that confuse the order of being (what revelation is) with the order of knowing (how we identify or verify revelation)? Why must those two activities be subsumed under the same principle?

iv) Let's consider some ways in which revelation might be attested:

a) A prophetic claimant performs a miracle. A miracle is a different category than a revelation.

b) A prophetic claimant exhibits verifiable supernatural knowledge. Suppose he tells you something that happened to you in private. Something which no one else would naturally be privy to. Although his supernatural knowledge is revelatory, it doesn't require revelation on your part to confirm what he said. Natural knowledge will suffice. Your memory of what happened to you.

c) Suppose a contemporary of the apostles testifies that John was a disciple of Jesus. That's testimonial evidence. Eyewitness testimony.

These are ways of attesting revelation that are not, themselves, revelatory. Do they violate sola scriptura? If so, how so?

(Occasionally there is a reference in some scriptural text to some other particular scriptural text, but that's not what I'm talking about. What we don't have is anything remotely close to: "Here is a list of all and only the texts that count as scriptural" -- and even if we did, we'd have to ask how we know that that text is itself really scriptural.)

True. But Catholic apologists typically ignore the internal evidence for the canon. It's important to draw attention to that line of evidence. Take intertextuality.

Then there all the various specific doctrinal matters which (a) advocates of sola scriptura typically regard as definitive of Christian orthodoxy even though (b) advocates of sola scriptura

have also taken radically different and opposed positions on. In my previous post, I gave as examples the centuries-old controversies concerning the Trinity, the Incarnation, justification, transubstantiation, contraception, divorce and remarriage, Sunday observance, infant baptism, slavery, pacifism, the consistency of scripture with scientific claims, and sola scriptura itself. If the sola scriptura advocate says (for example) “You must be a Trinitarian on pain of heresy” even though advocates of sola scriptura disagree about whether Trinitarianism is really scriptural, then he is in a position analogous to that of the Humean who makes use of mathematics, even though it is extremely dubious at best whether mathematics can be analyzed in terms of either “relations of ideas” or “matters of fact.”

i) Here he arbitrarily defines sola scripture to mean that if it were true, it would secure doctrinal agreement. But that's a

non sequitur.

The issue isn't, in the first instance, whether sola scriptura is sufficient to make everyone agree, but whether it's sufficient to ascertain where the truth lies. Those are hardly equivalent. There's an elementary distinction between having sufficient evidence for what is true, and whether one is receptive to the truth—or supporting evidence.

Presumably, Feser is not a 9/11 Truther. Does he think the fact that Americans don't agree on who was behind 9/11 mean the evidence is insufficient to rule out a massive conspiracy theory?

ii) Regarding his list, Scripture teaches the Trinity, incarnation, and sola fide. Scripture allows for contraception as well as divorce and remarriage in some cases.

Scripture rules out pacifism, transubstantiation, and Tridentine justification.

"Slavery" is ambiguous. Scripture condemns some forms of servitude, but allows for others.

Scripture allows for some "scientific claims," but disallows others.

iii) I think Scripture is somewhat vague on infant baptism and Sunday observance. As a Protestant, I'm not embarrassed by that ambiguity. That just means God was intentionally vague. That means it's okay for me to be noncommittal where Scripture is ambiguous.

iv) In addition, there's a distinction between what's obligatory and what's permissible or impermissible. Even if infant baptism or Sunday observance isn't obligatory, it can

still be permissible. Indeed, unless it's forbidden, why would it be impermissible?

v) Finally, people like Feser often have in mind philosophical or sectarian refinements like double procession. But the fact that Scripture may be silent on philosophical or sectarian refinements doesn't mean Scripture is silent on the truth of the Trinity, Incarnation, &c.

sola scriptura [is] self-refuting, since it is not itself found in scripture. It presupposes precisely the sort of extra-scriptural theological criterion it purports to rule out.

Based on what? Based on historic Protestant definitions? Or based on Ed's tendentious, stimulative definition?

Except that it too is in fact entirely arbitrary, dogmatic, and question-begging, and for reasons which exactly parallel the problems with the allegedly more modest empiricism. For again, we need to take a vantage point from outside of scripture even to judge that scripture really is itself reliable and to determine which texts count as scripture

-- just as the empiricist or naturalist has to take a point of view outside of either conceptual analysis or natural science in order to judge that they have a privileged status.

i) He's stuck in that rut. It seems to be a purely semantic argument, where he infers the principle from the words "sola scriptura," then contends that if "we need to take a vantage point from outside of scripture even to judge that scripture really is itself reliable and to determine which texts count as scripture," that contradicts the principle.

It's as if he thinks the way to determine what Einstein's theory amounts to is to look up the words "special," "general," and "relativity" in a dictionary.

ii) Let's take the argument from prophecy. A prophet verifies his divine commission by making one or more predictions which could only be foreseen if he's divinely inspired.

Now, to gauge fulfillment, you have to see if events turn out as predicted. That assumes a vantage point outside of prophecy. That's comparing the oracle to future events. But how is that incompatible with what is meant by sola scriptura? In the nature of the case, verifying a prophetic claim involves a combination of Scriptural and extrascriptural knowledge. The principle of sola scriptura was never intended to exclude that vantage-point.

So why exactly should we count scripture (and especially scripture as Protestants draw up the list) as the one infallible guide -- any more than we should regard conceptual analysis or natural science as somehow privileged? Why not instead count as the one infallible guide scripture as Catholics would draw up the list, or scripture-together-with-the-decrees-of-such-and-such-councils, or some part of scripture such as the Gospels, or any of an indefinite number of other possible lists of authoritative texts?

We should count the Protestant canon as Scripture because there's better evidence for the Protestant canon than the Catholic canon. Feser acts as if these are a priori questions to be answered a priori. And that unless they can be answered a priori, the answer is "arbitrary."

But we're dealing with contingent truths, not necessary truths. With divine freedom. What kind of world did God create?

And why take there to be only one infallible guide in the first place? Why not two or three or fourteen?

Because it's not an a priori question with an a priori answer. Rather, it's a question of what possibility God has actually decided upon. That is to be discovered, not intuited.

Nor does it for a moment help to appeal to theological modesty or the need to avoid the purported “errors” of pre-Reformation theology. For all of this begs the question no less than the naturalist’s appeal to the “success” criterion does.

Actually, there are contemporary Catholic commentators who often admit that traditional Catholic exegesis was wrong, and Protestants were right.

Naturally, the sola scriptura advocate will deny all this. But the problem is that even the purportedly more modest, non-simplistic version of sola scriptura has no non-question-begging reason for denying it. The position is entirely ad hoc, having no motivation at all other than as a way of trying to maintain rejection of the various Catholic doctrines the sola

scriptura advocate doesn't like, without falling into the self-refutation problem facing the more simplistic version of sola scriptura. It is nothing more than an expression of one's rejection of those Catholic doctrines, and in no way provides a rational justification for rejecting them (just as the empiricist or naturalist criteria are really just the expression of a rejection of traditional metaphysics disguised as a rational justification for rejecting it).

i) That's terribly ill-conceived. Sola scriptura doesn't target particular doctrines. Rather, it targets an illicit argument from authority. It targets an illicit authority source. It denies the infallibility of the church.

ii) This is why Feser's disproof of sola scripture is systematically mistaken. He acts as if the principle is meant to exclude extrabiblical sources of knowledge. He then cites counterexamples to show that it's self-refuting. But that's a straw man. Sola scriptura is not opposed to extrabiblical sources of knowledge. Rather, sola scriptura is opposed to an illicit appeal to an authority—illicit because the "authority" in question is illegitimate. The polluted headwaters, and not the mouth of the river, are the source of the problem. Rome is a bogus authority.

iii) There are plenty of non-question-begging reasons to deny that Rome is a source of divine guidance is matters of faith and morals. Exegetical and historical reasons.

Conversely, anyone who's studied the evolution of the papacy can see how ad hoc that is.

And so much extra-scriptural argumentation ends up having to do the key work -- the work of determining what counts as scripture...

That disregards the amount of internal evidence for the inspiration of Scripture and the canon of Scripture.

the work of drawing implications from scripture,

What in the world makes Feser imagine that drawing implications from Scripture is contrary to sola scriptura?

Now, Fulford's latest response inadvertently does nothing but confirm this harsh judgment. Recall point (c) of the Jesuit critique of sola scriptura cited by Feyerabend, according to which scripture alone cannot give us a

procedure for deriving consequences from scripture, applying it to new circumstances, etc.

So long as the "new circumstances" are comparable to the original circumstances, an argument from analogy will suffice.

For example, he will have to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is not infallible, since it depends in part on (what he regards as) non-infallible extra-scriptural philosophical premises. And if such doctrines are not infallible, then they cannot be regarded as binding matters of basic orthodoxy, any more than the specifically Catholic doctrines Fulford and other Protestants reject can be regarded by him as binding.

i) To begin with, the Catholic formulation of the Trinity isn't all that rigorous. Consider Karl Rahner's reformulations.

ii) Suppose, for the same of argument, that these doctrines are fallible. How does it follow that something is only "binding" if it's infallible?

Suppose I see a child sauntering down to a river frequented by crocodiles. I don't infallibly know that a crocodile lies in wait. Maybe on this particular occasion it's safe for the child to play by the water's edge. Does my uncertainty mean I have no obligation to keep the child away from the river?

Except that the problem with this, of course, is that it quite obviously and quite massively begs the question. For why should we suppose that those who think that scripture has “been corrupted in the transmission” are wrong?

Because textual critics furnish probative evidence to that effect.

Why should we prefer “grammatico-historical principles” over “allegorical” ones, or over some combination of the two approaches? How exactly are these views incompatible with sola scriptura? How can scripture alone tell us whether the text has been corrupted or whether grammatico-historical principles should be preferred over allegorical principles?

Because allegorical exegesis is contrary to how later Bible writers interpret earlier Bible writers.

Now, if revelation takes place fundamentally through persons themselves, then there is a potential problem. Persons die, or at least human persons do. A prophet might speak or write, but when he's gone, all we have left are his remembered or written words, and where those words are unclear, or incomplete, or indeterminate in their application to new circumstances, we cannot ask him for clarification.

That objection exposes a faulty doctrine of providence, as if the state in which matters were left at the time of death was happenstance. As if God didn't plan the life of a Bible writer so that he'd die after his mission was accomplished.

Similarly, the Church took over for itself and judged to be authoritative and infallible the scriptural texts of ancient Israel.

That wasn't "the Church." That was the example of Jesus and Christian leaders in NT times.

The OT is in a position to judge a claimant to be "the Church."

To those, it added the New Testament, which might be thought of as a written record of the teaching of certain members -- namely, the founding members -- of the moral person that is the Church. That moral person also ultimately decided which books had what level of authority -- that such-and-such books would count as having the highest level of authority (i.e. scriptural authority), that certain other books (the writings of the Church Fathers) would have some lesser but still very high level of authority, and so forth. In these various ways, what counts as scripture or as a document of some other kind of authority is the expression of the mind of the Church, of the decrees of a certain moral person.

i) How does Feser establish the authority of the church apart from the NT and the church fathers alike? What source of information does he have, independent of the NT as well as the church fathers, to determine that "the Church" has this authority in the first place? If "the Church" has a ranking system for the Bible and the church fathers, then "the Church" outranks both. How does Feser establish his standard of comparison? How does he get started?

ii) How does he isolate and identify "the mind of the Church"? Is that a cipher for the papacy? The Roman magisterium? If so, surely he doesn't invoke the papacy to prove the papacy, or invoke the magisterium to prove the magisterium, does he? He can't very well cite the authority of the papacy to authorize the papacy. How does he determine that the papacy is authoritative in the first place?

Use of a blanket term like "scripture" or "the Bible" can obscure the fact that it is really a large collection of books that we are talking about, not merely one book. And why is it made up of these exact books rather than some smaller collection, or larger one, or a collection with altogether different contents? Fulford and other critics of my posts on sola scriptura have avoided addressing this problem head on, preferring to discuss instead the issue of why we

might judge some particular scriptural book divinely inspired, which isn't really relevant. And that is not surprising, because there's no way they can address it.

That assumes there's a larger aggregate of comparable candidates, of documents with equal claims. But when you compare the date and/or authorship of canonical books to other books, it's hard to come up with anything comparable.

That is the position the sola scriptura advocate is in. He has abstracted the canon of scripture out of the context in which it arose and in which alone it makes sense -- namely, its status as the product of the moral person that is the Church.

The OT was assuredly not the product of "the Church." And it's highly equivocal to say the books of the NT were products of "the Church."

To paraphrase Feser, use of a blanket term like "the Church" can obscure the fact that he's saying the books of the OT were really the product of the Roman church. The books of

the NT were really the product of the Roman church. You only have to spell it out to see how unhistorical that is.

The claim is rather that the precise shape of the canon cannot be accounted for apart from the decrees of the institutional Church.

So before the Council of Trent issued its "infallible" decree on the canon, no Catholic theologian, bishop, or pope knew the precise shape of the canon? The papacy and the Roman episcopate were in the dark until the 16C?

Jude, 1 Enoch, and 2 Peter

i) Jude's use of apocryphal material in v9 & vv14-15 raises a familiar conundrum, which I've often discussed. I'll take a someone different tack in this post.

This post will be organized like those movies that begin with a cliff-hanger ending, then—through a series of flashbacks—show the audience how the action got to this point, before resolving it.

I'm going to work through a series of positions I reject. By process of elimination, I will arrive at my own position.

ii) A critic might contend that it's special pleading for Christians to canonize Jude, but refuse to canonize 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses. If Jude makes positive use of these sources, and we venerate Jude, then we ought to share his high view of these sources.

Conversely, if we think the sources are unreliable, then we should downgrade our view of Jude. If it was right to canonize Jude, then it would be right to canonize 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses. Conversely, if it would be wrong to canonize 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses, then it was wrong to canonize Jude.

iii) And the argument (such as it is) logically extends to 2 Peter. Inasmuch as Peter makes positive use of Jude, he is, for better or worse, implicated in the fortunes of Jude.

iv) Let's consider the first horn of the alleged dilemma. Even if (ex hypothesi) the church should have canonized Jude's sources, that's no longer a viable option at this late date.

a) There are no extant copies of the Assumption of Moses. And the Testament of Moses only exists in translation in one 6C Latin MS. Moreover, the relationship between the Assumption of Moses and the Testament of Moses is difficult to untangle, given the fragmentary state of the evidence.

b) We don't have 1 Enoch in the original. The full text of 1 Enoch exists in a Ethiopic translation of a Greek translation of an Aramaic original. There are some Greek fragments, as well as some Aramaic fragments.

How can the church trust the reliability of a translation of a translation? Moreover, the textual transmission of 1 Enoch is ferociously complex.

c) A related complication is how much of 1 Enoch we're supposed to canonize. 1 Enoch is a composite book. Even within that anthology, the Book of the Watchers is a composite work. 1 Enoch has a very complex editorial history.

Even if the church should have canonized 1 Enoch, that's a lost opportunity. It's too late to rectify that judgement call.

v) Let's consider the second horn of the alleged dilemma. Suppose the church was mistaken in canonizing Jude?

a) It won't do for Catholics to exclaim: "We told you so! This is why the Protestant canon is so unstable. That's what happens when you don't have a Magisterium."

But on the hypothetical I'm discussing (for the sake of argument), the church of Rome made the same mistake. So either Rome never had a divine teaching office or the man in charge was asleep at the switch.

b) In principle, Christianity could certainly survive the loss of Jude. In terms of historical theology, Jude is a marginal book. The same could be said for 2 Peter. Neither book supplies the backbone of historical Christian theology.

c) At the same time, that's too facile. The problem is not so much with the loss of Jude (or 2 Peter), but whether the entire canon would begin to unravel once we begin to tug at certain threads.

In principle, Christianity could still survive. It would have to contract into a core canon. The core canon would be defended on evidentialist grounds. The books which have the best claim to historicity. Testimonial evidence.

But if God allowed every Christian denomination to mistakenly canonize Jude, then that would introduce a serious degree of uncertainty into the Christian faith. It wouldn't be the end of the world, but it would be damaging.

Again, these are counterfactuals. I propose them to dispose of them.

vi) I think a key lies in the relationship between 2 Peter and Jude. Most scholars think Peter uses Jude. I won't rehearse the evidence.

Assuming that's correct, it's instructive to compare and contrast the parallel passages where Jude is clearly using apocryphal sources.

2 Pet 2:11 paraphrases Jude 9, but eliminates the identifiable references to the Testament/Assumption of Moses by recasting the statement in more generic terms.

2 Pet 2:18 repeats the boastful motif in Jude 16, but eliminates the quote from 1 Enoch (in vv14-15) which forms the lead-in to the boastful motif.

A number of scholars think Jude 6 alludes to 1 Enoch, and 2 Pet 2:4 parallels and paraphrases Jude 6. If, however, Jude is alluding to 1 Enoch, that's far more oblique than the sources in v9 & vv14-15. So Peter doesn't need to omit that or recast it in generic terms, since the underlying source is already pretty obscure.

Mind you, I agree with Daryl Charles that this is not an allusion to 1 Enoch.

vii) To judge by how Peter edits Jude, Peter suppresses the references to apocryphal literature—by paraphrase or outright omission. How are we to interpret his redactional practice?

a) One possibility is that he's correcting Jude. However, I think that's implausible. If he thought Jude was so lacking in critical discernment, why would he make such extensive and positive use of Jude in the first place?

b) Another possibility is that he thinks Jude's sourcing would be misleading for Peter's audience. Peter may have felt that if he simply quoted Jude, Peter's audience would draw a false inference regarding the authority of the apocryphal sources. So he protects his audience from treating 1 Enoch and the Assumption of Moses as inspired scripture.

Jude's letter may have been a very in-house affair. Jude may be manipulating this material for polemical purposes.

His audience understood that. But in shifting to a different audience, the ad hominem context might be lost sight of.

viii) Assuming this explanation is correct, then Peter validates Jude without validating his sources. Peter intentionally distinguishes Jude, which he reaffirms, from his apocryphal sources, from which he distances himself.

In that case, it is not inconsistent for Christians to grant the canonicity of Jude even though they disassociate themselves from Jude's sources—except in the polemical vein that Jude may have exploited them. 2 Peter set the precedent.

ix) If so, that's analogous to how Matthew and Luke sometimes edit Mark. Assuming that Matthew and Luke are literarily dependent on Mark for some of their material, they sometimes redact Mark. There are various reasons. To polish the language. To say the same thing in fewer words. To adapt the material to their own audience.

But in some instances, it seems to be a case where they thought Mark's way of putting things might be misleading. To forestall confusion, they reword it. That doesn't mean they were critiquing Mark. But in using and reusing a source, they enjoy the license to edit the source. Every historian does that.

Can we be sure?

Over at Beggars All I got into a lengthy exchange with a Catholic apologist ("Cletus Van Damme"). I'm posting my side of the exchange:

steve said...

Two quick points:

i) The canon is "ever-provisional" in the hypothetical or counterfactual sense that if God did not intend his people to have a stable position on the canon, then it's fluid.

But, of course, God doesn't promote instability for the sake of instability. If God intends his people to have the correct canon of Scripture, then it isn't "ever-provisional" in practice. It would only be revisable in practice if, say, there was some hidden counterevidence which God preserved for centuries before it was discovered. Say, finding a lost letter of Paul.

ii) Although extrascriptural criteria violate SS, extrascriptural evidence does not. And by "criteria," we mean superior criteria.

"A self-admitted opinion that never changes is still an opinion."

i) If you think all opinions are equal, then your own opinion is self-refuting. You evidently have a favorable "opinion" of the Roman church.

ii) If you're going to frame the issue in terms of opinion, don't you need to distinguish between true and false opinions? "That's just your opinion!" is the slogan of the alethic relativist.

iii) "Opinion" is your word, not mine. Why cast the issue in terms of "opinion" rather than "knowledge."

Is there a correct canon? If so, is that an object of knowledge?

iv) Assuming, for the sake of argument, that it's a matter of opinion, the question at issue is whether God intends his people to have a correct "opinion" on the canon. If their opinion is the result of divine intention, who cares if you call it an "opinion"?

"If the canon and its attendant doctrines are (irreformable) articles of faith and not just opinion, I fail to see how Protestantism can offer it as such without violating its own principles."

One of your problems is a failure to distinguish between ontology and epistemology. An irreformable belief corresponds to an irreformable fact. If there are only so many extant scriptures, then that's fixed—unless God intended continuous public revelation. And unless there's reason to believe that God intended continuous public revelation, then the canon is irreformable in that ontological sense. There's nothing more that could be canonized, and

nothing less that should be canonized. We hit bedrock with what there is.

"If God intended SS as the rule of faith, why was the recognition of the full canon amongst his people a centuries-long process (that many still ended up blowing with the OT canon)?"

I don't equate the Orthodox church or the church of Rome with "God's people"—if that's your tacit frame of reference.

There's also a distinction between custom and codification. God's people can have and use the full canon before it's formally recognized.

"Why does the canon now have asterisks on disputed passages? If Scripture is to function as the sole infallible authority, isn't it critical that the recognized extent and scope of it be and remain irreformable from the outset?"

SS doesn't preclude the need for textual criticism. You're talking like Bart Ehrman, as if the Christian faith hinges on constant miraculous intervention to rewind or reset the watch.

"Again, if semper reformanda and 'fallible collection' hold (consistent with Protestant principles), that the opinion never actually changes according to whatever Protestant body I ally myself with does not entail such does not remain ever-provisional opinion."

It would be irrational to change a settled "opinion" unless it was poorly reasoned in the first place or new evidence comes to light which challenges the status quo.

"So the canon is not irreformably closed. It is not an article of faith that it is closed, just an opinion consonant with what we have now."

I'm discussing hypothetical scenarios. "Closed" in relation to what? Closed in relation to what's actually available? Closed in relation to some hypothetical future rediscovery?

"Right, so the only criteria that can be used in establishing the canon consistent with SS principles is self-attestation and inner witness."

Once again, you're blasting past my stated distinction between criteria and evidence. We can include extrabiblical evidence in establishing the canon.

Scripture is not a self-referential fantasy novel. Scripture refers to God's providence in the world. It's hardly at odds with Protestant theology that God sometimes provides "outside" evidence to corroborate Scripture.

A few other points:

i) There's the implicit invidious contrast between "ever-provisional" Protestant theology and "irreformable" Catholic dogma. However, that's just a paper theory. It can't be seriously argued that Catholic dogma is irreformable. Yes, there are diehard Catholic apologists who devote much special pleading to that futile cause, but Rome has clearly reversed herself on several crucial issues.

ii) Moreover, there's no virtue in being irreformably wrong. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Catholic dogma is irreformable, then so much the worse for Catholic dogma.

iii) You can't just ask whether or not Protestant theology is "ever-provisional" in a vacuum. That's context dependent. For the answer depends on other questions.

When people ask whether the canon is really closed, that invites the hypothetical question of what we'd do if a lost letter of Paul were discovered. That hypothetical pops up in debates over the finality of the canon.

Now, I don't have the slightest reason to think that's a realistic scenario. But it does crop up in these debates.

Moreover, it's not just a hypothetical question for Protestants. If you can pose that hypothetical to Protestants, you can just as well pose the same hypothetical to Catholics. Is the Tridentine canon irreformable even if a lost letter of Paul was discovered?

iv) Suppose the Protestant canon is not closed given that scenario? How would it be a problem for Protestant theology to be "provisional" in that situation? A newly-discovered letter of Paul wouldn't contradict what he taught elsewhere. So we wouldn't have to recant traditional Protestant theology.

v) There are three possible answers to this conjecture:

a) God wouldn't permit a lost letter of Paul to resurface.

b) Even if that did happen, it would be too late to make the cut.

c) If that did happen, we should incorporate it into the canon.

It's a bit presumptuous to insist on (a). However, I don't think it's the least bit likely that God has a lost letter of Paul hidden away, to be found at some later date.

I think (b) is arbitrary. I think (c) is the preferable response. That, however, assumes it could be authenticated. Of course, one could built that into the hypothetical as well.

"Why does the canon now have asterisks on disputed passages?"

It isn't just Protestant commentaries and editions of Scripture that have that. Catholic Bible scholars and textual critics face the very same issue.

And you can't brush it off by saying the Roman church doesn't rely on SS. For Catholic theology is supposedly anchored in the once-for-all-time deposit of faith. Public revelation ended.

Hence, it's a problem for Catholic theology if the Johannine Comma, Long Ending of Mark, or Pericope Adulterae (to take three disputed passages) is spurious.

Let's back up. Notice how Catholic apologists frame the issue. Their modus operandi is to stipulate some artificial threshold of (alleged) religious certainty. They then try to put Protestants on the defensive. Unless we can cross their stimulative threshold of (alleged) religious certainty, sola scripture is a failure.

There are three fundamental problems with that framework:

i) Catholicism fails to offer religious certainty even on its own terms. Catholic apologists oscillate between two conflicting arguments. When attacking Protestantism or advertising Catholicism, they tout the superior religious certainty which Rome allegedly offers.

When, however, they are defending Catholicism against examples of theological error or reversal, they do an about-face and resort to various escape clauses and face-saving distinctions to savage the infallibility/indefectability of Rome from logical or historical disproof.

They end up with a position that's unfalsifiable at the cost of being unverifiable. When promoting Rome, they lead with (alleged) certainties. When defending Rome, they fade into vagueness.

ii) Another basic problem is a fatally flawed starting-point.

As a Protestant, I don't begin by setting the bar at some a priori height, then spend the rest of my time trying to get over the bar.

Rather, I begin with reality. I begin with the church God has actually given us. I begin with revelation. I accept revelation as it comes to us from God's hand. I start with how God has chosen to reveal himself. What he's chosen to reveal and what he's chosen to keep to himself.

It's not incumbent on me to decide ahead of time how God is supposed to reveal himself or govern the church. It's not incumbent on me to cast the issue in terms of artificial, postulated conditions which must be met to warrant the assent of faith. I don't begin with a category of "irreformability," then measure the success or failure of my faith in those terms.

That's an exercise in theological fiction. It begins, not with revelation, not with providence, but with a Catholic's preconceived notion of what faith should be like or the church should be like.

I reject your fictional framework. I reject your diktats.

Catholics invent problems, then invent solutions to their manufactured problems. I don't play the game by your rules. The whole exercise is a self-referential confabulation from start to finish.

iii) To the extent that Catholics offers religious certainty, these are ersatz certainties in nonentities and nonevents. Historical fantasies like Immaculate Conception, Assumption, and virginity in partu. That's certain in the same sense that Legolas is the son of the elf-king Thranduil of Mirkwood.

Catholic dogmas are true by definition, but that's the nice thing about fiction—including pious fiction. It's true that Legolas is an elf. True—but imaginary.

The whole Catholic set-up is an elaborate exercise in make-believe.

That doesn't mean I reject the possibility of religious certainty. But I don't define it on your terms.

Let's take some examples of Rome's reversals on major theological issues:

I) SALVATION OUTSIDE THE CHURCH

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2005/05/from-nulla-salus-to-tota-salus.html>

<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/02/001-who-can-be-saved-8>

II) THE DEATH PENALTY

<http://www.prisonerlife.com/articles/articleID=41.cfm>

<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2002/10/antonin-scalia-and-his-critics-the-church-the-courts-and-the-death-penalty>

III) THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

<http://vaticanfiles.org/2014/08/88-is-scripture-true-only-in->

a-limited-way-the-truth-of-the-bible-according-to-the-pontifical-biblical-commission/

Here's further evidence of Rome's doctrinal reversals. Just compare the positions of the Pontifical Biblical Commission under Leo XIII, long before Vatican II, with the positions of the PBC under recent popes, after Vatican II. There's been a tectonic shift away from traditional adherence to the plenary inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

IV) THE NATURE OF TRADITION

"In this connection I would like to relate a small episode that I think can cast much light on the situation. Before Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was defined, all theological faculties in the world were consulted for their opinion. Our teachers' answer was emphatically negative..." Tradition" was identified with what could be proved on the basis of texts. Altaner, the patrologist from Wurzburg...had proven in a scientifically persuasive manner that the doctrine of Mary's bodily Assumption into haven was unknown before the 5C; this doctrine, therefore, he argued, could not belong to the "apostolic tradition.

And this was his conclusion, which my teachers at Munich shared. This argument is compelling if you understand “tradition” strictly as the handing down of fixed formulas and texts...But if you conceive of “tradition” as the living process whereby the Holy Spirit introduces us to the fullness of truth and teaches us how to understand what previously we could still not grasp (cf. Jn 16:12-13), then subsequent “remembering” (cf. Jn 16:4, for instance) can come to recognize what it has not caught sight of previously and was already handed down in the original Word,” J. Ratzinger, Milestones (Ignatius, n.d.), 58-59.

Let's take another example of Rome reversing herself:

Any memory of old theories of verbal inspiration was to be omitted, and hence any form of an impersonal, mechanistic interpretation of the origin of Scripture... But this little word veritas that intruded here proved to be a living cell that

continued to grow. But what did it mean? Only, "religious" or even "secular" truth, to use the language of the 1962 schema? This was the real problem that now had to be taken up with full force both inside and outside the conciliar discussion. This did not happen, and new suggestions for the solution of the inerrancy question, as modern research posed it, could be made only hesitantly. Form F was worked out in the third session of the Council. The first change that strikes us is in the title of Article 11: "Statuitur factum inspirationis et veritatis S. Scripturae." Inerrantia is replaced by the positive term veritas, which is notably extended in the text. In the course of the discussion on the schema in the autumn of 1964, various fathers from the Eastern and the Western Churches made important speeches on the necessity of an interpretation of the inerrancy of Scripture that would be in harmony with the latest findings of exegesis. It was variously pointed out that the doctrine of inerrancy received its particular and narrower formulation in the 19th century, at a time when the means of secular historical research and criticism were used to investigate the secular historical accuracy of Scripture, and this was more

or less denied - which had inevitable consequences for its theological validity. The teaching office of the Church sought to concentrate its defense at the point of immediate attack: i.e. to defend the inerrancy of Scripture even in the *veritates profanae* generally defending the claim of the Bible and of Christianity to be revelation. To defend scriptural inerrancy in this sphere of secular truths various theories were employed which sought to prove the absolute inerrancy of Scripture on the basis of these conditions and attitudes. Because of the apologetical viewpoint from which they started, they were in danger of producing a narrowness and a false accentuation⁷ in the doctrine of inerrancy. Also in the area of the interpretation of Scripture and the rules pertaining to this we can see a similar phenomenon, which the Council observed in different spheres of theology and endeavoured to nullify: namely, the tendency to an apologetical isolation and the claim to absolutism of a partial view. With this kind of motivation for the defense of the inerrancy of Scripture in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, there was a weakening of the awareness that Scripture as the inspired, written word of God is supposed above all

to serve the preservation and expansion of the saving revelation and reality given through Christ in the world. Of course it was always realized that this was the real purpose of Scripture. In the question of inerrancy, however, the emphasis was placed on the one-sided and isolated - accentuation of the veritates profanae. This tended to create uncertainty rather than a joyful confidence that God's truth and salvation remain present in the world in an unfalsified and permanent form-- namely through the inspired word. It was necessary to reawaken this awareness. The doctrine of inerrancy needed its own centre and the right accentuation.

In this respect the most important contribution was undoubtedly the speech by Cardinal Koenig on 2 October 1964. Several other fathers who took part in the discussion from 2 to 6 October either verbally or in writing came back to this point. The Cardinal first of all pointed out the new situation that exists in relation to the question of inerrancy. As a result of intensive Oriental studies our picture of the veritas historica and the fides historica of Scripture has been clarified. Many of the 19th century objections to the Old Testament in particular and its

reliability as an account of historical fact are now irrelevant But Oriental studies have also produced another finding: “ . . . laudata scientia rerum orientalium insuper demonstrat in Bibliis Sacris notitias historicas et notitias scientiae naturalis a veritate quandoque deficere.” Thus Cardinal Koenig admitted that not all the difficulties could be solved.

The fact that this speech could be held in a plenary session without any protest being made is surely significant... Thus Cardinal Koenig implicitly gives up that premise that comes from the aprioristic and unhistorical thinking that has dominated teaching on inerrancy since the age of the Fathers: if one admits that a sacred writer has made a mistake, then one is necessarily admitting that God has made a mistake with the human author. The actual aim of inspiration allows us to find a better solution: one can still maintain the true influence of God on the human authors without making him responsible for their weaknesses. These relate only to the form or the outer garment of the Gospel, and not the latter itself, however much the two might be inwardly connected- indeed, without this

genuine humanity, with all its limitations, Scripture would appear like a foreign body in our world. But God speaks to us in this way, in our language, from out of our midst.

*A number of Council fathers followed the example of Cardinal Koenig and refer to him as an authority: others, admittedly in the minority, produced the traditional statements, without, however, dealing with the new points raised by Cardinal Koenig. H. Vorgrimler, ed. **Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II** (Herder & Herder, 1969), 3:204-207*

Back to Cletus:

"God's people who got the NT right (to varying degrees) in the early centuries blew it with the OT. And then they also blew it with other widely held doctrines you reject."

i) That's simplistic. Some people got it right (e.g. Jerome) and some got it wrong.

ii) Moreover, early church fathers were better positioned to be historical witnesses to the NT canon than the OT canon.

Apart from the NT witness to the OT canon, the Jews were better positioned to be historical witnesses to the OT canon than most church fathers.

"Protestantism can easily deflect the charge by actually offering infallible/irreformable teachings/interpretations."

The Bible contains infallible teachings. Likewise, the NT contains infallible interpretations of the OT.

That's good enough for me. Pity it's not good enough for you.

"Right so again 'articles of faith' are no such thing in Protestantism - they are simply reasoned opinions based on the best available evidence we have according to whatever erudite scholars we sub-select for who bring their own biases, analytical methodologies, expertise, etc to the data set (that data set itself being a matter of opinion)."

i) You're straining to typecast me in your imaginary drama.

But I don't select for commentators who agree with me. I don't know ahead of time how many will agree with me. I own commentaries by liberals, conservatives, Catholics, charismatics, Arminians, Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Dispensationalists, Calvinists, &c. You've miscast me in your imaginary drama.

ii) You're recycling postmodernist cliches about how everyone is biased. One problem with that line of attack is that it boomerangs on Catholicism. The Latin Fathers were culturally conditioned. The Scholastic theologians were culturally conditioned. The popes were culturally conditioned. Rome's representatives are not exempt from bias, social conditioning, &c. Do you think the views of Pope Francis aren't shaped by Latin American history?

iii) There's not much methodological difference between contemporary Catholic and Protestant commentators. Catholic Bible scholars like Ray Brown, John Meier, Joseph Fitzmyer, Luke Timothy Johnson, Mgr. Jerome Quinn, John J. Collins, Jerome Murphy-O'Connor et al. use the same toolkit as Protestant Bible scholars. The main difference is that contemporary Catholic Bible scholars are overwhelmingly liberal.

iv) I admit that my own viewpoint is historically situated. No doubt my views are influenced by where and when I was born and raised. I don't apologize for that. That's a reflection of divine providence. Assuming that's a problem, it's beyond my control.

Popes, Catholic bishops, Catholic theologians et al. don't form their views in a hermetically-sealed bubble chamber. Catholic apologists bask in safe abstractions about the religious certainty afforded by Rome. But it looks very different at ground level.

For instance, consider how complicated and iffy it is to interpret just one famous papal proclamation:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/08/catholic-augury.html>

Likewise, Cardinal Dulles penned a monograph on the magisterium, which I reviewed:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/08/magisterial-cat-and-mouse-game.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/08/magisterium-int.html>

"The Reformers would carry more weight if they did 'wonders and mighty deeds' to prove themselves approved by God. This was one of Francis de Sales arguments. But they fell far short of that."

i) How many popes, priests, Latin Fathers, scholastic theologians, bishops, and cardinals perform miracles to prove themselves approved by God? Your argument cuts both ways.

ii) In addition, your argument is a red herring. The Reformers weren't prophets. Signs and wonders are irrelevant in this situation.

The only salient question is whether their exegetical and

church historical arguments are superior to those of Rome. The fact that you deflect their arguments by broaching the question of miraculous confirmation is a backdoor admission that your side lost the argument.

One doesn't need to perform a miracle to present a logical argument from Scripture. A miracle won't make an illogical argument logical or a logical argument more logical than it already is.

And the way to be approved by God is to be faithful to his Word. The Reformers don't require any divine authorization over and above the divine authorization of Scripture itself. A sound interpretation of Scripture carries the divine authority of Scripture. For a sound interpretation of Scripture captures the sense of Scripture. Likewise, a necessary inference from Scripture carries the divine authority of Scripture.

"Because the prophets and itinerant preachers performed signs and wonders to demonstrate their authority as revelation was still developing."

There's no evidence that every OT prophet and/or Bible writer performed miracles.

"The Reformers offer no such miracles..."

Aside from your double standard (see above), there are

many reported miracles involving the Huguenots and the Covenanters (among other Protestants), so be careful what you ask for:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/let-god-arise.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/07/huguenot-miracles.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2013/11/the-charismatic-covenanters.html>

Let's grant that Rome allows for an open canon if a lost letter of Paul was discovered. Is that catastrophic to the STM-triad of authority? No. Just as asterisked passages are not.

Really? The deposit of faith can be added to?

"Now is an open canon and disputed passages catastrophic to SS as the sole final authority? I would think so - if Scripture interprets Scripture and is the sole final authority, it seems rather important that the scope and extent of the recognized canon be irreformable and closed. How can you have a sole

infallible standard when that standard itself is reformable?"

i) To begin with, this is just a hypothetical. And it's not "open" in the sense of new future revelation. Rather, the hypothetical concerns old past revelation.

ii) Since a lost letter of Paul would be Scripture, finding a lost letter of Paul would hardly be incompatible with sola scripture. If we now had a 14th letter of Paul, that doesn't change the Scripture-only principle. It's not something other than Scripture.

iii) An additional Pauline letter wouldn't contradict Scripture. It wouldn't violate "Scripture interprets Scripture."

"The only stipulation I'm making is that articles of faith are irreformable. If you think that is "setting the bar at some a priori height" you're free to demonstrate how."

i) Yes, "irreformable" is an a priori stipulation. There's no justification for that demand. For instance, why should we insist on *irreformable* articles of faith rather than *true* articles of faith?

ii) Moreover, that's not your only stipulation. Another

artificial stipulation is what you posit to "warrant to the assent of faith."

"When, however, conservatives are defending inerrancy against examples of error or corruption, they do an about-face and resort to various escape clauses and face-saving distinctions to salvage the inspiration/inerrancy of Scripture from logical or historical disproof."

Two basic problems with your attempted tu quoque:

i) I've documented cases, including from Catholic sources, where Rome reversed course. Even if your tu quoque were successful, proving that Protestants have a parallel problem does nothing to disprove your own.

ii) Unlike me, you haven't documented your allegation.

"Rome's claims can be falsified."

How are the Immaculate Conception, virginity in partu, and Assumption of Mary falsifiable? How is transubstantiation falsifiable?

"However, in examining a system, it is important to evaluate that system by its *own* defined standards and criteria."

It's legitimate to evaluate a system on either internal and external grounds.

"Rome has defined her standards for infallibility, you may think it should operate differently, but you can't then disprove its claim by foisting your foreign standard upon it (your examples of alleged contradiction suffer from this)."

i) To the contrary, I can judge a system by a foreign standard so long as I justify my foreign standard.

ii) And if, for the sake of argument, we grant your contention, then you can't invoke Catholic criteria to disprove Protestantism.

"Just as you would not let atheists get away with foisting their standard upon how inerrancy should work in examining your position."

I don't simply deny their standards. I challenge their standards.

"So God intended and illuminated the minds of God's people to get the NT right (well, most of it depending on who and where) in the early centuries, but clouded their minds so they blew the OT but kept it clear among those who rejected his Son and were no longer His people. Odd."

Historical knowledge doesn't depend on illumination, but personal or historical memory.

"And again appealing to this consensus of "God's people" in establishing the canon is invalid..."

I didn't deploy a consensus argument to establish the canon.

"...you can't use a posteriori knowledge in justifying/recognizing the canon since that wasn't used in the process of its initial recognition."

That's an illogical principle. Take the stock distinction

between knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance. I had a great-grandfather who believed in the Civil War because he fought in the Civil War. But that's not why I believe in the Civil War. I believe in the Civil War because I've read things about it and seen period photographs.

There can be evidence for the canon which wasn't used in the process of initial recognition. Neglected evidence is still evidentiary and probative.

"On what basis do you offer that? Does every book of the bible (indeed every verse given textual criticism) claim infallibility for itself?"

For starters:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2014/06/plenary-verbal-inspiration.html>

"By deflating the church's authority and notions of infallibility, Protestantism in one swoop opens the door for liberalism to do the same with Scripture."

Your denomination is increasingly dominated by liberals.

You have a paper theory that's at odds with the facts on the ground.

"So what happens when you interpret the NT? Can such an interpretation or teaching ever become irreformable based on Protestantism's starting principles?"

Once again, you're imposing your tendentious categories on me. It's sufficient that a teaching be true.

"Right - and I would assume you admit your own fallibility and inherent limitations."

And I admit the fallibility and inherent limitations of bishops, popes, church fathers, and scholastic theologians.

"And this is all upstream from the point where you apply your current provisional filtering of that state of analysis to accept certain conclusions as opposed to other ones."

You mean...the way popes, church fathers, scholastic theologians et al. apply their timebound provisional filtering to accept certain conclusions as opposed to other ones?

"Such criteria does not and cannot form the basis for articles of faith. You trade submission to an infallible magisterium that can offer articles of faith to a self-admitted fallible scholarly magisterium that has erudite scholars on all sides of various questions that can offer you nothing more than plausible opinion by its own admission."

No, I trade submission to a fallible magisterium with infallible pretensions that's incompetent to offer articles of faith to consulting scholars and theologians who must argue for their conclusions by appeal to reason and evidence. Whose process of arriving at their conclusions is transparent and accountable to the scrutiny of the reader. Scholarship is not a magisterium. Reading commentaries is not an act of submission. It's not an argument from authority. You're indulging in sloppy, boilerplate rhetoric.

"One who submitted to Christ/Apostles did not thereafter continually hold their past and future teachings hostage to his own personal interpretation or arbitrary

threshold of acceptance before he would submit to them."

i) To begin with, subscription to Catholicism is "hostage" to your own plausibility structures.

ii) You're the one who's setting up an arbitrary threshold of acceptance before you submit to Christ, the apostles, and the prophets.

"If all religious truths reduces to probable/confident opinion, we're stuck in sheer fideism, or you reduce articles of faith to natural knowledge and we become stark rationalists."

i) You are pointing Protestants to a Catholic target, then telling us that that's the target we should aim for. Unless we hit that target, our religious epistemology is a failure.

But that simply begs the question. If your target is the wrong target, then the fact that we miss your target does nothing to disprove or even undermine the Protestant position.

All you've done, all any Catholic apologist ever does, is to posit that sola scripture fails because it falls short of your target. So what? Hitting your arbitrary target isn't what God requires of me—or you, for that matter. It's just an exercise

in misdirection. And evasion of your true religious duties.

ii) Moreover, your argument is just a rehash of the same stale argument that Michael Liccione has been dishing out for years. I've been over that ground repeatedly. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/01/arian-wolves-in-papal-vestments.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/01/clashing-paradigms.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/07/tarot-card-catholicism.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/01/once-upon-a-priori.html>

"There's no boomerang because RCism claims divine authority and protection in offering its doctrines."

The operative word is "claims." You haven't begun to demonstrate that claim. What you've done is to begin with your preconception of what you think Christianity should be like, then shop around for an available religious tradition that suits your preconception. You haven't justified your preconception. Rather, you take that for granted. You begin

with your self-imposed necessity, then cast about for something to feed it.

By contrast, I begin with revelation. What are my duties to God? That's something to be discovered, not posited. Something I find out by reading God's word. You dictate to God, I listen to God.

"So atheist or liberal biblical scholars aren't biased in their methodology?"

You mean the liberal bias of contemporary Catholic Bible scholars?

"Rome sees ghm exegesis as useful, but limited and not the sole final tool in which to ascertain divine truth - that's already a methodological difference. GHM does not answer whether it is to be the primary (let alone ultimate) method to be used in ascertaining divine truth, or if it is to be combined with other methods, nor does it answer how it should best be applied to the biblical data (hence the differing conclusions amongst ghm-only proponents). And it is itself subject to change as

scholarly/historical analysis and evidence in the fields that inform it grows and develops - it's built on shifting sands of changing data and abductive/inductive reasoning and tentative probable conclusions. So it again doesn't get you out of the sea of opinion. So while Roman scholars may use some of the same toolkit as Protestants, they also have a much larger shop with supervisors they are working in - they aren't stuck with the toolkit alone."

i) To begin with, there's a difference between the party line and how modern Catholic Bible scholars actually exegete Scripture.

Officially, Rome can't dispense with the allegorical method because too much Catholic dogma is traditionally invested in the allegorical method. You can only proof-text Catholic dogma from Scripture by resort to fanciful interpretations. Take the comical proof-texting of *Ineffabilis Deus*.

So Rome must hold in tension two or more conflicting hermeneutical methods. It's quite a strain.

ii) But that stands in contrast to how modern Catholic Bible

scholars actually exegete Scripture. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2008/09/interpretation-of-scripture-in-defense.html>

"Sure - which is partly why infallibility is a negative protection against error and has specific criteria to be met."

Which assumes what you need to prove.

"Rome's claims can be falsified."

In one sense, I agree with you. Rome's claims are eminently falsifiable—when judged by impartial criteria. Not just falsifiable, but falsified.

"However, in examining a system, it is important to evaluate that system by its *own* defined standards and criteria."

i) Ah, there's the catch. So now you're claiming that it's only falsifiable by its own standards and criteria. Of course, that's a way of rendering a system unfalsifiable. The standards and criteria are formulated so that nothing in practice can ever count as evidence against it.

ii) Admittedly, that takes a certain amount of foresight. Since Rome is having to make things up on the fly, it may trip itself up even on internal grounds.

iii) Apropos (ii), let's go back to your notion of a tiebreaker. The pope is the tiebreaker.

Even if we grant that for the sake of argument, who breaks the tie when the legitimacy of the pope is the very issue in dispute? A pope can't be the tiebreaker to adjudicate which claimant is the true pope and which is the antipope, for that's viciously circular. Only the true pope can play that role. So you need a tiebreaker above the pope to resolve that dilemma. And that isn't just hypothetical.

"Is that catastrophic to the STM-triad of authority?"

Let's clear that up. Rome doesn't have a triadic authority. It isn't STM. It's only M. Indeed, just a subset of M. The triad is illusory.

It isn't scripture plus tradition plus the magisterium, for scripture only means what the magisterium says it means, and tradition only means what the magisterium says it means. Scripture and traditional have no independent authority. Only the magisterium.

So it boils down to the magisterium, which boils down to the papacy, which boils down to the current pope. It isn't the magisterium in general, or even the papacy in general.

In Catholicism, Christianity is whatever the current pope says it is.

Speaking of the "infallible" church of Rome, here's what the Pope emeritus said about the "infallible" Vatican II council:

Ratzinger's commentary on the first chapter of Gaudium et Spes contains still other provocative comments. The treatment of conscience in article 16, in his view, raises many unsolved questions about how conscience can err and about the right to follow an erroneous conscience. The treatment of free will in article 17 is in his judgment "downright Pelagian." It leaves aside, he complains, the whole complex of problems that Luther handled under the term "servum arbitrium"...

<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2006/02/from-ratzinger-to-benedict>

Back to Cletus et al.:

"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19).

"Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18).

For muddledheaded Catholics like Guy, the keys of the kingdom and binding and loosing are two separate prerogatives. Therefore, even though the power to bind and loose is granted to the congregation generally in Mt 18:18, Guy cluelessly assumes that Mt 16:19 still reserves a unique prerogative for Peter.

It doesn't occur to him that these are two (or three) related metaphors to express these same ideas: locking/unlocking, opening/closing, binding/loosing. The power of the keys simply is the power to bind and loose, and vice versa.

"Binding and loosing" is epexegetical for the keys. The "keys" is, itself, a partial metaphor. The full metaphor is locking or unlocking doors, which, in turn, involves opening or closing doors. And that's further defined by the Rabbinic idiom of binding and loosing.

Scripture frequently uses multiple metaphors and

synonymous parallels to vividly depict the same concept.

A further indication that these two metaphors are synonymous is their shared "heavenly" motif—with the contrast, by turns implicit and explicit—between heaven and earth.

"So sound interpretations that carry divine authority are infallible right?"

You have a hang-up about infallibility. An interpretation needn't be infallible to be right. Fallible people are right some of the time.

i) Your demand for an infallible interpretation is unreasonable. It's sufficient that an interpretation be right. What necessary contribution does infallibility make to a correct interpretation?

ii) Moreover, your infallibilist alternative is chimerical. The church of Rome can't make good on that claim.

"STM-triad guards the deposit of faith."

You're ducking the issue of whether a newly-found letter of Paul would add to the deposit of faith, and, if so, whether that's compatible with the traditional definition of the deposit of faith.

"Scripture interprets Scripture and Scripture is the sole infallible authority is your rule of faith. I'm interested in knowing how that works if the recognized scope and extent of the canon is reformable."

The addition of a newly-found letter of Paul wouldn't change the principle.

"But does SS work with just the OT canon?"

That's how it worked during the Intertestamental period.

"Secondly this still doesn't answer how you establish the 'irreformable' baseline standard to compare the new Pauline letter against."

i) You're a slow learner. As I've said before, I don't grant your operating framework. God doesn't require me to posit an "irreformable" baseline. You keep imposing that extraneous category onto the discussion. But that's not a divine mandate.

ii) Who said a newly-found Pauline letter must be compared against a baseline standard? Every Pauline letter is a standard in its own right.

"Divine revelation is true but not irreformable?"

i) You've done nothing to justify your a priori insistence that articles of faith must meet a condition of "irreformability" over and above the condition of being true.

ii) Moreover, "irreformability" is ambiguous. Divine revelation is "irreformable" insofar as truth never needs to be corrected. However, it's reformable insofar as progressive revelation (during the period of public revelation) augments divine revelation and/or articles of faith.

"As I said, to put your faith into mere plausible opinion (whether it be true or not) is either sheer fideism or stark rationalism."

Once again, you disregard the elementary distinction between true and false belief. You also fail to show why true belief never counts as knowledge.

"Yes and atheists have documented cases, including from liberal Protestants, where Scripture is errant. Further, there are two relevant questions - whether

Rome has actually reversed course and whether it has reversed course in such a way that damages or is relevant to infallibility."

Your tactics to take refuge in safe, fact-free abstractions. You have a paper theory which you refuse to compare with the actual output of your denomination.

"that's a fair non question-begging approach."

You exhibit a pattern of defective responses. You raise an objection, I present a counterargument, then you repeat your original objection without engaging the counterargument.

As I already pointed out to you, it's not question-begging to judge a belief-system by external standards so long as the critic justifies his own standards.

Your persistent deficiency in refusing to acknowledge and engage counterarguments betrays a lack of good faith on your part.

"You seem to freely admit it can't offer irreformable doctrines. Great."

I reject your arbitrary and impious conceptual scheme.

"Okay so the 'God's people' stuff you were arguing before is irrelevant?"

Are you attempting to be clever, or are you really that uncomprehending? I didn't appeal to God's people as a criterion or evidence for the canon. Go back and reread the context of my remarks.

"Why did you forget your own advice - Even if your tu quoque were successful, proving that Protestants have a parallel problem does nothing to disprove your own."

i) It's revealing how you consistently evade your own burden of proof. That's a tacit admission that your own position is indefensible, which is why you constantly shift the onus onto the Protestant.

ii) I've defended sola scriptura in detail on numerous occasions.

"You sidestep the entire argument pertinent to the difference between

Protestantism and Rome's rule of faith (and associated warrant) to deflect.

You haven't presented a scintilla of evidence that the Catholic rule of faith is true, much less rebutted evidence to the contrary.

All you've done is to pull out of thin air the claim that your alternative must be true.

"Wonderful - so articles of faith are just reasonable conclusions. Faith is just rationalism. You weigh and evaluate all these evidences to come to your tentative probable 'true' conclusions you assent to. It can never rise above that because of the very starting principles you agree to."

You're working with some shadowy epistemology which you haven't bothered to spell out. Sounds like crude foundationalism, which its appeal to "first principles."

Suppose reliabilism is a good model of knowledge/justified true belief. If my beliefs are the result of a reliable belief-forming process, then my beliefs count as knowledge.

i) Let's plug that into Calvinism. God can give the elect knowledge by providentially arranging their experience to

put them in contact with true theological information, which they are socially conditioned to believe. Say God predestines them to be born and raised in a Christian home where they have access to the Bible—as well as indoctrinated in a theologically sound church.

By prearranging the circumstances of their lives, God fosters faith. And their faith is "warranted" by a divinely-guided process which aims at the formation of true beliefs. These aren't accidentally true beliefs, but divinely intended true beliefs.

That wouldn't be mere "opinion." That would be justified true belief.

You can try to take issue with reliabilism, but whatever your unstated alternative epistemology happens to be, that, too, will be subject to philosophical scrutiny.

ii) One of your problems is the gratuitous assumption that we can only arrive at knowledge by the application of an external criterion. That, in turn, suffers from two fundamental objections:

a) It generates an infinite regress. What's the criterion for your criterion?

b) It fails to distinguish between first-order knowledge and second-order knowledge. It confuses knowledge with proof.

"It's a fallible scholarly magisterium."

I already corrected you on your cutesy parallel between the Roman magisterium and a "scholarly magisterium."

"You run around amassing all your commentaries and books touching on all the relevant fields..."

You're simply repeating yourself and failing to absorb my prior response. All of us are at the mercy of providence for what we know and believe. God puts some people in an advantageous situation where they can (and do) arrive at the truth while putting others in a disadvantageous situation where the truth is inaccessible.

That's out of my hands. If God intends me to be mistaken, I can't do any better.

I don't fret over matters beyond my control. That's really not my responsibility.

It's not as if your supposed alternative can bypass the circumstances in which God places each individual.

"Yes the arbitrary threshold that divine revelation is infallible and irreformable."

You're playing a bait-n-switch. The question at issue isn't whether divine revelation is infallible, but whether faith must be infallible. Or do you just not know the difference?

"Protestantism doesn't make the claim and actively rejects it in the first place, so it removes itself of its own accord."

You haven't begun to demonstrate that what you require of Christians is what God requires of Christians. Rather, you impose artificial standards and conditions in defiance of what God actually demands. Protestantism doesn't claim more than God claims.

"So Christ and the Apostles claims to divine authority were completely superfluous then?"

Christ and the Apostles didn't make your claims about "irreformability" or what "warrants the assent of faith." That's your claim, not theirs, which you make in spite of what they say.

What is the warrant for believing Jn 20:31? Not the papacy. Not the Roman Magisterium. That's not what's given in the text.

A reader doesn't need any warrant over and above the document itself. That's how it's stated.

By contrast, you're telling the reader that he doesn't have a right to accept what Jn 20:31 says unless he also submits to the pope. You're telling the reader not to believe what it

says. You're telling the reader to disbelieve the claim unless the Magisterium authorizes him to believe it.

Your position is nothing short of impious.

"Have to have a way to coherently identify revelation first according to your starting principles."

i) To begin with, I've done that on many occasions.

ii) However, your methodology is flawed. We don't need "first principles to identify revelation. God can simply put Jews and Christians in a time and place where they *have* divine revelation. God identifies it for them by handing them the finished product. For instance, God providentially gives them a copy of a Protestant Bible.

iii) You're confusing faith with apologetics. We don't need to begin with first principles to know things or have access to the truth. That can be useful for confirming or disconfirming our religious legacy.

"So Rome doesn't use the same toolkit as Protestants."

That's a simpleminded retort. On the one hand there's the quasi-official position of Rome. Take the PBC's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993). That, itself, is a compromise document, subject to revision.

On the other hand, there's the way in which contemporary Catholic Bible scholars actually go about their business. And their religious superiors are aware of this. In practice, they use the same toolkit as Protestants.

"If this was true, M would not be beholden to S and T. It could chuck out Romans and say Mary is eternal or that Nicaea never happened or that Orange endorsed Pelagianism. It could just make up whatever it wants."

Catholicism plays a double game. On the one hand it claims that even the pope can't change dogma. Even the pope is bound by the deposit of faith.

On the other hand, since the pope is the supreme interpreter of Scripture and tradition alike, they have no independent meaning or authority. So, **by definition**, the pope hasn't contradicted dogma or the deposit of faith even if he chucks Romans or says Orange endorses Pelagianism.

For he's not contradicting dogma or the deposit of faith. He's "interpreting" dogma or the deposit of faith. That's the sense in which your system is unfalsifiable.

A Catholic can't over over the head of the pope by appealing directly to Scripture or tradition.

"You run around amassing all your commentaries and books touching on all the relevant fields and try to assimilate as much as you can and weigh all the conflicting tentative conclusions and arguments of these scholars with their varying presuppositions and analytical methodologies. Of course you will never become competent or an expert in all these fields. And even if you magically could, such would still just be your expert opinion (which is nothing more than the most erudite specialists can offer). So your conclusions remain ever-provisional."

"they are simply reasoned opinions based on the best available evidence we have according to whatever erudite scholars we sub-select for"

Let's see. Catholic apologists run around amassing evidence for Rome from sundry sources. Catholic apologists will never become competent or expert in OT studies, NT studies, patristics, church history, canon law, liturgics, dogmatic theology, &c.

Thus their case for Roman Catholicism can never rise higher

than the conflicting tentative conclusions of the scholars they sub-select for. Their faith in the Roman church is never more than ever-provisional opinion.

"Bingo. The claim is a necessary, though not sufficient. Rome makes the claim. So do EO and Mormons and Crazy Dave on the street and David Koresh. The next stage would be evaluating the credibility of those claims. Protestantism doesn't make the claim and actively rejects it in the first place, so it removes itself of its own accord."

Free free to count yourself out. God isn't groveling for your consideration.

"The principle of Bible Alone is a totally unworkable principle."

The Magisterium is a totally unworkable principle:

We are in fact constantly confronted with problems where it isn't possible to find the right answer in a short time. Above all in the case of problems having to do

with ethics, particularly medical ethics...We finally had to say, after very long studies, "Answer that for now on the local level; we aren't far enough along to have full certainty about that.

*"Again, in the area of medical ethics, new possibilities, and with them new borderline situations, are constantly arising where it is not immediately evident how to apply principles. We can't simply conjure up certitude...There needn't always be universal answers. We also have to realize our limits and forgo answers where they aren't possible...it simply is not the case that we want to go around giving answers in every situation..." (J. Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth* [Ignatius, 1996], 100-101).*

Back to Cletus:

"You tied sound interpretation to divine authority. Is divine authority fallible?"

You're being evasive and equivocal. An interpretation of divine revelation needn't be infallible to be authoritative. If revelation is infallible, then a fallible, but correct interpretation, has derivative authority.

I asked: "What necessary contribution does infallibility make to a correct interpretation?"

You reply: "So why does Protestantism fear it like the plague?"

Notice that Cletus didn't answer the question.

"Rome doesn't offer any infallible/irreformable teaching? If it offers one such article, it's made good on (and is consistent with) the claim."

The operative word is "if." You've done nothing to demonstrate that the conditional is true.

"Public revelation has ended with the death of the last apostle, resulting in a fixed deposit of faith. That is irreformable doctrine. A newly discovered letter would not alter that public revelation has ended."

And if that's the case, then a newly-discovered Pauline letter wouldn't alter sola scriptura.

"You're free to offer how Protestantism can affirm that public revelation has ended as irreformable."

You seem to lack adaptive intelligence. You try to dictate the terms of the debate (e.g. irreformability). I've explained to you why I reject your framework.

When I do so, you offer no counterargument. Rather, you simply push the rewind button and replay your prerecorded message.

That's fine with me. All you have is slogans. You have nothing to back up the slogans.

"Isn't a 'canonical hermeneutic' essential to SS?"

The OT was the "canonical hermeneutic" during the Intertestamental period. The OT and NT form the "canonical hermeneutic" after NT times.

"So the oral torah/tradition was not in effect during the IT period?"

Another example of your persistent equivocations.

i) To begin with, the oral torah was often wrong. Jesus frequently took exception to the oral torah in public debates with the Jewish authorities.

ii) To the extent that oral torah/tradition sometimes represented a valid interpretation or valid application of the OT, that's a derivative authority. It has no inherent authority.

"Is it a divine mandate that Scripture is infallible?"

Modern Catholicism treats Scripture as eminently fallible.

"I see. So how do you evaluate psuedo-Pauline letters from the genuine article? Doesn't a 'canonical hermeneutic' apply in evaluating credibility of proposed writings?"

i) We're dealing with a hypothetical case, so it depends on what type of hypothetical verification we propose. That doesn't require a canonical hermeneutic.

ii) Furthermore, a "canonical hermeneutic" isn't necessary to validate actual individual books of Scripture.

"Can something be true without being irreformable?"

i) Why do you need something to be more than truth? Why do you act like truth is inadequate?

ii) And, yes, I already explained to you how something can be reformable in one respect, but irreformable in another. You're not paying attention.

"I see - so we are still in the era of progressive revelation now?"

Are you uncomprehending? I didn't say or suggest we're still in the era of progressive revelation. Rather, I made the point that during the period of progressive revelation, divine revelation is both "reformable" and "irreformable" in different respects.

Do you think it's clever for you to offer these snappy, unintelligent comebacks? Don't try to be clever at the expense of intellectual honesty or comprehension.

"If not, why the persistent a priori denial of irreformability applied to articles of faith?"

You think it's cute to take my words (e.g. "a priori") and put them into your replies. You need to master the distinction between parallel phrasing and parallel arguments. You're not presenting parallel argument. You're just resorting to a superficial verbal tactic.

The truth of divine revelation a pervasive biblical theme. My appeal to the truth-criterion is not a priori. By contrast, your irreformability-criterion is an a prior imposition on what God requires of us.

i) I don't deny that a priori. I deny that because it runs counter to our revealed duties. That's a posteriori.

ii) Moreover, inasmuch as you persistently refuse to present any evidence for your criterion, I'm well within my rights to deny it.

"If a Jew randomly falls to Christ's feet and starts following him even though he's heard nothing about his claims to divine authority, even though objectively he is right, would he have actually been submitting in faith and commended by God? Protestants get lots of things right. But they are just correct *opinions*. It never gets above that, due to the nature of the starting claims/principles - it shot

itself in the foot before the race even started."

i) I notice that when your claims are challenged, you have nothing in reserve. So you just repeat the original claim. You don't rebut the counterargument.

ii) You mindlessly recite your mantra about "opinions." I've already corrected you on that. Let's go back to my example of reliabilism.

Traditionally, knowledge was defined as true belief. However, true belief is a necessary, but insufficient condition for knowledge inasmuch as the cognizer may have a true belief without adequate grounds or evidence. The link between truth and belief may just be coincidental. A lucky guess.

So the challenge was how to redefine knowledge to avoid "epistemic luck." What added condition (i.e. "justification," "warrant") in tandem with true belief converts true belief into knowledge?

According to process reliabilism, knowledge is true belief caused in a suitable way. A cognizer knows a proposition if the proposition is true and his belief is produced by a reliable process. Likewise, that's how his belief is justified.

I then sketched a model whereby God providentially cultivates true justified (or warranted) theological beliefs by having predestined some people to be indoctrinated in an epistemic environment where they are exposed to true theological propositions, and where, as a result of monergistic regeneration, they are receptive to the revealed

truths they read or hear.

That isn't mere "opinion." It's not a matter of luck or coincidence that they have true theological beliefs. Rather, that's the result of a divinely-orchestrated process aimed at the cultivation true beliefs. As such, that counts as knowledge.

Now, you may try to attack the reality of that scenario. But you haven't even shown that, as a matter of principle, such beliefs fall short of knowledge (i.e. defeasible opinions).

iii) Moreover, it's not as if you have even outlined your own preferred epistemology. All I've gotten from you is a vague appeal to "first principles." So what is your religious epistemology, or epistemology in general? Is it some version of foundationalism?

"Do you think conservative RC scholars do not exist?"

i) To begin with, there are no contemporary RC Bible scholars of any prominence who affirm the inerrancy of Scripture.

ii) Moreover, if a denomination is so latitudinarian that it tolerates liberals and conservatives alike—with liberals in the dominant position, no less—then that's a theologically compromised denomination. To have a few token conservatives is hardly exculpatory.

"Christ/Apostles didn't value sheer fideism and incoherent rules of faith."

i) To begin with, all you've done is to assert that the Protestant rule of faith is incoherent or fideistic.

ii) You don't accept what Christ or the Apostles say on their own authority. You only accept what your denomination gives you permission to accept.

"You employ tu quoques all over the place as if they are sufficient."

And I'm prepared to back them up if challenged. You, by contrast, resort to tu quoques as a rhetorical gimmick with nothing in reserve when challenged.

"No I'm answering you on your own terms."

To the contrary, I give evidence for my claims. You do nothing of the kind.

"Is justified true belief irreformable or not?"

You're playing hopscotch, where you jump back and forth from one square to the other.

The question at issue is whether a justified true belief is knowledge in contrast to true opinion. You haven't shown that irreformability is a necessary condition for knowledge.

And if it's not a necessary condition for knowledge, then why do you demand an additional condition over and above knowledge?

"Secondly, how would one falsify 'divinely-guided process which aims at the formation of true beliefs' which you criticize Rome for lacking? Any Muslim or Mormon could use your exact same argument - I doubt you'd be swayed."

One of your problems is an inability on your part to keep track of either your own argument or mine.

i) The question at issue, as you yourself often cast the issue, is whether Protestant beliefs are necessarily reducible to "mere opinion." You are asserting that, as a matter of *principle*, these never rise above the level of "opinion."

To rebut your argument, my model of theistic process reliabilism needn't be true. I don't have to prove that that's actually the case.

That's because this is a question of principle. In responding to you on your own grounds, it's sufficient for me to show that Protestant beliefs are not "mere opinion" as a matter of principle. Get it?

ii) Second, my model of theistic process reliabilism dovetails nicely with the Reformed doctrine of providence. So the evidence for the Reformed doctrine of providence also counts as evidence for theistic process reliabilism.

iii) Since Mormonism doesn't espouse meticulous providence, a Mormon couldn't use the exact same argument. Not even close.

Muslim metaphysics ranges a long a spectrum. However, even if a Muslim could use "the same exact argument," that's a red herring. I'm not using this argument to prove Protestantism.

Even if a Muslim could use the same argument in isolation, that doesn't mean he can use it to defend Islam apart from all other considerations.

iv) BTW, given the favorable things that Vatican II says about Islam, it would behoove you to avoid that comparison. It boomerangs against your own position.

"There was no infinite regress when NT believers submitted to Christ/Apostles claims to divine authority."

i) You don't submit to their claims of authority. Rather, you submit to the pope's claims of authority. You accept what

Christ or the Apostles say on condition that your denomination allows you to accept what they say.

ii) Your response is an exercise in misdirection. You haven't shown how your criterion can avoid generating an infinite regress. If you insist that we cannot submit to Scripture directly, that there must be some criterion external to Scripture to authorize or warrant submission, then what's the basis for your belief in that extrabiblical criterion? By what additional criterion do you evaluate the claims of the papacy?

"By saying you don't submit to scholars - even though you rely on them to weigh arguments and come to reasonable conclusions."

Consulting commentaries is not an argument from authority. I don't accept what they say on authority. Rather, they cite evidence and give reasons for their conclusions. That's a transparent process that's open to the scrutiny of the reader.

"Which then yields only ever-provisional probable opinion."

i) As I've explained to you, that doesn't follow on theories of knowledge like theistic process reliabilism. You need to learn how to engage the argument.

ii) And if what you say is true, then you're in the same bind. For in making a historical case for the claims of Rome, you yourself "rely on patrologists and church historians to weigh arguments and come to reasonable conclusions. Which then yields only ever-provisional probable opinion."

"My supposed alternative says it has divine authority to identify (irreformable) articles of faith. It is not subject to the ever-shifting seas of competing scholarship and evidence that can never offer such."

How do you established your supposed alternative in the first place? You rely on historical evidence. Alleged evidence for Petrine primacy, Roman primacy, papal primacy, papal infallibility, &c.

That forces you to dive right into the "ever-shifting wave" of competing interpretations by patrologists, church historians, canon lawyers, &c.

Even if the papacy is a short-cut to certainty once you arrive at the papacy, there's no shortcut for getting to the papacy. And if you rely on probabilities in making your case for the papacy, then you will end no higher than where you began. You're chasing a receding mirage.

"So it's hardly an artificial standard by your own admission."

Once again, you play hopscotch by jumping back and forth between different categories. The question at issue is whether your condition (e.g. "irreformability") to "warrant the assent of faith" is an artificial standard. That imposes something on Christians (and OT/2nd Temple Jews) which God doesn't require of us. And you haven't begun to show that God requires that of us.

"so Christ and the Apostles claims to divine authority were completely superfluous then?"

You don't credit their claims to divine authority.

"And I'm telling readers to believe Jn 20:31 on the same basis they should believe 2 Peter and reject Shepherd of Hermas."

Which is not the basis that John gave. You substitute a different basis, thereby rejecting John's authority. You refuse to accept what he said on his own stated grounds.

"And the document has to be reliably identified."

Not if it's true. You fail to distinguish to draw an elementary and essential distinction between truth and verification. Truth doesn't require verification. If Jn 20:31 is true, then the promise holds truth regardless of whether we have independent evidence.

"God identifies it for them by handing them the finished product. For instance, God providentially gives them a copy of the Koran or book of Mormon."

i) Once more, you're unable to keep track of your own argument as well as mine. Try to think rather than reflexively reacting.

I'm not discussing how to prove the Bible or disprove the Koran or the book of Mormon. Are you capable of absorbing that distinction?

ii) BTW, you need to stop citing the Koran as a counterexample. It's your own sect, at Vatican II, that said Muslims and Christians worship the same God.

iii) The question at issue is whether Protestants need an infallible church to know true doctrine. I've presented a mechanism. God can place an individual in a cognitive environment that engenders true theological beliefs. Indeed, this providential process is divinely aimed at the production of true beliefs. The resultant belief isn't mere opinion. Rather, that amounts to knowledge.

That mechanism doesn't require the individual to either start from scratch or apply a criterion. Rather, he's on the receiving end of that propitious process. He's the beneficiary.

And this doesn't mean the end-result can't be subject to types of confirmation (if true) or disconfirmation (if false). But knowing the truth isn't contingent on proving the truth.

"Yes and the PBC is a consulting arm to the Magisterium (as it was made in 1971), not the magisterium itself."

An example of "ever-provisional opinion."

"Read Benedict's Verbum Domini and the section 'The Interpretation Of Sacred Scripture In The Church' to see the proper hermeneutical balance."

What Roman Catholic commentators have you read?

"Since the Apostles interpreted Scripture and tradition alike, they have no independent meaning or authority."

That's more cute than acute. Look at how two popes go

about proof texting Marian dogma. After going through the motions, this is how it ends:

"by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory. Hence if anyone, which God forbid, should dare willfully to deny or to call into doubt that which we have defined, let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith."

"by the authority of Jesus Christ our Lord, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own: "We declare, pronounce, and define that the doctrine which holds that the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in the first instance of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege granted by Almighty God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the human race, was preserved free from all stain of original sin, is a doctrine revealed by God and therefore to be believed firmly and constantly by all the faithful."

Hence, if anyone shall dare -- which God forbid! -- to think otherwise than as has been defined by us, let him know and understand that he is condemned by his own judgment; that he has suffered shipwreck in the faith; that he has separated from the unity of the Church; and that, furthermore, by his own action he incurs the penalties established by law if he should dare to express in words or writing or by any other outward means the errors he think in his heart."

That's not how Jesus and the Apostles reason from the Scriptures. In the Gospels, in Acts, in Romans, in Hebrews, they don't fall back on an appeal to their personal authority to leverage the interpretation. Rather, they appeal to reason. They use logical arguments which a reader or listener can follow for himself.

"This reduces all development to contradiction. Something can be understood deeper and develop without contradicting what came before."

Classic, post-Newman special pleading.

"I'm giving you just a sampling of how it would be falsified."

That's a throwaway concession. For you it can only be falsified in theory, never in practice.

"Protestantism has had 500 years to come up with these obvious contradictions and hasn't yet done it..."

I provided specific documentation which you've studiously dodged. Your faith is all theory, sealed away from contaminating contact with reality.

"This completely misses the point about something changing pre and post submission. An NT believer evaluated the claims of credibility Apostles/Christ offered. That does not mean after submitting he would continue to hold their current and future teachings in a dock perpetually to continually re-evaluate to see if they meet his current provisional criteria and threshold of acceptance. If he did that, he would not

have submitted to their claims in the first place - nothing would have change pre and post submission. In Protestantism, nothing changes - everything remains ever-provisional probable conclusions by virtue of the rejection of the claims in the first place."

You've boxed yourself into a hopeless dilemma. You scorn "opinion," however reasonable. You scorn scholarship as "ever-provisional." Yet that's your bridge to Rome. Your conclusion is only as solid as the process by which you arrive at your conclusion.

Suppose (ex hypothesi) that if the church of Rome is infallible (under specified conditions), then Catholics can know theological truths.

But that only pushes the problem back a step. How can you know if church of Rome is infallible? You can't. You can only believe that, based on juggling probabilities. Based on sifting "every-provisional scholarship."

You can't invoke your opinion regarding the infallibility of Rome to retroactively turn your opinion into knowledge. You believe that you believe in "irreformable" articles of faith. But you don't know that. You can't know that. For you can't bootstrap infallibility from your fallible starting-point.

What you've really give us is the proverbial leap of faith into the dark. You simply hope it's true. But your evidence, even on your own partisan interpretation, is merely probable and

provisional.

Yes, you can drive an artificial wedge between pre and post submission, but that's make-believe. That's you pretending that post submission is more certain than pre submission. Yet you don't have any mechanism to convert pre submission uncertainty into post submission certainty.

"Is it really so difficult to see that a revealed religion demands, from its very nature, a place for private judgment and a place for authority? A place for private judgment, in determining that the revelation itself comes from God, in discovering the Medium through which that revelation comes to us, and the rule of faith by which we are enabled to determine what is, and what is not, revealed. A place for authority to step in, when these preliminary investigations are over, and say 'Now, be careful, for you are out of your depth here.'"

i) That's an exercise in mirror-gazing. The authority that "steps in" is just a projection of private judgment. In private judgment, such an authority exists.

Given your authority source, that could then confirm your

"preliminary investigations." But your authority source is not a given. That's not something you have at the outset. Rather, that will never be more than a reflection of the state of your preliminary investigations, at whatever stage you gave up. The "Medium" is the face you see at the bottom of the well, staring back at you.

ii) Judaism was a revealed religion. But there was no infallible tiebreaker in 2nd temple Judaism. That's why you had a profusion of Jewish sects and schools of thought in the 1C. Essenes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots. Rabbi Shammai. Rabbi Hillel. And so on and so forth.

The body of Moses

But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you" (Jude 9).

According to some church fathers, this is an allusion to a pseudepigraphal work: the Assumption of Moses or Testament of Moses. Since the book is no longer extant, we can't directly compare it to Jude's statement.

However, this still raises questions about Jude's use of that suspect material. In principle there are three explanations:

1) There's a liberal explanation. Jude was gullible as well as careless about his sources. He believed this apocryphal story was true. I only mention this explanation for the sake of completeness, as well as to provide a point of contrast for two orthodox alternatives.

2) Jude isn't crediting the historicity of the anecdote. Rather, he's using it the way a contemporary Christian might use an anecdote from a popular science fiction movie or TV series, or a comic book superhero, to illustrate his point.

That explanation would be consistent with the inerrancy of Jude. And since we can't interview Jude, we don't know for a fact how he viewed this material.

3) Jude was crediting the historicity of this incident, and he was correct. Let's consider a few points:

i) Although the immediate source may be a pseudepigraphal work, that, in turn, is glossing a canonical source. For the passage is paraphrasing Zech 3:1-2:

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. 2 And the Lord said to Satan, “The Lord rebuke you, O Satan!

As in Jude, you have a high-ranking angel rebuking Satan in the name of the Lord.

Also, in Dan 10, you have the Archangel Michael contending with a territorial spirit. So, to that extent, Jude's source has a basis in OT history.

ii) It's not unlikely that Satan would lay claim to the body of Moses. His corpse would be a prime candidate for the veneration of relics. Corpses of holy men, even reputed corpses of holy men, become the basis of shrines, pilgrimages, and prayers.

So the proper disposal of Moses' body is religiously significant. Making his corpse inaccessible—in an unmarked grave (Deut 34:6)—forestalls the development of a religious cult that rivals the true faith.

Prayer of Manasseh

What is the Roman Catholic canon of Scripture?

And it has thought it meet that a list of the sacred books be inserted in this decree, lest a doubt may arise in any one's mind, which are the books that are received by this Synod. They are as set down here below: of the Old Testament: the five books of Moses, to wit, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Josue, Judges, Ruth, four books of Kings, two of Paralipomenon, the first book of Esdras, and the second which is entitled Nehemias; Tobias, Judith, Esther, Job, the Davidical Psalter, consisting of a hundred and fifty psalms; the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Canticle of Canticles, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Isaias, Jeremias, with Baruch; Ezechiel, Daniel; the twelve minor prophets, to wit, Osee, Joel, Amos, Abdias, Jonas, Micheas, Nahum, Habacuc, Sophonias, Aggaeus, Zacharias, Malachias; two books of the Machabees, the first and the second.

Moreover, the same sacred and holy Synod,-- considering that no small utility may accrue to the

Church of God, if it be made known which out of all the Latin editions, now in circulation, of the sacred books, is to be held as authentic,--ordains and declares, that the said old and vulgate edition, which, by the lengthened usage of so many years, has been approved of in the Church, be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons and expositions, held as authentic; and that no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever.

<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct04.html>

The problem with this list is how the second paragraph conflicts with the first. The list omits the Prayer of Manasseh. Yet the Prayer of Manasseh was included in traditional editions of the Vulgate, which the second paragraph deems authentic, complete with the warning that "no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever."

By the standard of the second paragraph, the list in the first paragraph is defective. Yet the stated intention of the first paragraph was to specify which books were canonical, "lest a doubt may arise in any one's mind, which are the books that are received by this Synod."

Francis Beckwith's canonical confusions

Francis Beckwith says:

*It's my understanding that the
Palestinian Jews rejected the New
Testament as well.*

<http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2012/12/why-do-i-reject-the-apocrypha/#comment-82735>

Francis Beckwith is fond of these cute little quips. But they're intellectually shallow.

i) There's nothing inconsistent about regarding Palestinian Jews as more reliable witnesses to the OT canon than the NT canon. God revealed the OT to the Jews. For centuries, the Jews copied and recopied the OT. A chain-of-custody. That's hardly comparable to the NT.

ii) In addition, it's reasonable to distinguish between Palestinian Jews and Diaspora Jews. Jews who relied on a Greek edition of the OT were further removed from the source.

iii) Keep in mind, too, that some NT writers were Palestinian Jews. So not all Palestinians Jews rejected the NT. Consider Jewish followers of Jesus who belonged to the 1C church of Jerusalem.

It is not clear how a divided Church tradition helps the Protestant case, since by employing this argumentative strategy you seem to concede the central point of Catholicism: the Church is logically prior to the Scriptures.

Divided tradition applies to “the Church” as well as the canon. There are divergent traditions regarding the primacy of Rome.

That is, if the Church, until the Council of Trent’s definitive declaration, can live with a certain degree of ambiguity about the content of the OT canon, that means that sola scriptura was never a fundamental principle of authentic Christianity.

i) No. At best that would mean sola scriptura was never a fundamental principle of Roman Catholicism.

ii) But this isn’t really a question of sola scriptura, although Beckwith would like to recast it in those terms. If the church of Rome can live with a certain degree of ambiguity about the canon of Scripture, that means the church of Rome can live with ambiguity about when or whether God has spoken.

Ambiguity about true and false prophecy. Ambiguity about people speaking in God's name without God's authorization.

If that ambiguity applies to the canon, why not church councils and papal encyclicals?

After all, if Scripture alone applies to the Bible as a whole, then we cannot know to which particular collection of books this principle applies until the Bible's content is settled. Thus, to concede an unsettled canon for Christianity's first 15 centuries, as you do, seems to make the Catholic argument that sola scriptura was a 16th century invention, and thus not an essential Christian doctrine.

i) Needless to say, Protestants don't think Trent settled the canon. At best, Trent settled the canon for the church of Rome. And even then, Trent settled on the wrong canon.

ii) Beckwith fails to draw an elementary distinction regarding the canon:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2012/04/oracles-of-god.html>

iii) Beckwith's argument is circular. As long as the church of Rome had a monopoly on western Christendom, then, by

definition, sola scriptura wasn't fully operative. If a drug cartel controls a city, things can't return to normal until the power of the cartel is broken.

iv) Trent didn't confine itself to the OT canon. Trent settled a number of other Catholic dogmas. So, by Beckwith's logic, Tridentine dogmas were never essential Christian doctrines. Tridentine dogmas were never fundamental to authentic Christianity.

IX. Magisterium

By what authority?

In objection to sola Scriptura, a Catholic apologist says, "By what authority do you justify your interpretation?" (or words to that effect). Catholic apologists routinely frame the issue in terms of authority. Unless your interpretation is authoritative, it's just fallible private opinion.

It's striking how many Catholics find that gambit persuasive. But that's why they're Catholic.

i) Appeals to authority are used to settle disputes. But for that very reason, an argument from authority can't settle a dispute in the case of competing authorities. If the legitimacy of the authority source is the very issue in dispute, it is viciously circular for one side to appeal to his authority source to trump the opposing side.

Rather, he must first present an argument for the legitimacy of his authority source. He can't deploy an argument from authority to justify the authority source he's appealing to.

The dispute between Catholics and Protestants is in part a dispute over legitimate authority. You have two competing claimants: Scripture alone or the Roman Magisterium. It's premature and question-begging at that stage of the argument for the Catholic to mount an argument from authority based on the Magisterium, for that has yet to be established.

ii) Moreover, by attacking unaided reason, a Catholic apologist disarms himself from arguing for his authority source. His objection generates an infinite regress. If you always need some authority source to warrant your beliefs, then by what authority do you believe in the Magisterium?

The Catholic objection just pushes the demand back a step, creating a dilemma for the Catholic apologist. By what authority does he trust in his authority source? What authorizes the Magisterium?

If it's illicit in principle to argue for your position by using unaided reason, then a Catholic apologist has preemptively invalidated any arguments for the Magisterium. If he makes a case for the Magisterium, that's just his fallible private opinion. There's no referee to say which side is right. Unwittingly, Catholic apologists who takes this approach neutralize Catholic apologetics. They can never get started.

Given the Magisterium, he can appeal to the authority of the Magisterium, yet he needs a preliminary argument independent of the Magisterium to legitimate the Magisterium in the first place. But by his skepticism and relativism concerning unaided reason, he forfeits the ability to give a Protestant compelling reasons to believe in the Magisterium. His apologetic strategy is self-defeating.

It's funny how many Catholic apologists are blind to the quandary they've made for themselves. They locked themselves in a cage and thrown away the key.

Infallibility and authority

1. A common Catholic objection to the Protestant faith is that evangelicals lack certainty for their beliefs. Which presumes that Catholicism provides the remedy, but of course, Catholicism doesn't actually provide certainty—as I've often explained. But I'd like to make another couple of points:

2. There's a sense in which an evangelical can have beliefs that aren't merely true, but infallible. Although inspiration entails infallibility, infallibility doesn't require inspiration. It's possible for uninspired beliefs to be infallible.

This is what I mean. We typically say what's inerrant is without error but what's infallible is without possibility of error.

Suppose the Protestant canon is true (to take one example). Suppose God cultivates belief in the Protestant canon by providentially arranging that many Christians are raised in evangelical churches. By virtue of their religious conditioning, they not only have a true belief about the canon, but they cannot fail to have a true belief about the canon. God intends for them to believe in the Protestant canon, and he's caused that belief through selective indoctrination. Even if some of them are exposed to the Catholic argument, let's say they are unable to overcome their engrained belief in the Protestant canon. Not only do they have a true belief in that regard, but it's not psychologically possible for them to change their true belief to a false belief.

3. On a related note is the question of whether the use of reason to assess revelatory claimants makes reason more

authoritative than revelation. However, evangelicals, unlike Rome, don't claim that their assessments have divine authority. So reason is not a rival to the divine authority of Scripture. Ironically, the alleged weakness of the Protestant position is a strength. We don't claim to be divinely authoritative arbiters of the canon or divinely authoritative interpreters of Scripture. We don't deify reason in the way Rome deifies the Magisterium, by ascribing divine authority to Magisterial judgments. So we, unlike Rome, remain subordinate to the authority of Scripture.

Standing in judgment of the Magisterium

The Magisterium must seek to present a convincing case, showing how its presentation of the faith is in itself coherent and in continuity with the rest of Tradition. The authority of the papal Magisterium rests on its continuity with the teachings of previous popes. In fact, if a pope had the power to abolish the binding teachings of his predecessors, or if he had the authority even to reinterpret Holy Scripture against its evident meaning, then all his doctrinal decisions could in turn be abolished by his successor, whose successor in turn could undo or redo everything as he pleased. In this case we would not be witnessing a development of doctrine, but the dire spectacle of the Bark of Peter stranded on a sandbank.

I quoted this once before, without comment, but now I'd like to tease out the implications of the statement. Cardinal Müller is one of the premier Catholic theologians of his generation. Benedict XVI appointed him prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but Francis sacked him. So he represent the conservative wing of the church.

1. The first implication of his statement is that the veracity and legitimacy of Catholicism depends on historical continuity at the level of Sacred Tradition. Likewise, popes don't have the authority to abrogate the binding teachings of their predecessors.

2. The second implication is lost on many converts and Catholic apologists. Continuity at the level of Sacred Tradition must be demonstrable. The Magisterium must be able to show continuity, not stipulate continuity. The argument can't be that it's consistent because the Magisterium says so. No, that has it backwards. For the authority of the Magisterium hinges on continuity at the level of Sacred Tradition. So whether or not there is historical continuity at the level of Sacred Tradition is an independent judgment that must be made apart from the Magisterium. Hence, private judgment is indispensable, and prior to the Magisterium.

If sola scriptura is the problem, is the magisterium the solution?

Perhaps the major Catholic objection to the Protestant faith is that sola Scriptura "fails" to secure unanimity. It spawns "30,000" denominations. It's a "blueprint for anarchy". An infallible book is pointless without an infallible interpreter.

Here's one way to formulate the objection: Calvinists don't find Arminian interpretations convincing while Arminians don't find Calvinist interpretations convincing. Paedobaptists don't find credobaptist interpretations convincing while credobaptists don't find paedobaptist interpretations convincing. Zwinglians don't find sacramental interpretations convincing while sacramentalists don't find Zwinglian interpretations convincing. Amils don't find premil interpretations convincing while premils don't find amil interpretations convincing. Charismatics don't find cessationist interpretations convincing while cessationists don't find charismatic interpretation convincing. And so on and so forth.

Therefore, we need an authoritative tiebreaker to cast the winning vote. A referee to say which side is right.

But if that's the problem, is the Roman Magisterium the solution? No, because the magisterium simply relocates the same problem. The magisterium has failed to secure unanimity. It failed to forestall the Photian schism. It failed to forestall the Protestant Reformation. It failed to forestall the Jansenist movement. It failed to forestall the rise of modernism in the Catholic church. It failed to forestall the RadTrad backlash.

And for the same reason: Protestants don't find the purported evidence for the magisterium convincing. They don't find the biblical prooftexts and patristic prooftexts convincing. What is more, they don't find the answers provided by the magisterium to be convincing. And not just Protestants, but Eastern Orthodox. And not just outsiders, but insiders (e.g. Jansenists, modernists, RadTrads).

If God intended the magisterium to be the solution, why didn't he provide convincing evidence? Evidence sufficient so that everyone is persuaded by the "solution"? Just as rival Protestant groups find each others interpretations unconvincing, ever so many people both inside and outside the Roman communion find Magisterial interpretations unconvincing.

So the Catholic answer fails to resolve the problem it posed for itself. And that's worse for Catholics since Protestants don't concede that sola Scriptura is a disqualifying objection to begin with. If, however, you're going to say that sola Scriptura is fundamentally unsatisfactory because it fails to secure unanimity, then the onus is on you to solve the perceived problem. Catholic apologists fail to discharge their own burden of proof because their alternative merely repackages the perceived problem. So they failed on their own grounds. There's no failsafe. The magisterium is just another "answer" that lots of people find unpersuasive—like answers in general.

Running in place

Before Called to Confusion became such a dead zone, the two contributors with the most philosophical heft were Bryan Cross and Michael Liccione. Liccione was never formally a member of Called to Confusion, because—I guess—he's a revert rather than a convert. He has one argument which he recycles ad nauseam. I've been critiquing it for years. But recently on Facebook we got into a head-to-head debate. It was a useful opportunity to finally engage him directly. It looks like he dropped out of the debate. So here's an edited version of our exchange:

Hays

i) One problem with your position is that it was more pertinent in the past when the Catholic church had a long list of damnable sins and damnable errors. Likewise, that you were doomed unless you were a member of the Roman Catholic communion, in submission to the pope, receiving valid sacraments. Saving grace was channeled through the sacraments.

But post-Vatican II theology has drastically softened all that. Not only is allowance made for the salvation of non-Catholics but the salvation of non-Christians. Indeed, hopeful universalism seems to be widespread among the hierarchy. Belief that while hell exists, it may be empty. So it's no longer the high-stakes gambit it used to be, where your immortal soul hung in the balance. There's such a thing as innocent theological error. So even if Protestant are wrong, that's not a damnable error.

ii) Another problem is that it only rises to the level of fallible belief in the infallibility of the church. *If* the church is

infallible, then church teaching can be assuredly true. But a cradle Catholic or convert to Catholicism must rely on his fallible reason to convince himself that the church is infallible. Even if the church is infallible, he can't circumvent his fallible reasoning process to access that truth directly. So his conviction reduces to a fallible belief that the church is infallible. His epistemic warrant can't rise higher than the process by which he arrives at the conclusion.

Liccione

My response to them depends on the following conditional premise: *If* there is such a thing as said revelation, *then* its content cannot be reliably understood as such without a living, visible, and infallible interpreter. Without such an interpreter to resolve disputes, all we are left with is more or less plausible opinions about the content of said revelation—and human opinions are not divine revelation. We would thus have no reliable epistemic access to divine revelation precisely *as* such; hence, the assent of faith would be impossible, or at least ruled out by our epistemology...Reason will never suffice to establish, objectively, that there has been such a revelation, whether or not the Church and her role are part of said revelation. If one affirms the fact of said revelation at all, it will be on grounds that make the affirmation reasonable, but not certain. Yet on the Catholic/Orthodox understanding, divine revelation is objectively certain; and on the same understanding of the virtue of faith, it is subjectively certain...So my argument basically is that one can affirm divine revelation only by trusting in divine authority, to which we have epistemic access only through a church that is infallible under certain conditions. The Church's authority is not self-certifying; it is attested by Scripture and Tradition and supported by rational considerations.

Hays

Let's break that down. Suppose a seeker is considering whether to become Catholic. At that stage of the investigation/argument, all he has to work with are Scripture, tradition, and rational considerations. At that preliminary stage, he can't appeal to the authority of the magisterium, since that's what needs to be proven. But according to Liccione, Scripture and tradition cannot be reliably understood by unaided reason. Reason alone will never suffice to ascertain the correct interpretation with objective certainty. All he's got are more or less plausible opinions about the best interpretation of Scripture and tradition. But how can his conclusion ever rise above the starting-point? He may perceive Scripture, tradition, and rational considerations to establish the infallibility of the Church, but that's just psychological certitude rather than objective certainty. In his opinion, Scripture, tradition, and rational considerations establish the infallibility of the church, but his opinion or understanding is the product of unreliable reason. He can never escape the medium of his own mind. That's the instrument he must use to interpret/assess the documentary evidence. So how can he ever make the transition from the outside (subjective certitude) to the inside (objective certainty)? Where's the entry point to break into the charmed circle?

Liccione

I hope you grant my initial premises.

Hays

Speaking for myself, I don't concede that. I went along for the sake of argument to assess your case on your own grounds. That said, you seem to be operating with a kind of oracular, topdown model where the only way to achieve objective certainty is to have an infallible agent or agency tell you what's true and false. But is that the only available model?

Suppose God wants Betty to have saving faith, which requires knowledge, belief, and trust in certain theological tenets. Suppose God cultivates faith in Betty through social conditioning. He prompts her to attend a church where that is preached. The pastor is fallible. The sermons are fallible. But he gets the basics right with regard to the tenants of saving faith.

God uses that oblique process to cultivate saving faith in Betty. She has true beliefs, and—what is more—her beliefs are the product of a reliable belief-forming process, since God engineered the circumstances to hit that target.

Now, this isn't an oracular, topdown model. Rather, it operates at a providential and subliminal level. Betty is oblivious to the behind-the-scenes factors that are guiding her to a particular set of beliefs.

Liccione

I've already indicated that the truth, as distinct from the reasonableness, of Catholicism cannot be established by reason alone.

Hays

Actually, what you said falls short of even providing for the [superior] reasonableness of Catholicism. You've taken a very skeptical view of unaided reason, where it can only yield "more or less plausible opinions." Given your skepticism, atheism, agnosticism, evangelicalism, and Catholicism might all be reasonable options. It's reasonable to be Catholic but reasonable not to be Catholic.

So you create a dilemma: the more unreliable you make unaided reason, the less justification to have rational

confidence in the case for Catholicism—compared to rival positions.

Liccione

Suppose, just for argument's sake, that Catholicism is true. If so, then the exercise of personal judgment to accept Catholicism entails a free decision to accept the gift of faith as the Church understands it. That gift does by grace what we cannot do by nature.

Hays

A gift which you *attribute* to the Catholic church. So if the hypothetical is true, that gift will be conferred on the Catholic believer, thereby raising epistemic warrant from psychological certitude to objective certainty. But that does nothing to show that the hypothetical is true.

Liccione

Thus, when we accept it, we choose to submit our judgment to the Magisterium's, because we accept that the Magisterium speaks with divine authority, and thus infallibility, under certain conditions.

Hays

Which is either nothing more than your untrustworthy opinion regarding the divine authority of the magisterium or else a hypothetical gift of certainty. You have yet to explain how you bridge the gap.

Liccione

So *if* Catholicism is true, the faithful have justified certainty by grace, because they obey God by submitting their judgment to the Church's. Such certainty is not opposed to reason but transcends it.

Hays

Which only gives you *hypothetical* justified certainty. But since the examination of Catholicism begins from the standpoint of unreliable reason, how do you ever prove the hypothetical?

Liccione

But I have just shown that there is an alternative. Submitted personal judgment is logically possible, because Catholicism is logically possible.

Hays

But, once again, how do you make the transition from what's logically possible to what's demonstrably true? You can't appeal to "the gift of certainty by grace" to transcend your skepticism because that's a *hypothetical* advantage. It's not evidence that the hypothetical is true.

Liccione

To remain Protestant, then, is essentially to take the view that the individual as such, apart from ecclesial authority, can reliably know the deposit of faith, and thus divine revelation, precisely as such by exercising their unsubmitted personal judgment.

Hays

i) To recast the issue in your terms, are you saying that's logically impossible? Why can't God providentially guide them to arrive at the truth? Why must it be a topdown process rather than a process operating at a subliminal level (like I outlined in another comment)?

Which doesn't mean God preserves Protestant from error. Just that he cultivates saving faith in the elect.

ii) All you offer is a theological postulate. You then act as though you can use your postulate to prove your postulate.

BTW, how does your appeal to supernatural assurance differ from the Protestant inner witness of the Spirit?

Put another way, you have yet to provide "objectively certain" evidence that your theological postulate is true. As it stands, you end up right where your argument began.

Your dilemma is that you're making an epistemic or evidentiary truth-claim about objective certainty. But do you have objectively certain evidence for your claim about objective certainty?

iii) My question is not "how do you know such-and-such is the *word of God*" but how do you know that your *theological postulate* is true. You've indicated that a divine teaching office can provide certainty in a way that private judgment cannot. But you've cast that claim in hypothetical terms. You have yet to provide evidence commensurate with the nature of the claim.

For instance, if someone claims that 9 out of 10 doctors recommend Bayer aspirin, evidence commensurate with the claim would be a survey in which 9 out of 10 doctors recommend Bayer aspirin.

By contrast, you've made skeptical claims about the reliability of reason to assess the evidence for Catholicism or the interpretation of Scripture. It's reduces to more or less plausible competing opinions.

How to you get from that to objective certainty? You can't appeal to the authority of the magisterium before you establish the authority of the magisterium.

Liccione

Accordingly, I regard the notion that said authority must somehow be 'proven' from Scripture as a non-starter.

Hays

Now you're changing the subject. In our exchanges on this comment thread I never once used Protestant epistemology as the benchmark to evaluate your argument. Rather, I've been assessing your argument on your own grounds. I've confined my analysis to the assumptions you yourself provided. It's an internal critique. I haven't interjected my own theological assumptions into the discussion.

Of course my own position is fair game. I'm happy to expound and defend the Protestant alternative. However, we need to settle one thing at a time. The attempt to poke holes in the Protestant alternative doesn't salvage your own position.

Liccione

We're dealing here with a clash of interpretive paradigms, in which what counts as proof texts is predetermined by the paradigm to which one adheres.

Hays

Which pushes the question back a step, because it then shifts the issue to the evidence for one's paradigm. Is that independent of your ecclesiology? If not, what's the justification for your ecclesiology?

Liccione

And I accept the authority of the Magisterium for the reason already stated. On the other hand, if you recognize no living, visible authority as infallible under any conditions, then anybody who affirms a particular scriptural canon and its inerrancy might be wrong...

Hays

But if the criterion is whether one's position might be wrong, you haven't shown how your own position is immune from error. On the one hand, you've said a reasonable case can be made for Catholicism based on Scripture, tradition, and rational considerations.

Of course, there are Protestant patrologists, Bible scholars, and church historians who examine the same evidence and conclude that Catholicism is false. For that matter, there are Catholic patrologists, Bible scholars, and church historians who challenge traditional Catholic prooftexts and the traditional history of the papacy. So it's unclear how your preliminary appeal even demonstrates that Catholicism is *more* reasonable than the competition. Your backup move is twofold:

- i)** You appeal to the supernatural virtue of faith
- ii)** You appeal to the magisterium

Again, though, these are both theological truth-claims, so it's unclear how you can appeal to truth-claims to validate truth-claims. Whether those truth-claims are indeed true is the very issue under consideration.

Catholic tropes

I was reading a critic of a recent book on Roman Catholicism. He recycled standard Catholic tropes.

I think the problem mostly exists and subsists in the more individualist...forms of Protestantism to be frank.

i) Individualism is neutral. Individualism isn't inherently good or bad. Depends on the example. For instance, I remember reading an anecdote by David Marshall, a Christian apologist. He was teaching Chinese students English when the issue of a potential war between China and some other country came up. The students automatically sided with China. Marshall then asked, "What if China is wrong?"

It never occurred to his students to question the wisdom of their government officials. If China went to war, then China must be right.

Yet that kind of unquestioning groupthink is dangerous. It gets you killed. Sometimes individualism is a good thing. Sometimes it's important to question orders.

Take someone born into a Protestant denomination. Catholic apologists think they should convert to Rome. But it takes an individualistic mindset to question your religious upbringing.

It is not proper for Christians to be able to say mutually conflicting concepts (i.e. whether or not infants should be baptised and whether or not baptism is salvific or not) be allowed to "agree to disagree". Christians cannot say X is Christian and also Y is Christian when Y is contradictory, not supplementary, to X.

Even if that's improper, Catholicism is just one more opinion. You still have two sides on these issues. Catholicism lines up behind one side. Catholicism doesn't eliminate conflicting opinions. Rather, it represents one side of the conflict.

A Catholic apologist will say that's different! Catholicism is on the right side!

But everyone says their side is the right side to be on.

A Catholic apologist will say that if we just agreed with Rome, we wouldn't have these conflicts. Of course, that's true in the circular, tautological sense that if everyone takes the same side, then there won't be any conflict. But that doesn't tell you which side you should take.

And if you side with Rome, you're still part of the same competitive dynamic. You just picked the Catholic team to root for.

But is it true that the Church is infallible? Yes. One cannot state that the Church purports to tell the Truth when the authenticity of the Church is in question. This is why a staunchly "inclusivist" ecumenism is outright utter heresy to be repudiated, not celebrated. For this strongly contends the image that there is a divided body of Christians. So in as much as the Church purports to tell the Truth, I do not see any way someone can be claiming the name of Christ while coming up short of the glorious image that the Church is his Body on Earth which he has instituted to speak the Truth to the nations. Does it do it imperfectly? Yes. Jesus is one body, he is not a severed body nor a body with two heads, two arms, and two legs which contradict each other.

i) This illustrates the blinding power of a selective metaphor. But one question we have to ask is what the metaphor is intended to illustrate.

In addition, Scripture uses multiple metaphors for the church. Take the metaphor of the vine (Jn 10). But in that metaphor, branches can be severed from the vine. It's a pruning process. That's what the metaphor is all about.

Or take the metaphor of the flock (Jn 10; 21:15-17; Acts 2:28-29). But in that metaphor, individual sheep are separable from the flock or the shepherd. Some sheep stray. Some sheep are picked off by wolves.

Moreover, sheep are notoriously wayward. So two or more sheep might go in opposite directions.

Or take the image of Jesus removing lamps from churches (Rev 1-3).

ii) But suppose we stay with the body metaphor. Even if that's a "glorious image" of the church, that doesn't mean Rome matches the image. You can't just take a theological metaphor for the church, then assume that it must correspond to Rome.

Catholics don't begin with theological metaphors as their standard of comparison, then ask if Rome matches up. Rather, they begin with Rome as their standard of comparison, then adjust the metaphors to apply to Rome. They trim the metaphor as necessary to make it fit over their own denomination.

Uprooting "the Jewish roots of the papacy"

I'm going to comment on Brant Pitre's presentation on the "Jewish roots of the papacy":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xl3pD4l0K5U>

This is the final time I plan to write about Pitre, although I reserve the right to change my mind. As with my other posts on Pitre, I'm going to make some methodological observations about his hermeneutical grid. In this presentation he labors to document the "Jewish roots" of Mt 16:18-19 by ransacking Josephus, the Mishna, Babylonian Talmud, and Targums. Based on his putative background material, he draws "connections". For instance:

There was a central stone, pillar, or rock around which the temple was built. What the rabbis tell us is that not only was this true of the pagan temple that we have at Philippi, it was also true of the Jerusalem temple as well. In the holy of holiness, upon which rested the ark of the covenant. Rabbis had interesting traditions about this rock upon which the temple was built. It was the same stone on which Abraham offered Isaac. The rabbis had tradition that the whole world stemmed from this one stone. Jerusalem center of the earth, first thing God made.

They kept the keys of the temple in a rock—a slab of marble with a ring and chain which the keys hung from. Notice the connection? Keeper of the keys, the prefect of the priests. Sound familiar? The prefect? Captain of the temple. When the temple of Jerusalem was destroyed, the priests took the keys of the kingdom and threw them up into heaven.

It was the priests who had the temple keys. There were actual keys to the temple and they were kept by Jewish priests, so when Jesus gives Peter the keys, Peter is going to be offering the sacrificial offering of the eucharist. If Peter is the foundation stone in the holy of holies, do you already begin to see the priestly context of who was able to go into the holy of holies and put the blood on the foundation stone. The high priest and the high priest alone. So there's a connection between the foundation stone of the temple and not just any priest but the high priest. Peter is a warrior who plunders Hades. Jesus is building a new temple on Peter—the new temple of new covenant.

So what are we to make of this?

1. I'm struck by Pitre's ultramontane view of the papacy. He's the reincarnation of Ignatius Loyola. The presentation was given when Benedict XVI was pope. I wonder if Pitre is that enthusiastic about the pontificate of Francis.

He compares Mt 16 to Mt 23. He takes for granted a particular interpretation of Mt 23. He never mentions competing interpretations. Some commentators think what Jesus says about submitting to the Pharisees is sarcastic.

He really thinks Jesus is telling us that the Pharisees had binding authority to interpret Scripture. Yet many Pharisees were outspoken opponents of Jesus. They challenged his teaching. He challenged their teaching. So Jesus can hardly be issuing them a blank check. By Pitre's logic, when they say Jesus is a blasphemer, sorcerer, demoniac, and false prophet, the rank and file are obligated to accept their verdict. So Jesus would be giving his arch-enemies veto power over his messianic claims. The reason Pitre backs himself into this indefensible interpretation is that he wants to create a parallel between the binding authority of the Pharisees and the binding authority of the papacy.

2. Then there's the gullible way in which he appeals to Rabbinic legends. Not to mention the danger of anachronistic sources (e.g. Babylonian Talmud).

3. In the Gospels there are two basic sources for Christ's imagery:

i) The OT

ii) The natural world and social world.

Jesus was a keen observer. Consider all the agrarian imagery in his teaching. Or references to fishing, sheep and

shepherds, slaves and masters, banquets, children at play, women in labor, women kneading bread, and so on. The primary background for his imagery isn't to be found in rabbinic writings but in the OT and daily life in Palestine.

4. Pitre does a bait-n-switch when he compares the legendary stone on which the ark of the covenant rested in the Solomon's temple with the stone key box in the Second Temple. But even if we credit both tales, these are different "rocks/stones" with different functions and different symbolic values. So the comparison is equivocal.

5. Also, the business about the "prefect" only works in Latin. That's reading a Latin title back into the rabbinic sources.

6. Pitre thinks the parallels between Mt 16:18-19 and his rabbinic sources are nothing short of "unbelievable". It's comical how oblivious he is to the fallacy of sample selection bias. The parallels you "uncover" depend on the sources you consult. If you assume that rabbinic sources supply the background material for the imagery of Jesus, it's no great surprise that the same metaphors in rabbinic sources frequently derive from the cultus: temple, priesthood, sacrifice. That reflects the interests of the rabbis. It never dawned on Pitre that the "incredible" parallels that he uncovers are the result of his circular methodology.

If I read a book about football or poker or horse-racing, the vocabulary will have connotations that mirror the subject-matter. What a coincidence!

7. Pitre recontextualizes Mt 16:13-20 by shifting attention from the original setting around Caesarea Philippi to the temple of Jerusalem. But if Jesus wanted to his imagery to

evoke the cultus in Jerusalem, why did he take his disciples on an excursion into the boonies of gentile Palestine rather than bringing them to Jerusalem and asking his leading question within the temple precincts?

The region of Caesarea Philippi is conspicuously rocky. In addition, it was a heathen worship center. So if we take his chosen locale as an interpretive clue, Jesus is saying he will build the church right over a pagan shrine. He will take the fight to the enemy. The "rock" refers to the rocky terrain. The landscape is the literal background.

8. But even if we assume something more literary, consider the theological connotations of rocks in biblical usage. God is a rock (Deut 32:4,15,18,31). Water from the rock for the thirsty Exodus generation in the wilderness (Exod 17:6; Num 20:10).

Or, if you're going to focus on foundation stone symbolism, in the very same Gospel Jesus quotes Isa 8:14 (Mt 21:42-44). Then there's his illustration about a sandy foundation compared to a solid foundation (Mt 7:24-25).

Why not explore that material before reaching for rabbinic sources? Because it doesn't suit Pitre's agenda, that's why.

9. What about the binding/loosing imagery? There's nothing essentially or presumptively rabbinic about that. Consider standard biblical usage (e.g. Judges 15:14; 16:11; Ps 146:7; 149:8; Mt 22;13; Acts 16:26; 24:26). That, in turn, can be used figuratively (e.g. Lk 13:16).

In the very same Gospel, there's the illustration the strong man (Mt 12:29). So the metaphor can be used without any

rabbinic connotations.

10. Then there's a cluster of interrelated metaphors: locks, keys, gates, doors, and walls.

i) These are elements of an overall picture. The elements can be mentioned separately or in combination.

ii) Likewise, they pair off in antonyms: open/shut, locked/unlocked.

iii) They can be used in reference to the temple, but the imagery itself is generic. In many cases it has its basis in fortified cities with defensive walls and outer gates (e.g. Deut 3:5,9; 9:1; 28:52; Josh 6:1; 1 Sam 17:52; 23:7; 2 Sam 18:24; 2 Kgs 25:4,10; 2 Chron 8:5; 14:7; 26:6; Neh 1:3; 2:8; Ps 87:2; Acts 9:24; 14:13).

It can also be used for prisons (Acts 5:23; Rev 9:1; 20:1,3), private homes (Lk 11:7; Jn 20:19,26), or walled gardens (Num 22:24). It can be figurative (e.g. Ps 24:7,9; Isa 60:11,18; Rev 21:25). In particular, as a metaphor for the grave (Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps 9:13; 107:18).

So the imagery is flexible. Consider the diverse ways Jesus uses the imagery:

7 Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened (Mt 7:7-8).

Enter through the narrow gate ([Mt 7:13](#)).

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut ([Mt 25:10](#)).

1 Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice...7 Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep ([Jn 10:1-2,7](#)).

I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades ([Rev 1:18](#)).

See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut ([Rev 3:8](#)).

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me ([Rev 3:20](#)).

Nothing sacerdotal about the imagery. These are metaphors drawn from mundane experience. So they don't require a special explanation in rabbinic sources. They don't automatically or presumptively connote anything about the temple, priesthood, and sacrifice.

Who picks the referee?

I listened to Bishop Barron's argument for Catholicism.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWYwBDqFsuE>

It's hardly an original argument.

i) I agree with him that the Holy Spirit doesn't interpret the Bible for readers.

ii) Notice the a priori nature of the appeal: "If God saw fit to do X, then we'd expect him to do Y."

An armchair prediction, rather than evidence.

iii) As I've mentioned before, one problem with the "living voice" argument is that a primary purpose for NT letters is to settle disputes when an apostle couldn't be present to resolve the dispute in person. The written word was authoritative.

Imagine someone responding to 1 John or Galatians or Hebrews or Colossians by exclaiming, "Well, that's only a text! It's can't resolve anything without an infallible interpreter!"

But that reaction subverts the function of those letters.

iv) Finally, although Barron's referee analogy is superficially appealing, it only pushes the issue back a step. If we need a referee, then who picks the referee? By what authority do we determine who should be the referee? Suppose there's a disagreement about who should be the referee? Then we

need a referee to broker the disagreement. We need a referee to choose a referee.

So that solution fails to solve the problem it posed for itself. It's necessary to exercise independent judgment to settle on a referee, before a referee can settle anything else. But why is independent judgment necessary and reliable when selecting the referee, yet unnecessary and unreliable once the referee is chosen?

One would still need to be able to examine the Bible and church history apart from the referee to determine if a referee was God's will for the church. But doesn't that nullify the necessity of a referee in the first place?

Umpires who bet on their own team

Around the 26-31 min. mark, Bishop Barron defends the papacy:

<https://youtu.be/pcBdqwNvMIU>

1. He's discussing the difference between authentic and inauthentic theological development. Developments may deviate from the essential meaning of the original idea. So that requires the authority of the pope to play umpire.

But there's an obvious flaw in Barron's argument: an umpire isn't supposed to bet on his own team. By contrast, the pope is not a disinterested arbiter. The papacy is, in itself, a product of theological development, so popes have a vested interest in developments that aggrandize the papacy. They have a direct hand in writing their own job description. An umpire who has a personal stake in the outcome should be disqualified, because that rigs the game. So Barron's comparison backfires.

Cult-leaders and false prophets make self-serving claims. Now, it's possible to make a self-serving claim even if the claim is true, but in that event we should have some corroborative evidence independent of the claimant. Because the papacy has a direct stake in theological developments, appealing to the papacy to make the call regarding what constitutes authentic or inauthentic development of doctrine is viciously circular.

2. Barron trots out the ersatz "30,000" Protestant denomination figure as contrary to Christ's prayer for unity in Jn 17. But what kind of unity does Barron think Jn 17 refers to? Surely not doctrinal

unity. Doctrinal unity is not a requirement for membership in the church of Rome. Passing a theology exam is not a prerequisite for confirmation in the church of Rome.

3. He compares *sola Scriptura* to handing a kid a copy of *Hamlet*. The bare text of *Hamlet*. Point being: *Hamlet* requires an interpret lens. The reception history. It's borderline irresponsible to pick up the Bible and off you go.

i) It's true that the average reader will have a much better grasp of *Hamlet* if he reads an annotated edition by A. L. Rowse. But Barron knows perfectly well that most Protestant pastors have a seminary education. He knows perfectly well that Protestants produce commentaries on the Bible by OT and NT scholars. So the comparison backfires. Just as the interpretation of Shakespeare benefits from having background knowledge about his time, place, and sources of influence, Protestant exegetical scholarship does the same thing in reference to Scripture.

ii) Moreover, the proper interpretive lens isn't the reception history of the text but the original setting. Not what came later, but a Bible writer's background and the background of his target audience. The occasion, purpose, situation.

iii) Modern Catholicism subverts the historicity and supernaturalism of Scripture. Take the footnotes of [the NABRE at the USCCB website](#).

4. In addition, it's possible to overemphasize as well as underemphasize the necessity of Bible scholarship. To take a comparison, a Trekkie will get more out of some *Star Trek* movies than a novice. *Star Trek* movies have in-jokes and allusions to the *Star Trek* mythos. It's useful to

know the backstories of Vulcans, Romulans, and Klingons. It's useful to know the backstory of Spock. His hybrid psychological makeup.

However, that doesn't mean you have to be a Trekkie to make sense of a *Star Trek* movie. If well-written, it has a plot that's comprehensible to a novice. Most of the dialogue is comprehensible to a novice. If you enjoy the cheesy space western genre, you can get the gist of the movie even if you come to the movie as a novice. *Star Trek* movies operate at more than one level. At one level is the basic plot and dialogue. That's accessible to general viewers. But it also has a subtext for the fan base.

By the same token, the Bible is not a closed book unless you have a commentary by your side. Much of Scripture is accessible to a novice. Returning to Barron's illustration, T. S. Eliot wrote a famous essay on "Hamlet and His Problems". Although Eliot didn't know as much about Shakespeare's world as Rowse, yet as a poet and literary critic, he was able to analyze the play on strictly dramatic or literary terms.

By the same token, because there's so much narrative in Scripture, literary critics like Robert Alter, Leland Ryken, and Meir Sternberg explore the internal dynamics of biblical accounts without reference to the world outside the story. And that contributes to our understanding of the text. That draws attention to a dimension of meaning that's lost sight of if a commentator is preoccupied with comparing a biblical narrative to the world outside the text.

Like Shakespeare or *Star Trek*, the Bible operates at more than one level. There are different ports of entry.

Roman mojo

Let's consider the concept of church office. Before we do that, let's consider the concept of office. An office is a permanent position with temporary incumbents. Officeholders come and go but the office remains. There are many political examples of this, viz. kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers, senators, governors, mayors, generals.

Succession, in this sense, is to take over the same duties and responsibilities.

There's a difference between succession within that official framework, and instituting that framework in the first place. Take the founder of a company. He may create administrators who will run the company after he dies or retires. But they don't succeed him in the sense of doing the same thing he did. He was the only founder. And he may have greater authority than they did, since he started the operation from scratch. He makes the rules.

Or take the transition from monarchy to democracy. Say revolutionaries abolish the monarchy and establish a representative form of government based on elective office. Before that, you had royal succession. Now you have officeholders. Within each system, processors and successors are comparable to each other, but members of one system aren't comparable to members of another system. Kings aren't comparable to elected officials. There's a paradigm shift between the role of a founder and the custodial role of officeholders. Successive officeholders didn't create the office. Their duties and responsibilities are determined by the office, whereas the founder determines the official duties and responsibilities in the first place. As

the founder, his own prerogatives may be different, and more extensive, than the offices he institutes. He isn't bound by those constraints. Rather, he functions outside the system he instituted. Within the system, it's the same kind of relationship, from one incumbent to the next. But the relationship between a founder and his initial appointees or deputies is not the same kind of thing. His constitutive role is unique, including the constitutive prerogatives.

The fact that the apostles chose elders to carry on their work doesn't amount to "apostolic succession" in the sense of transferring their teaching authority to elders. That's not a logical implication of church office. That's like saying the first president is the successor to the last king. But that's equivocal. The position of president is very different from the position of an absolute monarch.

Moreover, nothing in the concept of church office requires a continuous line of succession. If, for some reason, church office was interrupted for a century, it could restart. The concept of office can be operative whether or not you have any officeholders.

Consider a hypothetical situation in which Christianity is systematically persecuted to the point where Christians die out. There are no Christians for a century. Then the brutal regime implodes. People rediscover the Bible, become Christians, and reinitialize the system of elders and deacons. It can start up at any time or place. Indeed, that happens on the mission field. It's just a question of observing the job description in the Pastorals.

Here's what the Catholic catechism says about apostolic succession:

77 "In order that the full and living Gospel might always be preserved in the Church the apostles left bishops as their successors. They gave them their own position of teaching authority."35

Indeed, "the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time."36

78 This living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, "the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes."37

"The sayings of the holy Fathers are a witness to the life-giving presence of this Tradition, showing how its riches are poured out in the practice and life of the Church, in her belief and her prayer."38

79 The Father's self-communication made through his Word in the Holy

Spirit, remains present and active in the Church: "God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the Spouse of his beloved Son. And the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church - and through her in the world - leads believers to the full truth, and makes the Word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness."39

Problem is, you can't infer that from what the NT says about elders. The Catholic paradigm is analogous to witchdoctor to transfers his mojo to his apprentice. There's this "power" that must be transmitted from one person to the next by direct contact, like an electrical current. If the flow of energy is stopped, it can't jump over the circuit breaker and resume on the other side. The Catholic paradigm is a pagan paradigm, based on magic. A magician conveys his magical powers to a successor. If he dies before transfing his mojo, it dies with him. He's the vessel of the mojo. Unless he touches someone, and empties his mojo into a new vessel, it ends with him.

Inventing apostolic succession

They began to be concerned with their own history...The Marcionite church had its beginning with Marcion...The Montanists went back to Montanus...All of these bore the names of founders whom people knew, while the Christian churches normally went back beyond the turn of the first century into the time of the apostles. Only that which can trace its history back into the earliest time, either directly or through fellowship with churches which are able to document it directly, can be genuine. In this way the concept of apostolic tradition developed and along with it, apostolic succession.

In this context people sometimes proceeded quite liberally in building the chain of tradition...Then, as now, historical thinking was overlaid with wishes.

The idea that both of them [Peter & Paul] first came to Rome after the church had already existed there for a longer time had no place in early Christian thinking, which in this case wanted to forge a connection between something they knew and the

earliest and best-known men whose names they knew.

*In the first century and the beginning of the second, the Roman church was led by a college of presbyters, as we learn reliably from 1 Clement which we have frequently mentioned. We can no more speak about an apostolic succession, by which Peter passed on the episcopal office by a laying on of hands, than we can about many other things. This idea was a product of the second century when the idea of apostolic succession inevitably developed from the concept or requirement of apostolic tradition. Both existed only after the second half of the second century. K. Aland, *A History of Christianity* (Fortress 1985), 1:118-120.*

Tell me what's true

Some years ago a student came to me in anguish, confessing that he intended to convert from his Protestantism to Roman Catholicism. He was in anguish because, of course, this would cause some consternation, if not disruption, within his family and among his friends. I asked him why he planned to convert and he said "Because I need someone else to tell me what is true." He clearly meant (and said) he wanted the pope to decide truth for him. First, with tongue in cheek, I offered to be his desired arbiter, decider, of truth. He declined my offer. Second, I pointed out to him that by deciding to convert he was deciding for himself what to believe about truth. He had not thought of that.

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2016/07/2-my-second-principle-only-i-can-decide-what-is-true-for-me/>

Although this stands on its own two feet, it's worth making some additional points:

i) What's the goal? Is it to avoid believing falsehoods? But suppose the institution you choose to tell you what's true is unreliable? If the Roman Magisterium or Eastern Orthodox tradition is not a reliable arbiter of truth, then there's certainly no presumption that you will believe fewer falsehoods. If you rely on someone else to tell you what's true, and you pick the wrong horse, you can easily end up believing more falsehoods than if you use your own judgment.

ii) What makes some people think they have the right to contract out their beliefs to a second party? What if you are directly answerable to God for what you believe? What if God takes a dim view of people who give a religious institution a blank check? What if God didn't authorize you to delegate those decisions to someone else?

iii) Joining the church of Rome or the Orthodox church is not an alternative to denominationalism. Rather, you've decided to join the Roman Catholic denomination or the Eastern Orthodox denomination.

iv) Even if, hypothetically, the idea of a magisterium sounds preferable, if the actual candidate is demonstrably unreliable, then that's a nonstarter.

v) Does God hold you accountable for having false beliefs, or does God hold you accountable for why you believe it? Suppose you make a good faith effort to believe what's true. Will God condemn you if you made an innocent mistake? If you made the most of your limited opportunities, but failed to get it right, is that culpable? Is

that what God cares about? Or was the fact that you were conscientious, that you did the best you could given your natural aptitude and the available evidence, praiseworthy even if you happen to be in error? How does Scripture prioritize our duties? For instance: Love God with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mk 12:33). Here the key consideration is the motivation.

Proto-papacy

One objection that I've raised to Catholicism is the absence of an OT magisterium. Why is that necessary under the new covenant but unnecessary under the old covenant?

I've seen some Catholic apologists counter that there was an OT magisterium in the person of the high priest. They quote **Jn 11:51** as a prooftext. A few basic problems with that appeal:

i) I don't think the point of the verse is to claim that the high priest was a prophet by virtue of his office. Rather, the point is to underline the divine irony. In God's overruling providence, he made the highest-ranking religious official unwittingly endorse the mission of Jesus. It's ironic because it comes from someone who's both an arch-enemy of Jesus and the top religious figure in Judaism.

ii) If that's supposed to be precedent for the Roman magisterial, then by analogy, the Roman Magisterium persecutes the faithful.

iii) In addition, the high priesthood was in the hands of the Sadducees for generations. They were heretics. They denied the existence of angels, an immortal soul, and the resurrection of the body. By analogy, the Roman magisterium can teach heresy!

Treating the high priesthood as a proto-papacy or proto-magisterium is a parallel that backfires.

You could be wrong!

An exchange I had with a Catholic apologist (indeed, a sedevacantist!):

It is interesting in a context of how Reformed presuppositionalists and Calvinists criticize evidentialists for "reducing Christian faith to probability" (an example is James White's constant criticism of William Lane Craig on these basis).

- i)** James White is not my standard of comparison.
- ii)** There is, moreover, a difference between knowing the truth and proving the truth. Arguments may be probable.

But if there is really no infallible authority, than Christian faith is indeed reduced to probability - everything, including Trinity and Deity of Christ, are merely "more probable interpretation of Scripture", and the truthfulness of Christianity is merely "more probable" than Christianity being false.

i) God can and generally does foster saving faith by putting the elect in churches where they are indoctrinated in the true Gospel. The fact that arguments may be probable doesn't mean the providential process of inculcating Christian faith is probable. A reliable belief-forming process can produce true, warranted beliefs.

ii) Moreover, unless you think God punishes Christians for innocent mistakes, unless you think God punishes Christians for holding mistaken beliefs through no fault of their own, because they had to rely on their individual aptitude and the available evidence, there's nothing scandalous about the consequence you derive.

An atheist will say you push the problem on step back regarding authority of the Bible. It is based on your private judgment and you could be wrong.

No, an atheist won't say that. Rather, it's Catholic apologists who are hung-up on "private judgment".

But that is begging the question. You assume that Trinity, penal substitution etc. are true and say that God will lead people to churches which teach that doctrine. Unitarians and Jehovah's

Witness could say as much about their doctrines and their churches.

i) Competing opinions are not equivalent arguments.

ii) You missed the point. I'm referring to simple Christians who lack the aptitude to defend their faith by reason and evidence. In their case, God fosters saving faith through social conditioning, by putting them in churches where they hear the true Gospel.

That doesn't mean knowing or proving the truth necessarily depends on finding a good church. To the contrary, Christian intellectuals can acquire that information independent of church attendance. And they have the aptitude to defend their beliefs.

I find your responses wanting.

I find your objections wanting. Your approval is not my touchstone.

Was there a Jewish Magisterium?

One problem for Catholic apologists is the fact that there was no equivalent to the Roman Magisterium in OT times or the Intertestamental period. But how can a Magisterium be essential to the new covenant community when it was inessential to the old covenant community?

Some Catholic apologists bite the bullet and say OT religion was inferior in that respect. Yet that fails to explain how Jews could even know what the Bible was, if a Magisterium is so indispensable.

Other Catholic apologists claim there was a Jewish Magisterium. They have two prooftexts: Mt 23:1-3 and Jn 11:51.

i) A general problem is the Catholic conundrum of proving Catholicism from Scripture. Except in the handful of cases where the Magisterium has given its "infallible" interpretation of this or that verse of Scripture, a Catholic apologist who ventures to prove Catholicism from Scripture must tacitly endorse the right of private judgment. The Catholic apologist is offering his personal interpretation of his prooftexts. But unless Scripture is perspicuous, and he has the right to exercise private judgment on the meaning of Scripture, he's conceding Protestant epistemology and hermeneutics. It's a self-defeating exercise. Frankly, it stalls at that point. There's nothing more we need to discuss.

But for the sake of completeness, let's consider the two prooftexts:

**Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,
2 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat,
3 so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not
the works they do. For they preach, but do not
practice (Mt 23:1-3).**

ii) Catholics take this to mean the scribes and Pharisees taught with the same authority as Moses. However, a glaring problem that interpretation is that Jesus frequently critiques the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. Indeed, in this very discourse, he calls them "blind guides." It would be wildly inconsistent for him to issue them a blank check.

iii) As a result, commentators like France and Carson think the statement is a sarcastic set-up for what follows. And that's a reasonable interpretation.

iv) Nolland offers a different explanation. At a time and place, when literacy spotty and most Jews and Christians didn't own private copies of Scripture, the scribes and Pharisees were "walking copies" of the Torah. They had committed large portions of the OT to memory.

If you wanted to know what the OT said, consult a scribe or Pharisee. That's distinct from their understanding of what it meant—or how to apply it. And I think that's a reasonable interpretation.

**49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all.
50 Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that**

the whole nation should perish.” 51 He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation (Jn 11:49-51).

What's the significance of his high priesthood in relation to his oracle? What's the intended link?

i) Some Catholic apologists take this to mean that Caiaphas was prophetic by virtue of his office. Prophetic inspiration came with the office.

A problem with that claim is that there's no evidence that prophetic inspiration was associated with the high priesthood in general. At best, some individual high priests were credited with the gift of prophecy.

Moreover, we must make allowance for our sources. Josephus was, himself, a priest—with prophetic pretensions—so he's biased. We'd expect him to make exaggerated claims about his own profession.

ii) In context, the link is ironic and topical. As chief priest, Caiaphas is Christ's highest ranking religious opponent. Yet he is, unwittingly, vouching for the mission of Christ. There's a double irony. He's prescient, but blind to his own prescience. And he's corroborating the claims of Jesus.

Status quo appeals

An impromptu debate I had on Facebook (with minor editorial revisions):

To begin with, evangelicals aren't bound by that article of the creed ("he descended into hell"). It's just a dubious tradition. I think evangelicals should edit it out of the creed. However, if you wish to read an evangelical defense of that article, <http://www.upper-register.com/papers/descended-into-hell.pdf>

If evangelicals aren't bound by the ancient creeds, how is that not "solo scriptura"?

Also: dubious tradition attested to unanimously by the fathers. About which Augustine said only a heretic would deny.

I don't agree with the sola/solo dichotomy of Mathison et al. Also depends on what you mean by "solo scriptura". That's generally a term of abuse.

From a Protestant standpoint, the church fathers aren't authority figures. I don't pretend that they are in a position to know more than they did.

You probably shouldn't pretend to speak for all Protestants.

So you labor under the illusion that according to Protestant epistemology, the church fathers are authority figures? Where did you come up with that?

Um Calvin, Luther, etc etc etc You're kidding right?

Luther and Calvin cite the church fathers because they are responding to Catholic theologians on their own grounds. They're documenting that it's Rome that changed. In addition, church fathers like Augustine say things they often agree with. That's not the same thing as making church fathers authority figures. Don't you know the difference?

And you seem to be using one illicit argument from authority (e.g. Luther/Calvin say so!") to prop up another illicit argument from authority ("the church fathers say so!").

The typical reformed answer that I've read and heard is that the fathers, councils, creeds, etc are an authority but not THE authority.

i) Uninspired creeds and councils have no intrinsic authority. If you wish to frame the issue in terms of authority, they are only authoritative insofar as they are true. And their truth is derivative.

ii) A denomination can treat a creed as authoritative. It can use a creed as a standard for ordination, church membership, hiring/firing seminary professors, &c. That's a kind of social contract.

iii) The descent into hell shouldn't be in a creed. No point reinterpreting it. Just admit it was a mistake and move on.

I'm glad that you admit that it's just you and Jesus.

That's the kind of caricature I expected. Your illogical notion that the alternative to the church fathers as authority figures is "just you and Jesus". That's so simplistic. Rather, it's a question of reason and evidence. If a church father has a good argument, then we go with the best argument, whatever the source, whether it's a church father or modern commentator. There's an elementary distinction between opinions and arguments. The mere opinion of a church father isn't presumptively true.

Of course it is just you and Jesus. While you think that it might be a "caricature", you've just defended the idea that creeds, councils, fathers, nothing has any authority over your understanding of scripture but your own conscience. It isn't illogical but the logical conclusion of what you're suggesting. You and Jesus.

Now you're trotting out the hackneyed argument of dime-a-dozen Catholic apologists who imagine there's an alternative to reliance on one's own understanding. That, however, is self-defeating, for their preference for Catholicism ultimately boils down to their personal perception of where the truth lies. That's unavoidable. You're no exception.

Okay let's take it back to the creed then. The fathers, absolutely unanimously, east and west, suggest that scripture teaches Christ descended to the dead. The clause is in both the apostles creed and the Athanasian Creed. Are you really suggesting that something so universally believed by Christians for 1800 years is incorrect? And if you believe it is incorrect, and that the individual has the right to throw out the clause, do you not see the epistemic problem for the Protestant? It puts one in a position where no single article of faith is accepted but everything believed can be reimagined or ejected on the basis of not appealing to the individual conscience.

i) To begin with, appeals to the consensus patrum are often inaccurate.

ii) Keep in mind that even if (ex hypothesi) Jesus went to hell when he died, there could be no eyewitnesses to that event this side of the grave.

iii) Most Christians back then were uneducated. So you're appealing to a tiny subset of Christians. That's a very unrepresentative sample.

iv) Do recall that "heresy" was punishable as a crime. That discourages public dissent.

v) It's no more of a problem to say the church fathers are wrong than to say evangelicals are wrong. However you slice it, someone is mistaken. God has not ensured uniformity in Christian belief. God allows some class of Christians to be mistaken. If Lutherans are right on some issues, then Roman Catholics are wrong, and vice versa (to take one example).

Suppose an Orthodox Jew tells a Christian, "Are you really suggesting that God failed to protect the Chosen People from disbelieving the true messiah?"

Why is it unacceptable for you suppose that God failed to protect the church fathers from falsely believing the descensus ad infernos, but acceptable for you to suppose that God failed to protect the vast majority of Jews from repudiating the prophesied messiah?

Whatever side come down on, God fails to protect large bodies of professing Christians from a serious error. Consider Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox. They have fundamental disagreements with each

other. Minimally, God failed to protect two of the three groups from falling into serious doctrinal error. Possibly he failed to protect all three groups. Not to mention dissension within those groups, viz. Old Calendarists, Hesychast controversy.

How is that not an epistemic problem for the high-church tradition?

So the idea that there's a problem if God allows many professing Christians to be in error is unavoidable, since that's going to be the case regardless of which side you take.

vi) I haven't appealed to "individual conscience". That's your lingo. I didn't make this an issue of conscience.

If you distrust the adequacy of reason, then you disqualify yourself from arguing for your own position. Take an evangelical convert to Rome. They interpret the Bible and church fathers to support Roman Catholicism. It seems to them that Catholicism is true. That's irreducibly an exercise in private judgment. You can't get around that.

It puts one in a position where no single article of faith is accepted but everything believed can be reimagined or ejected on the basis of not appealing to the individual conscience.

Creeds are not the ultimate standard of comparison. Only revelation enjoys that distinction.

They'll never win the continuity argument, but if Protestants can pretend to care about it, it can trick a ton of people.

Catholics will never win the continuity argument either. Newman chucked the continuity argument for what he euphemistically dubbed the theory of development.

Newman didn't create the idea of the development of Christian doctrine. The idea is present in Origen, Augustine, and probably most clearly St. Vincent of Lerins. Heck, even Aquinas speaks on it.

The Vincentian canon is the polar opposite of development. Try to differentiate between what they claim and the reality.

How ecumenical are "ecumenical councils"?

Recently I had a marathon debate on Facebook with some Catholics and one Orthodox commenters. Here's part of what I said:

Historical exegesis and linguistic semantics aren't decoder rings.

"Lately, I've been working through the Ante-Nicene fathers."

Have you been using your "personal decoder ring that you found in a *Cracker Jack* box" to interpret them?

"Yes, every Protestant sect is filled with historians and linguists... Good luck with that."

You depend on the same thing to evaluate the historical claims of Rome. So your remark is self-defeating.

"I don't hold myself up as the final authority in reading the Church Fathers, or the Bible. You hold yourself in that position."

Which embroils you in vicious circularity. You must exercise your private judgment to determine if you think the documentary evidence supports the claims of Rome. But you can't then turn around and act as if Rome is the final authority, which supersedes your private judgment, for your token submission to the Magisterium is ultimately subservient to your independent assessment of the documentary evidence. Daniel remains the arbiter from start to finish.

"Christ prayed for unity, and gave us a Church."

Do you think Christ's prayer has gone unanswered for 2000 years? When do you think God is going to answer Christ's prayer?

"Yes, studying history and the Church increases my confidence in it, but my submission to the authority of the Church is an act of faith, not of some rationalization."

So what's the basis for your confidence in the authority of Rome? Is it just an act of blind faith? A leap into the dark?

What's the relationship between your study and your confidence in the church of Rome? Is your faith in the Roman church independent of how you interpret the

documentary evidence? If so, then what's your evidence that the church of Rome has the authority you impute to it? If you don't base your confidence in Rome on the documentary evidence, which you must interpret for yourself, then your faith is arbitrary.

Put another way, is your faith in Rome conditional or unconditional? You say your study "increases your confidence" in Rome. Does that mean you began by entrusting himself to the church of Rome apart from study?

Do you think the authority of the Roman church provides a level of certainty lacking in your private judgment? But isn't your identification of Rome as the one true church based on your study? When you treat your personal study as uncertain, how can you then pretend that Rome affords certainty? For your confidence in the certainties of Rome result from your study. How can the uncertainties of your personal study yield confidence in the certainties of Rome, when that's the product of your study? How can the conclusion be more certain than the source of the conclusion?

You proceed *as if* Rome furnishes a level of certainty absent from your private judgment, yet your confidence in Rome can be no more or less certain than the private judgment by which you arrived at that conclusion.

It's like saying, if the deck is stacked, it's a dead certainty that I will be dealt a full house, but I'm uncertain that the deck is stacked. The conclusion can't rise higher than the process of reasoning that underwrites the conclusion.

Anyone of sufficient intelligence can read good commentaries.

"And yet there are thousands of Protestant denominations with different views on all of this. So are all of them stupid except you?"

Roman Catholicism is one of the "thousands" of Christian denominations. So are all of them stupid except for you?

"Catholicism is not a denomination."

Catholicism is a sect.

"No, with the Orthodox Church, Catholicism forms the Apostolic Church."

I understand your partisan position—which illustrates the fact that his statement involves a tendentious contrast. He exempts his own "church" from the "thousands". But that's a truth by definition tactic.

"Given that he's Catholic, he's simply being true to what he believes. I would also hold that the Orthodox Church is the una sancta."

Yes, he take his own denomination as the standard of comparison. That's only convincing to like-minded people.

He's responding to something I didn't say. The question at issue was "special access," not consensus.

"Of course, if Steve knows better than all of the ecumenical councils, it really isn't surprising that he would find himself to be the smartest person in the room."

Of course, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox can't agree with each other on which councils are, in fact, "all" the ecumenical councils. Since he apparently knows the answer, he must regard himself as the smartest person in the room.

Moreover, that backfires. By his logic, if you can even call it logic, unless a Christian submits to Lateran IV or the Council of Trent, he must regard himself as the smartest man in the room. Yet that's self-incriminating on his part, because there is no consensus on which councils are ecumenical, or what makes a council ecumenical. When Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Oriental Orthodox disagree on that central issue (central for *them*), by his logic, that can only be adjudicated by believing you're the smartest man in the room.

What are his criteria for distinguishing an ecumenical council from a local council or robber council? There are no unanimous criteria. There are in fact competing theories about what makes a council ecumenical. Take receptionism.

What makes a gathering of a few hundred bishops from the Eastern Roman Empire a representative sample for the global church? Indeed, there was no global church at the time of ancient church councils. What makes a particular time and place ipso facto definitive for every time and place?

Some truths are timeless, yet he isn't lodging a direct appeal to truth, but mounting an argument from authority. By his logic, a few hundred bishops were the smartest men in the room. Yet there've been billions of Christians in the intervening centuries. So, once more, what makes a few hundred bishops a representative sample group?

If the question at issue is eternal generation, that belief need to be justified by suitable evidence. Christianity is a revealed religion. Where's the revelatory evidence for eternal generation?

You have some traditional prooftexts, but that's only as good as the meaning of a Greek compound word, and that's now disputed even by Roman Catholic scholars. So this isn't just *my* position.

"It's not in contention at all -- they were declared dogmatically by the Orthodox Church in Nicea, Constantinople and Ephesus."

An illicit argument from authority. That appeal depends on a particular ecclesiology which is, in itself, a bone of

contention. I'm not Eastern Orthodox, So I don't grant that standard of comparison.

When Protestants debate Catholics, or Catholics debate Orthodox, it ultimately devolves into the upstream issue of ecclesiology rather than the downstream issue of the particular doctrine.

"No, but when you go out on a limb by yourself and fail very hard, you should have the humility to go back to the councils and creeds to see how you can better map your linguistic framework onto theirs. If you can't, I would recommend deferring to them. If you won't, then accept that you are a formal heretic, since you understand the difference but refuse to submit to the Church."

That's a classic example of Catholic playacting, where you get swept up in role-playing.

I'm not answerable to Catholic bishops. That's not the divine standard of judgment. I'm answerable to God via biblical revelation.

BTW, it's hard for people to submit to "the councils" even if they wish to since theologians draw ad hoc distinctions

regard which conciliar statements are fallible and which are infallible.

By the definition of your sect, I'm "formal heretic" because I deny the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary. But since I don't cede to your sect the prerogative to define reality, color me unimpressed.

According to rabbinical Judaism, Christians are "formal heretics". I'm I supposed to lose sleep over that?

"Perhaps you will be the one person on your own who used your own concepts to arrive at the truth."

You are using your own concepts to arrive at what he deems to be truth (i.e. Roman Catholicism).

"I don't expect you will be impressed. I think it would be essential to all formal heretics that they are unimpressed by the fact that a Catholic would identify them as such."

When people can't win the argument through rational persuasion, they resort to intimidation tactics.

Conversely, Protestants like me consider the input of many other Christians when we read commentaries, theologians,

&c.

Some Catholic commenters are guilty of an illicit argument from authority. Appealing to the opinion of dead bishops isn't a given when disputing with Protestants. You can't just reason *from* your Catholic assumptions. Rather, you must reason *for* your Catholic assumptions. An argument from authority is tendentious unless both sides grant the legitimacy of that benchmark.

Mind you, dead bishops sometimes got it right, but that's a case of judging their conclusions by the quality of their supporting arguments, rather than deferring to them as unquestioned authority figures.

Quest for the pot of gold at the end of the Roman rainbow

I've been debating some Catholics on Facebook. Here's a sample:

Hays

A basic problem with Catholic theology is how evolving dogmas become more specific the further we get away from events, eyewitnesses, and living memory. Dogmas increasingly detailed in inverse proportion to the availability of reliable historical sources. To someone not already committed to the system, that's a wee bit suspicious.

Tait

Do you apply this to the differences between Mark and Matthew/Luke? If not, why not?"

Hays

The Synoptic Gospels are all 1C documents. Matthew and Luke are maybe 10-15 years later. Eyewitnesses are still alive. Living memory is still in place.

That's hardly comparable to theological traditions that surface generations later, much less centuries later.

Assuming, moreover, traditional authorship (for which defenses are readily available), Matthew and Luke aren't merely dependent on Mark. In addition to Mark, they have independent sources of information. In the case of Matthew, firsthand knowledge. In the case of Luke, his extensive contacts with contemporaries of Jesus.

"Also, doesn't this argument also condemn Trinitarian theology?"

Scholars like Richard Bauckham, Gordon Fee, Simon Gathercole, Sigurd Grindheim, M. J. Harris, Larry Hurtado, Leon Morris, and P. T. O'Brien among others have meticulously documented a high Christology in the NT.

Tait

So you would deny the consensus of most scholars that Matthew and Luke are later...

Hays

I said in my initial response to you that I think Matthew and Luke are probably about 10-15 years later than Mark. I also explained why I don't think that's significant.

"and that their greater detail on a number of points (including, as it happens, that favorite Catholic proof-text Matthew 16) is the result of early doctrinal development?"

No, I think the main difference is that Mark has a narrative focus. He writes about events, especially spectacular events (miracles, exorcisms).

By contrast, Matthew and Luke include a lot of material from the teaching ministry of Christ. They take over Mark's

basic narrative, but they add a pedagogical dimension that's largely lacking in Mark. I don't think that's theological development.

"You find no significance whatever in the fact that neither Mark nor Paul says anything about the virginal conception, while Matthew and Luke do?"

Paul wasn't writing a life of Christ. And he may not have had enough independent information to do so. Paul is mainly concerned with theological interpretation. Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy. The redemptive significance of Christ's death and Resurrection. Things like that.

It's not just that Mark doesn't discuss the virgin birth. He doesn't have a nativity account in general.

We can speculate on why that's the case. According to Acts 12:12, Mark was a native of Jerusalem. If so, he may well have been an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus on occasions when Jesus was in town. By the same token, he may have tagged along to see and hear Jesus in other parts of Palestine and Samaria. As we know, there were crowds who followed Jesus around. Everywhere Jesus went was within walking distance of Mark's hometown.

What I'm suggesting is that Mark may have largely confined himself to reporting events that he personally observed during the public ministry of Christ. But Christ's nativity were before his time. He wasn't around, at that time and place, to witness that.

Which is not to deny that he probably got some additional information from questioning the disciples. But you can only get particular answers if you know what to ask. So there's some circularity there. Unless you already knew about the virgin birth, it wouldn't occur to you to ask about it.

"You want to bracket out the first century from the rules of historical development that you apply to the rest of church history, even when normal application of historical methodology would lead to seeing the beginnings of later trajectories in the first century."

I don't know quite what that's supposed to mean. If I write a biography, and I'm not making stuff up, then I'm limited to what actually happened. There's no room for developing the past. That's over and done with.

There can be development at the level of theological interpretation. However, to be an authentic development, that must be constrained by what actually happened.

"And I wasn't talking about a generic 'high Christology,' which, defined broadly enough, would cover all the rival theologies of the fourth century, but

about the theology enshrined in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed."

I'd say Nicene Christology is actually lower than NT Christology. We could get into that, if you wish.

Bradley

The circularity of the argument is broken by history.

Hays

Actually, the claim of a 1C monepiscopate is broken by history. The claim of apostolic succession is broken by history.

"On the other hand, I would like to hear the argument that will make 'the church' of 1 Tim 3:15 something that didn't appear until the 16th century."

I already explained that. If the church is the people of God, the community of faith, then you always had that.

"The fallacy of the alleged argument is that the text is being used to justify the infallibility of the Catholic church but

nothing says that the text was referring to the Catholic Church."

1 Tim 3:15 says nothing about the infallibility of the church. For that matter, churches planted by apostles were hardly infallible. That's why we have so many NT letters correcting errant churches.

"...hence, every local church could determine its own canon of the bible."

How is that worse than one man (the pope) determining the canon of Scripture for everyone, if that one man is actually fallible?

Hays

DeLuca,

i) To begin with, the way you frame the question is prejudicial. You beg the question by assuming that an authority figure must make these determinations.

It's not an issue of who decides, but the basis on which decisions are made. Having good reasons.

ii) You then quote 1 Tim 3:15, but that doesn't say anything about the church's authority or prerogatives. You imported those categories into your prooftext.

iii) In addition, it's funny when Roman Catholics quote Bible verses about "the Church," because, for them, "the Church"

instantly shrinks down to the papacy or current pope or so-called ecumenical councils.

But, of course, Paul didn't say anything about the pope or papacy or a episcopal council in 1 Tim 3:15.

iv) Moreover, Paul doesn't say the church is the source of truth. And he doesn't say the church has the authority or prerogative to determine the truth. Rather, the church is tasked with the responsibility of upholding the truth.

"Determine" is ambiguous. That can mean "ascertain" or "arbitrate". Those are two very different concepts. To ascertain is an act of understanding. To arbitrate is an act of authority. To obligate other people.

v) In Pauline ecclesiology, the church is the people of God. Christians. Hence, Christians have a duty to uphold the truth.

So, for instance, you had mid-1C churches planted by Paul. It was incumbent on individual members comprising the congregation to uphold what Paul taught them. They received the truth from St. Paul. Their duty was to remain faithful to what he taught them—or in some cases his handpicked deputies.

BTW, you yourself had to determine what your proof-text (1 Tim 3:15) meant for you to use it in an argument. Your denomination (i.e. the church of Rome) can't very well determine that for you, because you have to know if it's even applicable to your denomination. Unless it refers to your church, or includes your church, then your church isn't a ground and pillar of truth. In which case it isn't qualified to interpret that passage on your behalf.

That's a Catholic conundrum. You can't rely on your denomination to determine what is true before you determine that your denomination is a rightful candidate for that distinction.

De Luca

The 'Church' is not set up as a democracy so that every Christian has an equal vote as to 'what is and is not' the case regarding doctrines and beliefs of the Christian tradition.

Hays

I didn't frame the issue in terms of every Christian having an equal voice, but in terms of the quality of the evidence or argumentation that's given in support of doctrine and belief. Not all arguments are equal in value. There are good arguments and bad arguments, reliable evidence and unreliable evidence, or no evidence at all.

"Authority was handed to certain (persons) by Christ. The power to bind and loose is a unique authority given to the disciples..."

No doubt the apostles had authority. They are dead.

"Surely, you don't think that somehow any baptized Christian has an authoritative say so about the nature of

the hypostatic union of Jesus, for example."

You keep recasting the issue in terms of authority rather than truth, evidence, or reason. I reject the imposition of your categories.

It's not a question of whether any particular Christian has the right, but whether what he say is right.

"So the question is... who does? Well, as Catholic's we can point historically to an unbroken chain of authority that has existed since the first century."

You can point to claimants. Even at that level, you can't distinguish a pope from an antipope.

"So was there no such thing as a legitimate authority residing in the church until the reformation?"

You keep making authority the standard of comparison. That's something you argue from, rather than something you argue for.

BTW, the church fathers themselves were often members of the upper class. Minimally, they were drawn from the

educated classes—or sometimes Roman aristocrats. Even if they weren't nobility, they were socially conditioned by a cultural milieu that had emperors, kings, and aristocrats. So it's not surprising that they view ecclesiology in autocratic terms.

"I'm addressing the epistemic problem of how we know what to believe and what not to believe."

Which you can't exegete from your prooftext (1 Tim 3:15).

"Where should we go today?"

If it can't be resolved by exegesis, then it can't be resolved. Some questions remain open questions.

"Whenever the issue could not be handled in a small community, it then would be taken to a larger council as seen throughout Christian history. Many of their declarations, I would imagine you actually think are binding on all Christians."

They're only binding insofar as they are true, and not because they are authorities.

"The salient point is that Jesus established a single Church. Within this body he gave the authority to certain people to shepherd the flock. So, for example, in the book of Acts when it had been decided that gentiles needed not to be circumcised to be included into the new covenant people of God, you and me and the rest of the Church are bound to that decision, despite there being possibly very good reasons why circumcision should have remained."

i) That was long before the NT was completed.

ii) The people calling the shots in Acts 15 are apostles, plus a stepbrother of Jesus. They're dead.

De Luca

...but one very good reason why I would argue that the Catholic's and Orthodox has something of a unique claim to legitimate authority is the mere fact that they were simply the only game in town. There wasn't any such thing as Baptists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists etc. Protestant shoots didn't spring up for another 1,500 years.

Hays

i) Since dissenters were often severely persecuted, that's a disincentive to rival views springing up.

ii) There wasn't such a thing as Roman Catholics who believed what Vatican II says about non-Christian religions in Nostra Aetate until the mid-20C. There wasn't such a thing as Roman Catholic theistic evolutionists until Darwin. There wasn't such a thing as Catholics who redefined tradition as development until Newman. There wasn't such a thing as Catholic pacifists or Catholic opponents of capital punishment until the late 20C. There have been a number of striking theological innovations or reversals in Catholic theology that post-date the Reformation. So you play with fire when you attack Protestant theology as theologically innovative. You're setting a wildfire that will burn down your own position.

De Luca

This argument actually stands opposition to the scriptures themselves. The OT 'scriptures' known to the apostles would have commanded that circumcision still be in place. And yet without any *scriptural precedent* the leaders of the Church decided that no such requirement would continue in Church for gentiles coming in. It seems to me if the first century church didn't function under SS, why think we should? Odd."

Hays

Nice illustration of people who don't grasp the position they presume to attack. The Protestant position is that not sola Scriptura was operative during the period of public revelation.

De Luca

We have to logically recognize that it's the Church that Christ gave the power to 'bind and loose', (as protected by the Holy Spirit)"

Hays

Unfortunately for you, that promise isn't made to popes, bishops, and priests.

"The 'scriptures' are a product of the Church, not the other way around."

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel would be fascinated to learn the Church produced their oracles.

Even in NT times, De Luca's statement is demonstrably false. The church didn't produce the letters of Paul—Paul did. The church didn't produce John's Gospel—John did. And so on and so forth.

Catholics constantly operate with this illicit substitution.

De Luca

How are you so sure about this? Care to provide an argument ??

Hays

The onus is not on me to disprove a claim for which you provide no evidence. You alluded to Mt 18:17. There's nothing in that verse, or the pericope, or the whole Gospel of Matthew, that unpacks "the church" in terms of popes, bishops, and priests. Likewise, there's nothing in that verse, or the surrounding context, that limits the binding and loosing to a subset of church members. This is you reading

the Bible through Catholic glasses, where you see Catholicism in you prooftexts, not because it's there, but because Catholicism is etched on your glasses, so wherever you look, that's projected onto the object. It's in the lens, not the text.

"I was referencing the NT."

Then you shouldn't say "the scriptures," since that designation includes the OT.

"This seems to be a bit muddleheaded. Folks like John and Paul and the other authors of the NT who are unknown are presumably members of the 'Church'."

And Peter was a husband. That doesn't mean his wife is married to the church. John was a fisherman. That doesn't mean the church is a fisherman.

It's your own equation that's hopelessly muddleheaded.

"One precedes the other. Christ didn't establish a book, he established a Church."

He established more than one thing. For instance, he established the Apostolate. That's not the church.

And some of them wrote Scripture, as a part of their apostolic duties.

"with authority that would eventually write stuff down."

"The church" didn't write the NT. You repeated the same fallacy.

"You keep taking stabs at the CC. (with rather weak objections but nevertheless) however, I've yet to see one argument as to why you think the tradition you hold is correct."

Maybe you should complete unfinished business on other comment threads before changing the subject.

When interacting with Protestants (or at least with me), your approach takes the following form. In essence you say, "Given the Catholic paradigm, how would a Protestant answer this question?" Or, "Given the Catholic paradigm, how would a Protestant solve this problem?"

That's a nonstarter for me since I can't give the right answer to the wrong question. I don't grant your paradigm. From my perspective, you're asking the wrong questions. Your questions are conditioned by your Catholic paradigm.

Likewise, you find Protestant theology problematic based on your Catholic frame of reference.

Now, that's understandable given your viewpoint, but you're not arguing for Catholicism; rather, you're arguing from Catholicism, which gives me no reason to accept that frame of reference.

For instance, you keep appealing to your authority source, but you haven't begun to demonstrate how you verify your authority source in the first place. In philosophy, your approach is called the problem of the criterion. If you think you need a criterion to know anything, then you can't know anything because you can't establish your criterion. If you think you always need a referee to arbitrate theological disputes, that generates an infinite regress, for by what criterion do you determine the right arbiter? That's a preliminary judgment you'd have to be able to make apart from an arbiter.

Let's put the same point another way; either you think arguments are adequate to determine the best position or not. If you deny that arguments are adequate, then you can't argue for Catholicism.

De Luca

Let me ask you a question. Is there a specific place or institution that has held authority since the time of the Church's inception??

Hays

No. At the inception there was apostolic authority. But that kind of authority died with the apostles.

"If you reject the CC claims to authority and presumably that of the Orthodox as well, can you tell me if there is indeed a line of authority since the beginning and where to find it today??"

i) We need to define "authority". Ecclesiastical authority is conditional. Elders have disciplinary authority, but that's fallible. Church discipline is sometimes mistaken. There's no duty to submit to error.

Elders and denominations have the right and duty to teach revealed truth. Creeds and sermons are authoritative insofar as they are true, since truth is authoritative. We have an obligation to believe the truth. Creeds and sermons are not authoritative insofar as they are false.

ii) Ecclesiastical authority needn't be a continuous line of authority. It exists when the conditions exist. And that can come and go. For instance, if missionaries plant churches, those churches have church officers. Church officers have authority (as I defined it). But if Christianity dies out at that time or place, then there's a "break" in the authority. It can, however, be restarted at any time or place.

You have yet to explain why you're obsessed with authority rather than truth and evidence.

De Luca

So when in Church history did SS become operative?

Hays

Scripture was always operative, beginning with the Pentateuch. Sola scripture was operative during the Intertestamental period. And Sola Scripture once again became operative after there was no other comparable evidence. Initially, that would be person-variable. Initially, you had some Christians who learned Christian theology direct from the apostles. Even in that case, Scripture was more reliable than memory.

And your memories die with you. You can share memories, like family lore is passed down by word of mouth. But that dwindles with the passage of time.

De Luca

Why think this assertion is true? Can you provide some 'scriptural' evidence or perhaps cite some church fathers that hold this view? I'm curious.

Hays

Because you can't have apostolic authority without apostles. So unless you think the Apostolate is a continuous office, it died with the apostles. And what were criteria for an apostle?

21 So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, 22 beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection" ([Acts 1:21-22](#)).

"The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works" (2 Cor 12:12).

Acts 1:21-22 manifestly has a chronological cutoff, barring a miraculous exception, like Paul's Christophany (Acts 9).

Likewise, Rome doesn't even claim that 2 Cor 12:12 is a condition for the episcopate.

"In fact, speaking of the fathers, don't you find it odd that within church history the VAST majority of Christians actually hold to a form of apostolic succession throughout the ages?"

How in hell would you know that the vast majority of Christians held to a "form" (weasel word alert) of apostolic succession? Do you have polling data on what the vast majority of Christians believed about apostolic succession? What percentage of Christians ever wrote about that?

"Your view seems to be quite novel in light of what we know of Christian history."

You're repeating the same mistake I corrected you on before. Roman Catholic theology is hardly monolithic. There

are notable novelties in Catholic theology. I gave examples. You better wear steel-plated boots when you shoot yourself in the foot that way.

"Did the fathers and the existing church of the time get this entire bit wrong for over 1,500 years?"

You mean like Tertullian?

BTW, you keep dodging the dilemma posed by your own position. If you think we must always begin with an authority source, how do you establish your authority source? Do you need another authority to authorize your authority source? If so, an infinite regress ensues. If not, then you concede that we can and must have a starting-point independent of ecclesiastical authority.

De Luca

Surely you don't think the Catholic and Orthodox position is that we having living apostles among us today. So the scriptures you provided is simply a non starter. The Catholic and Orthodox (sans the pope) belief of apostolic succession is as follows: An uninterrupted transmission of spiritual authority from the Apostles through successive popes and bishops.

Hays

Yes, you try to have it both ways. Apostolic authority minus apostles. You drive a wedge between apostles and apostolic prerogatives by contriving a fake category of "spiritual" authority from the apostles through successive popes and

bishops. Those are face-saving distinctions that can be deployed to render any position unfalsifiable.

"This clear ancient belief can be traced back as early as 80 A.D."

You didn't quote any documents from 80 AD. Oh, and Clement wasn't a pope. You're salting the mine.

Moreover, you repeat the usual equivocations of usage and semantic fallacies by failing to distinguish between the meaning of words and the meaning of concepts. You need to bone up on lexical semantics. But of course you won't.

"Steve, I don't need a polling station to claim that the majority of Christians believed in a lineage of authority that could be traced back to the apostles themselves."

Actually, you do need to have evidence commensurate with the scope of your claim. You need to show that your sample is representative.

"Let's use some common sense here."

That would be a refreshing change on your part.

"How many Catholic and Orthodox Christians are in the world compared to the number of Protestants who deny apostolic succession?"

Keep in mind that those figures count anyone who's baptized Catholic or Orthodox. That includes nominal Catholics and Orthodox as well as children.

"The denial of AS did not come about until relatively recently in Church history and is held by small minority."

Yes, it started to come about during the Renaissance, when people learned the original languages, went back to the sources, and had increasing freedom to exercise their own judgment without fear of being tortured to death by agents of the papacy.

"You stand in stark opposition to a great and long standing tradition of the Church. This should give you great pause my friend."

And most Jews said the same thing about that schismatic minority group called Christians. By your logic, you'd be part of the lynch mob demanding the crucifixion of Jesus.

Likewise, devout Jews were often a minority remnant in OT times. To be in the majority is hardly a reliable index of truth. And this should give you great pause, but of course, it won't.

People resort to majoritarian appeals because they can't give good reasons for their position.

De Luca

This, in my perspective is answered rather easily. Much can be said, but I'll be brief. Jesus is the source of ALL authority. Jesus gave authority to his apostles to do great things, like preach the Gospel, forgive sins, raise the dead shepherd his flock (the Church) This special kind authority is passed down from the apostles to their successors in order to effectively shepherd and sanctify his flock that would come into God's covenant family in the future generations. There is no fallacy of regress at all."

Hays

You still don't get it. Try again. Do you know that with or without the aid of the Magisterium? Do you rely on the Magisterium to interpret the evidence? But unless you already know that the Magisterium has that authority, you can't justifiably rely on its self-serving interpretations, now can you? If, on the other hand, you're competent to interpret and evaluate the evidence on your own, without the aid of the Magisterium, then you put the Magisterium out of business.

"The NT scriptures for example, are authoritative in so far as to who it was doing the writing."

Authority is your only conceptual category. The only tool in your toolbox.

"Jesus never commanded anyone to write anything down."

What an ignorant statement Try Rev 1:11.

Moreover, your comment is shortsighted. Jesus sent the Spirit. The Spirit inspires writers. Jesus doesn't have to command anyone to write for him to intend people to write. Jesus conveys his intentions as much by what he does as what he says.

"This Church is comprised of baptized men, women, babies leaders (bishops, priests) , prophets, teachers, healers). From these folks, came along writings(NT) that we as Christians conform and meditate on. However, we should be very careful about ripping the scriptures out of the authoritative bosom of the Church, categorizing it as our highest authority."

You have no check against a "church" becoming a cult, with unaccountable leaders.

"You continue say well why can't we go with what's 'true' as opposed to trying to figure out where might we find authority. That is the perennial problem with SS. EVERYONE is claiming that they know what is 'true' with the bible in hand."

You're in the same boat. You had to exercise your private judgment when you compared and contrasted various options, then determined by yourself and for yourself that Rome was the way to go.

"Do we trust what 'you' think the scriptures teach or maybe Jerry's interpretations? What about James White? Perhaps you can see where I'm going with this."

Where you're going with this is that you're blindly contradicting yourself. You landed in the church of Rome based on your personal interpretation and evaluation of the documentary evidence. Your private interpretation of Biblical and patristic prooftexts.

BTW, it's not a question of trust, but reason. And you continue to contradict yourself. You play both sides of the fence. If you don't think sifting arguments and evidence is a reliable way to arrive at the truth, then you can never defend Catholicism. You're a selective skeptic. You're skeptical about the ability of reason to prove Protestant claims and disprove Catholic claims while you're confident in your powers of reasoning when it comes to proving Catholic claims and disproving Protestant claims.

"This lineage is unbroken"

That's unverifiable even in principle. Among other things, apostolic succession depends on valid ordination. Valid ordination depends on both officiant and ordinand having the right intention. But that's a state of mind. An outsider can't read another person's state of mind.

It only takes one broken link to interrupt the chain of succession. Everything after the break is invalid. And it could break down at any point, given vicissitudes of ordination (see above).

You're oblivious to the paradox of your position. You say Jesus gave us a church, not a book. He didn't command anyone to write. Rather, he established a church.

How do you know what Jesus said and did? You're getting that from...a book! The NT is the primary source of information regarding the life and teaching of Jesus. There's precious little putative Agrapha. The church fathers quote the NT, but that's because they have a NT to quote. That's because someone wrote it down. You keep demoting Scripture and promoting "the Church" even though you are

utterly dependent on Scripture as your primary source of information about Jesus.

Two paradigms

I recently had a Facebook discussion with a Catholic. I've changed his name to anonymize the exchange:

Hays

How does Rick establish with certainty the Roman Magisterium in the first place? How does he sidestep private judgment at that preliminary stage of the argument?

Rick

The Protestant, once he invests his principle into the Scripture (however much history, tradition, commentary, natural life of reason, etc,etc - are implied), maintains his place on the same boat because he is continually subject to the corrective that he might discover in his private interpretation of Scripture. This, of course, would explain how my former Protestant minister started off as an ultra-dispensationalist who protested baptism as strictly for Jews, to a Dallas Theological Seminary fundamentalist pre-trib dispensationalist, to a moderate Norman Geisler/Demarest 4-point Calvinist, to then eventually leading a congregation which is 5-point Calvinist open to historic premillennialism. In and through each stage was the threat of anathema to all dissidents.

Hays

But Roman Catholicism doesn't avoid individualism. Rather, Roman Catholicism privileges the outlook of select individuals, viz. popes, bishops in ecumenical councils, Latin Fathers, church Doctors.

Moreover, there's a zigzag trajectory to Catholic teaching. Take the current crisis precipitated by Francis. Bishops and cardinals are accusing him of changing dogma by green-

lighting the admission of divorced and remarried Catholics to communion.

Or take opposition to capital punishment by recent popes. Or salvation outside the church. Or how the anti-modernist positions of the Leonine PBC have been mothballed. And so on and so forth. So the faithful end up following the erratic peregrinations of the papacy.

Rick

Now, unless you are prepared to say that the self is infallible in addressing what is divine revelation, you would have to be committed to believing that your criteria of sufficiency is opined. But since opinion would not encompass what is needed for knowing what God revealed as his revelation 2,000 years ago in places and atmosphere outside of your first-hand witness, you are left on a totally different boat epistemically.

Hays

There's a problem with positing inhuman standards of certainty. An artificial standard that humans can't attain. Everyone loses out when you set the bar that high.

In addition, each of us is ultimately at the mercy of divine providence for what we believe. It's ultimately up to God whether your particular aptitude and experience guide you into truth.

Rick

But the difference is herein - I am willing to attribute a principled means of infallibility by divine law in whatever it is I have invested, whereas the Protestant still clutches to no-principled infallibility either in the self or the respective protestant communions.

Hays

Yet that's deceptive. At best, that only follows given the Magisterium, but how does one establish the given? It still bottoms out at the level of private judgment. If there is a Magisterium, perhaps it could provide a higher level of certainty, but the underlying conditional remains uncertain.

Moreover, that's a hypothetical ideal which is belied by the messiness of how the Magisterium actually operates in the course of church history. We can see the groping, the compromises, the reversals.

Rick

I can see that you have not taken a basic course in the Catholic magisterium. Last I check, even R.C. Sproul was one of the better teachers on our beliefs. Consult him if not an authentic Catholic source.

Hays

Among other things, I've read *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith* by Cardinal Dulles.

Rick

Ecumenical Councils, Popes, the consensus of Church Fathers, the *sensus fidelium*, are not individuated by private judgement. Our principles entail that the exercise of Council, Papal decree, Patristic consensus, and the *sensus fidelium* are all divinely assisted in a way which is divine and supernatural, and thus far from the realm of opinion. So these are not just individuals in quantities different than the self.

Hays

The question at issue is not the claim but whether the claim is true. Sure, you deny that's an exercise of private judgment, but that's the very issue in dispute.

Rick

As for the accusations of Pope Francis - name a single prelate who is accusing him of heresy?

Hays

Are you really unaware of his prelatial critics?

Rick

We hold to a moral certainty based on the principles we have invested [in] faith.

Hays

A euphemism for private judgment.

Rick

I believe that the Catholic can show, while standing on your own epistemic boat, that there is the motive of credibility over all other claimants to 'Church', and would then take the leap of faith into the paradigm wherein we have no foot in that epistemic boat.

Hays

So your position boils down to indemonstrable hypothetical certainty. If the Magisterium is what it claims to be, then it can furnish certainty on particular issues. But your confidence in the claims of the Magisterium are probabilistic. Hence, you haven't escaped the finality of private judgment. You're position is only as good as your private judgment. That remains the ultimate arbiter. The Magisterium is only right if you're right about the Magisterium. But if you're wrong about the Magisterium...

Rick

And the subject of magisterium is forbidden by God from leading the Church into the shipwreck of faith by the

imposition of obliged heresy.

Hays

Which, once again, assumes the very question at issue.

Rick

"Hold fast to what is in epistle or by word", etc,etc (as 2 of many examples). We don't have an expected expiration of this modus operandi, for Paul gives the same charge to St. Timothy, who in turn can pass the charge to others.

Hays

But there is an expected expiration date. Paul is telling people who have face-to-face knowledge of his teaching to hold fast to what they heard from his own mouth. You can't legitimately extrapolate from that to situations far removed from face-to-face knowledge, as if Paul is vouching for traditions in the indefinite future.

Keep in mind that this occurs in correspondence where Paul warns about forgeries. That's why he signs his letters. So even at that stage there's a concern about spurious apostolic traditions.

Timothy was one of his handpicked deputies. Once again, you can't legitimately extrapolate from that to would-be successors centuries after the fact.

Rick

Yes, I can. St. Paul speaks of the charism transmitted unto the ordinand, and we find nothing of the reverse, i.e. Luther ordaining a new cult, or Calvin establishing a new authentic source of legitimacy. In truth, what the Reformed need is the habitual example of pointing to Scripture as the ground, but St. Paul does not do this. He points to the objective

paradosis and the constituent charism to carry it via the presbyterium.

Hays

i) In the text [2 Thes 2:15] you initially cited, Paul points to his own teaching, and not some free-floating paradosis.

ii) St. Paul mentions many different spiritual gifts in his letters. What makes you suppose the gift in 1 Tim 4:14 & 2 Tim 1:6-7 corresponds to the "charism" of the priesthood or episcopate?

iii) A gift is not an office.

iv) The legitimacy or illegitimacy of Calvinism depends on whether it is true. Calvin is not an authority-figure. He needn't be in succession to be correct in his interpretation of Scripture. Your objection is a category error. Ditto: Luther.

Rick

The magisterium does furnish certainty on the truths which are given by God and which save our souls.

Hays

It does so provided that it is, in fact, what it claims to be. But this reduces to your opinion of the Magisterium. In your fallible opinion, the Magisterium is what it claims to be. Assuming that the Magisterium is what it claims to be, the consequence might follow (although there are lots of ambiguities about ascertaining what the Magisterium officially teaches), but that superstructure is resting on the foundation of your fallible opinion regarding the claims of

Rome. Newman's illative sense, while valuable in its own right, won't salvage your position.

Rick

Like I've said, I have happily conceded to the mode of private judgement in a part of this investigation. I do so again here. That, however, does not suffice to put Catholics in the same boat as you. For the reasons I've said and repeated, and will do once more here. There is a dividing point where we invest a principled infallibility into the Catholic Church, whereas you maintain your commitment to the mode of private judgment in Scriptural interpretation. And, as I said way above in certain expectation of the charge "tu quoque" , the difference is that where Catholics unload their trust into a visible criteria for the deposit of God's truth, however false it may be, the protestant is always in test-mode leaving discovery of error always open, and which is principled by the self who interprets.

Hays

All you do is to impute a "principled infallibility" to the Magisterium—"however false it may be".

That's no improvement over what you find deficient in Protestantism. To the contrary, that's far more hazardous position because you've put all your chips on that bet, even though, by your own admission, the gamble may not pay off. The Catholic alternative is a high-stakes poker game where you have everything to lose if you're wrong on that one point. By contrast, a Protestant can be mistaken about this or that without systematic error.

Just from a hypothetical standpoint, both Catholic and Protestant paradigms have tradeoffs. In the Catholic paradigm, if true, Catholics who know "official" teaching (whatever that is) are spared from making certain

theological and ethical mistakes which some Protestants will make without that divine guidance.

If false, Catholics will make certain theological and ethical mistakes which some Protestants will avoid because Protestants don't stop with the received answers but scrutinize them. If false, the Magisterium will in some cases unwittingly oblige heresy. By resigning their critical judgment to the illusory failsafe of the magisterium, Catholics will relinquish the ordinary checks which, while fallible, are more reliable than misplaced faith. Believing in the infallibility of a source which is in fact fallible removes screen by which we filter out certain errors when we must rely on reason and evidence. We suspend our critical faculties, which leaves us entirely at the mercy of the source.

Rick

Hypothetically = no end.

Ultimately , I think the debate is far better on subjects of doctrine. The epistemic differences will remain as they are until we can show that one is credible over the other.

Hays

Yes, there's something to be said for debating specific doctrines. However, since Catholics and Protestants have different rules of evidence, such debates are usually stalemated by the preliminary issue.

Private interpretation

I recently had an informal debate with two Catholics on Facebook. Here are the highlights, which I've consolidated:

Several problems with proof texting apostolic succession:

- i)** There's a semantic fallacy, which equates the meaning of Greek words, with the concept of episcopacy in Roman Catholic theology. That's reading later theological developments back into ordinary 1C Greek usage.
- ii)** "Succession" in the sense of church office is not equivalent to succession in the sense of apostolic succession. Apostles had very specific prerogatives. The fact that they appointed church officers to carry on their work hardly carries the implication that their specific apostolic prerogatives are perpetual. It just means that having planted churches, other people need to maintain what they started. Like the difference between an architect and a custodian.
- iii)** The argument either proves too much or too little. In Catholicism, apostolic succession is funneled through the papacy, but there's nothing distinctively Petrine about these examples.
- iv)** If Catholic bishops possess apostolic prerogatives, why don't they perform miracles the way Peter and Paul did?
- v)** If Catholic bishops possess apostolic prerogatives, why is the era of public revelation over? It's ad hoc to claim apostolic succession, on the one hand, then say the era of public revelation is over, on the other hand.

vi) Timothy and Titus weren't bishops. So there's this studied equivocation when you claim that Timothy and Titus were "bishops". That's a loaded word with connotations based on centuries of theological development.

There is no fixed definition of "bishop" in church history, even in reference to Roman Catholicism. And it's ridiculous to quote early church fathers, as if they are prospectively vouching for subsequent developments in Roman ecclesiology, many centuries later. The church fathers weren't prophets. They were men of their times, adapting to the challenges of their day.

The episcopal office has been under continuous evolution in Roman Catholicism. In fact, you have two competing theories of the episcopate in Vatican II, one given by the majority of the bishops, and one given by Pope Paul VI. And currently, Pope Francis is attempting to decentralize the church of Rome.

vii) In the pastorals, elders aren't "bishops" in the Catholic sense. They don't oversee a diocese. At most, they are pastors or troubleshooters for one local church at a time.

viii) For that matter, notice that the qualifications for elders in the Pastoral epistles omit to say anything about sacerdotal functions. There's no priesthood in the Pastorals.

ix) The fact that apostles appointed elders doesn't entail apostolic succession in the sense of how Roman Catholic theology defines the role of the episcopate. The Pastorals don't ascribe distinctive episcopal functions to church officers. Indeed, they don't even ascribe sacerdotal functions to church officers. Rather, it's just pastoral duties.

You can't develop the concept of the Roman episcopate and priesthood from the Pastorals, for the distinctive concepts aren't present to develop.

x) The imposition of hands has various functions in Scripture. That doesn't imply "succession" in the technical sense that you are using it.

xi) There's an equivocation over the meaning of "tradition". Naturally some Christians were orally taught by Apostles when Apostles were still alive. That hardly justifies appeal to Sacred Tradition centuries after their demise.

A commenter appealed to oral apostolic teaching. You're now indulging in a bait-n-switch, where you redefine the nature of tradition. An example of 1C Christians learning theology in person from a living apostle is hardly analogous precedent for continuing revelations of "Holy Tradition".

You appeal to your denomination to prove your denomination. Same viciously circular argument.

You conveniently exempt the Protestant faith from your self-serving definition of "the Church", which preemptively discounts evidence contrary to your thesis. The whole exercise begs the question. You need some evidence independent of your denominational claims to establish that your denomination has the authority you impute to it.

Then you cap it off by offering your private interpretation of 2 Pet 1:20 to condemn private interpretation! You're oblivious to the dilemma that your appeal generates.

BTW, 2 Peter 1:20 doesn't refer to how a reader or listener interprets prophecy, but how the prophet interprets his dreams and visions. It's about the divine origin of prophecy.

Finally, Pope Francis is an agent of chaos. His own bishops try in vain to pin him down on what he means.

"What you state 2 Pet 1:20 to mean is merely your private interpretation."

Even if that were the case, so what? The pertinent question isn't whether an interpretation is "private," but whether it's correct.

"Mine was not but it was the interpretation of the whole Church (not merely a denomination BTW!) prior to 1517."

You haven't provided a single piece of evidence to support that sweeping contention. What do you even mean by the "whole Church"?

You mean every Christian layman prior to 1517 shared your interpretation of 2 Pet 1:20? How do you propose to do opinion polling on Christian laymen between the NT era and 1517? They're dead. How many of them wrote down their

interpretation of 2 Pet 1:20? How many of them even thought about the meaning of 2 Pet 1:20?

Or when you say the "whole Church," is that code language for some popes or church fathers or bishops or doctors of the church? If so, that would hardly constitute the "whole Church". At best, that would be an infinitesimal fraction of the whole Church.

"What part of the difference don't you understand?"

I understand that you are positing your private interpretation of what the pre-Reformation church allegedly believed. You must exercise your private judgment when you interpret the testimony of the pre-Reformation Church. At best, that's an interpretation of an interpretation.

"On what basis of superior revelation do you claim that your interpretation trumps that of the Christian witness since the NT era?"

i) Interpretation doesn't require revelation.

ii) You haven't provided any documentation that your interpretation of 2 Pet 1:20 represents the Christian witness from the NT era up to the Reformation. How would you be in a position to know what? Feel free to cite all the

extant Christian writings between the 1C and the 16C that interpret 2 Pet 1:20 the same way you do.

iii) Here's an example to the contrary. Oecumenius says:

"This means that the prophets received their prophecies from God and transmitted what he wanted to say, not what they wanted. They were fully aware that the message had been given them, and they made no attempt to put their own interpretation on it". Commentary on 2 Peter.

According to him, the prohibition isn't directed at readers, but the prophets who received oracles. And Oecumenius wrote that centuries before the Reformation.

"So after stating his belief in the (material) sufficiency of Scripture, Vincent argues that the Church's standard interpretive Tradition is necessary because of the various ways in which different people (particularly heretics) have misinterpreted the Scriptures. To make this especially relevant to the situation today, and why the consensus of Tradition is necessary..."

The consensus of tradition is an illusion fabricated by only counting like-minded individuals while discounting people who think otherwise (e.g. Novatian, Donatus).

"One can substitute modern-day denominations and see how his argument still holds..."

i) We could also add the church of Rome to your list. Your contrast is question-begging because you take the church of Rome as the standard of comparison, then set that in antithesis to the alternatives. But that's an artifact of your selection-criterion.

Catholics and Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox cite the same Scriptures as well and traditionally anathematize each other. And there were competing religious schools in 1C Judaism. God didn't prevent that.

ii) Furthermore, your argument is self-defeating. You can only proof-text Roman Catholicism if you can know what the passages mean independent of the Roman Magisterium. You can't legitimately appeal to the authority of your Catholic sect to authorize an interpretation that favors your Catholic sect. For unless you already know, apart from the claims of your Catholic sect, that it has the authority to interpret Scripture, you have no warrant for believing that its self-serving interpretations are authoritative.

iii) And even if we grant the Vincentian Canon for argument's sake, that falsifies the Catholic church inasmuch as Rome today teaches things that were

assuredly not taught everywhere, always, and by all. That's why Newman invented the theory of development.

"Thus your friend Oecumenius' statement, in falling outside of Vincent's test, is clearly teaching an unsound interpretation of the text in question and is thus falling foul of the prohibition censured by the text, whereas the Church has interpreted it correctly, not privately but corporately."

i) You're moving the goal post. You made a blanket claim. I provided a counterexample. I responded to you on your own terms.

The honest thing for you to do at that point would be to withdraw your original claim, which I debunked. Instead, you demand evidence, when evidence is provided, you dismiss it out of hand. You're not arguing in good faith.

ii) I'm struck by the chasm between the scope of your claim and the scope of your supporting material. Having appealed, in the abstract, to the testimony of the "whole" pre-Reformation church on the interpretation of 2 Pet 1:20, you don't provide any pre-Reformation commentary whatsoever on that text, even though you were the one who adduced that text in the first place.

You made a claim about the testimony of the entire pre-Reformation church regarding the interpretation of 2 Pet 1:20. By doing so, you assume a commensurate burden of proof. I'm waiting for you to provide systematic evidence, century-by-century, that this is how the whole pre-Reformation church construed 2 Pet 1:20.

iii) Instead, you quote the opinion of a 5C Christian writer. And he's not even discussing 2 Pet 1:20 in particular. Where's your evidence that his statement is representative of the "whole" church prior to the Reformation? He can hardly vouch for the future.

iv) Finally, even if you could muster some church fathers who share your interpretation of 2 Pet 1:20, collecting the opinions of church fathers is no alternative to private interpretation. Adding up a number of individual opinions yields a set of private opinions that happens to agree on that particular verse.

The fact that the Donatists and Novatianists were condemned by your sect means nothing to me since I don't grant the authority of your sect. That's the very issue in dispute.

I didn't cite them "in support of and authority for" my position. I merely responded to you on your own grounds. And I didn't initiate the reference to them. You did in your original quote. Have you already forgotten how this started?

It's hardly irrelevant when you appeal to "the consensus of tradition," but preemptively disqualify historical testimony to the contrary. If you exclude all the dissenters, then by

process of elimination, you wind up with a residual consensus, but that's sleight-of-hand. If you only include like-minded people, then by definition your subset represents a consensus of opinion. But that's a selective, artificial consensus. You've concocted an unfalsifiable definition of tradition by summarily disenfranchising all the witnesses to the contrary.

I don't classify Donatists and Novatianists as heretics. They were mistaken, but there are degrees of error. Both sides of the dispute were mistaken in similar ways and different ways. Although I can condemn Montanism, I can also condemn sacerdotalism.

Donatus and Novatian are hardly comparable to Arius. He's a bona fide heretic. But not because your denomination condemns him. That's not what makes him a heretic. He's a heretic because he denies essential NT Christology.

"Explain how you determine whose private interpretation is the correct one. If you give one interpretation and the guy next to you a contrary one, how is the observer to adjudicate between you?"

It's not just a matter of giving one's interpretation, but giving reasons in support for one's interpretation. You adjudicate competing interpretations based on which side has the best supporting arguments for their interpretation.

And there's no methodological difference in the way Protestant commentators defend their interpretations and the way Catholic commentators like Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, Luke Timothy Johnson et al. do. Both sides use the same toolkit.

"Your last post doesn't really address the elephant in the drawing room."

I can't fail to address things you didn't raise in the first place.

"What if two scholars, equally learned and marshalling equally strong arguments for their view, come up with diametrically opposed interpretations of the same Scripture? What then?"

i) To begin with, is that just an ersatz hypothetical, or do you think it happens? Examples?

ii) If we lack sufficient evidence to adjudicate rival interpretations of a Bible verse, then we should honestly admit our uncertainty. We can't go beyond the evidence at hand and stipulate an interpretation that's underdetermined by the evidence.

Your consensus is an arbitrary consensus. By summarily excluding anyone who doesn't agree with your frame of

reference (e.g. Oecumenius, Theophylact), you can produce a "consensus," but that's just a subset of the total.

I don't share your definition or identification of what constitutes the church.

Your problem is that you argue from your assumptions, but you don't know how to argue for your assumptions.

How did you get from evaluating arguments and evidence to "subjective relativism"? Ironically, it's your own position that reduces to subjective relativism. Apparently, you think you need some authority figure, be it the pope or church fathers or church councils, to validate the correct interpretation. You don't think you can judge the exegetical arguments for yourself.

But in that event, how do you validate your authority figure? You've disqualified yourself from arguing for your position, because you indicate that we can't judge the rightness or wrongness of a position by assessing the arguments. Rather, we need some referee to broker the issue. If so, that just pushes the problem back a step. How do you legitimate the referee? If you can't judge that on the basis of reason and evidence, then it's just a coin toss.

"This leads me to a rather obvious conclusion: if relying on the Bible alone plus the individual inspiration of the Holy Spirit leads to this doctrinal anarchy, then clearly either the Holy Spirit isn't doing a very good job...OR there is the

need for some kind of singular teaching authority to interpret scripture...."

i) Notice I didn't once appeal to divine illumination. That's not how to interpret a text, whether sacred or secular. The notion that our interpretations are guided by the Holy Spirit is a false presupposition to begin with. It's a shortcut some people take who don't use proper hermeneutics.

ii) Your conclusion doesn't follow. For instance, there was no "singular teaching authority to interpret scripture" in 1C Judaism (or Intertestamental Judaism). Why didn't God provide for that if you think that's necessary?

iii) Doctrinal unity is no advantage if that unity is based on bogus appeal to a nonexistent teaching authority. That's not something you can conjure up out of thin air just because you dislike the consequences of not having a singular teaching authority. Even if that gives you doctrinal unity, it's not unity in truth, but unity that derives from a make-believe teaching authority.

iv) People disagree over the meaning of Scripture in part because they bring an agenda to Scripture which they require Scripture to ratify. Scripture doesn't speak to certain issues with the specificity they demand. The problem isn't with sola Scriptura, but with people who are dissatisfied with how much they can get out of Scripture. They need to confine their questions to the answers Scripture is designed to offer.

"If you don't read the Bible with the Holy Spirit, then you're not really reading it, are you?"

What makes you think that's true? Are you saying the Bible is a closed book that only insiders can possibly understand? In that event, how could anyone come to faith by believing the message if it's incomprehensible to unbelievers?

The Bible is propositional revelation. The meaning of Scripture can be understood by outright unbelievers.

In that respect, understanding the Bible is no different than understanding a secular text. The role of the Holy Spirit is to engender receptivity to the message, not comprehension of the message.

"Also, what you might call 'proper hermeneutics' (incidentally, no mention of exegesis, I wonder why?)..."

I didn't pose a dichotomy between exegesis and hermeneutics.

"...will surely differ from what I call it or indeed the man next to either of us in the pew might call it, so I'm afraid your appeal to 'proper hermeneutics' gets us

no further than sola Scriptura ie: precisely nowhere."

Your objection is self-defeating, for that applies with equal force to understanding the "singular teaching authority" you take refuge in. The issue is communication in general, whether it's a case of understanding Scripture, papal encyclicals, conciliar documents, the church fathers, doctors of the church, &c. You've created a circle that you can't break into.

"Judaism did not and does not have the fullness of truth possessed by the Church so your point is irrelevant."

What make you think the new covenant community requires doctrinal unity but the old covenant community did not? Did 1C Jews not have to be able to recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of messianic prophecy?

"There is no such bogus appeal being made here or conjured up out of thin air but rather an appeal to the teaching authority established by Christ Himself and historically followed by the Church ever since."

You're still trapped in vicious circularity. Your appeal depends on your private interpretation of prootexts, church fathers, &c. Unless you're able to establish the authority of your "singular teaching authority" apart from appeal to your "singular teaching authority," you can't rely on your "singular teaching authority", since it hasn't been established at that stage of the inquiry. That's one of your problems: you can never get started. You need your "singular teaching authority" as your starting-point to determine what Christ instituted and to identify the one true church, yet that can't be your starting-point since you first need to establish that there is a "singular teaching authority" which you can identify on your own. Within your framework, you have nowhere to begin.

"Since we all bring such an agenda - you, me, the man in the pew next to us - then that doesn't help either."

i) No, not everyone brings an agenda to the Bible. Some unbelievers just pick up a copy of Scripture and begin reading out of curiosity, to discover what it says. So your claim is a facile overgeneralization.

ii) More to the point, the question at issue is not whether we may bring an agenda to Scripture, but whether we're prepared to acknowledge that having gone in search of prooftexts to validate our prior agenda, we discover that it doesn't speak to that particular issue. We didn't find what we were looking for. It isn't there.

It's not a flaw of sola Scriptura that Scripture doesn't provide certainty on every conceivable issue. The problem is

not with sola Scriptura, but with our making unjustifiable demands, based on a priori expectations of what we think Scripture is supposed to address.

But the way to find out what Scripture is supposed to address is to find out what Scripture does and does not address. If God hasn't chosen to speak with specificity on an issue of interest to us, then we need to revise our priorities. Not invent a "singular teaching authority" to pad out the alleged deficiency in Scripture.

iii) You're seeking an intellectual shortcut. While I understand the attraction of taking intellectual shortcuts, seeking an arbiter to simplify decision-making process is actually a circuitous detour. It doesn't make the process simpler or the results more certain. If anything the opposite:

iv) To begin with, it just restarts the intellectual justification process in a different location. If you think we need a referee to break the tie, that leads to a regress. Now you must justify your choice of referee. If you appeal to documentary evidence to defend your choice, you have to interpret your documentary evidence. Not only must you interpret your Scriptural prooftexts, but on top of that you must now interpret your patristic prooftexts, which redoubles the effort. Each church father needs to be interpreted in historical context. That takes some background knowledge. That has its own uncertainties and competing interpretations.

v) Then there's the question of how you can prove your case in the first place. You can't use the Magisterium before you prove the Magisterium. You must rely on your unaided reason to legitimate the referee before you can appeal to the referee's decisions. But if unaided reason is trustworthy

to independently interpret the documentary evidence you adduce to legitimate the referee, why does it suddenly become untrustworthy assuming you succeed in discharging that preliminary step? Hasn't the very attempt to prove the necessity of the referee proven the superfluity of the referee?

vi) You assume the burden of proving that papal succession is seamless. A single broken link will cause everything to fall apart that hangs on that chain.

vii) If you think we're incompetent to assess alternative interpretations based on which side has the better of the argument, you disarm your ability to argue for your own position. You can't argue against sola Scriptura unless you think we can arrive at the truth by sifting the evidence. You can't argue against sola Scriptura unless you think we can assess competing claims by judging the reasons that each side gives in support of its position. But how is that different from exegesis?

"For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man"

*A major divide exists among scholars on the precise understanding of *idias epiluseos* ["from an individual's own interpretation," or "by the will of man"]. Some, such as Kelly, assert that this verse forbids the private interpretation of Scripture by the reader (or hearer) outside of an authority such as the church. Thus, *idias*, "from an individual's own," would refer to any reader of Scripture, rather than to the prophet who authored Scripture. Along with *epiluseos*, "interpretation," these two words would pertain to any person's unauthorized, illegitimate interpretation of written Scripture.*

*However, that understanding of *idias epiluseos* does not make sense in the present context. In 2 Pet 1:16-18, Peter addressed the divine origin of the apostolic message. 2 Pet 2:21 addresses the same issue of origin regarding Scripture in general. Moreover, 2 Pet 1:21 includes the explanatory *gar*, "for," which draws close connection between 2 Pet 1:21 and 2 Pet 1:20, implying that Peter's further declarations about the*

*inspiration of Scripture in 2 Pet 1:21 are intended to elaborate upon his statements in 2 Pet 1:20. Thus, 2 Pet 1:20 too must be about the origin and inspiration of Scripture, not about its later interpretation by readers. Since the context of 2 Pet 1:20 addresses Scripture's divine origin, and since *idias epilueos* ["by the will of man"] in 2 Pet 1:20 supports this topic if taken to refer to a prophetic author (rather than a later reader), the best conclusion is that 2 Pet 1:20 speaks of the divine origin of Scripture as well. C. Giese, **2 Peter and Jude (Concordia 2012), 93-94.***

Catholic fideism

I'm going to begin by quoting from a standard work on Enlightenment skepticism, then comment on the excerpts:

Chillingworth saw that the Catholics were demanding a type of certainty, infallible knowledge, as the basis of religion, and that such certainty was unattainable not only in this area but in any other as well. But, once this had been recognized, the conclusion was not complete doubt on all matters but, rather, an acceptance of a lesser degree of evidence, moral certainty. Our senses may sometimes deceive, our reasoning may sometimes be faulty, our judgments may not be infallible, and we may not be able to find a demonstrative basis for what we know, but, just the same, we have sufficient assurances so that we can utilize the information that we possess to form reasonable and morally certain judgments.⁸ The person who wants more certitude than this is a fool. "For, as he is an unreasonable Master, who requires a stronger assent to his Conclusions than his Arguments deserve; so I conceive him a forward and undisciplin'd Scholar, who desires stronger

arguments for a conclusion than the Matter will bear.” 9 Once one has recognized that there is no infallible or mathematical certainty to be found regarding scientific or religious matters, then one does not suspend judgment, but, instead, one proceeds to judge problems according to the degree of assurance that can be obtained.

One finds this style of argumentation, in whole or in part, in various writers trained at, or teaching in, the Jesuit colleges, especially those of Clermont and Bordeaux; such writers as St. François de Sales, Cardinal du Perron, Cardinal Bellarmine, and Fathers Gontery and Veron, for example.

As St. François de Sales put the problem,

The absurdity of absurdities, and the most horrible folly of all, is this, that while holding that the entire Church has erred for a thousand years in the understanding of the Word of God, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin can assure themselves of understanding it well; even more that a simple parson, preaching as the Word of God, that the whole visible Church has erred, that Calvin and all men can err, dares to pick and choose among the interpretations of Scripture

that one that pleases him, and is sure of it and maintains it as the Word of God; still more, that you others who hearing it said that everyone can err in matters of religion, and even the whole Church, without wishing to search for other views among the thousand sects which boast of understanding well the Word of God and preaching it well, believe so stubbornly in a minister who preaches to you, that you do not want to hear anything different. If everybody can err in the understanding of Scripture, why not you and your minister? I am amazed that you do not always go around trembling and shaking. I am amazed that you can live with so much assurance in the doctrine that you follow, as if you could not [all] err, and yet you hold it as certain that everyone has erred and can err.18

This initial version of this style of argumentation was intended to show that as soon as the Reformers had admitted that the Church could err, thus denying the traditional rule of faith, they could then be reduced to sceptical despair.

The core of Veron's reduction of Calvinism to total scepticism was an attack on the use of rational procedures and evidence to justify any statement of

a religious truth. Veron insisted that he was not claiming that our rational faculties or achievements were doubtful but only that they ought not to serve as the foundation or support of the faith, which is based on “the Word of God alone set forth by the Church.” 20

The argument begins by asking the Calvinists, “How do you know, gentlemen, that the books of the Old and New Testament are Holy Scripture?” 21 The question of canonicity raises a peculiar difficulty. If the Calvinists hold that Scripture is the rule of faith, then how are we to judge which work is Scripture?

*But, even if one could tell which book is Scripture, how could one tell what it says, and what we are supposed to believe? The text, as one of the later Catholic users of Veron’s *Victorieuse Méthode* said, is just “waxen-naturd words not yet senc’t nor having any certain Interpreter, but fit to be plaid upon diversly by quirks of wit.” 23 And so, since the sacred writings are only words, with no instructions for reading them, one needs some rule for interpreting them.*

If the Calvinists say, in their own defense, that they are reading Scripture reasonably and drawing the obvious logical inferences from what it says, then they are obviously targets for “the machine of war.” First of all, any alleged reading is uncertain and may be mistaken, unless there is an infallible rule for interpretation. To go beyond the words to draw inferences, as Veron claimed the Calvinists had done in deriving all their articles of faith, is definitely an unscriptural procedure. The Bible does not itself say that it is to be interpreted in this fashion, nor does it give any rules of logic. Nowhere have we any warrant for the assertion that truths of religion are to be based on logical procedures.²⁴ The Reformers cried out that reasoning is a natural capacity given to man and, also, that Jesus as well as the Church Fathers reasoned logically.²⁵ Veron replied that the rules of logic were set down by a pagan, Aristotle, and nobody appointed him judge of religious truth, though he may be the arbiter of valid argumentation. Neither Jesus nor the Church Fathers claimed their views were true because they were derived by logical procedures, but rather they

*called them true because they were the Word of God.*²⁶

The core of Veron's case against arriving at religious truth by reasoning from the text of Scripture was summarized into what he called his eight Moyens: (1) Scripture does not contain any of the conclusions reached by the inferences of the Reformers. (2) These inferences are never drawn in Scripture. (3) By drawing inferences, one makes reason, rather than Scripture the judge of religious truths. (4) Our reason can err. (5) Scripture does not teach us that conclusions arrived at by logical procedures are articles of faith. (6) The conclusions reached by the Reformers were unknown to the Church Fathers. (7) The conclusions are, at best, only probable, and are built upon bad philosophy or sophistry. (8) Even a necessarily true conclusion drawn from Scripture is not an article of faith³² (because "nothing is an article of faith which is not revealed by God").³³

Veron answered by accusing Daillé of having missed the point of the method and of having become Daillé, "Minister of Charenton, new Pyrrhonian, and indifferent in religion."⁴¹ The problem of the

application of reason to specific questions does not entail the universal scepticism that Daillé made of it, and Daillé “has fought against his shadow.” 42 The issues that Veron had raised were twofold. First of all, since the Calvinists had insisted that the Church erred in reading Scripture, and that all men are fallible, how then could they be sure they had not erred in their own particular interpretations of Scripture? This sort of problem does not extend to scientific and mathematical reasoning, Veron said, because there the principles and inferences “are evident and certain.” 43 But to contend that the same is true in regard to the Protestant reading of Scripture: “Is not this to be reduced to desperation? What! So many holy Fathers have not possessed common sense, nor any of our predecessors? and the minister alone and his cobbler will have? and will be sure of it? etc. and on this assurance and folly he will risk his damnation?” 44 In this case, it appears the height of presumption and audacity to pretend that only the Protestants, in the last hundred years, have been en bons sens and have interpreted the Bible correctly, while the entire Catholic tradition has been wrong. And so, Veron continued, the same sort of basis for doubt about

Scriptural interpretation does not lead to a more general doubt about all our knowledge.

But then the second issue arises again. The fact that our reasonings may be “evidents & certains” in some matters, does not mean that what is evident and certain is an article of faith. “This ignoramus [Daillé] confuses not being an article of faith with being dubious knowledge.” 45 Lots of things, scientific knowledge, evidences of the Christian religion, and so on, are not doubtful, according to Veron, but, at the same time, they also are not articles of faith and will not be such unless revealed by God.46

Since Veron refused to admit that his knowledge of the true religious propositions was based on any evidence, interpretation of documents, or experiences but was contained only in the revealed word of God, he could observe that Daillé’s ways of arguing “would introduce the sect of the Pyrrhonians, and indifference in religion.” 48

Veron brushed aside this defense of rationality by saying, “Who doubts it? but none of this suffices to establish an article of faith, for none of this is the

Word of God, and to believe is nothing but to hold something as true because God has said it.” 51 The defense of reason is not the point at issue, but only whether an article of faith can be established by reason. People like Ferry, in glorifying our rational abilities, come close to adopting what Bayle called the Socinian heresy, that reason is the rule of faith.52 For Veron, reason may be perfectly sound and unquestionable, but this does not overcome a scepticism with regard to its use in establishing the articles of faith. Even theological reasoning, which Veron admitted could be “necessary and certain,” does not make its conclusions religious truths, unless they have also been revealed by God.53

The Protestants, however, saw that the same sceptical approach could be used on its inventor, with the same effective results. The “new machine of war” appeared to have a peculiar recoil mechanism that had the odd effect of engulfing the target and the gunner in a common catastrophe. If the Reformers could not determine infallibly true articles of faith from the text of Scripture by rational means, neither could the Catholics discover any religious truths, since they would be confronted

with the same difficulties with regard to ascertaining the meaning and truth of what popes, councils, and Church Fathers had said. As far as the Reformers could see, Veron had developed a complete scepticism to defeat them but was just as defeated as they were by this argument.⁵⁵

The Catholics could not be harmed by the sceptical bombardment issuing from their own guns, since they had no position to defend. Their view was grounded in no rational or factual claim but in an accepted, and unquestioned, faith in the Catholic tradition. They saw, as Maldonado had suggested, that if they once doubted this faith by traditional acceptance, they, too, would be pulled down into the same quicksand in which they were trying to sink the Reformers.⁵⁸ And so one finds an implicit fideism in many of the French Counter-Reformers that can be, and probably was, best justified by the explicit fideism of the nouveaux pyrrhoniens.

Many of the other Counter-Reformers offer no rational defense of their position, but a fideistic view is suggested by those theologians and philosophers they admire. The Cardinal du Perron, perhaps the greatest of the French Counter-

*Reformers,61 and himself a convert to Catholicism, spent practically no time in his controversial writings presenting evidence for his cause but devoted himself primarily to pointing out the inadequacy of the Calvinist theory of religious knowledge. The cardinal, however, was a friend of Montaigne's adopted daughter, Marie de Gournay, and a great admirer of the fideistic writings of Montaigne's adopted son, Pierre Charron.62 A story about du Perron indicates his evaluation of the merits of human reason in theological matters. He was once invited to dinner by Henri III and, at the table, presented a discourse against atheism, offering proofs of the existence of God. When the king expressed his pleasure at this and praised du Perron, he answered, "Sire, today I have proved by strong and evident reasons that there is a God. Tomorrow, if it pleases Your Majesty to grant me another audience, I will show you and prove by as strong and evident reasons that there is no God at all." R. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism* (Oxford 2003), chap. 4.*

Those of us to respond to Catholic apologists will find this strategy numbingly familiar. This is where it all got started.

But it raises a mare's nest of issues:

i) Take the a priori presumption that articles of faith must be certain. What makes that a given? Is that a Catholic assumption? Is that a Catholic standard? If so, that has no traction when debating Protestants inasmuch as we don't grant their standards and assumptions. If the stricture that articles of faith must be certain is a Catholic assumption, why would a Protestant concede a Catholic standard when the legitimacy of Catholic standards is the very issue in dispute? So the objection is vicious circular.

ii) Whether articles of faith must be certain depends on the kind of world we live in. Has God put us in a world where articles of faith must be certain? What if God put us in a world where articles of faith must only be likely?

Can we know in advance of the fact which of those two worlds we inhabit? Isn't that something we must discover? We only know what kind of world in which we find ourselves by examining the world in which we find ourselves.

The Catholic contention is an armchair stipulation. But that's not something that can be determined in the abstract. The kind of world God made for us is a contingent truth. Infinite variations are possible.

iii) I think religious certainty is obtainable in some respects, but the larger point is that it's illicit for Catholic apologists to posit an artificial standard of certainty. That's not a demand which they're entitled to impose on Protestants. We don't jump when they say "Jump!"

iv) Is the assumption that certainty is necessary because the stakes are so high? That theological errors might be damnable heresies, which is why we must set the bar

higher for articles of faith?

If so, the ground has shifted under traditional Catholic apologetics. In modern Catholicism, the presumption has been reversed. The traditional presumption was no salvation unless you were a communicant member of the Roman Church. But in post-Vatican II theology, it's very hard, if not impossible, to be damned. So the menacing specter of damnation for heresy has receded into the shadows. If that used to be the basis for insisting on certainty for articles of faith, then that foundation has been torn up.

v) From a Protestant perspective, not all theological errors are culpable errors, much less damnably culpable. Christians may commit innocent mistakes, based on their individual aptitudes, social conditioning, educational opportunities, and so forth. Religious duties are person-variable (Lk 12:48; Heb 13:17; Jas 3:1). There's no reason to think God will punish Christians who make innocent mistakes. Conscientious Christians who made the best of the situation God put them in.

vi) Caricaturing sola Scriptura as if that precludes logical inference. In fact, we see many examples in Scripture itself. In his disputes with the religious establishment, Jesus draws logical inferences from the OT. So does Peter in Acts. So does Paul in Romans. So does the author of Hebrews. The Mosaic law code presumes that judges must draw inferences from case laws.

vii) Appeal to the mirage of pre-Reformation theological consensus. But consider all the groups and movements which Rome traditionally classifies as schismatic:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2017/11/did-reformation-split-church.html>

viii) Catholic fideism is self-defeating, by disarming a Catholic apologist from making a case for his own position. He dare not appear to reason and evidence to establish the magisterium since, by his own lights, that falls short of religious certainty. He's surrendered the ability to justify his alternative. Their position reduces to their fallible faith in the infallibility of the magisterium.

ix) John Henry Newman famously gave up on ill-fated efforts to document all Catholic dogma from the consensus patrum. He invented the theory of development. Nowadays we see how the magisterium uses the theory of development to abrogate entrenched tradition and rationalize theological innovations. So, once again, the ground has shifted from under the traditional Catholic apologetic.

X. Marian Dogmas

Marian mythology

I've been debating some Catholics on Facebook. A few of my comments:

1. I'd like to follow up Edwin's query about sufficient evidence.

i) To begin with, I wasn't making a case for the Protestant faith, but presenting an argumentative strategy. How to frame the argument.

ii) I haven't given Edwin a detailed answer because there is no one answer. What counts as evidence depends on the nature of the claim. Different kinds of claims require different kinds of evidence. Scientific evidence may be different from historical evidence (although they sometimes overlap). Evidence for abstract objects is different from evidence for concrete objects. To take a few Marian examples:

iii) What would count as evidence for the Immaculate Conception? What kind of evidence would even be probative? In the nature of the case, there could be no physical evidence for the Immaculate Conception.

In what respect, if at all, would the Immaculate Conception even be detectable to Mary or her parents?

Assuming (*ex hypothesi*) that Mary was sinless, what evidence could there be that she was sinless from the moment of her conception, rather than at some later stage in utero, or as a newborn baby, or one-year-old? In other words, if God intervened to exempt her from the stain of original sin, how would Mary or her parents know when that

happened? Even in principle, how could there be any evidence for the timing of God's intervention?

For that matter, surely the church fathers had a different understanding of conception and the moment of conception, than we do, thanks to modern gynecology and related disciplines. So what does the traditional dogma even mean?

And assuming (ex hypothesi) that there was some sort of evidence which the concerned parties could recognize, how does it follow that church fathers were privy to that? Is it not far more likely that this belief evolved through multiple stages of theological speculation?

iv) Let's take a comparison: The external evidence for the traditional authorship of John's Gospel includes the claim that Irenaeus knew Polycarp, who, in turn, knew the Apostle John. That gives us a stated chain of custody. We know who the links are, and how many links there are. And if the report is true, then that would be directly germane to the nature of the claim. In other words, we can see in principle how that information could be reliably transmitted down the line. At least we're in a position to evaluate the evidence.

What do we have that's the least bit comparable respecting the Immaculate Conception, Assumption, and Perpetual Virginity (including in partu virginity)?

v) Consider the virginity in partu. What would even count as evidence for that claim? Would there be physical evidence?

When the hymen is ruptured during initial sexual intercourse, there can be some discomfort or bleeding. If,

however, Mary was a virgin at the time of birth, then surely that evidence would be masked or obliterated by the messy, painful process of giving birth. How could Mary, or a midwife, or Joseph (if he had to deliver the child) distinguish the effects of the birthing process from the effects of a ruptured hymen, or an intact hymen?

Keep in mind, too, that Mary didn't give birth in a brightly lit operating room, but in a dimly lit hut.

And even assuming that her hymen remained intact during the process of birth, how would church fathers be privy to that fact? Did Mary go around telling relatives that her hymen was intact, which was somehow passed around by word-of-mouth in Christian circles?

2. Notice two clashing Catholic paradigms. On the one hand is the old, pre-Newmanesque, Counter-Reformation (a la Bellarmine) paradigm, where you attempt to proof-text Catholic dogma from Scripture. On the other hand, you have the theory of development. What is more, Catholic apologists and their acolytes keep assuring us that dogma doesn't require Biblical justification, since Sacred Tradition is another valid source of dogma.

Yet so many Catholics fight tooth-n-nail for these traditional proof-texts, as if they really believe in sola scriptura, which makes them cling for dear life some Biblical warrant for each and every Catholic dogma. The schizophrenia is something to behold. Perhaps psychotropic medication will relieve the unbearable tension.

3. Notice that defending Catholicism is just as complicated as defending Protestantism. In my experience over the years, evangelical converts to Catholicism typically swim the Tiber because they imagine that's a simplifying device. That

gives them a level of certainty lacking in Protestantism. Now they have a single arbiter to make decisions for them on the interpretation of Scripture, orthodoxy, and orthopraxy.

But the simplification and certainty is illusory. Before they convert, they must convince themselves that Catholic prooftexts from Scripture and church fathers in fact point Romeward. At this preliminary stage of the evaluation, they must exercise their private judgment when they interpret the documentary evidence. Likewise, they must review the historical record and judge for themselves that prima facie reversals in Catholic theology are actually consistent. By the same token, they must somehow determine that apostolic succession is consistent with the Western schism. Those are just a few examples. All the same historical uncertainties and "interpretive pluralism" will confront them at that stage of the analysis.

Put another way, what's the difference between a Protestant apologist and a Catholic apologist? A convert to Rome has merely moved one chair over on the roundtable. If a Protestant apologist must defend his position against objections by Catholics, Orthodox, atheists, and non-Christian religions, a Catholic apologist must defend his position against objections by Protestants, Orthodox, atheists, and non-Christian religions. Both Catholic and Protestant apologists are fighting on multiple fronts to vindicate their respective positions.

Just look at poor little sweaty overworked Mark Daviau. He's like the lone volunteer at a leaky dam. As he's plugging one leak, the dam springs another leak. When he tries to plug the second leak, the seal on the first leak breaks. Or the dam springs a third leak.

Look at how Mark Daviau is constantly on the defensive. The moment his back is turned, the dam springs another leak.

Honestly, is his position any simpler than a Protestant apologist? Indeed, Mark Daviau acts like a gerbil sharing a terrarium with a boa constrictor. Mark dare not close his eyes. The fatal strike could come from any direction at any time.

"The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person"

492 The Father blessed Mary more than any other created person "in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" and chose her "in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love".137
*[Cf. **Eph 1:3-4**]*

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p122a3p2.htm

See anything wrong with that statement? Let's compare it to the wording of their prooftext:

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him (Eph 1:3-4).

Eph 1:3-4 doesn't single out Mary as the object of Eph 1:3-4, but Christians in general. The elect.

Indeed, it says absolutely nothing about Mary. At best, she would be included among other Christians.

Ever since Newman, Catholics appeal to the theory of development. Here we see a passage of Scripture decoupled from its context, to prop up Marian dogma. Once Scripture is decoupled from context, the process takes on a life of its own.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with theological development, but it has to be logically valid. Problem is, Catholic theology develops in the same way a seminal fictional motif develops over time. Take the literary evolution of the Faust legend or the Arthurian legend, or the cinematic evolution of Batman, Superman, the vampire mythos, or the permutations of the Star Trek canon. Because fiction isn't subject to factual constraints, it can change. The only limit is consistency and is the imagination of the storyteller.

But historical events can't change. They are what they were. Frozen in time.

Catholic theology undergoes the kind of legendary embellishment that's characteristic of fiction. Uncontrolled development, because reality poses no check on where it can go.

Is the PVM a big deal?

Is the perpetual virginity of Mary (hereafter PVM) a big deal? A few considerations:

1. What's at stake

In itself, the PVM is not a deal-breaker for the Protestant faith, but it is a deal-breaker for the Catholic faith. If the PVM is true, that doesn't falsify the Protestant faith—but if the PVM is false, that falsifies the Catholic faith. It's dogma. If even one Catholic dogma is false, the Catholic faith is false. Protestants don't have the same stake in the issue that Catholics do. In principle, we can take it or leave it .

2. Burden of proof

i) As a rule, we should avoid giving credence things without sufficient evidence. Gullibility is not a theological or epistemic virtue. As a practical matter, we can't avoid forming many beliefs without sufficient evidence, and that's frequently innocuous, but sometimes it's harmful. In addition, religious beliefs are more important than many mundane beliefs because there's more to gain if you're right and more to lose if you're wrong.

ii) The onus is not on Protestants to provide evidence to the contrary, but on Catholics to provide sufficient evidence. It's not incumbent on me to disprove something for which there's no good evidence. If you tell me there's a genie in the bottle, the burden of proof is not on me to prove you wrong.

iii) There's a standing presumption that Jewish couples had sexual relations. Is there compelling evidence to overcome

that presumption?

3. Rationale

Ironically, the reasons Catholics give in support of the PVM may be reasons to reject it. Considered in isolation, it's not a big deal one way or the other, but the justification may make it a big deal. Consider Brant Pitre's contention that it was dangerous for Joseph to have marital relations with Mary because she was the ark of the covenant. For Joseph to have sexual relations with his wife was equivalent to unauthorized personnel venturing into the Holy of Holies. If you did that you got zapped.

In effect, that makes Mary radioactive. A hazard zone. Did they require separate beds? Was it safe to hold hands, or did Joseph have to wear latex gloves lest he combust through skin contact with his wife?

4. Dogmatic authority

A Protestant might be open to the possibility of the PVM, but that's not nearly good enough from a Catholic standpoint. Rather, you are obligated to believe it. You must have a level of certitude disconnected from the level of the evidence.

Ultimately, church authority is the makeweight. Believe it on the authority of the Roman magisterium. If, however, you reject the claims of Rome, that's a reason to reject the PVM.

5. Exaggerated importance

Something can become important, not because it's intrinsically important, but because people make it more

important than it is. Making something optional or inconsequential mandatory or all-important creates a problem where no problem existed.

6. The cult of virginity

It lays the foundation for monasticism. The notion that normal family life can't be as holy as the single state. To be saintly you must be celibate.

7. Virginity in partu

According to Catholic dogma, as I understand it, either Jesus didn't pass through the birth canal, or even if he did, that didn't rupture the hymen.

That treats the process of childbirth as impure or defiling. But human beings are essentially earthy. We have souls, but we're embodied agents. We are earthy by design. That's not a result of the Fall.

To take a comparison, have you ever considered what it means that the Son remains Incarnate? It carries the presumption that even now, Jesus must eat, breathe, drink, itch, sneeze, sweat, sleep, excrete, trim his hair, fingernails, and toenails. Maybe he snores. He's not a heathen deity with elixir flowing through his veins.

Marian titles

A sample of a recent debate I had on Facebook:

Mark

Theotokos/God-bearer?
or Mother of God?
or both?

Hays

I'll stick with "Mary"

Adam

Both are true, to deny either as they were meant at Ephesus and Chalcedon is heresy.

Hays

Yes, it's heretical to deny a made-up, manmade title.

Adam

Yes. The word Trinity is a man-made title...If you deny the trinity you are also a heretic.

Hays

Denying the *concept* of the Trinity is heretical. It's convenient to have a label for the concept, but from a Protestant perspective, the concept antedates the label or conciliar/patristic formulations.

We don't need to invent Marian titles to make Christological statements about Jesus. Guess what—we are able to coin Christological titles to make Christological statements about Jesus, like God-Man, God-Incarnate. We don't have to infer Christology from invented Marian titles. We can denote the person of Christ directly.

A problem with Marian titles is that it shifts the focus to exegeting a Marian title. That's a very roundabout way to do Christology. In addition, Marian titles are a wedge tactic into Roman Catholic Mariology.

Adam

It's also a simple formula for detecting heresy - applying the theology to a particular case study and working it out.

Hays

You unwittingly illustrate the problem by making Marian titles a litmus test of Christological orthodoxy. That's unnecessary. Once again, we don't have to infer the person of Christ from invented Marian titles. The Bible provides copious direct material for the person of Christ. And that can be turned into direct theological formulations. It's a diversion to get bogged down into dissecting invented Marian titles. We don't require that detour to know who and what Jesus is.

Church councils have no intrinsic authority. They are only authoritative insofar as they are true. There must be a litmus test for church councils independent of church councils.

Adam

Personally, I don't think it is "unnecessary" - Nestorius argued his case from copious direct biblical material and he turned it into direct theological formulation which seemed to many to be persuasive - but which in fact were heresy and were demonstrated to be so primarily in the context of running them out to their logical conclusion with regards to his mother and his cross.

Hays

"Mother of God" is an ambiguous title, and Catholic apologists exploit that ambiguity. "Mother of God" muddies the theological waters rather than clarifying the theological waters.

Marian apparitions

In Catholicism, there are different kinds of visions and apparitions, including Christophanies and angelic apparitions. Jesus is said to appear to famous Catholic mystics.

Reputed Marian apparitions occupy a central place in Catholic piety. But that raises question: What niche do Marian apparitions fill that isn't already covered by Christophanies and angelic apparitions? If, according to Catholicism, Jesus can and sometimes does appear to people, aren't Marian apparitions inferior and superfluous? What distinctive purpose do Marian apparitions serve if some people have visions of Jesus?

It might be countered that God often works through intermediaries. But isn't that a function of angels? If it's a question of supernatural emissaries, angels already play that role.

Catholics say Mary points people to Jesus. But even if that were the case, why are most reputed apparitions visions of Mary rather than, say, visions of St. John the Evangelist? Isn't St. John the Baptist well-positioned to point people to Jesus? Why aren't there more Catholic reports of St. John appearing to people? "I'm the Beloved Disciple. I was the closest confidant of Jesus. I was an eyewitness to more of his ministry than anyone else".

Moreover, angelic apparitions or apostolic apparitions wouldn't draw attention to themselves in the way Marian apparitions do. People know that angels are merely creatures, and apostles are merely emissaries.

By contrast, reputed Marian apparitions draw attention to herself. She (allegedly) tells San Juan Diego to build a shrine to *her*—not to her Son.

She (allegedly) introduces herself to Bernadette as the Lady of the Immaculate Conception, and to Lúcia, Francisco, and Jacinta as the Lady of the Rosary. That draws attention away from Jesus.

It's striking that the catalyst for Christian revival in the Muslim world is dreams and visions of Jesus rather than Mary. And that makes sense. Between visions of Jesus and visions of angels, there's no niche for visions of Mary.

Is Mary the Mother of God?

I responded to some Catholics on Facebook. The context was whether Mary is the "Mother of God".

There's a lot of equivocation going on in this comment thread. Is Jesus God?

i) It's unorthodox to say that Jesus is God without qualification, just as it's unorthodox to say the Father is God without qualification. After all, without introducing necessary qualifications, to say the Father is God and Jesus is God entails that Jesus is the Father. Surely we wish to avoid that conclusion.

Orthodox theology requires precision thought. Using simplistic terminology isn't orthodox. So let's drop the facile accusations of heresy when the accusers are using ambiguous terminology.

It would be more precise to say the Trinity is God. Likewise, it would be more precise to say each person of the Trinity is divine.

ii) In addition, Jesus isn't simply divine. Rather, there's the doctrine of the two natures. Distinguishing the two natures isn't equivalent to separating the two natures. Some things are true of Christ's human nature that are false of his divine nature, and vice versa. That's a necessary, orthodox distinction.

There was never a time when the Son qua Son did not exist. Mary was never the mother of the Son qua Son.

I repeat: orthodoxy requires precision thought and precision formulations.

Now, you can say things like "God died on the cross" in the extended sense that an individual died on the cross who united divine and human natures in one person. But to say "God died on the cross" without further qualification is confusing, inaccurate, and unorthodox.

"Motherhood" has connotations of sourcehood. Mary was not the source of the Son qua Son's existence. Jesus has an origin in time. The Incarnation as a calendar date. But orthodoxy requires us to draw conceptual distinctions.

Consider the following logic: Jesus is God, the Father is God, therefore Mary is the Mother of God the Father.

That's a problem with using simplistic, ambiguous formulations. In their zeal to paint evangelicals in a corner, some Catholic apologists are painting themselves in a corner. Don't use arguments that can easily be turned against you.

Weeping Madonnas

And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain (Rev 13:15).

I'm going to comment on this article:

<http://www.tyndalehouse.com/Bulletin/60=2009/5%20O'Connell.pdf>

O'Connell raises some good objections to the mass hallucinatory interpretation of the Resurrection accounts:

i) Even assuming that his examples are best construed as mass hallucinations, these usually involve a religious expectation. So that introduces an autosuggestive dynamic. But the resurrection of Jesus was contrary to the expectation of the disciples.

ii) He also makes the point that in the cited cases, the vision never carries on a conversation with the recipient.

However, his case against the hallucinatory interpretation of the Resurrection accounts is far weaker than it could be, due to many dubious assumptions in his analysis.

i) As he himself admits, some reported Marian sightings could be optical illusions. That's different from a hallucination.

ii) There's no a priori reason to treat visions of Jesus (or Mary) as hallucinations. That's a prejudicial classification. There's no reason to assume that Jesus would never appear to someone in a vision. At least, I don't think there is, and O'Connell never offers a supporting argument for his assumption. He just takes it for granted.

iii) A possible objection is that no one knows what Jesus looks like. So modern-day visions of Jesus (or medieval visions) necessarily mimic customary iconography. However, I don't think that, of itself, is a strong objection. Precisely because no one knows what Jesus looks like, if Jesus did appear to someone, he'd have to assume a recognizable appearance based on cultural expectations.

iv) The very fact that ancient Jews (and Gentile) believed in ghosts and visions means they'd distinguish ghosts and visions from a resurrection. When the Gospels record Jesus predicting his resurrection from the dead, it must mean something other than returning from the grave as a ghost or vision, since there'd be nothing special about a postmortem appearance in that respect. Rather, it has to stand in contrast to ghosts and visions. And that's already the case in Matthew and Mark, even before we get to the accounts in Luke, John, and 1 Corinthians which explicitly stress the physicality of his resurrection.

v) I'd add that this undercuts O'Connell's angelic interpretation of some Resurrection appearances. Moreover, his angelic interpretation suffers from parallelomania. In addition, the luminosity of Christ in Acts 9 is no more angelic than his luminosity at the Transfiguration.

vi) It's a mistake to assume that sightings of Jesus and sightings of Mary must have the same explanation. To begin

with, I'm automatically dubious about weeping or bleeding madonnas where the statue or icon is in the custody of a church or monastery. That's not subject to round the clock public surveillance. Rather, that provides after hours opportunities for monks and priests to touch up the statue or icon. In other words, it's easy to stage.

vii) However, I don't necessarily assume that all Marian sightings must either be hoaxes or hallucinations. Before getting to my own explanation, let's consider another alternative. Is it possible that Mary sometimes does appear to people? It might be argued that this would be an encouragement to faith. It might also be argued that this would be a divine accommodation to culture. If that's the only religious culture which some people are in a position to know, and if God wishes to contact them, then it will be through their cultural categories. Or so goes the argument.

viii) Having said that, I don't think it's theologically tenable in the case of Marian sightings. If some reportedly weeping or bleeding or animated madonnas are genuine, that would inevitably foster the kind of superstitious idolatry and totemism which the Bible constantly condemns. So we'd have conflicting revelations. Biblical revelations which condemn the veneration of images, and revelatory images of Mary. These don't mesh.

ix) In addition, this fosters a Mary-centered piety that makes her a rival to Jesus in pious devotion. Indeed, the theological interpretation of weeping or bleeding madonnas is that Mary shares in the Passion of Christ. But that's wholly unacceptable from a Biblical standpoint.

I realize that Catholic apologists rationalize Marian devotion on the grounds that this supposedly redounds to devotion to Jesus. But other issues aside, if Jesus is the ultimate object

of devotion, why not more reports of weeping, bleeding, or animated icons and statues of Jesus rather than Mary? Why not cut to the chase?

x) Furthermore, you have reports of weeping or bleeding madonnas in both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox settings. Yet these can't very well attest both theological traditions, inasmuch as these represent competing theological traditions.

xi) In principle, there's a difference between a miracle that happens to Catholics, and a miracle that's inseparable from a Catholic theological paradigm. A reported miracle that, if authentic, inevitably lends credence to the theological tradition which sponsors it.

A Catholic or Orthodox apologist might object that my interpretation of Scripture begs the question. They might accuse me of special pleading. But that won't work.

For one thing, we have to compare some religious claims to Biblical criteria. That's what the Biblical criteria is for. Take the classic criteria for a false prophet (Deut 13). And notice that this makes allowance for a bona fide miracle.

Moreover, Catholics (and Orthodox) don't have a monopoly on reported miracles. You have Protestant parallels. So these can't be cited to uniquely evidence the claims of Rome.

xii) In addition, we have an example of an animated statue in **Rev 13:15**. A statue that promotes veneration. Yet that's occultic. So there's biblical precedent for the possibility of phenomena analogous to weeping and bleeding madonnas, yet this doesn't imply that God caused the miracle.

xiii) It might be objected that attributing such phenomena to the dark side, if mistaken, borders on the unpardonable sin. However, we're not talking about Jesus, but Mary. Moreover, passages like Deut 13 and Gal 1:8 require us to make allowance for that explanation. And given conflicting evidence, we have no choice but to take sides.

Joseph's fiat

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

973 By pronouncing her "fiat" at the Annunciation and giving her consent to the Incarnation, Mary was already collaborating with the whole work her Son was to accomplish. She is mother wherever he is Savior and head of the Mystical Body.

The "fiat" alludes to the Vulgate rendering of Lk 1:38:

fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum

"let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38).

Catholic theologians act like this means God was putting the plan of redemption up for a vote by giving Mary a veto. Of course, the Annunciation is an announcement of what God will bring to pass.

I've read Catholic apologists claim that if the virgin birth was nonconsensual, then it was rape. That overlooks the elementary fact that rape requires sex: penetration of sexual intercourse. But of course, the virginal conception is nonsexual. Sexless rape?

Be that as it may, let's play along with the Catholic argument for its own sake by drawing a comparison. In Mt 2, Joseph receives some revelatory dreams. These are premonitions of danger. The dreams implicitly raise the specter of alternate futures. If Joseph stays, his young son will be murdered by Herod's henchmen. But he can avert that hypothetical outcome if he gets out of Dodge in time. If things continue as is, along their current trajectory, Jesus will die a premature death.

This raises a question for Christian libertarians. Was failure to heed the angelic warning a live option for Joseph? Pause to consider what that would entail. We're not just talking about the fate of a lone individual. The fate of the whole human race would hang in the balance. The Incarnation would be in vain. Centuries of providential preparation would go up in smoke. God would have to start from scratch. So by parity of argument, why does Catholicism single out Mary's "fiat" but ignore Joseph's "fiat"?

For that matter, the logic of the Catholic argument extends to so many other players in the history of redemption. Take the call of Abraham.

XI. Sacramentalism

Eating God

Alexander Pruss recently gave a talk at the Thomistic Institute defending transubstantiation:

<http://alexanderpruss.blogspot.com/2018/11/eucharist-talk.html>

Pruss is probably the most brilliant Catholic philosopher of his generation, so this is the best defense of the real presence that you're likely to encounter. It's always good to evaluate the strongest case for something. In fairness, only the slides are available, so some of his supporting arguments may be missing, but I can only comment on what's available.

He likes to discuss transubstantiation because it's philosophically challenging, which appeals to his ambidextrous mind. There is, though, the danger of misplaced ingenuity.

Real Presence: Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans and some other Christians agree Jesus is really, substantially present in the Eucharist.

i) "Substantially" does the heavy-lifting. That's a term of art. I assume Pruss is using it in a Thomistic sense. Which also depends on how he interprets Aquinas on that point.

ii) Strictly speaking, Catholics don't believe Jesus is in the Eucharist but is the Eucharist.

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:26-28; see also Mk 14:22-24, Lk 22:19-20, 1 Cor 11:23-25)

Taken literally implies Real Presence.

True, but were we meant take it literally? The Eucharist has its background in the Passover. The Passover is a memorial, commemorating the Exodus. The Exodus is an unrepeatable event, but memorials are indefinitely repeatable. A reenactment is a representation of the original event. Participants are recapitulating the actions of the original participants. The language of identity is substitutionary, where participants assume the same roles, by acting in the place of the original participants. Like different actors who all play the part of Hamlet.

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless

you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him....” ..

.

After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:52-56,66-68)

The slides don't explain why Pruss thinks that foreshadows the Eucharist rather than the Crucifixion.

Maybe the Eucharist is only symbolic of us eating Christ's body? Biblical symbolism:

Crossing of Red Sea → Baptism

Washing with baptismal water → Cleansing from sin

Form of a dove → Holy Spirit

Feeding of 5000 → Eucharist

Eucharist → eating Christ's body?

Reality A symbolizing reality B.

If washing with baptismal water is a reality, then cleansing from sin is a reality.

So, if the Eucharist is a reality, then eating Christ's body is a reality.

But where else do we really eat Christ's body except in the Eucharist?

So symbolism theory also leads to Real Presence!

i) The historicity of the Exodus is no longer a given in Catholic theology.

ii) Pruss is using his Catholic interpretation of baptism to prop up his Catholic interpretation of communion, but evangelicals don't subscribe to baptismal justification/regeneration,

iii) Appealing to 1 Cor 10:1-4 is counterproductive to his argument. Paul draws a parallel between baptism/communion and OT counterparts, yet apart from Joshua and Caleb, the original Exodus generation was

cursed to die in the wilderness. They never made it to the Promised Land. By analogy, reception of baptism and communion not only fails to guarantee salvation, but even fails to create a presumption of salvation.

iv) I don't think the feeding of the 5000 prefigures or stands for the Eucharist.

v) Then there's the general flaw in his argument. Although both relata of the relation are real, that doesn't imply the specific kind of reality Pruss is angling for. The Red Sea Crossing was a real event and baptism is a real event. That doesn't imply that baptism confers the remission of sin.

The manna/water from the rock were real events and the Eucharist is real event. Which doesn't imply that the communicant is eating the physical body of Jesus.

Pruss is attempting to infer the real presence from the fact that the Eucharist is a real event. But how in the world does that follow? No one denies that celebrating the Eucharist is a real event. But that's independent of what the rite signifies.

The Passover was a real event. They ate real lamb and real bread. But they didn't consume something over and above the lamb or the bread.

Appearances of bread and wine → Jesus's body and blood

The crossing of the Red Sea is a case where a real miracle symbolizes a deeper reality. Similarly:

Jesus giving us his body and blood → Jesus dying for us on the cross

Jesus coming to be in our body → Indwelling of the Spirit from Jesus

Eating Jesus's body and blood → Spiritual nourishment

And much more

i) The Red Sea crossing symbolizes a deeper reality in the sense that Christ delivers his people from the bondage of sin. But that's not the kind of "reality" Pruss needs to make his case.

ii) I don't think the Holy Spirit literally indwells human bodies. Scripture uses spacial metaphors. Take "being filled with joy". But that doesn't mean joy fills a body, as if joy shows up on an MRI.

iii) Jesus doesn't give us his body and blood on the cross, if that's what Pruss means. Rather, the sacrificial death of Christ is a propitiatory offering to God to atone for sin. It involves a body because death requires a body. It involves blood because it stands for violent death or bloodshed. The point, however, is not the body or blood in itself, but the sacrificial death.

iv) It's not about internalizing the body and blood, but a forensic action. Christ's redemptive death on the cross doesn't change us, but changes our standing before God.

I have no taste for corruptible food nor for the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David; and for drink I desire his blood, which is love incorruptible. (St. Ignatius of Antioch, ca. AD 110)

For not as common bread nor common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nurtured, is both the flesh and the blood of that incarnated Jesus. (St. Justin Martyr, ca. AD 151)

This is why the Romans accused the early Christians of cannibalism.

Ignatius and Justin Martyr were admirable Christians, but gentile Christianity rapidly lost its roots in Jewish hermeneutics. It turns the Eucharist into a magical incantation that transforms bread and wine into magic potion.

But consider [the gnostics who deny that Christ came in the body], how opposed they are to the will of God. They have no regard for love; no care for the widow, or the orphan, or the oppressed; of the bond, or of the free; of the hungry, or of the thirsty. They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, flesh which suffered for our sins and which that Father, in his goodness, raised up again. (St. Ignatius of Antioch, ca. AD 110)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.... (Jn 1:1,14)

The gnostic heretics thought bodies were evil, and so Christ at most looked human.

Compare: Friends of the Singularity who long to be uploaded to a computer.

We are not souls running bodies like some kind of a drone.

We are beings of soul and body.

Both aspects will be glorified in the resurrection of the body.

I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Mt. 28:20)

In the Eucharist, Jesus is still with us in soul and body.

No Eucharist in the Singularity!

i) The guilt-by-association with Gnosticism is ironic since Pruss thinks the communion elements merely appear to be bread and wine. The Catholic position is "Gnostic" by driving a wedge between appearance and reality vis-a-vis the Eucharist.

ii) His argument apparently depends on hylomorphism. But I'm a Cartesian dualist, not a Thomistic dualist, so I don't object to our souls running bodies like some kind of drone. To my knowledge, the Thomistic notion of the soul as the form of the body is essentially physicalism. I demure.

iii) Pruss needs to provide an exegetical argument that Mt 28:20 has reference to the Eucharist. I take it to mean by that virtue of his immortality and sovereign authority, Jesus will be directing the course of Christian missions behind-the-scenes. That also allows for the occasional Christophany.

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (Eph. 5:31-32)

In the Old and New Testament, the relationship between God/Christ and the Church is compared to marriage.

Christ came to be with his beloved Church.

But Jesus says:

[In marriage] they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder. (Mt. 19:6)

So, Christ is still with the Church in body.

By bodily Eucharistic union, we are united to one another.

Modern gnostics deny importance of body in marriage.

That's vitiated by equivocation. Marriage involves a union between two literally embodied agents. By contrast, the

"body" is a metaphor for the church. Christians symbolize different body parts.

***The Eucharist is a deep source of grace
for the individual and the Church.***

If that's the case, why are so many Catholics so morally abysmal?

But isn't this cannibalism and morally repugnant?

***Fortunately, we receive Christ's body and blood
under the appearance of bread (leavened or
unleavened) and wine.***

In cannibalism, the victim's body is destroyed.

***But when we receive Christ into our bodies, Christ is
also in heaven, unchanged by this.***

i) Kinda like if somebody cooked your mother and served her for dinner, you wouldn't find it repugnant so long as they didn't tell you that you were eating your mother.

ii) Ingenious explanation for how the Eucharist isn't cannibalism. However, the victim's body needn't be destroyed in cannibalism. The cannibal can keep the victim alive and eat parts of the victim that don't perform vital functions.

What is present looks like bread (or a wafer) or wine.

Of course the Church Fathers all knew that.

God who made all things maintains the full appearance of bread and wine, all the way down to the minutest microscopic level.

It is only by God's word that we know that this is Christ's body and blood.

It's true that God could create an undetectable illusion. How very "Gnostic"!

God is present everywhere at once.

God's presence is real but not physical.

So it is possible to have a real presence in multiple places at once.

Lesson: There is more than one way of being present in a location.

Speculation: There could be a sacramental presence that is compatible with having multiple locations.

i) I don't think God is actually present everywhere—or anywhere. God doesn't occupy the universe. God is "present" in the world in the pervasive but mediate sense that a novelist is present in his novel or a video game designer is present in the game.

ii) God can be present in the human mind the way dream characters can be present to the dreamer. But that's illocal, since dreams don't occupy actual space.

iii) God can produce audiovisual phenomena (theophanies) that simulate his presence.

iv) I don't know what Pruss means by a presence that's "real" but not "physical". How is location real but not physical?

Suppose in ten years you invent a time machine and go back in time to shake hands with yourself.

Then you will be in two places at once.

There is no contradiction in such time travel.

So no contradiction in being in more than one place at once, even physically.

This is obviously not how God does it in the case of the Eucharist, but it may show that the contradiction argument fails.

Something can be impossible without being contradictory. Logical contradictions are different from natural impossibilities. Is backwards time-travel a natural possibility? If not, where does that leave his comparison?

Places in space are real things.

To be in a place is to stand in a certain “location relation” to that place.

We cannot say much more about what that relation is besides that.

You can have the friend-of relation to multiple people.

So why can't you have the location relation to multiple places?

i) To be in a place is to stand in relation to other things with varying degrees of proximity. To be "here" is not to be "there".

ii) How is a friend-of relation analogous to multiple places? Friendship is psychological, although it may have physical expressions.

Einstein's Theory of Relativity: Space-time is curved.

God could make space-time curve back on itself so that a place in heaven and one or more places on earth are literally the same place.

Not contradictory.

Nothing is difficult for an all-powerful being!

i) To what extent is space-time curvature a metaphor? Is this really like folding a piece of paper? Cosmic Origami?

ii) There's a sense in which some things are too difficult even for an all-powerful being. If God is operating by the laws of physics, then that limits his field of action to what's consistent with the laws of physics.

iii) Notice Pruss isn't saying that according to space-time curvature, the sun and the earth are literally the same place. Conditions on the surface of the earth are hardly equivalent to conditions on the surface of the sun. So by itself, space-time curvature doesn't entail that all places in the universe are literally the same place.

Rather, he seems to be saying that God can manipulate the laws of physics to make what are otherwise two different places the same place. But does that really have anything to do with the laws of physics? Or is that a case of God bending or circumventing the laws of physics to create a situation that's unnatural? Seems like Pruss is trying to have it both ways.

iv) Pruss doesn't think that Jesus is automatically on earth. Rather, that only happens at Mass. So does he think Jesus

makes an intergalactic trip every time a Mass is celebrated? If so, doesn't that require superluminal speed? Doesn't superluminal speed involve backwards time-travel? How is any of this really consistent with the laws of physics?

v) Then there's the question of where heaven is. Perhaps the unspoken assumption is that since Jesus has a physical body, but he must be somewhere. Fair assumption. But where? On a planet somewhere else in the far-flung universe? On a counterpart to earth in a parallel universe? If a parallel universe, then you can't cause a place in one universe and another place in a parallel universe literally the same place by making space-time curve back on itself, for each universe is separate. Each universe is a closed system relative to another universe. Or so it seems to me.

St. Thomas Aquinas thinks that objects have a location by having in them a certain kind of locational “accidental property” (a property a thing can exist without).

While the bread and wine cease to exist, their accidental properties remain. (Shape, color, etc.)

The locational accident of bread and wine remains.

Christ's body comes to be located both by means of its own locational accident (in heaven) and by means of the remaining locational accidents of bread and wine (on earth).

i) What extra work does a "locational accidental property" do over and above having a location? In what sense is location an internal rather than external property or relation?

ii) How are the empirical properties of the communion elements a means by which Christ is really presence in the Eucharist?

But the Eucharist is much smaller than a man!

Speculation: We can adapt the above models to make larger places in heaven line up with smaller ones on earth, or to make individual parts (particles?) of Jesus be located in differently shaped places.

i) Is heaven larger than earth? If, in context, heaven is a physical place, then in what respect is heaven larger than earth? Most of the saints are currently disembodied, so they don't need a place.

ii) Making individual particles of Jesus multiply-located isn't the same thing as making his body multiply-located.

Catholic vampires

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/11/eating-god.html>

Recently, Catholic polymath Alexander Pruss defended transubstantiation. I did my initial post when only the slides were available. However, an audio recording is now available:

<https://soundcloud.com/thomisticinstitute/eating-god-can-the-eucharist-really-be-jesus-alexander-pruss/s-lZ6vJ>

Having heard it, I'll make some supplementary observations:

1. In reference to Jn 6, he says the symbolic interpretation means Jesus gives us symbolic eternal life. But that's confused. On the symbolic interpretation, Jesus gives us real eternal life, which is symbolized by the manna/bread/flesh/blood imagery.

2. He says that in biblical symbolism, reality symbolizes reality, a miracle symbolizes a miracle. If communion is just a symbolic consumption of Christ's body, then it's circular-symbolizing itself. He says the merely symbolic interpretation suffers from a false dichotomy. But, once again, that's confused:

i) There's the complicated question of what makes something symbolic. Symbolism involves a kind of correspondence between two (or more) things, but that can operate at different levels. Two things can be similar at the level of resemblance. Or function. Or the same kind of thing.

ii) Suppose the eucharist is a miracle (i.e. transubstantiation). Yet it symbolizes the crucifixion. But the crucifixion is not a miracle. So his comparison breaks down even if we grant the Catholic interpretation regarding the first element of the comparison.

iii) Is Jesus both a literal lamb and a symbolic lamb? A literal lion and a symbolic lion? A real vine and a symbolic vine? A real star (Venus) and a symbolic star? Is the church both a physical body and a symbolic body? Is the bride/bridegroom relation between Jesus and the church both literal and figurative? When scripture compares judgment to a winepress, is that both literal and figurative? There are so many counterexamples to Pruss's claim.

3. He interprets Mt 28:20 ("I'm with you always") eucharistically, yet there's nothing in the text or context that clues the reader into a eucharistic allusion.

4. He compares it to divine omnipresence. But even if we grant his interpretation of divine omnipresence (I don't), God isn't multiply present in the same way the physical body of Christ is said to be multiply-present.

5. He says there's no philosophical consensus on what it means to be present, so it can't be said that transubstantiation is contradictory. But that's a self-defeating way to defend transubstantiation:

i) If we don't know what it means for something to be present, then Catholics have no clear idea of what they're affirming when they profess transubstantiation. Words without a definable concept behind the words. In that

event, they don't profess anything. They say something, but there's nothing in the mind which the words represent.

ii) The Bible can rely on a coarse-grained, common sense notion of presence. A pretheoretical concept drawn from paradigm examples in human experience. That will suffice to provide a concept that backs up the verbal claim. But unfortunately for the Catholic, the real presence is nonsensical on a common sense definition. So the dilemma remains.

6. Pruss has some interesting comparisons between Christian theology, which accentuates the importance of the body (e.g. Incarnation, resurrection, sexual mores) and modern gnostics who think sexual morality is reducible to feelings and psychology. Who hope to achieve immortality by uploading consciousness into a computer and leaving the body behind. Digital immortality. He thinks the real presence reflects a contrary outlook.

Yet the real presence is a counterproductive way to showcase the importance of the body. By his own reckoning, the real presence is imperceptible and undetectable. An empirical illusion. It drives a wedge between appearance and reality. Our eyes, hands, and tongue tell us one thing while the underlying reality is deceptively different.

7. He uses a time-travel thought-experiment, where, if I could go back in time, I could shake hands with my younger self. Perhaps, but that depends on particular theories of time and personal identity. Do I still exist in the past? Am I chronologically separable into multiple selves that can exist apart from each other and come into contact with each other? Can temporal stages of me, separated by intervening phases, skip over the intervening phases and circle back?

Even if I exist all along the continuum, does that mean I can also exist discontinuously, so that one stage of me can coexist with another stage of me, from different parts of the continuum? Surely that's not something Pruss is entitled to posit, without a detailed argument.

Kenny on transubstantiation

Steve sent this essay on transubstantiation by Anthony Kenny. The source is the first chapter of *Reason and Religion: Essays in Philosophical Theology*.

The doctrine of Transubstantiation is stated by the Council of Trent thus. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, when the bread and wine are consecrated the whole substance of the bread is thereby turned into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and the whole substance of the wine is thereby turned into the substance of His blood. This turning of one substance into another, the Council affirmed, was aptly named by the holy Catholic Church: 'transubstantiation' (Session XIII, cap. 4).

This doctrine is expounded as follows in the twenty-fifth section of the second part of the Catechism of the Council of Trent. 'Now there are three wonderful and stupendous things which in this Sacrament, Holy Church without all doubt believes and confesses to be wrought by the words of consecration. The First is, That the true Body of Christ, that very same which was born of the Virgin, and now sits in Heaven at the Right-hand of the Father is contain'd in this Sacrament. The Second is that no substance of the Elements remains in it: Altho nothing seems more strange and distant to the senses. The Third, which is easily gathered from both the former, tho the words of Consecration fully express it, is that what is beheld by the Eyes, or perceiv'd by the other Senses is in a wonderful and unspeakable manner, without any subject matter. And one may see indeed all the Accidents of Bread and Wine, which yet are inherent in no substance, but they consist of themselves; because the Substance of the Bread and Wine is so chang'd into the Body and Blood of the Lord, that the

substance of the Bread and Wine altogether ceases.'
(English edition of 1687, p. 208.)

In discussing this doctrine I wish altogether to abstract from the question, whether there is any good reason to believe it to be true. In particular, I wish to abstract from the question whether the exposition contained in the Tridentine Catechism is the only possible orthodox interpretation of the teaching of the Council. I wish to consider the purely philosophical question, whether the doctrine stated in that Catechism is or is not self-contradictory. If it is, then of course there can be no good reason to believe it true, no matter how august the authority which affirms it. On the other hand, if it does not appear self-contradictory, the question of its truth remains open for the philosopher. We cannot rule out from the start a philosophical position which accepted the coherence of the notion of transubstantiation, but rejected the possibility that it might be a doctrine revealed by God, on the grounds that a contradiction was to be found not in the notion of transubstantiation but in that of a divine revelation.

It might be thought that a philosopher could have no possible interest in investigating the concept of transubstantiation unless he already believed it to be revealed by God. For the occurrence of transubstantiation, even if not logically impossible, is surely extremely improbable. But it is wrong to suppose that a philosopher should be interested in analysing descriptions only of states of affairs which are likely to obtain. Contemporary philosophers, like philosophers in all ages, frequently use the consideration of very improbable suppositions in order to throw light on concepts of great generality. Thus Strawson, in his book *Individuals* (London, 1959), devotes a whole chapter to the discussion of purely auditory experience such as would be enjoyed by beings who lacked

all senses but that of hearing. Logicians talk of empty universes, and of the possibility of changing the past. In Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* we read of lions which talk, of dolls in pain, of disappearing chairs and languages of fantastic structure. The ability to imagine outlandish states of affairs is indeed a necessary skill for a philosopher. There is therefore no reason why the possibility of transubstantiation should not be investigated as a philosophical question in its own right, for the sake of the light such an inquiry might throw on concepts such as that of *material object*.

At the outset, it is obvious that if the true account of material objects is a phenomenalism such as that of Professor Ayer, then the notion of transubstantiation is self-contradictory. In his book *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London, 1940) Ayer wrote as follows in the chapter entitled 'The constitution of material things'. 'As for the belief in the "unity" and "substantiality" of material things, I shall show that it may be correctly represented as involving no more than the attribution to visual and tactual sense-data of certain relations which do, in fact, obtain in our experience.' On this view, to assert that a certain substance, e.g. bread, is or is not present in a certain place is to make a statement about what relations may be expected to obtain between sets of visual and tactual sense-data in our experience. But it is clear that a believer in transubstantiation who denies that the substance of bread is present on the altar after the consecration is not denying that all the relations between sense-data will obtain which would obtain if the substance, bread, really were present on the altar. As the Tridentine Catechism puts it: 'If the Faithful persuade themselves, that those things only are contained in this Sacrament, which are perceived by the senses; they must needs be led into the greatest impiety, when with their Eyes, their Feeling, their Smell, their Taste,

perceiving nothing at all, but the Species of Bread and Wine, they will judge that there is only Bread and Wine in the Sacrament.' If Ayer is right, therefore, the believer in transubstantiation is easily convicted of contradicting himself.

Since *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* was written, however, the doctrine which it contains has been severely criticized by people with no brief for transubstantiation, such as the late Professor J. L. Austin, whose posthumously published *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford, 1962) is almost entirely devoted to a refutation of Ayer's phenomenalism. Not all Austin's arguments are conclusive, but probably today most philosophers would agree with him in rejecting Ayer's claim that 'to say anything about a material thing is to say something, but not the same thing, about classes of sense-data' (cf. *Sense and Sensibilia*, p. 119).

If we reject phenomenalism, it might seem that we must say that behind the perceptible phenomena of any material object, there is an imperceptible part of it which is its substance. And indeed the Council Of Trent, when it speaks of the substance of bread and wine, has frequently been taken - by believers and unbelievers alike - to have been speaking about a *part* of the bread and wine. The teaching of Trent is often expounded with the aid of a doctrine of substance which goes as follows. There are some parts of a loaf of bread, such as its shape and colour and taste, which can be perceived by the senses; but the substance which is beneath these outward parts is not perceptible to the senses. The perceptible parts or accidents of the bread may be pictured as concealing the inner reality which is the substance of the bread rather as a layer of paint may conceal the wood of a table. Whatever may be perceived of a material thing is only accidental to it: for each of the perceptible qualities of a thing may change and yet the

thing remain the same. The substance of a thing is that in which these accidents inhere, the subject of which they are predicated. It is itself both imperceptible and indescribable: imperceptible, because all perceptible qualities are accidents; indescribable, because to describe a thing is to record its attributes, and attributes are what a substance has, not what it is.

I think it will be agreed that the doctrine of transubstantiation is often explained in this manner. Many who, like myself, find this account unacceptable, therefore reject transubstantiation. In fact it is very unlikely that the Council of Trent meant anything like the thesis we have just stated. It was not Trent, but Locke, who defined substance as some thing, we know not what, which supports the sensible qualities we find united in things. The account of substance accepted by the scholastics who worked out the theology of transubstantiation was not Locke's theory but the quite different one of Aristotle. The views of these scholastics are surely more relevant than those of Locke in determining what is likely to have been the mind of the Fathers of Trent.

Commonly, in their Eucharistic theology, when these scholastics spoke of 'substance', they had in mind what Aristotle in his *Categories* called 'first substance'. The doctrine of the *Categories* has been stated in modern terms by Miss Anscombe in *Three Philosophers* (Oxford, 1961). '*First substance*,' she writes, 'is explained in the first place as what neither is asserted of nor exists in a subject: the examples offered are "such-and-such a man", "such-and-such a horse". A "first substance" then is what is designated by a proper name such as the name of a man or of a horse, or again, if one cared to give it a proper name, of a cabbage. A proper name is never, *qua* proper name, a predicate. Thus what a proper name stands for is

not *asserted of* a subject.' A surface, such as the surface of a particular wedding-ring, is not *asserted of* a subject, but in Aristotle's sense it is *in* a subject. First substance, therefore, is described by contrast with what is asserted of and what exists in a subject (*Three Philosophers*, pp. 7-8).

In the *Categories*, Aristotle lists ten different types of predication. A predicate may tell you what kind of thing something is, or how big it is, or what it is like, or where it is, or what it is doing, and so on. We may say, for instance, of Christ that he was a man, that he was six feet tall, that he was a good man, that he was younger than John the Baptist, that he lived in Galilee, that he lived under Pontius Pilate, that he sat upon Jacob's well, that he wore a beard, that he healed the sick, and that he was crucified. The predicates which we use in saying these things belong to different categories: they belong, respectively, to the categories of substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, *habitus*, *actio* and *passio*.

'Substance' is here clearly being used in a sense different from that in which it occurs in the phrase 'first substance'. Geach, following Aquinas, has recently drawn a distinction between substantival and adjectival terms. 'Aquinas calls our attention,' he writes, 'to a feature of Latin grammar - that substantives are singular or plural on their own account, whereas adjectives "agree in number" with substantives (*Summa Theologiae* Ia, 39, 3c and *ad* I; 5 *ad* 5). This suggests to him a logical distinction between two sorts of terms: substantival terms, to which the question "how many?" applies directly, and adjectival terms, to which this question applies only in so far as they are used to add a qualification to substantival terms. One may ask how many cats there are in a room; but not, how many black things there are in the room; only, how many black *cats* (say) there are in the room. The basis of this

distinction is that the sense of "cat" determines a sense for "one and the same cat", whereas the sense of "black thing" does not in the least determine what shall count as one and the same black thing.' (*Three Philosophers*, p. 86; *Reference and Generality*, pp. 39-40.)

Geach's distinction take us only part of the way to understanding Aristotle's distinction between predicates in the category of substance and predicates in the other nine, accidental, categories. A substantival term is not the same as a substantial term. 'Gold' is a predicate in the category of substance; yet we cannot ask 'how many golds are there in the room?'. On the other hand, the noun 'city' determines a sense for 'one and the same city', yet 'city' does not stand for a kind Of substance.

The notion of a substantial predicate, as Miss Anscombe has insisted, is closely connected with a particular sense of the question 'What is that?' which might be asked while pointing to something. 'We can pick out that sense of "What is it?" that is answered by the name of a kind of thing or of a kind of stuff: "That is sulphur", ' 'That is an oak-tree", "That is a hyena".' "'Substance", writes Miss Anscombe, 'is a classification, but whether of things or of concepts (or words) seems difficult to determine. If we ask what falls into the category of substances the answer is "e.g. men, horses, cabbages, gold, sugar, soap". This answer mentions things, not concepts or words, so substance might seem to be a classification of things.' On the other hand, we cannot ask: in virtue of what characteristics are these things all substances. For a description of their characteristics would already be a description in the form: description of the properties of substances. It is not just a well-established hypothesis that gold or a cat is a substance: that e.g. the question 'What is it made of?' has an application to a cat or a lump of gold. (*Three Philosophers*, p. 13.)

Aristotle devoted much thought to the relationship between first substance and predicates in the category of substance. Consider a sentence which contains a predication in the category of substance, such as 'Socrates is a man'. The name 'Socrates' stands for the individual, or first substance, Socrates. Now what does the predicate '... [is] a man' stand for? A Platonist might say that it stands for humanity as such. But this answer is not open to an Aristotelian: he rejects the idea that there is such a thing as humanity as such. The answer which Aristotle gives to this question is that the predicate stands for exactly the same thing as the subject does; that is to say, it stands for, or refers to, Socrates himself.

On the other hand, in a sentence containing a predication in one of the other categories, such as 'Socrates is white', the subject and the predicate do not stand for the same thing. The subject, 'Socrates' stands for the man Socrates; but the predicate '... [is] white' does not stand for Socrates. Does it stand for whiteness? Only a Platonist could say this. The answer given in the Aristotelian tradition was that it stood for the 'individualized form', the whiteness of Socrates.¹

Such was the interpretation given by scholastics of the doctrines of Aristotle in *Metaphysics* A and Z. If we seek a definition of 'substance' and 'accidents' in this tradition, we must say that the substance of a thing is what a predicate in the category of substance, which is true of that thing, stands for; and the accidents of a thing are what true predicates of it in the other nine categories stand for. Thus, if it is true that Peter is a man, then the substance of Peter is what the predicate '... [is] a man' stands for, to wit, Peter himself; and if it is true that Peter is clever, then among the accidents of Peter will be whatever the predicate '... is clever' stands for in the sentence 'Peter is clever'.

Now most modern philosophers would object to saying that predicates of any kind, whether substantial or accidental, *stand for* anything at all. Names stand for, or refer to, what they name; but there is nothing which '... is a man' or '... is clever' stands for in the way in which 'Peter' stands for Peter. To be sure, '... is a man' and '... is clever' have meaning. But so do 'if' and 'but' have meaning; they are not empty noises. But no one supposes that they stand for some ifhood and butness existing in the world. So many philosophers would argue: a typical example is Quine in his essay 'On what there is' (*From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge, Mass., 1953).²

I am inclined to accept their argument, for the following reason. It seems clear that all the words in a sentence must stand for the same thing whether the sentence is true or false. If a question admits of the answer 'Yes' or 'No', the reference of all the words in the question must be the same no matter what the answer may be. But if the sentence 'Peter is clever' is false, there is no such thing as the cleverness of Peter for the sentence to be about. Therefore, the sentence 'Peter is clever', whether true or false, cannot contain any phrase or word which refers to the cleverness of Peter.³

For this reason I find it difficult to accept that accidents are the references of accidental predicates. But although many of the scholastics accepted such a theory, it does not seem necessary to do so in order to make sense of the teaching of Trent. All that it is necessary to believe is that the wisdom of Socrates, say, exists if and only if Socrates is wise. It is not necessary to believe, as these scholastics did, that this wisdom is actually referred to in the sentence 'Socrates is wise'. It is not difficult to find modern philosophers who are prepared to subscribe to the much more modest thesis that if Socrates is wise then there is

such a thing as the wisdom of Socrates, and if Socrates is not wise then there is no such thing as the wisdom of Socrates.

Mr Strawson, for instance, in his widely acclaimed book *Individuals*, discusses ways in which particular and universal terms may be tied to each other. We may distinguish, say, particular utterances, and particular catches at cricket. We can then group together some particular utterances as wise utterances, and some particular catches as difficult catches. We are in that case grouping particulars by means of universals which are attached or 'tied' to them. But we may also group particulars by tying them to other particulars: as we may group together Socrates's utterances, and Carr's catches. In cases where we have two particulars tied together in this way, we often find that one particular will be an independent member of the tie, and the other particular a dependent member. For instance, Socrates may be tied to many particular utterances, but any particular utterance of his cannot be tied to any other particular person. Particulars, such as Socrates, which are the independent members of all such ties as they enter into, are called by Strawson: 'independent particulars'. As he explicitly recognizes, Strawson's notion of *independent particular* is very close to Aristotle's notion of *first substance*.⁴

To an Aristotelian, the natural meaning of the decree of Trent which states that the substance of bread and wine turns into the substance of Christ's body and blood, is not that some part of the bread and wine turns into some part of the body and blood, but simply that the bread and wine turns into the body and blood. Following Aquinas (in [1 Cor 11:24](#)), the Fathers of Trent used the 'substance of Christ's body' and 'Christ's body' as interchangeable terms. According to scholastic theory, substance is not an

imperceptible part of a particular individual. It is not a part of an individual; it is that individual. And it is imperceptible by the senses only in the following sense: I do not see *what kind of a thing* something is with my eyes as I see *what colour* it is with my eyes, any more than I see *what it tastes like* with my eyes. For all that, substances may be perceived. I can see, say, sulphuric acid with my eyes; though it is not just by looking, but by intelligent use of hypothesis and experiment and information, that I know that the stuff I see is sulphuric acid. Similarly, when I see sugar, what I see is sweet, though it is not with my eyes that I discover this. *A pari*, before the consecration the substance of bread is *not* imperceptible: what I see is bread; the substance which I see is the substance, bread.

Transubstantiation is a *unique* conversion, a turning of one thing into another which has no parallel. In all other cases where A turns into B there is some stuff which is first A-ish, and then B-ish. As scholastics would say, the same matter is first informed with the form of A-ishness and then informed with the form of B-ishness. (This sentence is merely a restatement, not an explanation, of the sentence which precedes it.) But in the Eucharistic *conversio* there is no parcel of stuff which is first bread and then Christ's body; not only does one form give way to another but one bit of matter gives way to another. In an ordinary change, when the form of A-ishness gives way to the form of B-ishness, we have a *transformation* - substantial transformation, or accidental transformation, according to whether the forms in question are substantial forms or accidental forms, that is to say, according to whether the predicates '*... is an A*' and '*... is a B*' are accidental or substantial predicates. In the Eucharist we have not just one form giving way to another, but one substance giving way to another: not just transformation, but *transsubstantiation*.

It may well be asked at this point: what is now left of the notion of *turning into* here? To my knowledge, no completely satisfactory answer to this question has yet been given; nor do I think that I can succeed where others have failed. But it may help if we explain how the notion of *turning into* came to have a place in discussion of the Eucharist at all. There is no mention in Scriptural references to this sacrament of anything turning into anything else: why is there in Trent?

Aquinas introduces the notion of *turning into* as the only possible the presence of Christ's body under the appearances of bread and wine after the consecration. After the consecration it is true to say that Christ is in such-and-such a place. Now there are only three ways, says Aquinas, in which something can begin to exist in a place in which it did not exist before. Either it moves to that place from another place; or it is created in that place; or something which is already in that place turns, or is turned, into it. But Christ's body does not move into the place where the Eucharistic species are, nor is it created, since it already exists. Therefore something - to wit, the bread and wine - is turned into it.

It is essential to St Thomas's account that the bread and wine should cease to be, not by being annihilated, but by being *turned into* the body and blood. Transubstantiation is sometimes explained thus: the bread and wine are annihilated, and in their place Christ's body begins to exist. But for St Thomas there could be no sense in saying that Christ's body existed in *such-and-such a place* if the bread and wine formerly existing in that place had been annihilated. For, he would ask, how is the connection made between the body on the right hand of the Father and this particular altar? The connection, for him, is this, and only this: that the accidents of what has been turned into

Christ's body are in such-and-such a place. Take away the transubstantiation, according to St Thomas, and you take away the presence.

The accidents which remain, says the Tridentine Catechism, following the Council of Constance, remain without a subject. Believers in transubstantiation are sometimes wrongly thought to hold that the accidents after consecration inhere in the substance of Christ's body.⁵ If this were so then, for example, the whiteness which the bread once had would become the whiteness of Christ. And thus all the accidental predicates which are true of the sacramental host would become true of Christ: it would be true that Christ was white and round and two inches across and smaller than an orange.

When we consider the concept of accidents inherent in no substance, examples come to mind which are either incredible or too straightforward. The idea of the Cheshire cat's grin without the cat seems the very quintessence of absurdity. On the other hand there is nothing miraculous or mysterious in there being a smell of onions after the onions have ceased to exist. The smell of onions is just the sort of thing which St Thomas meant by an accident in this context. When he discusses the question how accidents without substance can nourish and inebriate he considers the suggestion that it is the smell of wine which inebriates, as the smell of wine in a full cellar may make you feel dizzy before you broach a cask. He rejects this suggestion, not on the grounds that an accident is a different sort of thing altogether, but on the grounds that you can get far more drunk on consecrated wine than you can by going into a cellar and sniffing. But perhaps a better example of an accident without a substance than any known to St Thomas is the colour of the sky. When the sky is blue, its blueness is not the blue *of* any substance. 'The sky' is the name not of

a substance, but of a phenomenal object (like 'the host') and there is no substance *in* the sky which is blue.

The principle that the accidents of the host do not inhere in the substance of Christ's body is one which is often violated in popular preaching of the Eucharist. '... is moved', '... is dropped', 'spat upon' are accidental predicates.

Consequently, if the host is moved, Christ is not moved; if the host is dropped, Christ is not dropped; if the host is spat upon, Christ is not spat upon. In the words of Cardinal Newman: 'Our Lord neither descends from heaven upon our altars nor moves when carried in procession. The visible species change their position but he does not move (*Via Media*, 1877, ii. 220).' The principle to which Newman alludes is violated in popular devotions to 'The Prisoner of the Tabernacle'; it was violated also by Cardinal Pole when he forced an unfortunate heretic to repeat the words of the recanting Berengar: 'The real body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ...are held and broken by the hands of the priests and are crushed by the teeth of the faithful.'⁶

The principle that the accidents inhere in no substance, however, leaves one problem with which I shall conclude. Among the accidental categories of Aristotle is the category of place. '... is on the altar', for instance, is an accidental predicate. But if the accidents which once belonged to the bread do not inhere after consecration in the substance of Christ's body, then it appears that it by no means follows from the presence of the host upon the altar that Christ is present on the altar. Thus the doctrine of transubstantiation appears in the end to fail to secure that for which alone it was originally introduced, namely the real presence of Christ's body under the sacramental species. I do not know of any satisfactory answer to this problem. If I did, I would give it. Since I do not, I must leave it, as the writers of textbooks say, as an exercise for the reader.

[Footnotes]

¹ A modern philosopher would speak naturally of the predicate of 'Socrates is a man' as being '... is a man'. Aquinas, though in his commentary on the *De Interpretatione* he recognizes the use now common, usually spoke of a predicate as a single term like 'man'. In a sentence such as 'Socrates is a man', if 'Socrates' and 'man' both stand for Socrates, what, if anything, does 'is' stand for? Aquinas's answer was that 'is' stood for *esse* - an *esse* which differed systematically accordingly as the predicate following the 'is' differed in category. (*In V. Met*, Cathala 890.)

² On the other hand, there *are* modern philosophers who are prepared to accept the idea that predicates have references. Strawson, (*Individuals*, p. 144), considers whether in 'Raleigh smokes' the expression 'smokes' can be said to stand for smoking, or the habit of smoking. He says: 'I know of no rule or custom which makes it always senseless or incorrect to say this, any more than I know of any rule or custom which would make it always senseless or incorrect to say that an assertion made in the words "Raleigh smokes" was an assertion about smoking.'

³ The form of this argument goes back to Buridan (Geach, *Reference and Generality*, p. xi).

⁴ *Individuals*, pp. 167-70.

⁵ Cf. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, viii (Everyman edition, p. 40).

⁶ I am indebted for these last two references to the Rev. H. Green, C.R.

"The Jewish roots of Catholicism"

I've been watching some Brant Pitre videos to see if he does a better job of making an exegetical case for Catholicism than other Catholic apologists. Here's a sampler.

The second thing to notice is that Jesus is emphasizing the realism of his presence under the form of food and drink...

That the food and drink he's going to give, which they don't yet understand [because] he hasn't instituted the Last Supper...

It's going to be necessary for us to receive it in order to have eternal life.

If you eat his flesh and drink his blood he will abide in you and you will abide in him.

The OT manna was miraculous bread from heaven. Now if the NT manna was just a symbol, that would make the old manna greater than the new manna.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWBQvUPabvY>

i) Jn 6 says nothing about the presence of Christ under the form of food and drink. Notice how Catholic apologists first stress the literal interpretation of the imagery, then

suddenly interject a distancing formula. They do that to save appearances. Obviously the bread and wine don't look like Jesus. So they abandon literality the moment their literality comes into conflict with manifest reality.

ii) Notice the hasty admission that Christ's audience wasn't in a position to understand the eucharistic interpretation. Since, moreover, the Lord's Supper is modeled on the Passover Seder, why would Jews think there was anything special about the Lord's Supper?

iii) Notice how Pitre's interpretation is at odds with the teaching of his own sect. According to modern Catholic theology, it isn't necessary to go to Mass to be saved. Muslims can be saved. Hindus can be saved. Buddhists can be saved.

iv) Does going to Mass cause the communicant to remain in Christ? What about the massive number of lapsed Catholics? Or is this a circular argument where you abide in Christ so long as you go to Mass? But in that case, the Eucharist doesn't keep you in Christ. It doesn't keep you going. So what difference does it make?

v) The OT manna was miraculous in the sense that it had a supernatural source. But the manna itself was apparently composed of natural biological material, just like the water from the rock, or the quail blown off-course to feed the Israelites.

vi) The point is not whether the NT rite is greater than the OT manna. The point of the manna isn't to prefigure the eucharist but to prefigure Jesus. It's Jesus, not the Eucharist, that's greater than the OT manna. This is a classic example of how the tinted glasses of Catholicism obscures the true significance of the comparison.

He is assigning to Peter the office of being shepherd over his flock...In Jn 10 Jesus reveals that he himself is the Good Shepherd. And he even says there will be one flock and one shepherd...Jesus is the divine shepherd, the supreme shepherd, but Peter is established as the earthly shepherd over the flock of Jesus' disciples—and that includes, very importantly, the other twelve.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPFZ5aL4B4c>

i) Even if we grant his interpretation, Pitre needs to brush up on arithmetic. Since Peter was one of the twelve, and Judas was out of the picture by then, Peter would, at best, be the earthly shepherd over the other ten, not the other twelve.

ii) More important is Pitre's fallacy. To say Peter is a shepherd doesn't imply that the other disciples aren't shepherds. It includes Peter as a shepherd without excluding others in that role. For instance, if Paul says that he's an apostle, that doesn't mean he's the only apostle.

iii) Peter is singled out, not because a unique prerogative is conferred on him, but because he betrayed Jesus in a way that the other disciples did not. He is singled out for restoration.

iv) If the singular shepherdship of Christ is consistent with the existence of undershepherds, then that's consistent with more than one undershepherd.

v) There's nothing in Jn 21 about Jesus assigning an "office" to Peter. An office is a permanent position with successive office-holders. That concept is absent from Pitre's prooftext.

There are certain traditions that are binding. Whenever we look at a passage in the Bible we interpret it in context. In 2 Thes 2:15...so apostolic tradition has to be kept...An apostolic tradition which is guided by the Holy Spirit and given to the church as binding, whether in written or oral form.

How I'm I supposed to know which traditions are apostolic and which ones are man-made, which ones are permanent and binding and which ones can be changed or be dispensed with? You know that by the living authority of the church. The reason Christ institutes a church with leaders—the living authorities, the apostles and their successors can discern through the Holy Spirit...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VevrZbpbRpc>

But ironically he interprets 2 Thes 2:15 out of context. Paul doesn't appeal to the living authority of the church, to Roman Catholic bishops to discern binding, permanent traditions from man-made, reformable, or dispensable traditions. Rather, the Thessalonians know which "traditions" are apostolic because they got it direct from St. Paul. Pitre has substituted a completely different criterion from the criterion that Paul actually stipulates. The "traditions" are binding if you heard it from the mouth of an apostle. That ensures the apostolic pedigree of the source. From his mouth to your ear. No intermediaries. No chain of testimony.

Jn 20:22-23...This is the foundational text for the power of the sacrament of reconciliation...Who can forgive sins but God alone? It's a divine prerogative to forgive sins.

The implication is that they would somehow know what those sins are...Otherwise, how are they going to know what sins to bind or what sins to forgive.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7KdILY2VXE>

i) How should we interpret Jn 20:22-23? It's in a Gospel, not a church history. So it doesn't explicitly show us how that was understood and implemented in the church. For that our best source is the Book of Acts. It's not that the disciples personally absolve sin. Indeed, you don't find that in Acts. Rather, they provide the means for the remission of sin by evangelizing the lost.

ii) How were the Eleven in a position to be father confessors to thousands of converts? That's quite unrealistic. So it doesn't envision auricular confession and absolution. God does the forgiving. The Eleven are simply intermediaries of forgiveness by preaching the Gospel. Their role is indirect rather than direct. That's further reinforced by the fact that there's no rite of confession to a priest and sacerdotal absolution in the NT epistles. Catholicism is a different religion.

iii) Finally, in the context of John's Gospel, passages like Jn 3:16-18 offer a clue about how 20:22-23 was meant to be understood. The basis for forgiveness and damnation isn't confession to a Roman Catholic priest and absolution from his lips but by having faith in Jesus or refusing to have faith in Jesus.

Communion and cannibalism

The charge of cannibalism does not hold water for at least three reasons. First, Catholics do not receive our Lord in a cannibalistic form. Catholics receive him in the form of bread and wine. The cannibal kills his victim; Jesus does not die when he is consumed in Communion. Indeed, he is not changed in the slightest; the communicant is the only person who is changed. The cannibal eats part of his victim, whereas in Communion the entire Christ is consumed—body, blood, soul, and divinity. The cannibal sheds the blood of his victim; in Communion our Lord gives himself to us in a non-bloody way.

<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/what-catholics-believe-about-john-6>

i) First of all, I always find ironic how proponents of the real presence stress the literal interpretation of Jn 6, but then when asked if that doesn't commit them to a cannibalistic view of the Eucharist, they back off. So do they take it

literally or not? They take it literally until you press them on the implications, at which point they get defensive and distance themselves from a literal interpretation.

ii) Suppose a psychopath kidnaps teenagers, chains them in his basement, then uses an I.V. tube as a straw to suck their blood. Isn't that cannibalistic? But it doesn't kill them unless the psycho exsanguinates them. He can keep them alive and sample their blood.

iii) Suppose a human body is dehydrated, ground into powder, and made into pills. If you pop those pills, you're consuming a corpse in a different form, but it's still cannibalistic, is it not? It's not the form but composition that makes it cannibalistic.

iv) What does it mean to eat a soul? What does it mean to eat divinity? Eating is a physical process. Is a soul physical? Is divinity physical?

v) Even if you take Jn 6 literally, it says nothing about consuming the soul or deity of Christ.

Unworthy communicants

Let's consider two related Catholic positions:

1. Traditional Catholicism practices closed communion. That's to protect unworthy communicants from physical and spiritual harm. Based on **1 Cor 11:27-30**, priests have a duty to fence the table because unworthy communicants expose themselves to illness, including mortal illness, as well as endangering their souls. To be a worthy communicate you must be in state of grace at the time of communion.

That's why Pope Francis's *Amoris laetitia* is so controversial. It allows divorced and remarried Catholics to take communion. But if marriage is indissoluble, then divorced and remarried Catholics are living in sin—the sin of adultery. This means they are in a state of mortal sin when they received communion.

2. Protestant communion is invalid. They don't receive the Host. The bread and wine (or grape juice) never becomes the True Body and Blood of Christ. The communion elements remain bread and wine (or grape juice).

I see Catholic apologists make this argument. I haven't read a Catholic theologian make this argument, but I'm guessing the logic goes something like this: for communion to be a valid sacrament, the communion elements must be consecrated by a validly ordained priest. To be validly ordained, the officiant must be in apostolic succession. But when Protestants broke with Mother Church, they ceased to be in apostolic succession. Here's one example:

<https://www.papalencyclicals.net/leo13/l13curae.htm>

Moreover, Anglicans have a stronger historical claim to be in apostolic succession than Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, &c., so if even Anglican ordination is null and void, where does that leave candidates with a poorer claim to apostolic succession?

3. Assuming that's an accurate representation of traditional Catholic theology, let's consider these two positions in combination.

i) On the one hand, it follows that as a rule, Protestant communicants can't be unworthy communicants. They fail to satisfy a necessary condition to be an unworthy communicant. So long as they confine themselves to Protestant communion, they can't be unworthy communicants because the Protestant eucharist was never a valid sacrament in the first place. They aren't receiving the Host unworthily. The Host isn't present in the Protestant eucharist.

Protestants can only be unworthy communicants if they attend Mass and receive the sacrament at Mass. Say a Protestant married to a Catholic who attends Mass to accommodate the spouse.

ii) The flip side is that only Catholics are in danger of becoming unworthy communicants, since only Catholics receive the Host.

4. This generates a striking risk-assessment dilemma. On the one hand, the risk to Protestants is to miss out on the benefit of sacramental grace in the eucharist.

On the other hand, the risk to Catholics is to contract illness, even fatal illness, and worse yet, imperil their immortal soul.

Ironically, this means Catholics have more to lose than Protestants. While Protestants miss out on a channel of sacramental grace, Catholics endanger their physical wellbeing and even—or especially—their eternal wellbeing. Protestant communion is safe whereas Catholic communion is Russian roulette. A cost/benefit analysis discourages the Catholic option.

5. Finally, this invites an actuarial comparison. If the Catholic position is true, then the morbidity rate for Catholics ought to be much higher than for Protestants. Given the number of unworthy communicants at Mass, Catholic communicants should be dying like flies, well above the replacement rate. You'd be safer in a snake-handling service than attending Mass. But is there any comparative statistical evidence that Catholic communion is far more hazardous than Protestant communion?

I don't accept the Catholic paradigm. I'm just playing along for the sake of argument to examine the implications of the Catholic paradigm on its own terms.

Born of water

3 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” 3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” 4 Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” 5 Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

9 Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” 10 Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these

things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (Jn 3:1-15).

This is a classic prooftext for baptismal regeneration.

1. One stock objection is that a baptismal referent is out of context. The institution of Christian baptism lay in the future. Nicodemus is reprimanded for failing to grasp what Jesus is alluding to. But if it refers to baptism, he'd be in no position to discern it. That information is not yet available.

Some theologians and commentators don't have a problem with the anachronism because they think this is a fictional dialogue that provides a backstory for later theological developments. But for Christians who affirm the historicity of the account, the anachronism can't be dismissed.

There are, however, other objections:

2. Jesus stresses the independence of the Spirit. Like wind, the Spirit is unpredictable. Wind can abruptly change direction.

If, however, baptismal regeneration is true, then the Spirit's agency is regularly channeled through the sacrament of baptism. In that event, the theology of baptismal regeneration is diametrically opposed to Christ's comparison.

3. Moreover, proponents of baptismal regeneration typically believe two additional things:

i) Baptism is unrepeatable.

ii) A Christian can lose saving grace. He can pass from a state of grace to a state of mortal sin.

But if (ii) is true, then it's unclear why baptism is unrepeatable. If sacramental grace is resistible and amissible, then why wouldn't baptism be repeatable to restore what was lost?

It's said that baptism confers an indelible mark on the soul, but that's in tension with the claim that sacramental grace is resistible and amissible. Can the grace of baptism be lost or not? Trying to split the difference is gimmicky.

Parsing "baptism"

My main objective in this post is to make a linguistic point about "baptism" in the NT. But for completeness' sake, I will review some related issues before getting to the main point.

i) Sacramentarians believe in baptismal regeneration and/or baptismal justification. This includes Roman Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, and Campbellites (e.g. Everett Ferguson, Jack Cottrell). In the case of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, this depends the authority of the church to dictate the interpretation of Scripture. In the case of Protestants, this involves methodological errors.

ii) Sacramentarians don't understand the basic nature of symbolism. A symbol stands for what it symbolizes. Therefore, you can impute to the symbol what is literally true of what it signifies. Take the OT sacrificial system. Animal sacrifice emblemized the principle of vicarious atonement and penal substitution. From that, some Jews probably inferred that sacrificial animals could actually atone for sin. But, of course, that's not true. That confuses the symbol with what it stands for.

Even if the NT attributes saving benefits to the sacraments, this doesn't mean the sacraments are in fact the source of saving benefits. For the NT would characterize the sacraments is precisely the same way even if that's merely what they represent. For that's the nature of symbolic representation.

iii) The Bible often uses food and water as theological metaphors. The fact, therefore, that some NT passages use

such imagery doesn't presume that this is referring to the sacraments.

iv) Although the NT sometimes attributes saving benefits to the sacraments, it often promises the same saving benefits apart from the sacraments. For instance, it indexes such benefits to faith in Christ. That confirms the point that the ascription of saving benefits to the sacraments is symbolic. They illustrate divine grace.

v) Now to the main point. Because the meaning of "baptism" (as well as the theology of baptism) is controversial, English translators of Scripture traditionally avoid prejudging the question by simply transliterating the Greek nouns and verbs rather than rendering them into English synonyms.

However, because the word "baptism" is used in almost every Christian denomination as a technical term for water baptism, for the rite of initiation or church membership, that conditions us to associate the word "baptism" with the Christian sacrament whenever we read the word "baptism" in the NT. That constant linguistic association in church practice becomes the subconscious default meaning when we read the NT.

As a result, sacramentarians find more occurrences of water baptism in the NT than may actually be there. So when we read the NT, we should make a conscious effort to bracket that linguistic conditioning. "Baptism" doesn't have a presumptive meaning in NT usage. Rather, that's to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

vi) There are explicit references to water baptism in the Gospels and Acts. In the Gospels, some of these refer to John's baptism—which is the precursor to Christian baptism.

But even in the Gospels, "baptism" doesn't always denote water baptism. In Mk 10:38-39 and Lk 12:50, it's a metaphor for persecution or judgment. It trades on the imagery of drowning.

Likewise, the Gospels refer to "baptism" by fire. That, too, is figurative.

vii) Although Acts contains several references to water baptism, the first reference is to Spirit-baptism (Acts 1:5). That's both backward-looking and forward-looking. It looks back to the contrast between John's baptism, by water, and the fiery "baptism" which Christ confers, which is a metaphor for imparting the Holy Spirit. And it looks forward to Pentecost, when the Spirit descends.

Interestingly, Joel's description uses an aqueous metaphor: the "outpouring" of the Spirit. One question is the precise nuance of this image. Does it trade on water as a cleansing agent? Washing away one's guilt? A metaphor for the remission of sins? Or does it trade on water as rain? A downpour which revives parched land after a drought? A metaphor for new life? Given the agricultural prelude in Joel, it probably signifies spiritual renewal or spiritual empowerment.

viii) Mt 28:19 is a locus classics of baptism. However, that doesn't specify water baptism. So that's not something we can just assume. It's something we ought to exegete. Could it refer to Spirit-baptism? One objection to that interpretation is that it makes reception of the Spirit contingent on apostles transmitting the Spirit, as if it's a power which they discharge. So I think water baptism makes more sense.

ix) More ambiguous are some Pauline references (e.g. Rom 6:3-4; 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 4:25-26; Eph 4:5). Do these

denote water baptism, Spirit-baptism, or something else?

Baptists tend to construe Rom 6:3-4 (and Col 2:12) as a reference to the Christian sacrament because they think that interpretation bolsters immersion as the proper mode of baptism. However, I think the up-and-down imagery trades on the comparison with burial and resurrection (i.e. to be lowered into the ground, to rise from the grave) rather than baptism. I think it's a mistake to use Rom 6:3-4 as a proof-text for the mode of baptism. Of course, it could still refer to water baptism, but that apologetic agenda shouldn't drive the interpretation.

I happen to think immersion is the normative mode of baptism. But I think narrative passages furnish better evidence for the mode.

x) Attempts to defend one interpretation or another (i.e. water baptism, Spirit-baptism) are often circular inasmuch as commentators will construe one Pauline passage in relation to other Pauline passages. But that assumes the other passages refer to the same thing, which is the very issue in dispute!

If it refers to Spirit-baptism, we might render the verb or noun by "saturated" in the Spirit (or something along those lines).

xi) Let's take some specific examples:

Commenting on Eph 4:5, Hoehner thinks it refers, not to water baptism, but functions as a baptismal metaphor for union with Christ in his death and resurrection. And he cites Rom 6:1-11, 1 Cor 10:2; Gal 3:27, and Col 2:12 to corroborate that interpretation. Ephesians, 518.

Commenting on Gal 3:26-29, Thielman says:

The reference to putting on Christ is metaphorical, and so the reference to baptism is best understood as metaphorical also. Ephesians, 258-59.

Commenting on 1 Cor 12:13, Fee argues for Spirit-baptism rather than water baptism, in part because there's no reference to water, as well as Semitic parallelism. To "drink" the Spirit is clearly figurative.

He also refers to agricultural metaphors (Isa 32:15; 44:3). God's Empowering Presence, 179-80.

xii) My purpose is not to settle on the correct interpretation of these passages. The point, rather, is that "baptism" in NT usage isn't necessarily a technical term for the Christian sacrament. It's a mistake to read the NT through that filter. That preconditions the reader to perceive something that may not be there.

We should treat "baptism" as a neutral word, a placeholder, the meaning of which must be determined in context. And in some cases, there may be insufficient textual clues to nail down the identification.

"Baptism saves you"

20 because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.

21 Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 3:20-21, ESV).

1 Pet 3:21 is a favorite prooftext for sacramentalism. Let's consider the various permutations of this issue:

1. For the record, I think the NT teaches the rite of water baptism. I'm not opposed to that.

2. Sacramentalists fail to grasp the nature of symbolism. They suppose that if baptism was "merely symbolic," the NT would describe it differently. But symbolism operates on a representational principle, where you can substitute the sign for the significate. In symbolism, the emblem takes the place of the thing it symbolizes. Therefore, whatever is true of the significate can be said of the sign.

For instance, when the cross is used to symbolize the redemptive work of Christ, we ascribe anything and everything to the cross that's actually true of the atonement. But that isn't meant to be taken literally. We aren't saved by a piece of wood.

So the NT would use the same descriptions for baptism and communion whether or not these were "merely symbolic."

3. Water is a flexible theological metaphor in Scripture. Water can be a source of life. Water can be a source of death.

Water is a direct source of life in terms of drinking water; water is an indirect source of life in terms of crop irrigation.

Water is a direct source of death in terms of drowning, or an indirect source of death in terms of Nile crocodiles.

Water is a cleansing agent. By extension, water represents ritual purification.

Finally, it's possible that the ancients associated water with birth via amniotic fluid.

4. Let's grant the sacramentalist interpretation of 1 Pet 3:21 for the sake of argument. If so, that passage is still fraught with complications and ambiguities:

i) Does that mean baptism necessary for salvation? Can you be saved apart from baptism?

ii) Does that mean baptism sufficient for salvation? Is baptism alone all you need to be saved?

iii) What baptism saves you?

a) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on the mode of baptism (e.g. immersion, sprinkling)?

b) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on the intent of the officiant?

c) In the case of adults, does the efficacy depend on the intent of the candidate?

d) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on the orthodoxy of the officiant? Is baptism performed by a heretic valid or invalid?

e) Does the efficacy of baptism depend on words as well as the action (e.g. a Trinitarian formula)?

f) Can a layman perform baptism, or must it be a church officer?

So even if you think baptism conveys saving grace, that leaves many crucial questions unanswered.

5. Concerning baptisma:

i) BDAG offers the following definitions: plunging, dipping, washing, water-rite, baptism. 165b.

ii) That's a fairly rare word in NT usage. By my count, it's only used about 20 times.

And out of that, most occurrences refer to John's baptism. Another few denote "baptism" as a metaphor for martyrdom.

Only three or four occurrences are generally thought to denote Christian baptism (Rom 6:4; Eph 4:5; Col 2:12; 1 Pet 3:21).

That's a very thin database from which to derive belief that baptisma is a technical term for the Christian sacrament. Technical terminology can be established by

stimulative definitions or stereotypical usage. But three or four occurrences hardly amounts to stereotypical usage.

iii) Moreover, the appeal to these three or four passages is circular, for unless you already know that baptisma is a technical term for the Christian sacrament, there's nothing in the context that demands that meaning, and, indeed, there are contextual factors which may militate against that meaning. We need some independent lexical evidence to establish usage.

6. There's no reason why Rom 6:4 can't be figurative. Certainly the passage contains other metaphors. Christians didn't physically die with Christ at Calvary. And they weren't physically buried with Christ. So this is vicarious language.

It seems arbitrary to insist that it refers to literal baptism, but not to literal death or literal burial. So I think it's at least as likely, if not more so, that this trades on picturesque imagery.

7. Likewise, it's unclear that Eph 4:5 refers to Christian baptism.

a) For one thing, if Paul is referring to the sacraments, why single out baptism to the exclusion of communion?

b) It might instead denote Spirit-baptism or symbolic death (e.g. martyrdom).

8. Concerning Col 2:12:

a) That may not even mention baptisma. The textual tradition is divided.

b) Even assuming that baptisma is the original reading, since Paul is using circumcision here as a theological metaphor, there's no presumption that he uses baptism literally.

Paul isn't treating baptism as the new covenant counterpart to circumcision. Rather, circumcision carries over into the new covenant as a theological metaphor ("circumcision of Christ").

Put another way, in this passage he uses "baptism" and circumcision as synonyms. But if one is figurative, why not both?

6. Which brings us to 1 Pet 3:21.

i) Unless baptisma is a technical term for the Christian sacrament of initiation, there's no presumption that that's what it means here. To translate the word as "baptism" is prejudicial.

ii) In what respect is baptism comparable to Noah's flood? Noah's family weren't saved by water, but from water. They were saved in spite of water. But those who espouse baptismal regeneration or baptismal justification hardly think we are saved despite the rite of baptism.

iii) Moreover, Noah's family never got wet. If that's analogous to baptism, then it's dry baptism. Surely, though, the sacramentalist considers contact with water to be a basic element of baptism.

Admittedly, analogies have disanalogies. But where's the parallel?

iv) What if, instead of "baptism," we render v21 as:

Washing (dipping, plunging), which corresponds to this, now saves you.

Because the generic usage doesn't specify baptism, it invites a figurative interpretation. Resurrection is the antithetical parallel to death. So baptisma may symbolize Christ rescuing us from spiritual death (by drowning) via our participation in the Resurrection.

Born of water and the Spirit

I consider "water" in Jn 3:5 to be a metaphor for the Spirit's agency in regeneration.

1. Ironically, the Catholic interpretation contradicts Catholic theology. If Jn 3:5 refers to water baptism, then the rite of baptism is a sine qua non of salvation. Yet at least since Trent (i.e. "baptism of desire"), Catholic theology denies that you must be baptized to be saved. Indeed, modern Catholic theology leaves the door open for the salvation of non-Christians or even atheists.

The problem here is that the traditional Catholic interpretation predates reversals in Catholic theology that contravene the traditional interpretation.

2. As many scholars note, John's Gospel deemphasizes the sacraments.

3. The Catholic interpretation is anachronistic. Jesus upbraids Nicodemus for failing to understand something which he ought to be able to grasp. If, however, Jesus is alluding to the Christian rite of baptism, that's not something Nicodemus could be expected to know.

For some interpreters that's not a problem because they think the speeches and dialogues in John's Gospel are fictitious. They favor the baptismal interpretation of Jn 3:5 because they think the narrator fabricated a backstory to retroactively validate a later Christian rite.

So the baptismal interpretation sacrifices the historicity of the account. The same problem afflicts the eucharistic interpretation of Jn 6.

4. A recurring motif in John's Gospel is the spectacle of listeners who misunderstand Jesus because they mistake his figurative usage for literal usage. That should warn us against assuming that Jn 3:5 is literal.

5. John's Gospel makes abundant use of theological metaphors, viz. light/darkness, sheep/shepherd/sheepgate/wolf, wheat, vine, sleep, birth, bridegroom, lamb, thief.

It would therefore be surprising if Jesus is speaking literally in Jn 3:5. In that event we'd expect a broad clue that he's speaking literally rather than figuratively.

6. That's especially the case if, according to the baptismal interpretation, the rite of baptism is a prerequisite for salvation. For if no one can be saved apart from baptism, we'd expect Jesus or the narrator to dispel any ambiguity regarding such a momentous issue.

7. The OT uses aquatic metaphors. An oft-cited parallel is Ezk 36:25-27. Likewise, the "outpouring" of the Spirit (Isa 44:3; Ezk 39:29; Joel 2:28) is an aquatic metaphor linked to the Spirit.

Another possibility is that Jn 3:5 evokes the water-from-the-rock motif. That would be consistent with the way in which Exodus narratives are often a subtext in John's Gospel.

8. Furthermore, the association with OT theological metaphors would dovetail with Christ chiding Nicodemus, since he ought to be familiar with that OT background information.

9. Following Keener, I think water= Spirit is a hendiadys, in which "Spirit" is epexegetical of "water".

Moreover, that has a parallel in Jn 7:38-39, where the life-giving work of the Spirit is likened to a spring or stream.

10. That's my preferred interpretation. My fallback interpretation is "water" as amniotic fluid. For a defense of that interpretation, cf. Richard Bauckham, Gospel of Glory (Baker, 2015), chap. 5.

Disambiguating sacramentalism

A commentator on my blog asked:

Does the N.T. assume the the sacraments are just symbols? If sacramentalists assume the reality why can you just assume they are merely symbols?

Here's an opportunity to introduce a point of clarification. In evaluating sacramentalism, it's necessary to unthread two intertwined issues:

- i) What are the prooftexts for sacramentalism?
- ii) What is the function of sacraments?

Concerning (i), Jn 3:5 and Tit 3:5 are standard prooftexts for baptismal regeneration, Mk 16:16 is a prooftext for the soteric necessity/sufficiency of baptism, while Jn 6 is a prooftext for salvific character of the Eucharist.

However, nonsacramentalists don't think those passages refer to baptism or communion in the first place. Or in the case of Mk 16:16, that's a scribal interpolation.

So one of the dividing lines between sacramentalists and nonsacramentalists is how many verses even refer to baptism and communion. That's before you get around to the question of how to interpret passages that do refer to baptism or communion.

It that event, it's not a case of saying, yes, that refers to baptism or communion, but a sacrament is just a symbol of grace, just a symbol of salvation.

Rather, if you don't think the passage in question even refers to a sacrament, then (ii) is moot. For (ii) presupposes (i). (ii) is irrelevant if the verse isn't even referring to a sacrament.

And this has some interesting consequences. For instance, both Jn 6 and 1 Cor 11:24,28 are traditional prooftexts for the real presence. However, 1 Cor 11:24,28 doesn't suggest that communion is a channel of saving grace. The only prooftext for that distinctive claim is Jn 6, where you have the promise of eternal life.

Therefore, if Jn 6 is removed from the list, sacramentalists no longer have a prooftext for communion as a salvific sacrament. At best, they only have a prooftext for the real presence (1 Cor 11:24,28)—which, of course, is disputed.

Likewise, although sacramentalists have other prooftexts for the soteric necessity/sufficiency of baptism (e.g. Acts 2:38; 22:16; Gal 3:27; Eph 5:26), Jn 3:5 and Tit 3:5 are their only prooftexts for baptismal regeneration, per se.

So, from the standpoint of the nonsacramentalist, it comes down to a very small set of verses that even need to be harmonized with their overall position.

Licking Jesus

Here's a sequel to my prior post:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/12/anti-catholic-myths.html>

In addition to his written response to Ben Shapiro's interview with JMac, Trent Horn also did a podcast, which covers more ground:

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/80-correcting-on-23128501>

Trent Horn is a Catholic apologist and convert to Catholicism. I don't normally listen to his podcast. But in this podcast, the way he frames the differences between Catholicism and evangelicalism, and draws some points of contrast between them, makes it a useful foil.

1. In contrast to sola fide, Horn says grace is infused like a spiritual hypodermic needle. God's very life is injected into our souls.

i) The comparison is misleading. In Protestant theology, grace has a transformative aspect. God renews Christians. But that's sanctification and glorification rather than justification, which is categorically different.

ii) Moreover, God doesn't renew us by injecting his own life into our souls. Divine nature and human nature are

different. God restores human nature. It's not a transfusion of extraterrestrial DNA, making us hybrids.

2. Horn takes a swipe at limited atonement. But what's the value of unlimited atonement? If Jesus died for everyone, but some of the redeemed wind up in hell, then what difference does it make?

3. Horn takes issue with JMac's characterization of Catholic sacramentalism as cold, impersonal, transactional, mechanical, impersonal. Horn says "I believe the most personal relationship I have with God is when I receive him on my tongue in the sacrament of the eucharist."

For Horn, Jesus is a popsicle. Licking Jesus is how we get close to God.

Isn't there something downright kinky about that? If a grown man told you that licking another grown man is how he forms a friendship with another man, isn't that homoerotic? Wouldn't you keep your distance from a guy like that?

I'm sure Horn is a regular guy. But bad theology makes some men say and do things no self-respecting man would normally be caught dead saying and doing.

4. Horn cites a statement of Cyprian about the salutary medicine of confessing to priests. Of course, Cyprian was a bishop, so it's not surprising that a bishop promotes priestcraft.

5. Because JMac rejects infant baptism, Horn defends Catholic baptism. Here's one argument he deploys: the new covenant is superior to old covenant. If Jews asked how bring their kids into new covenant, and you tell them they

can't be baptized until they reach the age of reason, the new covenant is not superior anymore. Now you've left out children who were a part of God's covenant before.

But his argument is fallacious on multiple grounds:

i) Among Presbyterians, baptism doesn't induct a child into the covenant. Rather, unbaptized children are deemed to be members of the covenant by virtue of God's promise to their Christian parents. Hence, they are entitled to the sign of the covenant.

ii) Jewish kids were members of a lesser covenant. Membership in the Mosaic covenant didn't automatically confer salvation. Membership in a lesser covenant doesn't imply that nonmembership in a greater covenant makes that covenant inferior. What makes it superior or inferior is what it confers. Membership in the Mosaic covenant confers a lesser benefit.

To take a comparison, suppose citizenship in Iran or North Korean is a birthright. By contrast, an immigrant to the USA must apply for citizenship. Does that make US citizenship inferior? Even if US citizenship wasn't a birthright, it would still confer a greater benefit than Iranian or N. Korean citizenship.

iii) There's also the question of what membership in the new covenant means. Does that refer to membership in the new covenant community? Or does that refer to salvation in the new covenant?

6. Here's another argument he deploys: Given baptismal regeneration/justification, Baptists deny a child God's grace in baptism. That's sets him up for the possibility that he'll reject God's offer of salvation later on, since he never had

the benefit of baptismal grace from the get-go. If you want to get lax believers or nonbelievers, don't baptize them.

But that argument is only as good as the case for baptismal regeneration/justification. If you reject that premise, then unbaptized kids don't miss out. So there's nothing to lose by waiting.

7. Apropos (6), Horn says he's unhappy that as Baptist kid, he missed out on 17 years of grace in his life that could have helped him make a lot better decisions in his teenage years.

But is there any statistical evidence that Catholic teenagers are wiser in their decision-making than their evangelical counterparts? And even if (ex hypothesi) they were, is there any evidence that that's attributable to infant baptism rather than other factors (e.g. catechesis, church attendance)?

8. Horn says that if infant baptism leads to lax believers, that applies to Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians as well as Catholics. He seems to use that as a wedge tactic, but I doubt JMac would object to that comparison. Surely JMac is critical of infant baptism whether in Catholicism or Protestantism.

In addition, are there any comparative statics on the retention/defection rate among young people who grow up in Catholic or paedobaptist churches compared to young people who grow up in credo-baptist churches? Is there an appreciable difference?

9. Horn says Protestants can also be guilty of reducing salvation to an impersonal transaction, viz. the altar call, sinner's prayer.

That's a valid comparison, but it's not as if the Protestant movement is a package deal. Catholic apologists are the first to stress Protestant diversity. So the fact that some Protestant traditions have functionally equivalent customs that parallel defective Catholic theology is not a knock against Protestant theology in general.

10. Horn objects to what he takes to be JMac's claim that infant baptism is a Constantinian innovation. I don't know if JMac intended to claim that.

i) I myself incline to infant baptism for sociological reasons. However, let's consider a credo-baptist argument. Infant baptism developed when a doctrine of original sin combined with a doctrine of baptismal regeneration. On this view, humans are born in sin. As such, humans are born hellbound. Baptism removes the guilt of original sin. Unbaptized babies who die are damned. Therefore, infant baptism arose as a precautionary measure. For instance:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/ferguson-on-infant-baptism-and-mode-of/>

That historical reconstruction may or may not be correct, but it's quite plausible. Certainly that's the motivation for infant baptism in traditional Catholic theology. So either infant baptism follows theology or theology follows infant baptism. Either infant baptism came first, then a theological backstory evolved to justify the status quo, or else the theological evolution of original sin and baptismal regeneration combined to produce infant baptism. It's possible that infant baptism represents the practice of the NT church, but at a later date, Catholicism reframed the rationale.

ii) I'd add that there's an asymmetry between Catholicism and Protestantism in this regard. If infant baptism is false, then Catholicism is false. But whichever position (credobaptism/paedobaptism) is true or false won't falsify the Protestant faith in general. At best, it would only falsify the practice of paedobaptist denominations.

Since, moreover, Protestant theology rejects the infallibility of the church, the fact that some Protestant denominations may be wrong about baptism doesn't even falsify their theology in general. They could be right about everything else, or most other things.

Since, by contrast, Rome affirms the infallibility of the church, and reserves that for itself, it can't afford to be wrong about infant baptism, inasmuch as that's a Catholic essential. It has no give. The fact that the Protestant faith is more flexible makes it much less susceptible to falsification.

11. Horn said that if Cyprian, Ignatius, and the Didache are wrong, then we have a real problem here. Was this early apostolic church corrupted too? Did we ever have an authentic Christian church?

i) But that's a false dichotomy. If the church is fallible, then pockets of theological corruption are inevitable. A degree of theological corruption is only incompatible with an authentic church if the true church is supposed to be infallible.

ii) However, seminal errors can expand and evolve to a point of no return, where a denomination becomes terminally corrupt. There was a time, early on, when correction was possible, but there comes a turning-point where the death spiral is irreversible.

Desecration of the Host

687. – After showing the dignity of this sacrament, the Apostle now rouses the faithful to receive it reverently. First, he outlines the peril threatening those who receive unworthily; secondly, he applies a saving remedy (v. 28).

688. – First, therefore, he says, Therefore, from the fact that this which is received sacramentally is the body of Christ and what is drunk is the blood of Christ, whoever eats this bread or drinks the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. In these words must be considered, first, how someone eats or drinks unworthily. According to a Gloss this happens in three ways: first, as to the celebration of this sacrament, namely, because someone celebrates the sacrament in a manner different from that handed down by Christ; for example, if he offers in this sacrament a bread other than wheaten or some liquid other than wine from the grape of the vine. Hence it says in Lev (10:1) that Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, offered before the Lord “unholy fire, such as he had not commanded them.

And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them.”

689. – Secondly, from the fact that someone approached the Eucharist with a mind not devout. This lack of devotion is sometimes venial, as when someone with his mind distracted by worldly affairs approaches this sacrament habitually retaining due reverence toward it; and such lack of devotion, although it impedes the fruit of this sacrament, which is spiritual refreshment, does not make one guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, as the Apostle says here. But a certain lack of devotion is a mortal sin, i.e., when it involves contempt of this sacrament, as it says in Mal (1:12): “But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted and its food may be despised.” It is of such lack of devotion that the Gloss speaks.

690. – In a third way someone is said to be unworthy, because he approaches the Eucharist with the intention of sinning mortally. For it says in Lev (21:23): “He shall not approach the altar, because he has a blemish.” Someone is understood to have a blemish as long as he persists in the intention of sinning, which, however, is taken away

through penitence. By contrition, indeed, which takes away the will to sin with the intention of confession and making satisfaction, as to the remission of guilt and eternal punishment; by confession and satisfaction as to the total remission of punishment and reconciliation with the members of the Church. Therefore, in cases of necessity, as when someone does not have an abundance of confessors, contrition is enough for receiving this sacrament. But as a general rule, confession with some satisfaction should precede. Hence in the book on Church Dogmas it says: "One who desires to go to communion should make satisfaction with tears and prayers, and trusting in the Lord approach the Eucharist clean, free from care, and secure. But I say this of the person not burdened with capital and mortal sins. For the one whom mortal sins committed after baptism press down, I advise to make satisfaction with public penance, and so be joined to communion by the judgment of the priest, if he does not wish to receive the condemnation of the Church."

i) A basic problem with his interpretation is that, in context, the sin resulting in mortal illness isn't desecration of the Host but dishonoring fellow Christians at the agape feast.

ii) That doesn't mean it's impossible to commit sacrilege. If you immerse a crucifix in urine, that's sacrilegious, not because a crucifix is intrinsically holy, but because there's the intent to express contempt for Christianity by using a symbol that represents the Christian faith.

Conversely, when priests trample on the crucifix (or icon of Christ) in *Silence* (2016) to spare Japanese Christians from torture, that's not sacrilegious because it's just a symbol, and their intention is not to profane the faith, but to save the innocent from brutalization.

iii) We might also draw a distinction between sacrilege and desecration. If Crusaders use a mosque as a latrine, that's a deliberate act of desecration, but unless Islam is true, it's not sacrilegious—for it doesn't profane the true God.

Relics

A traditional fixture of Catholic piety is the superstitious belief that it's possible to be healed through the virtue of a relic. Not surprisingly, this became a lucrative business. What are we to make of this claim?

One strategy is to simply deny that such healings ever occur. A certainly a lot of the hagiographic literature suffers from legendary embellishment, to say the least.

However, it isn't necessary to deny every story in kind. We just need to draw some rudimentary distinctions.

For example, Naaman was cured by washing in the Jordan river. Christ made use of mud to heal a blind man. And Christians are told to anoint the sick with oil and pray for their healing.

What do these examples have in common? Well, it's not as if the mud and oil and water have any inherent therapeutic or medicinal value. And it's not as if the mud and oil and water have any magical properties.

God can assign a particular effect to a particular medium. The connection between the two is arbitrary. As a rule, dipping in the Jordan river is not a cure for eczema. And the number of times he immersed himself was arbitrary.

It's not as if the Jordan river is holy water. It has no more sanctity than the Ganges or the Nile.

God sometimes uses props for their symbolic value. If God authorizes the prop, then you're entitled to use it. If it lacks authorization, then you have no right to use it. And even if

we're entitled to use it, we should place no faith in the prop.

Likewise, Christians can be miraculously cured with or without a particular ceremony. Moreover, Christians belonging to divergent theological traditions can receive miraculous healing. There's no one-to-correspondence between a miracle and a particular religious tradition, or between a miracle and a particular ritual.

The common denominator is the grace of God and the faith of the believer. God, in his sovereignty, heals whom he wills, while leaving others uncured or incurable.

When God answers our prayers, it's often in spite of our faulty methods and assumptions. Remember Jacob's exercise in husbandry? God blessed his misguided efforts. Jacob succeeded, not because his efforts in selective breeding were scientifically sound, but because God had mercy on his pitiful efforts. Jacob was successful despite his best efforts, and not because of them. God's overruling providence was the source of his success.

Quantum transubstantiation

Our Episcopal church in Waco used leavened bread for communion. One day, the bread was particularly dry, and so it was crumbling as people were receiving communion with crumbs falling on the ground. People ignored the crumbs that were accumulating on the ground; some crumbs may have even been walked on by people. The crumbs remained there until the end of the service. After the service, Lindsay, a friend of ours, and I went up and picked up the crumbs. We weren't sure if Christ was really present in the full sense at that point, but we thought that if he was, then just leaving him on the ground to be walked on was irreverent. From this experience, I could see that the Anglican and Episcopal lack of clarity on the nature of the eucharist had important practical ramifications. I was, for that reason, attracted to the Catholic Church's claim that God has

provided a clear teaching on the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and a corresponding clear standard for how the Eucharist should be treated. Faith and Reason: Philosophers Explain Their Turn to Catholicism (Ignatius 2019), 237.

Although he uses that as an argument for Catholicism, it generates a conundrum for transubstantiation. It isn't just a 1-1 match between Jesus and the wafer, but Jesus and each particle composing the wafer. By that logic, how far down does the fissioning process extend?

Wafer = Jesus

Crumbs = Jesus

Molecules = Jesus

Atoms = Jesus

Quarks = Jesus

Real spiritual presence

Lydia McGrew

Full disclosure: I'm a believer in a spiritual Real Presence, not in transubstantiation.

Apparently we have to be able to believe in some sort of special divine presence in particular physical locations in Old Testament passages. For example, the Holy of Holies. There was "something about it" so that only the High Priest could enter. The Ark of the Covenant. If the wrong person handled it, he would die. The Shekinah. So such statements as, "God is especially present in this box [the ark]" cannot literally be meaningless, or these OT passages wouldn't make any sense.

In those passages it may be that we can't go any farther in defining it than something like this: God had so ordained that he would specially interact with human beings in various ways (good and bad) in relation to that physical object or location.

That's not really apophatic, but it is something of a surd. That's just how it is. You do this, you die. You

do this, the walls fall down. You do this, you've offered a sacrifice of atonement for the people for another year. Why? Because God has set it up that there's something special--some special manifestation of his power or grace--in relation to this physical thing. And that can be referred to as "presence" despite the fact that God is omnipresent.

I think that that could be applied to the spiritual Real Presence in the Sacrament as well. In any event, the OT examples are a "proof of concept" that we can't rule it as per se meaningless to say that some object or location on earth "has" the "presence" of God in a way that other places or objects don't.

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/03/apophatic-sacramentalism.html?showComment=1552002724694#c4288716035029626027>

i) Catholics, Anglo-Catholics, Lutherans, and Eastern Orthodox affirm that the consecrated communion elements are the True Body and Blood of Christ (whatever that means). At the other end of the spectrum is the Zwinglian position. Then you have Christians who try to stake out a mediating position: spiritual presence. This provokes the scorn of Catholics, Lutherans et al.

ii) One issue is exegetical. If you don't think the stock prooftexts for the real presence (e.g. Jn 6) in fact refer to the eucharist, then there's no pressure to explain in what respect Jesus is presence in the eucharist.

iii) Another issue is metaphysical. In classical theism, God is separate from time and space. On that view, God can't physically or literally occupy time and space. That's a question of philosophical theology rather than exegetical theology, although some biblical passages may point to classical theism in that regard.

iv) I expect that in the background of Lydia's discussion is 1 Cor 11:30:

That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep.

That's analogous to the effect of profaning the ark of the covenant. In the Mosaic covenant, there's a concept of sacred space and cultic holiness. Does that mean God is present in holy objects associated with the tabernacle? Another example is the tree of life and tree of knowledge.

Rather than presence, I'd say these are examples in which God assigns a beneficial or harmful effect to the use or misuse of certain physical objects. That's not inherent in the nature of the object. They're not poisonous or radioactive. The object doesn't cause that reaction. Rather, God institutes an extrinsic correlation.

v) However, we might explore different models of presence. Consider the notion of **indirect presence**. Take a love letter. The lover can't be with the beloved, so he writes her

a letter. The letter is a stand-in for the lover. It says on paper what he'd say in person if he was there.

Photographs of loved ones are another example of indirect presence. Sometimes these are photos of the living, but sometime these are photos of the dearly departed.

In the modern era, phones are another example of indirect presence. Likewise, it's now possible to see the person you are talking to.

In that respect, there are degrees of indirect presence. To hear someone's voice has greater immediacy than reading their words. To see them talking to you via a computer screen has greater immediacy than merely hearing their voice.

vi) To take a different example, suppose a woman is a gardner. Everyday she puts fresh cut flowers on the dining room table. Suppose, at bedtime, her husband moves the flowers to her nightstand. Suppose her husband dies. Everyday she continues her routine of putting fresh cut flowers on the dining room table.

Suppose, when she returns from errands, she doesn't see the flowers on the dining room table. When she goes into the bedroom she finds them on her nightstand. Suppose that happens every so often.

She's sure no one broke into the house while she was out. Moreover, the position of the flowers has coded significance. Something only the widow and her late husband were in a position to appreciate.

So she concludes that while she was out of the house, her husband's ghost moved the flowers, as a symbolic way of

indicating his continued existence and enduring love for his wife. Changing the location of the flowers, in a way his wife would remember and cherish, is a mode of indirect presence. An oblique way to make contact. She never sees an apparition of her husband, but a token of his presence.

vii) A related example is an unmistakable answer to prayer. It's not like a theophany or Christophany. But events arrange themselves in such an unlikely yet discriminating and auspicious way as to point beyond the observable events to the hidden hand of providence.

viii) Another category is **psychological presence**. Take a premonitory dream in which a mother dreams that her grown son, who's far from home, is in grave danger. She wakes up and prays for him. The next day he phones her and tells her about he narrowly eluded death the day before.

Apophatic sacramentalism

One reason I don't believe in the real presence is because I couldn't believe it even if I wanted to. And that's because I don't know what it means. And I'm not alone in that. No one knows what it means.

I know what a human body is. I know what a male human body is. What does it mean to say a wafer or liquid (communion wine) is a human body?

I know what it would mean to consume human flesh. I know what cannibalism means. But proponents assure us that consuming the communion elements isn't cannibalism.

Okay, that tells me what it's not. But that doesn't tell me what it is?

Is the body of Jesus miniaturized, so that you eat duplicate microscopic bodies of Jesus when you take communion? I have some idea of what that means. But proponents assure me that that's not what the real presence means.

So the dogma of the real presence is a piece of apophatic theology. We're supposed to believe it, but there's no intelligible idea corresponding to the words. It's just a conceptual blank. It isn't possible to believe something if you can't form an idea of what that something is.

Christian theology allows for mystery, but it can't be mystery through-and-through. To believe what the real presence is not doesn't tell you what it is. When you peel back the label, there's nothing underneath. At best, it's labels all the way down. Proponents use word like true body and true blood, but to avert the specter of cannibalism, they

strip away what makes blood bloody or bodies bodily. You chase an ever-receding will-o'-wisp.

This has nothing to do with skepticism or lack of faith. Rather, there's nothing to believe. The claim has no positive content, once we start asking what the words stand for. To avert the specter of cannibalism, proponents must abstract away anything recognizably physical.

That's different from, say, the Incarnation or Trinity, where we can specify the elements of the composite concept, even if the nature of the relation is mysterious. The dogma of the real presence isn't even a paradox.

Problems with the real presence

Usually, arguments about whether Jn 6 and 1 Cor 11 teach the real presence revolve around exegetical considerations. However, that's not the only pertinent consideration:

i) Sometimes reality can serve a hermeneutical role. If the bread or wine just is Jesus, then why doesn't it look like Jesus? The total lack of correspondence between the interpretation and empirical reality is, in itself, a reason to question or reject the interpretation. If it is Jesus, shouldn't it bear a recognizable resemblance to Jesus?

If I held up a banana and said "This is Marilyn Monroe," the fact that the claim defies manifest reality is good reason to dismiss the claim out of hand.

ii) Sometimes reality is a check on our interpretations. Suppose a guy shows up on my doorstep tomorrow and announces that he's Jesus. He came back, just like he predicted.

Well, I need to compare that claim against reality. Does he do what Jesus can do. Does it match what Scripture says about eschatological signs when Jesus returns? Certain observable things are supposed to happen in the world that herald his return.

iii) Suppose someone objects that I'm overlooking the miraculous nature of the Eucharist. But one problem with that appeal is that even if we grant the Eucharistic interpretation of Jn 6, Jesus doesn't say it will be miraculous. There's nothing in the text of Jn 6 to indicate that the Eucharist is a miracle—even assuming the Eucharistic interpretation.

Indeed, none of the accounts of the Last Supper in the four Gospels and 1 Cor 11 say the Eucharist is a miracle. The miraculous nature of the Eucharist isn't required by the text, but by a particular interpretation of the text. Appealing to a miracle is an extraneous, stopgap explanation to save appearances for a particular interpretation.

Put out the light

I'd like to briefly discuss a potential confusion in debates over the real presence. Opponents of the real presence sometimes say that "This [bread] is my body" means "This [bread] represents my body".

In a sense I think that's an unobjectionable interpretation. However, it can be misunderstood. The argument is not that "This is my body" is symbolic because the copulative verb means "represent" in that statement. At least, that's not what the argument ought to be. Rather, to interpret "This is my body" to mean "this represents my body" is simply a way of characterizing the entire statement as figurative. It's not the meaning of the verb that makes the statement figurative. We're not translating "is" into "represents". Instead, that's just a way of saying the statement as a whole is metaphorical.

A metaphor is an implied comparison, where one thing stands for another. Take this statement from Othello's soliloquy:

Put out the light, and then put out the light.

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,

I can again thy former light restore

Should I repent me. But once put out thy light,

Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,

I know not where is that Promethean heat

That can thy light relume.

"Put out the light" occurs twice in first sentence. The same phrase is repeated, but it doesn't have the same sense. In the first occurrence, it denotes literal candlelight, but in the second sentence, candlelight is an emblem of human life.

The same verb ("put out") is used in each occurrence. What makes the statement figurative in the second occurrence is not that the verb has a different meaning, but the sentence has a different referent. In the second occurrence, the sentence refers to Desdemona. But she's not a literal candle. She's not composed of beeswax. She doesn't have a burning wick. Yet the candle represents Desdemona.

The audience is expected to discern an analogy between Desdemona and a burning candle. In fact, in everyday speech, "extinguish" or "snuff out" are synonyms for killing. Dead metaphors.

Gnostic communion

Protestants who deny the Real Presence are sometimes branded as Gnostics. They "spiritualize" the sacraments. Reduce them to "mere" symbols or "nude signs". They're allergic to any connection between grace and physicality. So goes the allegation.

Before getting to the main point, I'd like to make a few preliminary observations:

1. Professing Christians who affirm the Real Presence vary in the specificity of what they affirm. Some leave a lot of room for "mystery". In principle, if you affirm the Real Presence, then that commits you to one of two basic options:

i) The communion elements are actually the physical body of Christ (or Jesus in toto) rather than bread and wine. That's either/or.

ii) The communion elements are the physical body of Christ in addition to bread and wine. That's both/and.

2. Some Christians don't try to explain it. They punt to "mystery". They just call it a miracle.

i) In principle, I can respect that. However, that's an argument from authority, so it's only as good as the ostensible authority. Only as good as their prooftexts or ecclesiastical authority.

ii) Another problem with that appeal is that the NT nowhere depicts the Eucharist as a miracle. It doesn't use miracle terminology. It doesn't show Christians reacting to the

Eucharist as a miracle—unlike how people Scripture react to public miracles. So there's no indication that the Eucharist is miraculous.

3. Let's examine the both/and option. On that view, the Eucharist is real bread and wine as well as the real body of Christ. However, it only appears to be bread and wine. The appearance is true insofar as the bread and wine are real enough, and that's in part what the Eucharist is.

But, conversely, by not appearing to be something it is, it appears to be something it's not—for the most important thing about the Eucharist (on this view) is the physical body of Christ (or Jesus in toto), yet it doesn't seem to be that at all. It doesn't seem to be anything other than bread and wine. So the appearance is deceptive.

So why isn't that Gnostic? We might call this epistemological Gnosticism. Even though there's more to the Eucharist than meets the eye (or other senses, or chemical analysis), all you can perceive is bread and wine.

Suppose, during WWII, a French art collector covered his Monets and Renoirs with cheap canvas paintings to disguise them from the Nazis. They look like cheap paintings. And what the viewer sees is real enough. But right beneath the canvas of the cheap painting is a priceless Monet or Renoir.

4. Suppose, for the sake of argument, we propose a model for the both/and option. The bread and wine exists in our universe, while Jesus exists in a parallel universe. At the moment when a priest pronounces the words of consecration, an invisible wormhole opens up connecting the two.

That still doesn't explain how different individuals can ingest one and the same body. So let's say the body of Jesus exists in multiple parallel worlds. The body of Jesus is fissioned in a multiverse. Each communicant ingests the body of Jesus, which has infinitely many counterparts in parallel worlds. Like Hilbert's Hotel, you never run out of bodies to ingest at communion.

Even if the body/and option is something like that, the parallel universe is undetectable from our side of the event horizon. So there's a chasm between appearance and reality. Once again, that's awfully Gnostic.

5. Now let's explore the either/or option. That's classically represented by the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation.

i) Some Catholic apologists might try to deflect criticism by claiming it's a miracle and invoke mystery. I don't object to that in general. However, that won't work in this case, in part because Rome did not content itself with calling it a miracle and leaving it at that. Rather, transubstantiation is a philosophical explanation. A rational attempt to account for how it can actually be Jesus despite all appearances to the contrary. In that event, the explanation is properly subject to rational scrutiny.

ii) In fairness to Aquinas, if you're going to say the communion elements are really Jesus, then that commits you to something like transubstantiation. Even if you don't subscribe to Aristotelian physics or Thomistic metaphysics, your dogma requires you to drive a wedge between the primary properties and the secondary properties. So you will end up with something similar (if not identical) to transubstantiation. Given the either/or option, there's no affinity between the phenomenal qualia of the bread and

wine and what the communicant is actually ingesting. Jesus takes the place of the communion elements. He supplants the communion elements.

It seems to be bread and wine all the way down. According to our five unaided senses, it's bread and wine. According to chemical analysis, it's bread and wine. Put the wafer under an electronic microscope, and it seems to be just that. So the empirical properties are systematically misleading. Delusive.

Moreover, this extends beyond epistemological Gnosticism to embrace metaphysical (or ontological) Gnosticism. Just as Jesus only appeared to be human (a la Gnosticism), and only appeared to die on the cross (a la Gnosticism), the Eucharist only appears to be bread and wine, while the reality is something entirely different.

What is the real presence?

In this post I will try to explicate the real presence.

1. Let's define the real presence as the spatial localization of Christ's physical body in, with, or at the communion elements (e.g. bread, wafer, cup of wine or grape juice). I think that's an accurate definition.

In addition, this doctrine requires his body to be simultaneously present at multiple, disconnected locations.

2. The doctrine of the real presence generates a dilemma. Proponents think the NT clearly teaches the real presence. In their view, that's the face-value meaning of Jn 6 and 1 Cor 11. Yet, on the face of it, the bread and wine bear no resemblance to a human body.

So there's a fundamental tension in their position. On the one hand they appeal to what they deem to be the common sense interpretation of their prooftexts. On the other hand, this, in turn, forces them to reject a common sense understanding of what it means for a body to be present—or for a body to be a body. They must treat the real presence as an empirical illusion.

3. Many of them simply override philosophical objections by appealing to divine omnipotence. It's a miracle, so we shouldn't judge it by ordinary standards.

That, however, is too facile. Christians need to respect the integrity of miracles. A miracle isn't just any crazy thing you can postulate. A miracle isn't a get-out-of-jail-free card. Christians bring the concept of the miraculous into disrepute

by abusing that concept to defend any intellectual objection to their position.

In the case of the real presence, even if it is a miracle, it employs natural elements. The communion elements (bread and wine) are natural elements. Likewise, the body of Christ is a natural organism. Even the glorified body of Christ is still a natural organism.

If God works with or works through a natural medium, then that imposes limitations on what he can do by that means. God can achieve an effect apart from natural means, but if he confines himself to a natural medium, then that restricts his field of action. Defaulting to omnipotence won't remove the obstacle, for this is not a question of what God can do, but what a natural medium can do.

4. There are two basic models of the real presence:

i) Compresence

The body of Christ is present in or with the communion elements. The bread and wine might contain his body. His body might be united to the communion elements. They commingle. Something like that.

ii) Replacement

The body of Christ takes the place of the communion elements. The secondary properties are bread and wine, but the primary qualities are the body of Christ.

5. Both these models suffer from comparable challenges:

How can one body be simultaneously present in separate places?

In theory, Christ could have multiple bodies. Since the Son is illocal and the soul is illocal, it's metaphysically possible for the Son of God and his human soul to be in union with duplicate bodies.

But even if that's possible, in reality, Jesus only has one body. Yet in the nature of the case, a physical body is spatially continuous. It has physical boundaries. There's my body, and then there's what surrounds my body. My body begins and ends. If, however, the body of Christ is multiply-instantiated at discontinuous locations, then it can't be the same (singular) body.

6. In addition, there's the problem of scale. The body of Jesus is over five feet tall. Well over 100 pounds. How can a wafer contain his body? Or if the wafer simply is his body in disguise, how can a human swallow his body whole? Mental images of a python swallowing a pig spring to mind.

These aren't carping criticisms. These aren't facetious objections. This is taking the doctrine seriously, and considering what that entails.

i) One theory might be miniaturization. That could take two forms:

a) Shrinking a body by reducing the number of cells.

b) Shrinking the size of the cells.

I'm reminded of a movie I saw as a kid: *The Fantastic Voyage*, where a patient undergoes brain microsurgery by miniaturizing a medical submarine crew.

There are, however, problems with miniaturization:

If (a), then a human brain with far less mass can't do the same job as a normal human brain. If it has fewer brain cells by orders of magnitudes, it can't perform same functions. It lacks the physical complexity.

If (b), our cardiovascular system is designed to process oxygen molecules. The scale of the cardiovascular system is calibrated to the scale of oxygen molecules. If you drastically reduce the scale of the cardiovascular system, it can't process oxygen molecules.

Now, a sacramentalist might counter that the "laws" of physics and biochemistry are contingent. God could change that.

I agree. That, however, involves treating the body of Christ as a closed-system. Yet a living, breathing body is an open system. There's a continuous interchange between the body and its environment.

ii) Another theory might be to grant that Christ's body is on a normal scale, but punt to a miracle. But I don't think that will suffice.

Take the question, Can God make a box that's bigger on the inside than the outside? Seems to me the answer is no. Invoking omnipotence doesn't help, for if God works through a medium, then the nature of the medium will impose restrictions on what can be done via the medium.

Is it not physically impossible for a box to be bigger on the inside than the outside? How can a 3D object be larger than what contains it? Is that not an analytical truth?

And even if there were abstract geometries in which that's possible, to my knowledge, our universe does not exemplify that counterintuitive geometry.

Perhaps a sacramentalist might postulate that God miraculously creates pockets in the universe which exemplify a different geometry from the universe as a whole—like intrusions of a parallel universe. But even if that's possible, the Eucharist is not a closed system, but an open system. It must intersect with the communicant.

7. In any event, why resort to such esoteric metaphysics? Is that really the function of the Eucharist in Scripture?

For adherents of sacramental realism, the Eucharist is said to be, or contain, the glorified body of Christ. The body of the risen Christ.

If, indeed, you subscribe to the real presence, then I think that's unavoidable. What other body would it be? Not the body he had before the Resurrection, but the body he had after the Resurrection. That, after all, is the only body he currently has. There's a sense in which his mortal body no longer exists. It died.

To be sure, there's considerable continuity between his mortal body and his immortal body. For one thing, his mortal body was only dead for about 36 hours.

Still, there's a basic difference between the two: his glorified body is immortal. Ageless. Disease free. His glorified body is not a return to the status quo ante. Rather, it marks an advance over the status quo ante. Something better.

To say, however, that that's what is meant by the Eucharistic body and blood of Christ in Scriptural usage massively misses the point. For the point is not that Jesus had real hemoglobin flowing through his veins. Although that's essential to the integrity of the Incarnation and Resurrection, that's not what's significant about the body and blood of Christ from a redemptive standpoint, which the Eucharist illustrates.

It isn't blood, per se, but shed blood. Not a deathless body, but, to the contrary, a body that's put to death. The significance lies in the notion of sacrificial death. Violent death. That's an essential component of vicarious atonement. The Redeemer dies on behalf of others, in their place.

The Eucharist doesn't represent the Risen Christ, but the crucified Christ. Not Christ on Easter, but Christ on Good Friday. The Eucharist represents Christ on the cross, at Calvary.

The true body and blood of Christ

1. Historically, various denominations espouse some version of the real presence. Some denominations (Lutheranism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy) are committed to it while others (Anglicanism) allow for it.

Some theological traditions attempt to be more specific about how and what is. In Catholicism, Aquinas gave the classic formulation, which was codified at Trent. However, some 20C Catholic theologians (e.g. Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx) proposed alternatives.

Although traditional Catholics regard them as heretical, their alternative views on the eucharist were never officially censured (to my knowledge).

In Lutheranism, Martin Chemnitz provided the classic formulation in his monograph on The Lord's Supper. For a more up-to-date summary, see David P. Scaer's contribution to Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper (Counterpoints: Church Life).

You also have theologians who take a more eclectic, mediating position, viz. Myk Habets, Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance.

Conversely, there are Christians who affirm the real presence, but resist detailing the mechanics. They relegate that to mystery and miracle.

Whether that's successful I'll address momentarily.

In this post I'm not going to evaluate historical positions. I just mention them for background.

2. Just as a matter of logical options, it seems to me that the real presence reduces to one of two different claims:

i) The (consecrated) communion elements are the body of Jesus

ii) The (consecrated) communion elements contain the body of Jesus

Put another way:

i) The (consecrated) communion elements are other than bread and wine

ii) The (consecrated) communion elements are more than bread and wine

According to (i), the communion elements cease to be bread and wine. According to (ii), the communion elements remain intact, but there is now something over and above the communion elements.

I think models of the real presence come down to variations on either of these two claims.

3. There are roughly two components to the real presence:

i) A dichotomy between appearance and reality

ii) The underlying reality

According to the real presence, the appearance of the bread and wine is illusory, in part or in whole. By "appearance," I don't merely mean visually, or what we can see with the naked eye.

I mean in reference to the primary and secondary properties generally. The true body is empirically undetectable, whether by sight, taste, chemical analysis, &c.

As such, the theory of the real presence requires God to create an illusion. In principle, there are different ways this could be produced. Take science fiction scenarios about telepathic aliens who make people imagine things that aren't there, or fail to perceive things that are there.

BTW, I'm not being facetious. I'm taking the implications of the real presence seriously. This is what an adherent is committed to. It has an illusory dimension.

I think this component of the real presence is coherent. It's possible for God to do that. That's because this aspect of the real presence concerns perception rather than reality. The more challenging aspect of the real presence concerns the stipulated reality. Which brings me to:

4. In reference to the real presence, what is the "true body" of Jesus? What do the communion elements either become or contain?

Since the real presence stands in contrast to symbolic interpretations, since proponents accentuate literalism, I think this must have reference to the physical body of Jesus. A complete human body.

This means that when a communicant consumes the wafer or sips the wine, he's ingesting the brain, teeth, eyes, ribs, liver, bladder, intestines, penis, hair, toenails, &c., of Jesus.

I'm not being sarcastic when I say that. That's what their theory requires of them. There's not much wiggle room. It boils down to two alternatives: either a "true body" or symbolism. Since proponents deny that Jesus is "spiritually" present, since they reject the symbolic interpretation, the "true body" must be the physical body of Jesus. A complete human body. What else could it be—given the demands of the theory?

I think some proponents make the real presence more palatable (pardon the pun) by studied vagueness.

5. This, in turn, determines what must happen at communion. What the theory amounts to. There are at least two metaphysical components:

i) Miniaturization

How can a wafer be the body of Jesus, or contain the body of Jesus? If we take the claim seriously (it's a true body), then that suggests a process of miniaturization. After all, the dimensions of a wafer are far smaller than a human body. And the shape is completely different. A wafer is a small, flat, round object.

How can the wafer be the body of Jesus, or contain his body, unless his body is miniaturized?

In a way, it's even more daunting to ask how a liquid (communion wine in the chalice) can be, or contain, the body of Jesus. Are bodies of Jesus, in miniature, in the wine-like complex molecules?

I'm not making fun of the claim. I'm unpacking the claim. If it doesn't mean that, then in what respect is it the true body of Jesus?

I'm the moment I'm not discussing how that's possible. Rather, I'm discussing what is said to happen.

ii) Replication

If a priest distributes communion to 200 worshipers, doesn't that entail 200 bodies of Jesus? Each wafer is (or contains) the body of Jesus.

Likewise, if one communicant after another sips the wine, is a body Jesus replicated anew each time the next communicant sips the wine? Are there an infinite number of true bodies swimming around inside the chalice? Might you inadvertently imbibe more than one?

Or is the true body duplicated one at a time for each communicant?

Once again, I'm not being flippant. The theory of the real presence simultaneously affirms something and denies something. What is the claim?

It seems as though the real presence entails the reincarnation of Christ. The repeated reincarnation of Christ. His body is multiplied every time the Eucharist is celebrated. If two communicants receive his body, then it can't be the numerically same body in each case, can it? Rather, it has to be copies.

6. From what I've read, adherents of the real presence ground it in one of two events:

i) Made possible by virtue of the Incarnation

ii) Made possible by virtue of the Resurrection

According to (i), the human nature acquires the divine attribute of ubiquity via the hypostatic union.

That's subject to two objections:

a) Divine omniscience doesn't mean God has literal spatial extension. It doesn't mean he's diffused through space. That he exists in every part of space. Rather, it's a picturesque metaphor for divine omniscience and omnipotence.

b) To say divine attributes are transferrable to the human nature is pantheistic. It erases the categorical distinction between the creature and the Creator.

According to (ii), the glorified body of Christ is hyperdimensional.

That's subject to three objections:

i) It rests on exegetically dubious inferences

ii) Adding spacial dimensions fails to solve the problem it posed for itself. The problem is not that his body has too few dimensions, but too many. It's a problem of scale. A 3D human body is too big for another human to swallow whole. To say the glorified body has even more dimensions aggravates rather than alleviates the problem.

iii) A hyperdimensional body isn't recognizably human. That's not what Scripture means by a human body.

7. At this point, adherents retreat into pious appeals to mystery and miracle. And that appeal has a legitimate place in Christian theology. But it's not unqualified.

i) On a classic definition of miracle, God can produce naturally impossible results by circumventing nature. If, however, God is working through a natural medium, then that limits the divine field of action. If God uses a natural medium, then he can only do what's naturally possible. He can do what's naturally impossible by simply bypassing the natural medium. But so long as the natural medium is instrumental to the result, that imposes a restriction on what he can do with it. Nature is finite. It has in-built constraints.

ii) According to the real presence, the communicant is receiving something essentially natural. The body of Jesus is a natural object. A physical organism. If it were supernatural, it wouldn't be a true body.

So you can't invoke a miracle to make the real presence go through.

iii) In theory, you could invoke a miracle of replication (see above). But that wouldn't solve the problem of scale.

In theory, you could invoke a miracle of miniaturization. But that's problematic on several grounds:

a) Consuming tiny bodies of Jesus is cannibalistic. Adherents of the real presence deny that communion is cannibalism.

b) To miniaturize a human body, you must shrink everything down. Everything must be scaled up or down to match everything else, viz. the heart in relation to cells, &c. You'd have to miniaturize cells.

But body systems designed to function at one scale can't naturally function at a very different scale. Consider the difference between insects and humans. Because insects are so much smaller, they have systems which work at their scale that couldn't work for a much larger organism, or vice versa. Take the circulatory system or oxygenation. The scale of an organism affects what is feasible, from an engineering standpoint.

You end up with a makeshift explanation that isn't consistently natural or supernatural.

Nailing our sins to the cross

13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross (Col 2:13-14).

Sacramentalists (e.g. the real presence, baptismal regeneration, baptismal justification) have a simple argument. The NT attributes certain properties or effects to baptism and communion. Therefore, the sacraments are the source or cause of these effects.

There are three basic problems with this argument:

i) To begin with, whether some of their prooftexts (e.g. Jn 3:5; Jn 6; Tit 3:5) really refer to the sacraments is highly contestable.

ii) However, it's undoubtedly true that some verses of Scripture link baptism with the remission of sin. What about that?

One problem is that Scripture often promises the remission of sin by faith alone. It doesn't make forgiveness contingent on baptism. Moreover, that would be at odds with promising remission of sin by faith alone.

iii) But here's another problem: sacramentalists never get the nature of symbolism. Because a symbol stands for

something else, whatever is really true of the thing it stands for can be said of the symbol. At that emblematic level, the symbol takes the place of what it stands for.

Consider the passage from Colossians. Paul makes the physical details of crucifixion a graphic metaphor for the remission of sin. The iron nails and the wooden cross stand for the redemptive work of Christ.

That, however, doesn't mean we are actually forgiven by driving nails into wood. Paul figuratively ascribes to the physical details of crucifixion what is literally true of Christ's redemptive death. He doesn't think hammering nails into the cross remits our sin. That's a picture of redemption.

Baptism and communion are enacted parables which illustrate certain spiritual truths. Don't confuse the concrete metaphor with the reality it signifies. The connection is symbolic, just like Paul's vivid imagery in Col 2:24.

On Transubstantiation

Elizabeth Anscombe wrote a pamphlet expounding and defending transubstantiation. This is instructive because she was both a devout Catholic and a topnotch philosopher. This is the best case for transubstantiation. If it fails, that exposes the fundamental weakness of the dogma.

Such a child can be taught then by whispering to it such things as: "Look! Look what the priest is doing ... He is saying Jesus' words that change the bread into Jesus' body. Now he's lifting it up. Look! Now bow your head and say 'My Lord and my God'," and then "Look, now he's taken hold of the cup. He's saying the words that change the wine into Jesus' blood. Look up at the cup. Now bow your head and say 'We believe, we adore your precious blood, O Christ of God'." [The cry of the Ethiopians at the consecration of the chalice.]

A basic problem with her interpretation is that the none of the NT accounts indicates that the "words of consecration"

are an incantation to transform the communion elements into something else.

One might not even think of mentioning our Lord's resurrection explicitly in this connection. But it is there implicitly for it is no part of the Catholic consciousness, no part of our way of speaking of or to our Lord, to think he only comes to be, as it were intermittently, upon our altars. No, we speak of the risen man as always a living man in heaven and say that the bread and wine are changed into him. And because he is alive and not dead, his flesh is not separated from his blood, and anyone who receives any of either, receives the whole of him. So, in learning this, children learn afresh that he is alive.

Except that the Last Supper anticipates his death, not his resurrection. It's his mortal body which will be slain, not his glorified body.

I have spoken of teaching little children, both because it is important in itself and because it is the clearest way of bringing out what "transubstantiation" means. That word was devised (first in Greek and then in Latin by translation) to insist precisely upon this: that there is a change of what is there, totally into something else. A conversion of one physical reality into another which already exists. So it is not a coming to be of a new substance out of the stuff of an old one, as when we have a chemical change of the matter in a retort from being one kind of substance into another. Nor is it like digestion in which what you eat turns into you. For these are both changes of matter, which can assume a variety of forms. When one says "transubstantiation" one is saying exactly what one teaches the child, in teaching it that Christ's words, by the divine power given to the priest who uses them in his place, have changed

the bread so that it isn't there any more (nor the stuff of which it was made) but instead there is the body of Christ.

That's a useful clarification of what transubstantiation means.

The little child can grasp this and it is implicit in the act of worship that follows the teaching. I knew a child, close upon three years old and only then beginning to talk, but taught as I have described, who was in the free space at the back of the church when the mother went to communion. "Is he in you?" the child asked when the mother came back. "Yes," she said, and to her amazement the child prostrated itself before her.

Given her operating premise, that's a valid deduction. The church of Rome practices the reservation and adoration of the host. Leftover consecrated communion wafers are stored in a "tabernacle" (or monstrance, for public

processionals). You are supposed to genuflect when you walk past it, because you are in the presence of Christ.

But logically, this means every Catholic who just got out of Mass is a walking tabernacle. They should genuflect to each other.

"But the thing is impossible, contradictory: it cannot be believed! It has to be only a figure of speech!"
Well, indeed it cannot be really understood how it is possible. But if it is claimed it is impossible, then a definite contradiction must be pointed to, and if you believe in it, you will believe that each claim to disprove it as contradictory can be answered. For example, someone says: how can a man who is, say, six foot tall be wholly in this small space? Well, indeed not by the coincidence of his dimensions with the hole in space defined by the dimensions of the remaining appearance of bread: let us call this the "dimensive" way of being in a place.
"But that is the only way for a body to be in a place! "How do you know? We

believe that something is true of That which is there, which contradicts its being there dimensionally. And certainly the division and separation from one another of all these places where That is, does not mean a division and separation of It from itself. So, considered dimensionally, a thousand such diverse places can be compared to a thousand pieces of mirror each of which reflects one whole body, itself much bigger than any of them and itself not dimensionally displaced. But when we consider That which the bread has become, the place where we are looking has become (though not dimensionally) the place where it is: a place in heaven.

i) This assumes that at the Last Supper, Jesus was referring to his body in some illocal sense. But what evidence is there that he was speaking in such idiosyncratic terms?

ii) The mirror metaphor is aesthetically pleasing, but a reflection is not the same thing as what it reflects.

It would be wrong to think, however, that the thing can be understood, sorted out, expounded as a possibility with nothing mysterious about it. That is, that it can be understood in such a way as is perhaps demanded by those who attack it on the ground of the obvious difficulties. It was perhaps a fault of the old exposition in terms of a distinction between the substance of a thing (supposed to be unascertainable) and its accidents, that this exposition was sometimes offered as if it were supposed to make everything intelligible. Greater learning would indeed remove that impression. For in the philosophy of scholastic Aristotelianism in which those distinctions were drawn, transubstantiation is as difficult, as "impossible", as it seems to any ordinary reflection. And it is right that it should be so. When we call something a mystery, we mean that we cannot iron out the difficulties about

understanding it and demonstrate once for all that it is perfectly possible. Nevertheless we do not believe that contradictions and absurdities can be true, or that anything logically demonstrable from things known can be false. And so we believe that there are answers to supposed proofs of absurdity, whether or not we are clever enough to find them.

i) This is useful, because she debunks a popular rationalization of transubstantiation. Thomistic metaphysics rephrases rather than resolves the contradiction.

ii) Her appeal to mystery would be legitimate if this was, in fact, revealed truth. But the only thing keeping it afloat is the raw authority of her denomination. Since transubstantiation is not a revealed truth or deliverance of reason, the appeal to mystery is illicit. The argument from authority would be legitimate if we had good reason to countenance the claims of Rome. But her monograph takes that for granted, which is not a given for Protestants.

Why do we do this – why do we celebrate the Eucharist? Because the Lord told us to. That is reason enough.

But we can reflect that it is his way of being present with us in his physical reality until the end of this age; until he comes again to be dimensionally and visibly present on earth. We can also reflect on the mysterious fact that he wanted to nourish us with himself.*

This assumes that the purpose of the Eucharist is to "nourish" the communicant. Sanctifying grace. But what if the Eucharist is a symbol of forensic grace?

This to my mind is the greatest mystery of all about the Eucharistic sacrifice, a greater mystery than transubstantiation itself, though it must be an essential part of the significance of transubstantiation. To try to get some understanding of this, let us first ask ourselves what our Lord was doing at the Last Supper. If you ask an orthodox Jew to say grace at your table, he will take a piece of bread in his hands, will pray and break the bread and distribute a piece to each

person present. So our Lord was then saying grace and on a special occasion. He was celebrating the Passover; this supper was the first, highly ceremonial meal of the days during which Jews celebrate the passage of the angel of the Lord over Egypt when they were about to escape from their Egyptian slavery. Then they had to sacrifice a lamb, in groups large enough to eat it up, they were to smear their doorposts with its blood; the angel of the Lord passed over their houses, destroying the first-born children of all other houses. The Jews ate their sacrifice, being commanded on this occasion to eat all up and leave nothing behind; they stood ready to go on their journey, ready to leave Egypt. This meal in preparation for the journey out of bondage has ever since been memorialized in the supper – the Seder as present-day Jews call it – which was celebrated by our Lord with his disciples. But to the grace our Lord

adds the words "This is my body" and after the rest of the celebration, he takes the cup of wine and says it is "my blood which will be shed for you". We have seen how this showed that his coming death was a sacrifice of which he was the priest. (For his death was voluntary; no one could take his life from him if he would not give it up.) His actions showed that for us he himself replaced the Passover lamb, which was originally both a sacrifice and the meal in preparation for the journey of escape from slavery, and also provided the sign of difference between the escaping Jews and those who would have detained them.

There are two sorts of sacrifice, the holocaust, or "wholeburning" in which the whole of the sacrificed victim is destroyed in the sacrifice, and the kind in which the people eat what is sacrificed.

So his flesh and blood are given us for food, and this is surely a great mystery.

It is clearly a symbol: we are not physically nourished by Christ's flesh and blood as the Jews were by the paschal lamb.

This exposition is largely correct, but it suffers from a fatal equivocation. Her conclusion is inconsistent with her supporting material. In the Passover rite, the blood is separated from the sacrificial lamb. The celebrants didn't consume its blood. So it doesn't represent inner grace or presence. Rather, it was painted on the doorframe to ward off the angel of death. By parity of argument, the Eucharist is not about Christ nourishing us or making himself physically present within us.

Certainly this eating and drinking are themselves symbolic. I mean that, whether this is itself a literal or is a purely symbolical eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood, that is in turn symbolical of something else. So if we only symbolically (and not really) eat his flesh, our action is the symbol of a symbol. If we literally eat his flesh our action is a direct symbol. The reason why the action is in any case strange and arcane is this: it is not a natural or

easily intelligible symbol. How, and what, it symbolizes - that is deeply mysterious.

In modern times some theologians have tried to explain transubstantiation as trans-signification. The "substance" of some things is the meaning they have in human life. This is certainly true of some things, like money, and they have wished to say it is true of bread and wine: these aren't chemical substances, but mean human food and drink. Well, as to the first point (that they aren't single substances) that's true enough; but the bread and wine that are fit to use at the Eucharist are defined by the natural kinds they are made from, by wheat and grape. For the rest, what is said may be very true - but the odd thing, which apparently is not noticed, is that what gets trans-signified in the Eucharist is not the bread and wine, but the body and blood of the Lord,

which are trans-signified into food and drink. And that is the mystery.

Once again, she debunks a popular rationalization of transubstantiation.

When Jesus said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven", his words were a metaphor for the same thing, The metaphor is that of saying "I myself will be the nourishment of the life of which I speak." The saying is dark, like his saying "I am the way", "I am the truth" and "I am the life" or again "I am the door". Not "My way is the way" or "I show you the truth", but "I am the way and the truth". Similarly not "I have nourishment for you" but "I am the bread". The commanded action of eating his flesh creates the very same metaphor as the words - whether we take the description of the action literally or symbolically. For, even if the words "I am the bread (i.e. the food) that came down from

heaven" are to be taken literally, still that which they say, and which on that understanding is literally so, symbolizes something else.

This is interesting, because she admits that on any reckoning, you have to interpret Jn 6 figuratively. It's just a choice between a direct metaphor and an indirect metaphor. Keep that in mind the next time a pop Catholic apologist impugns you for rejecting the literal interpretation.

Our paschal lamb

THE PASSOVER

3 Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. 4 And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. 5 Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, 6 and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

7 “Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. 11 It is the Lord's Passover.

12 For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord.

13 The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses

where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

21 Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go and select lambs for yourselves according to your clans, and kill the Passover lamb.

22 Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin. None of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. 23 For the Lord will pass through to strike the Egyptians, and when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you ([Exod 12:3-7,11-13,21-22](#)).

THE LAST SUPPER

7 Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. 8 So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it.”

14 And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. 15 And he said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with

you before I suffer. 16 For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” 17 And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, “Take this, and divide it among yourselves. 18 For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” 19 And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” 20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood ([Lk 22:7-8,14-20](#)).

Few doctrines have suffered a more systematic distortion than the Eucharist. This is ironic because the actual significance of the Eucharist is transparent and straightforward.

The Last Supper is *based* on the Passover. That's not to say it's identical to a Seder meal. It's an analogy, inviting comparison and contrast. As you'd expect, the Last Supper has a more specifically Christian significance. What do they share in common?

i) The Passover is a meal. A communal meal.

ii) The Passover illustrates a substitutionary principle, where the paschal lamb dies in place of the firstborn male.

iii) And you have the function of the blood. Not merely blood, but shed blood.

iv) Although it's a meal, the significance of the rite isn't based on consuming the elements. It's not about internalizing the meat and blood.

To the contrary, the lamb is exsanguinated, to avoid consumption of the blood. The blood is external to the celebrant.

The blood is not inside the celebrants. Rather, the celebrants are inside their homes, while the blood is painted on the doorway. The doorway is both an entrance and an exit. It represents the boundary between the home and the outside world.

The blood is a "sign" (v13). In the Passover rite, painting the doorway with blood forms an emblematic barrier, which prevents the Destroyer from transgressing the premises and executing the firstborn male within. This is a bit of divine theater. And object lesson.

So the blood has a protective function. It shields the firstborn male from divine judgment.

These basic principles carry over to the Last Supper:

i) The rite depicts the vicarious atonement of Christ. That's already clear from its background in the Passover, but is reinforced by allusions to the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:6,10,12, LXX).

The elements are somewhat different. There's an emphasis on bread and wine rather than the lamb. That's because Jesus will take the place of the lamb. No doubt the original

Passover meal involved wine to wash down the solid food. But that ritual already had literal blood (the shed blood of the lamb), so there was no need for another element (wine) to symbolize blood—in contrast to the Last Supper.

ii) On analogy with the Passover, this is not about consuming blood. This is not about internalizing the body and blood of Christ.

Rather, the blood retains its protective significance. The wine represents the shed blood of Christ, anticipating the Crucifixion—just hours away. The bread represents the body of Christ, soon to suffer violent death. A sacrificial victim.

The blood of Christ shields the Christian from divine judgment. In this case, eschatological judgment (damnation) rather than physical death (the plague of the firstborn). The blood of Christ is "outside" us rather than inside us—like a protective barrier.

Mere signs

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26).

There are liturgical churches that put great stock in the real presence. If you don't believe in the real presence, you are said to reduce the sacraments to "mere signs" or "nude signs."

Let's talk about signs for a moment. The camera is a wildly popular invention. It's become even more popular in the age of digital cameras, cellphone cameras, and Facebook.

Why do people like to take pictures? Well, there are different reasons. Some people are just narcissistic.

But there are other, better reasons. As timebound, spacebound creatures, we take pictures to make a particular place or moment available. If we take a trip to a scenic locale, we may take pictures so that when we're no longer there, we can still see it. It's not as good as being there, but it's better than nothing.

When a husband is away at work, he may have pictures of his wife and kids on the desk. It's a reminder of what he looks forward to when he gets off work and returns home.

Likewise, once an event is past, you can't go back in time and see it again. So we take pictures to preserve the past. To make the past a bit more accessible in the present.

That's one reason parents take pictures of their kids when they are kids. Kids grow up.

Sometimes pictures can assume an added significance. When your mother or father was still alive, having their picture may not mean as much to you as long as you can see them whenever you want to. But after they are gone, that picture may suddenly mean a lot more to you. You don't have them in your life any more. You may have letters. And memories. And pictures. A picture may be the next best thing to having them. It's a poor substitute for having them with you, but that's what makes death so desolating.

Likewise, parents don't always outlive their kids. Sometimes their child dies of cancer or cystic fibrosis, or dies in a traffic accident.

Imagine going into the home of a parent who lost a child. You see pictures on the mantle. Imagine saying, "But they're just pictures!"

Well, in a sense that's true. And you're not telling the parent anything he or she doesn't already know. Painfully so. Acutely so. But that would be a pretty callous thing to say.

Yes, they're just pictures, but that's all the forlorn mother or has left. It's not much, but it's better than total absence. It helps them retain some sense of connection with the child they lost. Those pictures are very precious. Mental images can fade.

In addition, when we're dealing with Christians, where there's the hope of reunion in the world to come, those

pictures aren't simply a memento of the past, but a token of God's promised restoration.

And that's like what Paul says about communion in the passage I quoted. Communion is a ritual depiction that's both prospective and retrospective. A commemoration of the Cross as well as a preview of the Second Coming.

Yes, it's just a sign, but then, you might say the same thing about a picture of your late mother or father or grandmother whom you hope to see again in heaven.

XII. Sola Scriptura

What does sola scriptura mean?

i) It's become a Catholic trope to say that sola scriptura is self-contradictory, and I've seen Protestant apologists struggle with that charge.

ii) First thing I'd point out is that you can rule out certain options before you know the right answer. You can sense that a proposed answer is wrong before you know what the right answer is.

iii) The historic target of sola scriptura is the papacy and post-apostolic church councils. Sola scripture is the claim that there are no infallible post-apostolic church councils. Likewise, that God didn't institute the papacy. The pope is not a divine mouthpiece.

iv) Apropos (iii), suppose a Catholic apologist asks us where do we find that in the Bible? But that's the point—we don't find the papacy in the Bible. And we don't find divine promises to inspire post-apostolic church councils in the Bible. We find promises to the apostles. But we don't find comparable promises to bishops or post-apostolic church councils.

v) Catholics sometimes appeal to the "ordination" of Timothy (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6) as an example of holy orders. Suppose, for argument's sake, we agree that the ceremony conferred a "charism" on Timothy. But Paul officiated at that ceremony. So that provides no precedent for "bishops" who aren't handpicked deputies of the apostles. For "bishops" on whom apostles did not lay hands.

vi) Moreover, Paul isn't Peter. At best, the case of Timothy establishes Pauline succession, not Petrine succession. So that's hardly precedent for the papacy. Indeed, that's at odds with the exclusive claims of the papacy. That example is counterproductive to Catholic claims.

vii) It's not that we don't find sola scriptura in the Bible, in the sense of a direct statement about sola scriptura. That's a confused way to frame the issue. Sola scriptura is defined by the point of contrast. The historical alternative.

We don't find what sola scriptura opposes in the Bible. We don't find a divine mandate or promise regarding the infallible authority of post-apostolic church councils. We don't find a divine promise to protect post-apostolic church councils from error. And we don't find a divine mandate or promise regarding a Petrine succession, where bishops of Rome are oracles of God.

For Catholic apologists to ask or exclaim, "Where do you find that in the Bible?" proves our point. We don't, and that's the problem—for Catholicism.

viii) Moreover, it's not just an argument from silence. We've seen Roman Catholicism in action. We'd seen how the claimants to special divine guidance perform. We've seen popes and Catholic church councils in action. That doesn't make the Catholic alternative plausible. To the contrary, that brings the Catholic alternative into disrepute.

ix) Catholics appeal to Acts 15, but apostles along with a sibling of Jesus were participants. So that's no precedent for post-apostolic church councils.

x) Moreover, Catholics distinguish between local councils and ecumenical councils. But we don't find that distinction

in Scripture. There's no divine promise regarding ecumenical councils in contrast to local councils.

xi) Sometimes the debate is framed in terms of cessationism v. continuationism, but that's separable. It's true that cessationism rules out the kind of divine guidance and protection from error that Rome lays claim to, but so does continuationism inasmuch as continuationism, if true, is not a promise or expectation directed at the papacy or Roman bishops in council. Rather, continuationism, if true, applies to the laity in general.

xii) There are, of course, Catholic prooftexts regarding the papacy, tradition, apostolic succession, and "the Church", but that's different from the allegation that sola scriptura is self-contradictory. And Protestants regard the Catholic prooftexts as bogus.

xiii) Catholic apologists might object that it begs the question to say Catholic prooftexts are bogus. "By what authority" do we make that value judgment? Yet it must be possible to assess Catholicism independent of Catholicism—otherwise, nobody would ever be in a position to convert to Catholicism. Likewise, it must be possible for cradle Catholics to assess Catholicism independent of Catholicism. After all, the fact that you were born into a particular religious (or irreligious) tradition carries no guarantee or even presumption that you were born into the "right" religious tradition—inasmuch as people are born into different, competing religious (or irreligious) traditions.

Destination unknown

Some evangelicals convert to Catholicism because they are dismayed by what's sometimes called interpretive pluralism. In my experience, evangelical converts to Catholicism rarely read commentaries by Roman Catholic scholars. The Catholicism of the average convert seems to be the Catholicism of lay Catholic apologists, and not the Catholicism of contemporary Catholic Bible scholars and church historians. Which gives them a monolithic view of Catholicism that's illusory.

But I'd like to make another point. The difference between the Protestant rule of faith and the Catholic rule of faith is like the difference between committing to a script and committing to a screenwriter. If a script is written, you know in advance what you're committed to. But in committing to a screenwriter, you don't know how the story will end. That's a work in progress.

Because the Bible is a finished product, it contains no surprises. We know what we're getting. We know what to expect. Indeed, that's why intramural debates in evangelicalism are so repetitive and stereotypical. There's not much new to say. We retool our arguments for traditional positions.

There are uncertainties in biblical exegesis, although that's by no means uniform. To say Scripture is unclear in some places doesn't mean it's unclear in all places. Moreover, to say it's unclear to a modern reader doesn't mean it was unclear to the original audience. Conversely, some passages, like prophecy, can be clearer to a modern reader than the original reader, because we have the benefit of hindsight.

Although Scripture is not without interpretive ambiguities, we know where those are. To vary the metaphor, the territory has been mapped. Our rule of faith is self-contained.

By contrast, Catholic theology just keeps evolving. There's always another twist and turn in the road ahead. In that respect, nothing is really settled in Catholicism. Even "irreformable dogma" is subject to creative reinterpretation.

In a sense, the uncertainties in Biblical hermeneutics are synchronic. We have the entire work before us. We know the lay of the land. We know the boundaries.

By contrast, the uncertainties in Catholic theology are diachronic. It keeps reinventing itself and overwriting past theology. Erasing and redrawing the borders. Adapting to the Zeitgeist. Headed to a destination unknown.

To vary the metaphor once more, Catholic theology keeps bleeding out in unpredictable directions. Even if you stanch the hemorrhaging at one source, it will bleed from a new source.

How to read a map

One popular attack on sola Scriptura is the objection that an infallible Bible is useless without an infallible interpreter.

i) To begin with, this isn't a hypothetical question for Protestants. We believe in sola Scriptura because that is how God in fact chooses to operate. One could toy with abstract alternatives which have different consequences, but that's irrelevant to the real-world situation God chose to put us in.

ii) Let's take a comparison. If I have an up-to-date street map, that doesn't prevent me from taking a wrong turn. I can misread the map. I can miss a street sign.

But because I have an accurate street map, I can also reread the map, correct for my mistakes, and find my way out of the maze. I can retrace my steps and find my way back. Circle back and try again until I get it right.

But if the map itself is out-of-date, then I'm hopelessly lost. I have no frame of reference. No standard of comparison.

Even absent an infallible interpreter, an infallible Bible is a great advantage over a fallible Bible.

The question of sola Scriptura

I like to keep up with the competition. Brand Pitre is one of the best younger generation Catholic apologists. I recent read his book *The Case for Jesus*, which was pretty good.

So I decided to look at the outlines posted at his website. One thing I notice is that his view of Scripture is very retrograde by contemporary Catholic standards. It's nice that he has such a conservative view of Scripture, but that's highly unrepresentative of the modern-day hierarchy. In addition, many of the arguments in his outlines are simply atrocious. In this post I'll comment on his critique of sola Scriptura. Let's see if the younger generation does any better:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-NQD9iaqRA>

<https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1202/2816/files/the-origin-of-the-bible.pdf>

<https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1202/2816/files/why-we-believe-outline.pdf>

i) Let's begin with the video clip. Does he honestly think the only reason Protestants offer for how they know the Bible is the word of God is because they know it in their heart? Is he really that uninformed? Or is he referring to evangelical folk theology? If you ask the average layman, you might get an answer like that. But that's not how Protestant apologists generally argue for the inspiration or canonicity of Scripture.

ii) That said, many readers find the Bible convincing. Just reading the Bible engenders faith. Some people are

unbelievers when they begin reading, but are believers on the other side. They become believers in the process of reading the Bible. So even though the "know it in your heart" criterion is too coarse-grained to determine the canon, it has a grain of truth.

iii) How many Mormon missionaries actually experience what they claim? Or do they just say that because they've been trained to say it?

iv) Since God won't witness to a false prophet, they can't have the same experience as Christians.

v) Assuming that somebody must be the sole authority, why shouldn't I be the authority for me rather than punting to someone else (the pope) to make ultimate decisions about my fate? That's part of growing up. To be an adult is to make decisions about yourself for yourself. You may mess up, but then, delegating the tough calls to someone else is no guarantee that they won't mess up your life on your behalf.

vi) By what authority did Brant conclude that the pope was his ultimate authority source? How can the pope be his sole authority if it's up to Brant to determine whether the pope has that authority?

vii) Does sola Scriptura generate 33,000 Christian denominations? Even his fellow apologist Trent Horn rejects that claim:

First, this citation from the World Christian Encyclopedia is misleading (even though many Catholics are fond of

citing it). For example it counts the same religious group existing in different countries as belonging to different denominations and even cites liturgical rites within the Catholic Church as being completely different denominations, which is false.

<https://randalrauser.com/2019/02/a-conversation-with-catholic-apologist-trent-horn-part-1-the-magisterium/>

viii) Anyway, from a Protestant perspective, the church of Rome is just one more denomination. It takes its place among the "33,000" denominations.

Moving on to his outlines:

Common Misconceptions

- 1. The Bible did not fall from heaven, but was written by many different men.***
- 2. The Bible is not simply a single book, but a sacred library of many books.***
- 3. The Bible was not written all at once, but over many centuries (1500 B.C.-100 A.D.)***

4. The Bible was not written originally in English, but in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek

5. Translations of the Bible: from Original Languages; not one language to another!

6. The Bible is the end result of a long process: 1500 yrs (to write); another 300 years (to close Canon)

Those are common misconceptions? Common for whom? Evangelical pastors? Evangelical laymen? Or lay Catholics? Since Roman Catholics are Pitre's constituency, that's presumably the first group he has in mind. If he's referring to lay Catholics, then they are abysmally uninformed about the Bible.

a. The Bible did not fall from heaven

What intelligent Protestant thinks the Bible fell from heaven? Is that just rhetorical? Who does Pitre imagine he's opposing?

no inspired “table of contents”

Been there, done that:

<https://triablogue.blogspot.com/2019/02/an-inspired-table-of-contents.html>

b. How do you know which books belong in the Bible? (DSS? 'Lost' Gospels?)

Regarding the 'Lost' Gospels, the fact that the putative authors were long dead before the apocryphal Gospels were written knocks them out of the running. That automatically makes them forgeries.

c. E.g., How do you know Revelation is the word of God? (Bible doesn't tell you)

He can't be serious. The Apocalypse repeatedly indicates its status as prophetic scripture.

4. The Question of Inspiration: how we know which books are the Word of God

a. Where did the Bible itself come from?

That's canvassed in standard evangelical treatments of the canon.

e. Who decided which books were inspired, and which were not?

Christians inherited the Bible from Jesus and the apostles.

f. By what authority did they make this decision?

By what authority did Pitre decide that the pope is the decision-maker?

g. What about the “Dead Sea Scrolls” and “lost Gospels” ? Are they inspired too?

4. Contents of the Dead Sea Scrolls

a. Copies of Hebrew Scriptures (VanderKam, Dead Sea Scrolls Today, 30)

b. Writings of the Jewish sect of the Essenes

c. Copies of Jewish Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha (cf. Charlesworth, OTP)

8. Implications:

a. Essenes had a Broader Canon than later Pharisees (Jacob Neusner)

How does it follow that they had a broader canon just because they had a range of writings in their library? I have lots of books besides the Bible. That doesn't mean I have a

broader canon. His argument proves too much since the DDS include writings excluded from the Catholic canon.

Five Key Problems with Sola Scriptura

1. Sola Scriptura is unhistorical.

a. Church precedes the Bible:

The word of God precedes the church. Indeed, according to Gen 1, the word of God precedes creation.

But there's a reason God committed his Word to writing. We're not living in the 1C anymore. There are no living witnesses to Jesus.

Earliest Christians did not practice Sola Scriptura.

b. Problem: if so, they would have had to exclude the New Testament!

Does he even understand the position he presumes to critique? Protestants don't claim that sola Scriptura was operative during times of living revelation.

c. No-one Church Father ever taught it before the Protestant Reformation.

I'm not accountable to the church fathers. I'm accountable to God.

2. Sola Scriptura is illogical.

a. Luther and Reformers upheld infallibility of the Bible but denied infallibility of the Church.

b. Problem: If the Bible is infallible, then the Church who canonized it must also be infallible.

c. Otherwise, you are left with a fallible collection of infallible books.

d. This is logically impossible.

i) How is a fallible collection of infallible books logically impossible? To take a comparison, is it logically impossible to have fallible copies of infallible books? Is it logically impossible to have fallible Greek MSS of the NT?

ii) Suppose we have a collection that's fallible but correct? So long as the Protestant canon is correct, why does it have to be infallible? Even if the Protestant canon might have been off, yet if, as a matter of fact, they didn't get it wrong, why isn't that good enough? Suppose the Protestant canon is coincidentally right. So long as they got it right, who cares whether the result is fallible or not?

3. Sola Scriptura is unnecessary.

a. Unnecessary Dichotomy: It pits the Church against the Bible.

b. But it is the Church that gave us the Bible.

Actually, it's Jewish and Christian scribes who gave us the Bible.

c. Not either the Church or the Bible, but both the Church and the Bible.

d. Bible cannot be used against the Church who gave it to us.

Suppose, for argument's sake, that "the Church" gave us the Bible. Over time, institutions can change for the worse. The fact that an institution may have been trustworthy at one time carries no presumption that it remains trustworthy for all time. Consider universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. They started out well but lost their vision. The torch passes to someone else.

4. Sola Scriptura leads to division within the Church.

The papacy leads to division within the church. Ecumenical councils lead to division within the church.

a. Historical Fact: now over 30,000 Christian denominations!

b. All of them claim to use the “Bible alone” as source of doctrine.

And there were multiple sects in 1C Judaism, even though some of them supplemented Scripture with tradition. Tradition doesn't create unity, for every sect or denomination may create its own traditions.

c. Christ prayed that his Church might be “one flock, with one shepherd” (John 10, 17)

We have one shepherd (Jesus), and we are his sheep. All (true) Christians belong to the same flock in virtue of being his sheep.

5. Sola Scriptura is self-contradictory because it is unbiblical.

Something can be unbiblical without being self-contradictory. (Not that sola Scriptura is unbiblical, but his statement is a non sequitur.)

a. Says we should only believe what the Bible teaches.

That's a caricature of sola Scriptura.

b. But the Bible itself never teaches Sola Scriptura! (Not one single passage.)

Depends on how you formulate the claim. For instance:

- i)** Believe and obey divine revelation
- ii)** Don't elevate non-revelation to the status of divine revelation
- iii)** Disregard whatever is contrary to divine revelation

Scriptures teaches these propositions. That's sola Scriptura in a nutshell.

c. In fact, the Bible frequently refers to the authority of the Church and Tradition

- i)** Where does the Bible frequently refer to the authority of the church?
- ii)** "Tradition" is a loaded word.

The a priori argument against sola Scriptura

It is proved finally by reason. God was not ignorant of the fact that many difficulties would arise in the Church concerning the Faith. Therefore he had to provide a judge for the Church. But that judge cannot be Scripture...It is clear that Scripture is not the judge, because it is subject to various meanings, nor can it say which interpretation is true. Robert Bellarmine, Controversies of the Christian Faith (Keep the Faith 2016), 205.

In my experience, that's the most popular and influential objection to the Protestant faith. That objection is endlessly repeated and paraphrased by Catholic apologists. It's convincing to many cradle Catholics and evangelical converts to Rome.

Notice the nature of the argument. It's an a priori argument. The argument is premised on what Christians should expect God to allow or prevent. God would not allow something like that to happen. God would have a mechanism in place to prevent that outcomes. It reasons back from unacceptable consequences to divine provision and prevention.

As I say, many Catholics and prospective Catholics find that utterly persuasive. But is it in fact reasonable. Consider a few counterexamples that operate from the same principle:

It is proved finally by reason. God was not ignorant of the fact that many difficulties would arise in the Church concerning the Faith if Luther lived. Therefore God had to cause Luther to die in childhood.

It is proved finally by reason. God was not ignorant of the fact that billions of people would embrace a false religion if Muhammad lived. Therefore he had to cause Muhammad to die in childhood.

It is proved finally by reason. God was not ignorant of the fact that billions of people would embrace a false religion if Buddha lived. Therefore he had to cause Buddha to die in childhood.

It is proved finally by reason. God was not ignorant of the fact that Bart Ehrman would be the most influential apostate of his generation. Therefore he had to prevent Ehrman from becoming Bruce Metzger's student.

It is proved finally by reason. God was not ignorant of the fact that if Nabeel Qureshi died of cancer at

33, many Muslims would conclude that Allah punished him for apostasy. Therefore he had to heal Nabeel.

And so on and so forth. Point being, it's generally quite unreliable to predict what God would not permit.

The agrapha

21 After this Jesus revealed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias, and he revealed himself in this way. 2 Simon Peter, Thomas (called the Twin), Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples were together...20 Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who also had leaned back against him during the supper and had said, “Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?” 21 When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, “Lord, what about this man?” 22 Jesus said to him, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!” 23 So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?” (Jn 21:1-2,20-23).

One argument which Catholic epologists commonly deploy is the claim that you can't find Protestant distinctives in the early church. Protestant distinctives are theological innovations.

This argument takes two forms: (a) the claim that a Protestant distinctive (e.g. sola fide) isn't mentioned in the church fathers, or (b) the claim that Protestant theology

contradicts the church fathers (e.g. the real presence). (a) is an argument from silence (i.e. absence of evidence), whereas (b) appeals to (alleged) counterevidence.

This argument is generally bolstered by the attendant claim that patristic testimony, especially from the apostolic fathers, is presumptively apostolic. The apostolic fathers reputedly knew the apostles. Hence, they are transmitting apostolic doctrine.

There are several steps to this argument. Key assumptions. For instance, how many of the apostolic fathers actually knew the apostles? If so, which apostles did they know? How old were the apostolic fathers when they allegedly heard the apostles? How often did they hear them?

In addition, the appeal to patristic attestation is double-edged. Newman introduced the theory of development to account for innovations in Catholic dogma.

But let's address the argument head-on. In Jn 21:23 we have an agraphon: an oral tradition of something Jesus said.

We can also narrow down the source to one of the seven disciples present when Jesus spoke. This was then handed down by word-of-mouth.

[BTW, this is a mark of authenticity. If John's Gospel was fictitious, why would the narrator invent 7 disciples for this post-Easter scene, rather than the 11 remaining disciples (prescinding Judas)? This is the sort of incidental detail that we'd expect from the narrator if he were an eyewitness, reporting what he saw.]

Yet what Jesus originally said quickly became garbled in transmission. It became a false rumor about the Parousia.

That doesn't necessarily mean one of the seven disciples misreported what Jesus said. Rather, that what he reported was misinterpreted.

John therefore adds this editorial postscript to correct that distortion. John quotes Jesus, then carefully parses his statement.

But if we didn't have that canonical corrective, if we were at the mercy of oral tradition, then the rumor would assume the status of venerable apostolic tradition. An erroneous tradition.

And not a mistake about some side issue, but something as fundamental as the return of Christ.

This doesn't mean testimonial evidence is inherently suspect. We generally remember events better than words. And we generally remember the gist of what was said better than the verbatim wording.

The fourth Gospel itself doesn't rely on the vicissitudes of unaided memory. Inspiration is necessary to refresh fading memories (Jn 14:26).

Extra-ecclesiastical tiebreaker

i) A stock objection to the Protestant faith is the proliferation of denominations. Sometimes this involves the specific allegation that sola Scriptura is self-refuting. We need something outside Scripture itself to determine the boundaries of Scripture. I've addressed that objection on more than one occasion. For instance:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/01/is-sola-scriptura-self-refuting.html>

ii) Mind you, that objection overlooks the intertextuality of Scripture. The case for the canon of Scripture isn't confined to external evidence.

iii) But let's move to a new point: if the multiplicity of denominations is a problem for the Protestant faith (which I don't concede), it's no less a problem for Catholicism.

To begin with, a multiplicity of denominations is only essentially problematic on the assumption that there is one true church to which all Christians ought to belong. But of course that assumption begs the question in favor of Catholicism. If, however, there is no one true church, then there's nothing intrinsically wrong with having more than one Christian denomination (or independent church). So the Catholic objection only has traction on the assumption that the church of Rome is the one true church. But that's the very issue in dispute!

After all, the NT itself can speak of the church in both singular and plural terms. One church and many churches.

iv) In addition, even assuming there's one true church, the church alone can't determine what's the one true church, for this involves a comparison between rival claimants to that distinction. The one true church can't be the standard of comparison for determining which candidate qualifies, because you first need to determine which candidate is the one true church before it could be the benchmark. In a contest between ecclesiastical competitors, you will need an extra-ecclesiastical criterion. An aspirant can't very well be the referee.

Ironically, when Catholics object to sola Scriptura, it's easy to contrast a parallel concerning the one true church. When there are two or more contestants for that honor, you need an extra-ecclesiastical tiebreaker. Something over and above the church to point to us to the rightful claimant.

Even if there were one true church, you don't have access to that criterion before you establish which claimant is, in fact, the one true church. At best, that's something you can only adduce after the fact, and not in advance.

Is sola scriptura in scripture?

Opponents of sola scriptura seem to think that if it were true, Protestants ought to be able to point to a verse which spells out sola scriptura. But that's a very crude understanding of how the Bible teaches something. The Bible contains implicit as well as explicit teaching.

For instance, even in the OT there was the fundamental dichotomy between true and false prophets. Those who spoke truly for God and those who spoke falsely for God. Well, that's an incipient sola scriptura principle. It just hadn't been written down at that stage.

In Protestant theology, Scripture is to true prophecy as an infallible church is to false prophecy.

Feser on "the Church."

I'll comment on some of this:

<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2015/07/fulford-on-sola-scriptura-part-i.html>

The Turretin-Fulford argument has the same problem. At best it would show that certain specific writings (such as those associated with Moses and the apostles) are divinely inspired. It would not tell us whether or not other books are scriptural. And, crucially, it certainly would not show that scripture itself tells us which books are scriptural.

It's unclear what Feser is trying to say. Does he think Scripture doesn't contain self-referential statements about its contents and inspiration?

Now, sola scriptura tells us that scripture alone suffices to tell us what we need to know in matters of faith and morals. Well, the question of whether a certain

book is scriptural is itself certainly a matter of faith and morals.

That's just a semantic ploy.

But the Turretin-Fulford argument, in making use of historical evidence, criteria for evaluating such evidence, general logical principles, etc. -- evidence, criteria, and principles which cannot themselves be found in scripture - in order to settle this matter, thereby violates sola scriptura in the very act of defending it. For it uses extra-scriptural information and principles in order to settle a matter of faith and morals. In other words, it does precisely what the Jesuit point (a) cited by Feyerabend says a defender of sola scriptura implicitly has to do. So how exactly does the Turretin-Fulford argument constitute even a prima facie answer to point (a), or show that (a) is aimed at a "caricature"?

Feser fails to explain how those criteria cannot themselves be found in scripture. He merely asserts that to be the case.

Notice that I am not denying that the specific writings the Turretin-Fulford argument makes reference to are divinely inspired. I think they are divinely inspired. But I think that in arguing for their divine inspiration, it is a mistake to start with scripture itself. Rather, what comes first in the order of apologetics is an argument for the necessity of an infallible and authoritative institutional Church. We know that such-and-such purportedly scriptural writings are in fact infallible and authoritative only if we first know that there is an infallible and authoritative institutional Church, and that this Church has herself judged those writings to be infallible and authoritative. As St. Augustine wrote, "I would not believe the Gospel unless the authority of the Catholic Church moved me."

i) How does one establish "necessity of an infallible and authoritative institutional Church" apart from the testimony of Scripture? He doesn't say.

ii) Moreover, that just pushes the same issue back a step. If you can't start with scripture, how can you start with "the Church"? How do we "know that there is an infallible and authoritative institutional Church"?

Feser redux

Ed Feser attempted to mount a response to Andrew Fulford's rejoinder:

<http://edwardfeser.blogspot.co.nz/2015/07/fulford-on-sola-scriptura-part-ii.html>

Texts are made up of linguistic symbols, and linguistic symbols are human artifacts. That the shapes you see on your computer screen as you read this count as linguistic symbols at all is a result of the conventions of English usage. That they convey the specific meaning they do in this blog post is a result of those conventions together with my intentions in writing the blog post. Apart from those conventions and intentions, the shapes would be meaningless, mere patterns of light on a screen or (if you printed this post out) patterns of ink on paper. The linguistic symbols that make up scripture are, of course, like that too. They bear the meanings they do because of linguistic

convention together with the intentions of the authors.

They aren't claiming that without an authoritative institutional Church, scripture would be as unintelligible as (say) Esperanto is to most people.

i) True, but counterproductive to Feser's larger point. The linguistic community in which the Bible was produced, and to whom the Bible was addressed, isn't the 21C Roman Magisterium.

Feser is doing a bait-n-switch. He swaps out the original linguistic community, which was the actual frame of reference, and swaps in the Magisterium, which was not the frame of reference for the Biblical text.

ii) In addition, contemporary Catholic Bible scholars have the same hermeneutical toolkit as their Protestant counterparts.

Now, does scripture raise exegetical issues which appeal to scripture by itself cannot settle? The existence of myriad Protestant denominations and sects which agree on sola scriptura but nevertheless somehow disagree deeply on many matters of biblical

interpretation is, I submit, pretty good evidence that it does.

Actually, no. That can be due to emotional or sociological commitments.

To see what is wrong with this response, consider the theological controversies that have arisen over the centuries concerning the Trinity, the Incarnation, justification, transubstantiation, contraception, divorce and remarriage, Sunday observance, infant baptism, slavery, pacifism, the consistency of scripture with scientific claims, sola scriptura itself, and a host of other issues. Now, either scripture alone can settle these controversies or it cannot. If Fulford says that it cannot, then he will thereby make of sola scriptura a vacuous doctrine, since if it cannot answer such questions then it cannot tell us whether it is Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic Christians, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans, Mennonites, Seventh Day

Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Unitarian Universalists, or some other group entirely who has got Christianity right.

Presumably he would not say this, though. Presumably he would say that scripture alone can settle such issues, and certainly most sola scriptura proponents have thought so, since they tend to regard the holding of certain specific positions on at least many of these issues as a requirement of Christian orthodoxy. But in that case Fulford will be saying something false, since scripture alone manifestly cannot settle these issues, for opposite positions on all of them have been defended on scriptural grounds.

i) That's equivocal. By "settle," does he mean ascertain the right answer or does he mean secure consensus? Those are two very different principles. The Roman Magisterium fails to secure consensus even within its own communion.

ii) It's possible to raise questions that Scripture doesn't answer. That may simply mean the answers are not that important.

iii) He bunches these together as though an evangelical must say that Scripture either settles all these theological controversies or none of them. But there's no reason to treat them all alike.

iv) In addition, we've see how the church of Rome "settles" controversies. Take insider accounts of Vatican II by Hans Hans Küng and Aloys Grillmeier. It's the kind of horse-trading you see in the legislative process. You give each faction (modernist, traditionalist) enough of what it wants to get the votes and paper over the differences for a show of public solidarity. Church politics.

Moreover, what even most Protestants regard as the orthodox view on some of these issues was hammered out on grounds that are philosophical, and not merely scriptural. For instance, it is not merely scripture, but scripture together with considerations about the nature of substance, persons, etc. that leads to the doctrine of the Trinity.

That's an appeal to reason rather than religious authority. That's counterproductive to Feser's argument for the Roman Magisterium.

Or consider disputes about how to reconcile scripture with the claims of science. Should we read Genesis in a way that requires us to conclude that the universe is only a few thousand years old? Or can it legitimately be read in a way consistent with the universe being billions of years old? Does scripture teach that the earth does not move, so that it conflicts with a heliocentric view of the solar system? Or should the relevant passages be read another way? Should we regard Adam as having been made directly from the dust of the ground, or is there wiggle room here to regard Adam's body as having been made from it indirectly, God having used as raw material a pre-human ancestor whose own ancestors derived remotely from the dust of the ground? If Fulford were to say that scripture alone can settle these issues, he would be saying something manifestly false, since there is no passage of scripture that tells us which of the competing ways of reading

the passages in question here is the correct one.

You mean, the way the church fathers used to teach the world was only about 6000 years old? You mean how the papacy opposed Galileo? You mean, how anti-modernist popes opposed human evolution?

I imagine he would not say that, though. I imagine he would say instead that we have to look outside scripture itself in order to settle these matters.

But that's an appeal to science, not the Roman Magisterium.

But if it is consistent with sola scriptura to say that the general reliability of scripture, and general principles for interpreting scripture -- matters which in turn affect everything scripture teaches -- can legitimately come from outside scripture, then sola scriptura once again seems vacuous.

i) He hasn't shown how the general reliability of scripture or general principles for interpreting scripture comes from outside scripture.

ii) Moreover, appealing to natural revelation to supplement special revelation is very different from appealing to the Roman Magisterium.

What is to the point is that there is, nevertheless, necessarily going to be a degree of indeterminacy in the meaning of any text, considered just by itself, even given knowledge of linguistic conventions, historical context, etc. This is in the very nature of texts.

The point is that the text cannot by itself rule out all alternative interpretations. Now, where scripture is concerned, both the Catholic and Protestant sides in the dispute over sola scriptura agree that it has a divine author, who is of course not dead. But both sides also agree that this divine author works through human instruments. What they disagree about is whether these human instruments are all dead. The sola

scriptura position is, in effect, that they are all dead. For it holds that God reveals what we need to know for salvation via scripture alone, and the human authors of scripture are all dead. The Catholic position, by contrast, is that some of the human instruments in question are dead, but some are not. For it holds that God reveals what we need to know for salvation in part via scripture but also in part via an ongoing institutional Church which has divine guidance in interpreting scripture. But precisely because these are literal, living persons, you can literally ask them for further clarification if need be. You can't literally ask a text or a computer anything.

Rather, the Catholic position is that it can't all be just texts in the first place. Rather, we have to be able to get outside of texts, to persons who have the authority to tell us what the texts mean.

Problem is, the very purpose of a text is to serve as a surrogate for the living voice of the author. Because the author can't be in every place or every time, the function of the text is to take his place. To speak on his behalf.

The very thing Feser faults a text for is the very reason it exists in the first place! The apostle writes 1 John because he can't be there in person. But the church is supposed to treat that epistle as if it was John himself. As if it was John in the flesh. And it's supposed to make sense without him offering a running commentary.

Imagine the heretics whom the apostle condemns in 1 John borrowing a page from Feser: "Due to the indeterminacy of meaning, we can't rule out an interpretation that's consistent with Docetism! Unless John makes himself physically available, unless he presents himself to question in person, we can disregard his letter. His letter doesn't 'settle' anything, even though it was written with that express purpose. We must go outside the text of 1 John to interrogate the author."

A little lost

1. I've seen Protestant apologists and theologians struggle with sola scriptura. Is that a damaging admission? No. For one thing, I see Catholic apologists and theologians struggle with their own position. Both sides have struggles.

2. Suppose someone raises an objection to your position, and you don't have a good answer. That could mean one of two things.

i) Your position is wrong

ii) The question is wrong

There are no good answers to bad questions. Sometimes the question is the problem. Take loaded questions that have dubious assumptions.

3. It's quite possible not to have the right answer, but sense that someone else has the wrong answer. Many Protestants look at Roman Catholicism and think, "Whatever the answer is, that's not it!"

This parallels the history of science. There's a process of elimination. Take a brilliant young scientific maverick. He thinks the standard paradigm is wrong. He doesn't know what the right answer is—yet. But he can recognize a wrong answer even though he doesn't have the right answer. And he has to rule out bad explanations as a preliminary step to make progress in finding the right explanation.

Likewise, even if a Protestant didn't have a good answer to objections, that doesn't mean he can't spot a wrong answer.

4. The stock objection to sola scriptura is that it fails to settle theological controversies. Scripture isn't self-interpreting. Without a living interpreter, Christians disagree about what it means. Scripture alone fails to secure doctrinal consensus.

However, we can flip that around. If Scripture alone fails to secure doctrinal consensus, then that's not the function of Scripture. That doesn't mean sola Scriptura is false. Rather, that means Catholics have misidentified the purpose of Scripture.

5. Catholics approach the question from an a priori standpoint. They have an expectation about God's intentions for "the Church". God will intervene to protect "the Church" from error.

Ironically, this parallels the argument from evil, which has the same a priori structure. If there's an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God, he'd intervene to prevent evil, but since there's evil, God does not exist.

The argument operates from an expectation about what God would do or should do. Since that expectation is disappointed by experience, it follows that God doesn't exist.

But we can turn that around. If God doesn't intervene to prevent certain kinds of evil, then that doesn't falsify God's existence—rather, that falsifies an armchair expectation about what God would or should do.

Suppose you use a spoon to cut a steak. You complain about how ill-designed the spoon is. Surely there's a more efficient way to cut a steak. No doubt.

Does the spoon suffer from a design defect because it doesn't work as well as a steak knife? The spoon may be ideally designed to do what a spoon is supposed to do. The problem isn't with the tool, but misuse of the tool.

6. Even if you consider the Catholic alternative, does it solve the problem it posed for itself? It's not like Catholicism actually secures consensus. Take "ecumenical" councils like Trent, Vatican I, and Vatican II. The bishops don't think alike when they go into the council, and they don't think alike when they leave the council.

Competing factions are represented at "ecumenical" councils. As a result, compromise is sought to get enough votes for passage. When the vote is taken, there are winners and losers.

The losers aren't persuaded that they were wrong. In public they may submit to the results, but in private they remain unconvinced. In some cases, moreover, because the documents were deliberately ambiguous to forge a winning coalition, the losers can interpret the documents to agree with their own position.

7. Suppose we infer the purpose of Scripture from how it actually functions in the life of Christians. It guides them through life. They locate themselves in Scripture. They find their own story in the story of Scripture. They join the ongoing pilgrimage.

8. But how can it be a guide if Christians disagree? How can it be a map if Christians get lost?

Actually, I think every Christian is a little lost. Some Christians are more lost than others. But I don't mean "lost"

in a damnatory sense.

There are degrees of lostness. Suppose you grow up in a mid-sized city. It's small enough that you know parts of the city very well, but it's large enough that you may lose your bearings if you go into a strange part of town.

Here's the thing: you can get lost in your hometown, but you can't get totally lost. Because you have a good general knowledge of the layout, if you make a wrong turn, you can continue to driving in that direction, or experiment with different routes, until you find a landmark. Then you exclaim, "So that's where I am!"

Or suppose you're a tourist visiting an island like Port Townsend. You don't know your way around. You may lose track of where you are.

But even if you're lost, you're still on the island. There are boundaries to how lost you can get. The island is surrounded by water. That's what makes it an island. The roads only go so far before they circle back or run out at the sea.

Even though you may lose your way, you can only get a little lost. You may be temporarily lost, but you can't be hopelessly lost. For the island limits how lost you can get. The island imposes a physical barrier on your degree of lostness. You may be lost somewhere on the island, but your disorientation is within the confines of the island. You won't turn up as a missing person. The authorities won't discover your body a month later.

Or suppose your home sits on 5-10 acres of land with meadows and woods, hills and dales. A fenced-in property. You have a 4-year-old son. He wanders off to explore the

property. He becomes hopelessly confused. Is he lost? He is lost and not lost. He's lost in the sense that he can't find his way out. But he's not lost in the sense that he can't be found. If he doesn't come back, a parent or older sibling walks around the property until they find him. There are only so many places to look. It was safe to let him out of their sight because he can only go so far. How lost can he get? He was never truly lost.

To take a final illustration, suppose you get lost on a passenger ship. You make a wrong turn inside the ship. So many nooks and crannies and hallways leading to dead-ends.

But even if you couldn't find your way back, you are going wherever the ship is headed. The fact that you lost your way on the passenger ship doesn't affect your destination. You are lost, but the ship is not. The ship will ferry you to your destination even though you are lost onboard.

9. Sola scriptura doesn't mean we're saved by Scripture alone. In addition to Scripture, we're saved by God's grace and providence.

And that may be why God doesn't intervene to prevent Christian disagreement. We're not saved by our own cleverness. We're not saved by having 20/20 theological insight.

10. I'm not saying Bible readers can't be lost in a damnatory sense. But the good shepherd protects his sheep. To be lost in God's pasture, like the "lost" child in the fenced-in property of his parents, delimits how far you can stray.

Runaway plane

For those who find Catholicism appealing, a major source of appeal is the notion of a living oracle. It's a nice idea. No doubt most Bible commentators wish they could interview the Bible writer they strive to interpret.

There are some familiar challenges for Protestants. A few books of the canon are less securely attested than others. The text of the NT is very secure. The text of some OT books less so—although that's more problematic if you're an Orthodox Jew.

The OT contains some passages that make Christian readers queasy. Mind you, we could say the same thing about what happens in the world around us. And it's not as if atheism is in a position to moralize.

But despite the difficulties of the Protestant faith, which are easy to exaggerate, the Bible doesn't change. There are no surprises. It is what it is. We know exactly what we signed up for.

By contrast, Catholicism is a runaway plane. The pilot is locked in the cockpit, behind an impenetrable door. The passengers are trapped. They must go wherever the pilot takes them. Francis is like a pilot tripping out on acid.

Just in the last few weeks, there's the ever-enveloping Cardinal McCarrick scandal. Like vampires, queer bishops propagate their own.

You have the death penalty bombshell dropped by Francis. And now there's the grand jury report in Pennsylvania:

<https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/the-pa-catholic-sex-abuse-horror/>

Extrapolate from that to other states and other countries, then just imagine the scale of the contagion.

That's one of the problems with a living oracle. It's destination unknown, and you're along for the ride whether you like it or not. Can't open the door and walk away at 40,000 altitude.

Over at Called to Communion, they live under a glass dome. A climate-controlled utopia with fawns and flowers, songbirds and butterflies.

Unconditional submission

I'm going to respond to some remarks a commenter made at Beggars All:

Cletus Van Damme said...

You've moved the goalposts. guy's point is not that all catholics actually submit or never dissent, but that RCism, by the nature of its claims, allows for an actual change after submission - there is no such change allowed by Protestantism by nature of its claims. That's Devin's point which James and Svendsen are missing - everything remains under "private judgment" in Protestantism and perpetually so - because of the very nature of its claims. NT believers had to use private judgment in submitting to Christ/Apostles authority claims - that did not make those claims superfluous or meaningless (let alone worthy of rejection/indifference as Protestantism does in rejecting any body claiming divine authority/infallibility).

i) Private judgment is perpetual in Catholicism. The difference is that Catholics transfer private judgment from the laity to popes and bishops. Instead of laymen exercising private judgment, they submit to the private judgment of popes and bishops. But make no mistake: it's private judgment through and through.

ii) The difference is that Catholics arbitrarily relinquish the private judgment of the laity. It's an exercise in wishful thinking. Make-believe. They follow their private judgment to up a certain point, then suddenly act as if the private judgment of their religious superiors is unerring.

Is it really so difficult to see that a revealed religion demands, from its very nature, a place for private judgment and a place for authority?

Protestant theology has that. The place for authority is occupied by God's written revelation.

A place for private judgment, in determining that the revelation itself comes from God, in discovering the Medium through which that revelation comes to us, and the rule of faith by which we are enabled to determine what

is, and what is not, revealed. A place for authority to step in, when these preliminary investigations are over, and say "Now, be careful, for you are out of your depth here....these and a hundred other questions are questions which your human reason cannot investigate for itself, and upon which it can pronounce no sentence, since it moves in the natural not in the supernatural order. At this point, then, you must begin to believe by hearsay; from this point onwards you must ask, not to be convinced, but to be taught." Is it really so illogical in us, to fix the point at which our private judgment is no longer of any service?"

That's a familiar paradigm. We see that dynamic in cults. You submit to the wisdom of the cult leader. You submit your decisions to him. He tells you how many wives you may have, how many kids you may have. If he orders you to assassinate his rival, you carry out his command without question. Nothing is more dangerous than unconditional submission to the judgment of another sinful, fallible man.

No, the problem is such teachers and teaching are always subject to error (where error is defined as conflicting with my current provisional interpretation of Scripture) - hence semper reformanda and the ever-conditional authority of confessions and the like.

That's why everything remains subject to private judgment as I said above - there's no actual "submission" to such teachers (how can there be, given the nature of Protestant claims in the first place and rejection of the types of claims RCism and other bodies make).

This is where Catholics pretend that merely probable evidence enjoys the same warrant as certainty. Even though their private judgment in trusting Rome in the first place is admittedly uncertain, once they arrive at that uncertain conclusion, they posit certainty for the "divine teaching office" of the magisterium. But the actual state of the evidence, by their own admission, falls well short of warranting that confidence.

(And, of course, Protestants deny that there's even probable evidence for the claims of Rome. Rather, there's impressive evidence that the claims of Rome are false.)

This might carry more weight if Scripture predated the church.

It did. It's called the Old Testament.

But the church was operating for decades before Scripture was complete - the identification of the canon was based in part on the life of the church.

We could turn that around. Scripture was complete long before the church was complete. Indeed, the church of Rome is still a work in progress. Periodically redefining or reinventing itself.

Except the identification of the extent/scope of Scripture is not guaranteed to be free of corruption by your own principles.

i) Even if that were the case, so what? We have to accept the situation God has given us rather than invent a fictional ideal more to our liking.

ii) And if God intends to secure the scope of the canon for his people, he can ensure that result.

As said above, Scripture came out of the church which was operating with their successors before Scripture was completed. Therefore, they left behind both, not just one.

Scripture came out of individual Bible writers.

Now this is interesting. James [Swan] keeps on asserting Devin is assuming what he needs to prove, and yet what proof do we have that the model/precedent set by the Jerusalem council was a one-off thing that would no longer be followed once the final word of Scripture was penned? Granting sola scriptura, I would think that would have to be pretty explicitly stated in Scripture to be consistent.

Well, one reason it's a "one-off thing" is that it included apostles and a stepbrother of Jesus. But that's unrepeatable.

Similarly, you and James seem to agree apostolic preaching/practice of the faith preceded inscripturation. So at a minimum it seems Tradition and inscripturation were operating in parallel until the last sentence of the last book was written correct? So why assume that pattern and the rule of faith suddenly changed and shifted in essence in terms of transmission and operation when the last inspired word was penned - would it not be more reasonable to assume the pattern continued by default (especially when the church was already operating for decades) unless there was strong evidence to the contrary?

It's equivocal to equate apostolic preaching with "tradition." "Tradition" is something that's handed down from generation to generation. That's hardly equivalent to temporary oral communication.

And given your rule of faith, such evidence would have to exist in the

writings/Scripture themselves correct?

Sola scriptura doesn't exclude extrabiblical supporting evidence.

But if your rule of faith was not operating during inscripturation (as James [Swan] notes), I fail to see how that can even be possible, let alone probable since any appeal to support SS would violate the original meaning/intent of the words.

What words is he even referring to?

Because you only agree with those councils solely because they happen to agree with your interpretation of Scripture.

What's wrong with that?

You are telling me that a rule of faith that has infallible preaching/practice (i.e. Tradition) alongside infallible Scripture is not contradictory to Sola Scriptura. That would mean there are 2 infallible authorities, not one, which is contradictory to SS.

i) That confuses a mode of communication with the content of communication.

ii) Moreover, apostolic preaching isn't "tradition" (see above).

Suppose all Protestants thought alike?

In my experience, the most common Catholic objection to the Protestant faith is Protestant pluralism. That may also be the most common reason given by evangelical converts to Rome.

Try a thought-experiment: suppose all Protestants believed the same thing. Let's say all Protestants were Reformed Baptists. I'll pick that tradition out of the hat because it presents a dramatic contrast to Roman Catholicism.

If (ex hypothesi) all Protestants were Reformed Baptists, then the Catholic objection based on Protestant pluralism would vanish. But would that really make a dent in Catholic objections to the Protestant faith? If their leading objection was taken off the table, would that significantly diminish Catholic opposition to the Protestant faith? Or would they simply retrench and say that even though all Protestants believe the *same* thing, they believe the *wrong* thing? But in that event, how sincere, how important, is that objection to Protestant pluralism?

To take a comparison, consider a typical debate with a village atheist. They lead with a particular reason for rejecting Christianity. If you shoot down their stated reason, it doesn't faze them at all. They just reach into the bag for another reason. You can go down the list, and it makes no difference.

When Catholics object to the Protestant faith on the grounds of many competing denominations, is that their real reason, or is that a Catholic trope which they unthinkingly repeat, because it's a stereotypical objection to the Protestant faith?

Let this be recorded

Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord (Ps 102:18).

This verse lays down a fundamental principle. As one scholar notes:

That God saved his people from exile needs to be written down to ensure that future generations will know of his saving acts and proclaim his name.

Let...be written is to ensure its accuracy and permanence. This is for the benefit of the following generation. B. Waltke et al., The Psalms as Christian Lament (Eerdmans 2014), 232.

That's a sola Scriptura principle. To an ensure the accurate transmission God's words and deeds for the benefit of posterity, there needs to be a written record.

i) We remember events better than words. We remember the gist of what somebody said.

ii) Oral tradition is an inefficient means of mass communication. Word-of-mouth is provincial. Writing is a more efficient means of disseminating information in space and time.

iii) In oral tradition, moreover, you keep adding links to the chain of custody. Every time it's repeated (or paraphrased), that's one more step removed from the source.

As another scholar notes:

Ezra-Nehemiah are a fulfillment of this declaration; they put into writing the story of the city's restoration. J. Goldingay, Psalms: 90-150 (Baker 2008), 157.

To verify prophetic fulfillment, it's useful to have a written record of the oracle in advance of the fact. That establishes the priority of the oracle, as well as the wording. And that's something which posterity can consult after the fact.

Lay Catholic apologists are fond of quoting 2 Thes 2:15 to prooftext their appeal to oral tradition. But that's anachronistic.

If I were a mid-1C Christian in a church which Paul planted, if I heard him preach, then I'd hold fast to what he taught me in person. That's very different from what Catholicism means by oral tradition.

Where are the Protestants?

One major objection to the Protestant faith goes like this: "Where are the Protestants in early church history?" Catholic apologists complain that they can't find any Protestants in early church history. That's also one reason why some evangelicals convert to Catholicism.

The short answer is that you find them in the 1C. You find the Protestants in NT church history.

A problem with the Catholic objection is that it cuts both ways. Unitarians ask where are post-Nicene Christians in the ante-Nicene church?

Likewise, Jews ask, where are Christians in the Tanakh? Most Jews reject Christianity because they don't see Christianity in the OT.

By the same token, take the Jewish objection that if Jesus is the messiah, why did his own people disown him? And that question is tackled in John, Acts, and Romans.

So there's an ironic parallel between the Catholic objection to the Protestant faith and the Jewish objection to the Christian faith. The argument is structurally identical, based on historical discontinuity.

Although there's a sprinkling of messianic Jews in church history, the revival of messianic Judaism is a 20C phenomenon. In that respect it's a "novelty" in the way the Protestant Reformation is a novelty. Although there are some precursors to Protestant theology in pre-Reformation church history, the movement as a whole arose in the 16C. But if that discredits the Protestant faith, then the recent

emergence of messianic Jews discredits messianic Judaism. But from a Christian perspective, or even a Catholic perspective, that argument either proves too little or too much.

In the NT era, you find both Protestants and messianic Jews. But both largely disappear until they resurface centuries later. And it's interrelated. The separation of church and synagogue led to gentile interpretations and traditions that are alien to the Jewish context of the Bible. The Protestant faith began to recover a more authentically Jewish reading of the Bible, and modern Catholic Bible scholars follow suit, but official Catholic theology locked in a gentile perspective that decontextualized the Bible and sometimes replaced that with an extraneous theological paradigm. And it's not coincidental that modern messianic Jews typically have an evangelical orientation.

The mirage of 30,000 denominations

A stock objection to the Protestant faith is "30,000 denominations". That's a figure that Catholic apologists pull out of thin air. I've discussed this before, as have others. But I'd like to revisit the issue.

1. To begin with, doing a headcount of denominations is a dumb way to analyze the issue. Let's compile a theological list, in no particular order:

i) Predestinarian theism or freewill theism

ii) Is the Bible fallible or infallible?

iii) Are OT narratives historical or fictional? Are the Gospels historical or fictional?

iv) Is God inside space and time or outside space and time?

v) Does God know the future?

vi) Is everyone saved?

vii) Annihilation or everlasting misery?

viii) Is lying always wrong?

ix) Is vicarious atonement/penal substitution true?

x) Is regeneration causally prior to faith?

xi) Is justification forensic or transformative?

xii) Can a Christian lose his salvation?

- xiii)** Is baptismal regeneration true or false?
- xiv)** Is the real presence true or false?
- xv)** Is there an intermediate state?
- xvi)** Amillennialism, premillennialism, or postmillennialism
- xvii)** Did Christ die to atone for everyone or just the elect?
- xviii)** Do miracles happen?
- xix)** Are there permissible grounds for divorce and remarriage?
- xx)** Is baptism for infants or believers?
- xxi)** Can women be pastors?
- xxii)** Cessationism or continuationism
- xxiii)** The fate of those who never heard the Gospel
- xxiv)** Were Adam and Eve real people?
- xxv)** Is Tobit apocryphal?

I'm up to 25 disputed issues. That's just a sample. The list could be extended. However, it can't be reasonably extended to 30,000 disputed issues. Or even a fraction of that.

2. Moreover, the list is somewhat misleading. There are more general or more specific versions of the same issue. If you think Genesis is history, then the presumption is that

Adam and Eve are historical figures. Although you could discuss that issue separately, the genre of Genesis selects for the answer as well.

Likewise, only freewill theists believe that born-again Christians can lose their salvation. By the same token, only (some) freewill theists deny that God knows the future. So some of these issues are interrelated. Which side you come down on regarding one issue logically predetermines which side you come down on another.

3. What generates a large number of possible theological movements or traditions is not the number of the individual factors, but how these might be combined. There are many more possible combinations than the individual factors that comprise any particular package. It's the size of possible combinations that's great, and not the number of constituent factors.

So there's a difference between totaling the combinations and totality the constituent factors. The way that Catholic apologists quantify Protestant denominations is misleading and simpleminded.

It's like two dice with six faces. Just two dice with numbered faces generate a larger number of combinations (36). Yet you can factor that into something much simpler and smaller.

It comes down to how you'd answer a list of theological questions. It may not be a long list. But if there are two or more answers to each question, then different answers generate different combinations. Yet it's illusory to think that's something over and above the underlying list. For every combination is reducible to the underlying list.

4. At present, there's a plethora of concurrently running Bible commentary series. If you spend much time reading major Bible commentaries, there's a great deal of overlap. Many Bible verses are self-explanatory. If it's a verse-by-verse commentary, then it will comment on every verse for the sake of completeness, but not because the meaning of this or that verse is in reasonable doubt.

Then you have the disputed passages. But in many or most cases, the commentator will list two or more stereotypical options. Different commentaries on the same book will list the same stereotypical options. It boils down to the leading contenders.

With some exceptions, it's quite possible that we're approaching a limit on our understanding of the Bible. We only have so much new information. There are only so many plausible interpretations. We've got good answers for many verses. For some verses we can't be sure. And that's that.

A new archeological discovery may revise a received interpretation. Or a brilliant scholar may come up with a novel, but plausible interpretation. Yet there will always be some ambiguities in the interpretation of Scripture, so there comes a point where we understand it about as well as we are going to, given the available information, and we have to put what we know into practice.

In my experience, most Catholic apologists don't read commentaries by mainstream Catholic Bible scholars. If they did, they'd discover that there isn't any essential hermeneutical difference between Catholic and Protestant commentators. That's because the Vatican no longer requires Catholic Bible scholars to rubber-stamp traditional interpretations. Freed from the necessity of defending a

predetermined interpretation, they ask the same questions their Protestant counterparts do. Appeal to the same methods and evidence. Primary difference is that mainstream Catholic scholarship is liberal.

5. Speaking of which, for the past 500 years, the Catholic church has been a major frame of reference. However, it's been liberalizing ever since Pius XII. If it becomes just another mainline denomination, and it's already far along that trajectory, then it will cease to be a significant alternative. Catholic distinctives can only be justified by the authority of the magisterium. If, however, it becomes increasingly evident that the church of Rome was never infallible or indefectible, that then will snip the string keeping that particular set of beads together.

How can you read the church fathers if you can't read the Bible?

A stock argument for Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox is that it's arrogant and naive to think you can read the Bible directly. An ancient book like Scripture is so far removed from the modern reader in space and time that we need the church fathers to interpret Scripture for us.

The irony of this claim is that the same objection can be raised, perforce, to the church fathers. That, too, is ancient literature. They too are far removed from us in space and time. Different time, culture, and language. So that argument backfires.

What makes a problem a problem?

A stock objection to the Protestant faith is that sola scriptura is a problem for Protestants because it generates "pervasive interpretive pluralism". There are endless variations on that objection.

Let's take a comparison: there are idealist strands in Buddhism and Hinduism. On that view, the problem of evil is illusory in the sense that moral and natural evil (or what we ordinarily take to be natural evil) only exist in the mind. Which means, moreover, that they only exist in individual minds. Hence, it's possible to make evil disappear through the right kind of psychological conditioning.

It's like dreamers who suffer from chronic nightmares. Nightmares only exist in the mind. Moreover, they only exist in the mind of each dreamer. I don't experience your nightmare. Your nightmare can't hurt me.

So, from their frame of reference, evil isn't a problem for Indian idealism. It's only a problem for physicalists and dualists who lack enlightenment.

Of course, that only works if metaphysical idealism is true. But if, to the contrary, evil exists outside the mind as well as inside the mind, if evil is external to individuals, then evil isn't a problem for dualists and physicalists; rather, it's a problem for everybody. The problem isn't embedded in a particular philosophy but in reality.

By the same token, Catholic apologists and theologians think "pervasive interpretive pluralism" is a problem for the Protestant faith. But like Indian idealism, it's only a problem for our position if there's an alternative. If God instituted a

living teaching office, and that's located in the Catholic church, then "pervasive interpretive pluralism" is a problem for the Protestant faith.

But what if that frame of reference doesn't exist? What if God never instituted a living teaching office? Then the point of contrast is chimerical. Catholicism becomes just one more competing interpretation in the mix of "pervasive interpretive pluralism".

In that event, even if you think "pervasive interpretive pluralism" is still a problem, it's not a problem for Protestants but a problem for everybody. It's not a problem internal to Protestant theology but a problem embedded in reality. So it does nothing to discredit Protestant theology because everyone is in the same boat.

In that regard, Catholic apologists and theologians have it backwards. They shouldn't be starting with the alleged problem of "pervasive interpretive pluralism", because that's only a problem for Protestants provided that there's a living teaching office located in the Catholic church. If, however, that point of contrast is chimerical, then "pervasive interpretive pluralism" is either a problem for everybody or a problem for nobody in particular.

Just like it's backwards to say evil is a problem for dualists but not for Indian idealists. It may not be a problem if metaphysical idealism is true, but there's where the argument must be engaged. Is that assumption correct?

Perspicuity

In this post I'd like to make two related observations. They're not directly related to each other, but they share the same general topic, and it's more efficient to discuss them together than separately.

1. There are some Christians as well as former Christians who have an unwarranted expectation regarding the nature of Biblical communication. They fail to make certain allowances which they automatically make in ordinary human communication. For instance, when Proverbs makes blanket statements (e.g. Prov 22:6), they treat those as absolute promises. Likewise, when the NT makes blanket statements about prayer (Mt 21:22; Mk 11:24; Jn 14:13), they treat those as guarantees.

They have different rules for Scripture. They have the unspoken assumption that if God is talking, then we shouldn't have to make allowance for implicit conditions or qualifications.

In ordinary human communication, we use hyperbole. We generalize. But when it comes to Scripture, they suppose it ought to mean exactly what it says, without the unstated caveats, conventions, or limitations we take for granted in normal human communication.

It's a simple-minded expectation, like a child who complains that his parents broke their promise if some unforeseen contingency arises. They act as though God would be duplicitous if you had to nuance his statements. As a result, professing Christians who operate with that false

expectation suffer a crisis of faith or lose their faith when God "breaks" his promise.

2. I think part of the problem is that you have Christians who read the Bible as if God is speaking directly to them. This segues into my second point. In response to Roman Catholicism, Protestant theologians emphasized the perspicuity of Scripture. Indeed, they may have exaggerated the perspicuity of Scripture. That's understandable, but the case for the Protestant faith doesn't require that.

If God appeared to me and spoke to me personally, the meaning of his statement might well be unequivocally clear to me. That's because God knows how I will understand or misunderstand a statement depending on how exactly that's worded.

Clarity of communication isn't a purely objective feature of speech. It depends on the listener as well as the speaker. What is clear to one person may be unclear to another.

Take opinion polling. The same question may have different connotations to different respondents. Or take an exam in which questions may be open to more than one interpretation. It's possible to overthink some exam questions.

If the communication is individualized, and the communicator is omniscient, then that can forestall possible misunderstanding. But Scripture is a medium of mass communication. It isn't customized for each reader. In that respect, Scripture won't be equally clear to each reader.

However, a Magisterium is not a solution, not a genuine alternative, because the communications of a pope or

ecumenical council will also be mass communication. Will also be a one-to-many communication.

And even if (ex hypothesi), a pope or ecumenical council is infallible, that's not the same as omniscience. An infallible speaker can still be misunderstood, for unless he knows how the individual will construe his statement, his statement is still vulnerable to misinterpretation. So the Magisterium fails to solve the problem it poses for itself.

The perspicuity of Scripture

I'd like to comment on a neglected consideration in debates over the clarity of Scripture. The perspicuity of Scripture is a favorite target of Catholic apologists. If Scripture were all that clear, why so many competing interpretations? Sometimes atheists get in on the game.

Many commentators and theologians operate from the unquestioned assumption that every statement of Scripture is supposed to have a singular meaning. Hence, the goal of exegesis is to ascertain that singular meaning. If it's hard to choose between two well-argued interpretations, then the aim of exegesis is frustrated.

On this view, if you have two well-matched interpretations, then Scripture was either unclear, or it may have been clear to the original audience, but there's a missing piece of information which modern readers lack.

Now, in many cases, I'm sure Bible writers only intended a singular meaning. But I think it's dubious to make that a general or universal operating principle. My point is not to replace one presumption with the opposite presumption.

In some cases, or perhaps in many cases, we may have studied ambiguity. By that I mean, a Bible writer may deliberately make a statement that can be taken in two different ways. If you think about it, that's an efficient mode of communication. Rather than having to make two different statements to convey two different ideas, one statement can convey two different ideas.

Notice I said "different", not "divergent". Like a double entendre. For instance, that's a common feature in John's

Gospel.

Or it may not so much be that they were intentionally ambiguous. Rather, if, in his own mind, a Bible writer thinks both senses are true, there's no overriding reason to word his statement to specify one meaning to the exclusion of another.

But the ambiguity wouldn't be unclear in the sense that a writer failed to express what he really meant. To the contrary, in these cases he meant to leave it somewhat open-textured because both interpretations are true to what he intended to convey. He didn't word his statement to rule out an alternative interpretation so long as that's theologically true.

On this view, to accuse the text of lacking clarity reflects a gratuitously reductionist assumption on the part of the reader. An insistence that the text is supposed to be univalent rather than polyvalent. But in some instances, the reader may be guilty of imposing that assumption on the text, despite the author's intention.

i) I think it's good for commentators to first see if there's one clearly superior interpretation. If, however, they can't narrow it down to that degree, they should be open to the possibility that both interpretation options may be original and equally valid.

ii) That won't work for mutually exclusive interpretations. Both interpretations must be mutually consistent.

iii) Moreover, consistency is an insufficient criterion. There must be evidence in the text and context that the author may well have had that idea in mind.

Are church councils an ultimate criterion?

High churchmen typically reject sola Scriptura. They appeal to church councils to determine orthodoxy and heresy. But here's a problem with that: if they use church councils as their criterion for theological truth, how do they determine which church councils are authoritative? High churchmen don't regard all or even most church councils as authoritative. Indeed, they think some church councils are heretical or illegitimate.

Do church councils determine what's true, or does truth determine which church councils are true? If church councils are your starting-point, how do you decide which ones to start with? If you use church councils as your criterion, how do you decide which ones to trust? Unless you have independent access to the truth, apart from church councils, how do you winnow church councils that teach true doctrine from church councils that teach false doctrine? If you use church councils as your doctrinal criterion, what's your doctrinal criterion to assess church councils? There are competing conciliar claimants. What about Arian church councils?

"Why the Bible is Not the Final Authority!"

I'm commenting on this article because a revert to Catholicism cited this article as partial justification for his return to Rome:

<https://www.theaquilareport.com/bible-not-final-authority/>

i) There's a sense in which it's not the bare text of Scripture but the interpreted Bible that has functional authority for Christians. However, that functional authority is on loan from the source.

"Final authority" is imprecise. The Bible has intrinsic authority while creeds have extrinsic authority insofar as they remain true to Scripture. An interpreted Bible is necessarily derivative, and its authority, if any, depends on the match between the interpretation and the original

ii) In assessing interpretations of Scripture with Scripture itself, we compare different interpretations with the text as well as each other. Does the interpretation have good explanatory power? Does one interpretation have better explanatory power than another? An interpretation isn't supposed to be a filter that covers the text and supplants the text, as if we can't see the text beneath the interpretation. Rather, it's always possible to compare or contrast the interpretation with the text. In that regard, Scripture remains independent of interpretation. It doesn't disappear behind the interpretation. Scripture is still the criterion.

iii) An interpretation of Scripture is only as good as the exegetical argument or evidence provided in support of that interpretation. It's not a coin toss.

iv) Interpreters aren't arbiters of truth. Ball's hermeneutic seems to be reader-response criticism, as if the text means whatever a reader assigns to it. That's a radical and self-refuting position which sabotages his appeal to the Westminster Confession.

v) Exegetes aren't analogous to popes, but to play along with Ball's claim, a thousand Protestant popes are better than one Catholic pope, if it came to that. Far better to have a thousand Protestant popes, some of whom are right, some of whom are wrong, than be stuck with one wrong pope for everyone.

If you have a thousand Protestant popes, then odds are the right interpretation will be hit upon multiple times. If, by contrast, you have one Catholic pope, then his errors are binding on everyone else. He singlehandedly leads billions of adherents astray.

vi) In addition, Catholic popes are far more likely to misinterpret the Bible because popes leverage the interpretive process by invoking their alleged authority, or secondary traditions, rather than using responsible hermeneutical methods.

vii) By appealing to the Westminster Confession, it doesn't occur to Ball that he's simply relocated the issue by substituting an interpreted creed for an interpreted Bible. It's not the bare text of the Westminster Confession that has functional authority, but the interpreted text. The text as interpreted and enforced by the General Assembly (for instance).

viii) Given Ball's hermeneutical relativism, there's no reason for him to prefer the Westminster Confession to the Council of Trent, Vatican II, or the Racovian Catechism.

ix) I often consult Bible commentaries. That's not because I think Scripture is generally incomprehensible apart from commentators, but because it's prudent to double-check my impressions against the impressions of other readers.

Is the Bible the final authority?

Recently I was asked to comment on this:

<https://www.theaquilareport.com/bible-not-final-authority/>

In fact, I already did:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/10/why-bible-is-not-final-authority.html>

But since the same article was once again brought to my attention, I have a few additional observations to make:

i) Ball fails to distinguish between a final interpreter and a final authority. There's a sense in which every reader of the Bible or reader of a Bible commentary is the ultimate interpreter for himself. That's unavoidable. He will find a particular interpretation plausible or implausible, convincing or unconvincing. But there's no reason to recast that in terms of making him "the authority". "Authority" has the connotation of having authority over another or others, not having authority over oneself.

I suppose you could say "I'm my own authority," yet that just means no one else has authority over me in that regard. But collapsing authority into each individual isn't what we normally mean by authority, since that normally requires a distinction between the subject of authority and the object of authority. If we collapse the distinction, then the word "authority" does no work. It adds nothing to the

concept. You could more accurately say "It boils down to what seems true to me".

ii) Or we could reframe the issue by saying that I'm ultimately responsible—which is different from saying that I'm the ultimate authority.

iii) In addition, the fact that every reader is the ultimate interpreter for himself doesn't mean interpretation is necessarily arbitrary. Moreover, it doesn't mean the interpretation overrides the text.

To take a comparison: suppose I live in tornado alley. If a tornado siren goes off, or if I see a news report about a tornado in my neighborhood, I have to interpret the warning, but the tornado remains sublimely independent of my interpretation. If I recklessly disregard the warning, I may pay a terrible price. In a contest between the "authority" of the tornado and the "authority" of the interpreter, guess who's going to be the "final authority"!

Likewise, although there's a sense in which every reader is the final interpreter (for himself), that doesn't make him the standard of comparison—any more than my interpretation of the tornado siren is the standard of comparison. No, the tornado remains the standard of comparison.

Likewise, the meteorologist must interpret information about the tornado, viz. speed, velocity, trajectory. But there's something external to the weather report, and that's the tornado itself. Does the report correspond to the behavior of the tornado? That's the test. The reporter is not the criterion.

iv) At the end of the day, exegesis isn't autonomous. It depends on divine providence. While we might say it's up to the reader which interpretation he find persuasive, that only pushes the question back a step: why does he find that interpretation more persuasive? Sometimes because it's has more explanatory power. Sometimes because there's better evidence for that interpretation.

But in back of that is the will of God for particular individuals as well as church history in general. Every reader is at the mercy of God's benevolence and providence. God protects some readers from more error than others.

Yet that's out of our hands, so that's not something we ought to fret over. What we think is the result of something anterior to ourselves. So our concern should be to make conscientious use of the best resources that God has put at our disposal, which varies from individual to individual.

Catholic hypochondria

In my experience, the most common objection that Catholic apologists (or evangelical converts to Rome) lodge against the Protestant faith is Protestant pluralism. They consider sola scripture to be chaotic: "a blueprint for anarchy".

Various things can be said in reply to this. I've responded in different ways. Here's one more observation: Some people are temperamentally risk-averse. They play it safe. They value stability and predictability. A stereotypical example is maternal protectiveness.

Other people are temperamentally adventurous. Some become explorers. Some become inventors and researchers who pioneer new technology, make advances in science and medicine. Start new companies.

That results in shipwrecks. False leads before a scientist hits on the right solution.

The appeal of sports and games depends on an element of suspense, because the outcome is unpredictable. The risk of losing. The element of surprise.

In epistemology, the risk-averse temperament is exemplified by Clifford's notorious maximum that it's "wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

But as William James pointed out, a risk-averse strategy is risky in a different way, because it carries its own tradeoffs:

One more point, small but important, and our preliminaries are done. There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion,--ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. We must know the truth; and we must avoid error,--these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. Although it may indeed happen that when we believe the truth A, we escape as an incidental consequence from believing the falsehood B, it hardly ever happens that by merely disbelieving B we necessarily believe A. We may in escaping B fall into believing other falsehoods, C or D, just as bad as B; or we may escape B by not believing anything at all, not even A. Believe truth! Shun error!--these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by

coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford, in the instructive passage which I have quoted, exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford.

You can be so fearful of error that that you miss out on the opportunity to correct old errors and discover new truths—or rediscover forgotten truths. There's a price to pay for risk-

averse and risk-taker strategies alike. To play it safe has a hidden cost.

BTW, there's a certain parallel here with the cessationist/continuationist debate. The cessationist position is a risk-averse strategy.

One value of theological controversy is that it forces Christians to reexamine their assumptions, reexamine Scripture more deeply. Take doctrinal debates over Calvinism/Molinism/Arminianism/open theism, premillennialism/amillennialism, paedobaptism/credobaptism, creation/evolution, cessationism/continuationism, hell/annihilationism/universalism, complementarianism/egalitarianism, the New Perspective on Paul.

Take ethical debates over abortion, euthanasia, pacifism, homosexuality, capital punishment, immigration, gun rights. Take apologetic debates over atheism, Catholicism, Mormonism, Islam, Judaism.

Having to defend your position makes you deepen your understanding of your own position as well as the alternatives. In some cases that leads you question a position you thoughtlessly embraced, due to social conditioning, and adopt a better position. The possibility of error carries with it the possibility of correction. The freedom to be wrong includes the freedom to leave error behind, rather than to be stuck in a flawed theological paradigm.

Catholic apologists and converts to Rome are hypochondriacs who don facemasks to screen out theological germs. But what if their risk-averse policy has

locked them into a contaminated environment? They've quarantined themselves in the malarial swamp of Catholicism. The Protestant faith isn't risk-free, but fresh air is the best disinfectant.

30,000 denominations redux

I'd like to revisit a mindless but ever-popular Catholic trope about the Protestant faith. And that's the claim that sola scriptura spawned "30,000" denominations. The figures varies depending on the Catholic apologist. This is related to the Catholic objection that Protestants can't agree on anything.

Here's why I say that's a mindless trope: if you think the Protestant movement is so disunited that it doesn't stand for anything, then why classify all these groups as Protestant? Put another way, if you can't say what the opposing position represents, then you have no target to aim at.

If there's no such thing as a core Protestant theology, then there's nothing to critique. At best, a Catholic apologist could say the basic problem with the Protestant faith is that there is not Protestant faith. That would be catchy, and you could put it in one pithy sentence.

But of course, Catholic apologists offer detailed critiques of Protestant theology. They write whole books on the subject. And Catholic attacks on the Protestant faith bear an uncanny family resemblance.

In practice, a Catholic apologist takes one of two approaches. One line of attack is to critique generic Protestant theology. He attacks typical, representative Protestant doctrines. But that's a roundabout admission that Protestant faith does have a common, identifiable core theology.

The other line of attack is to pick a particular expression of the Protestant movement like Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, or Calvinists. Although these have distinctive positions that distinguish them from one another, they are representative Protestant schools of thought.

So both in principle and practice, Catholic apologists think there are recognizable Protestant doctrines. If they didn't think that, they couldn't write entire books attacking the Protestant faith.

Did the Reformation split the Church?

i) As well all know, the Church was unified until the Protestant Reformers splintered it. Just ask any Catholic apologist.

But what about the pre-Reformation church?

In the full and primitive sense of the word every serious rupture of unity and consequently every heresy is a schism. This article, however, will pass over the long series of heresies and treat only those defections or religious sects to which historians commonly give the specific name of schisms, because most frequently, and at least in the beginning of each such sectarian division, doctrinal error was only an accessory. They are treated in chronological order and the most important only briefly, these being the subjects of special articles in the ENCYCLOPEDIA.

(1) Mention has already been made of the "schisms" of the nascent Church of Corinth, when it was said among its members: "I indeed am of Paul; and I am of Apollo; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ." To them St. Paul's energetic intervention put an end.

(2) According to Hegesippus, the most advanced section of the Judaizers or Ebionites at Jerusalem followed the bishop Thebutis as against St. Simeon, and after the death of St. James, A.D. 63, separated from the Church.

(3) There were numerous local schisms in the third and fourth centuries. At Rome Pope Callistus (217-22) was opposed by a party who took exception to the mildness with which he applied the penitential discipline. Hippolytus placed himself as bishop at the head of these malcontents and the schism was prolonged under the two successors of Callistus, Urban I (222-30) and Pontianus (230-35). There is no doubt that Hippolytus himself returned to the pale of the Church (cf. d'Alès, "La théol. de s. Hippolyte", Paris, 1906, introduction).

(4) In 251 when Cornelius was elected to the See of Rome a minority set up Novatian as an antipope, the pretext again being the pardon which Cornelius promised to those who after apostatizing should repent. Through a spirit of contradiction Novatian went so far as to refuse forgiveness even to the dying and the severity was extended to other categories of grave sins. The Novatians sought to

form a Church of saints. In the East they called themselves katharoi, pure. Largely under the influence of this idea they administered a second baptism to those who deserted Catholicism to join their ranks. The sect developed greatly in the Eastern countries, where it subsisted until about the seventh century, being recruited not only by the defection of Catholics, but also by the accession of Montanists.

(5) During the same period the Church of Carthage was also a prey to intestinal divisions. St. Cyprian upheld in reasonable measure the traditional principles regarding penance and did not accord to the letters of confessors called libelli pacis the importance desired by some. One of the principal adversaries was the priest Donatus Fortunatus became the bishop of the party, but the schism, which was of short duration took the name of the deacon Felicissimus who played an important part in it.

(6) With the dawn of the fourth century Egypt was the scene of the schism of Meletius, Bishop of Lycopolis, in the Thebaid. Its causes are not known with certainty; some ancient authors ascribe it to

rigorist tendencies regarding penance while others say it was occasioned by usurpation of power on the part of Meletius, notably the conferring of ordinations outside his diocese. The Council of Nicæa dealt with this schism, but did not succeed in completely eradicating it; there were still vestiges of it in the fifth century.

(7) Somewhat later the schism of Antioch, originating in the troubles due to Arianism, presents peculiar complications. When the bishop Eustathius, was deposed in 330 a small section of his flock remained faithful to him, but the majority followed the Arians. The first bishop created by them was succeeded (361) by Meletius of Sebaste in Armenia, who by force of circumstances became the leader of a second orthodox party. In fact Meletius did not fundamentally depart from the Faith of Nicæa, and he was soon rejected by the Arians: on the other hand he was not recognized by the Eustathians, who saw in him the choice of the heretics and also took him to task for some merely terminological differences. The schism lasted until about 415. Paulinus (d. 388) and Evagrius (d. 392), Eustathian bishops, were recognized in the West as

the true pastors, while in the East the Meletian bishops were regarded as legitimate.

(8) After the banishment of Pope Liberius in 355, the deacon Felix was chosen to replace him and he had adherents even after the return of the legitimate pope. The schism, quenched for a time by the death of Felix, was revived at the death of Libenius and the rivalry brought about bloody encounters. It was several years after the victory of Damasus before peace was completely restored.

(9) The same period witnessed the schism of the Luciferians. Lucifer, Bishop of Calaris, or Cagliari, was displeased with Athanasius and his friends who at the Synod of Alexandria (362) had pardoned the repentant Semi-Arians. He himself had been blamed by Eusebius of Vercelli because of his haste in ordaining Paulinus, Bishop of the Eustathians, at Antioch. For these two reasons he separated from the communion of the Catholic bishops. For some time the schism won adherents in Sardinia, where it had originated, and in Spain, where Gregory, Bishop of Elvira, was its chief abettor.

(10) But the most important of the fourth-century schisms was that of the Donatists. These sectaries were as noted for their obstinacy and fanaticism as for the efforts and the writings rather uselessly multiplied against them by St. Augustine and St. Optatus of Milevis.

(11) The schism of Acacius belongs to the end of the fifth century. It is connected with the promulgation by the emperor Zeno of the edict known as the Henoticon. Issued with the intention of putting an end to the Christological disputes, this document did not satisfy either Catholics or Monophysites. Pope Felix II excommunicated its two real authors, Peter Mongus, Bishop of Alexandria, and Acacius of Constantinople. A break between the East and the West followed which lasted thirty-five years. At the instance of the general Vitalian, protector of the orthodox, Zeno's successor Anastasius promised satisfaction to the adherents of the Council of Chalcedon and the convocation of a general council, but he showed so little good will in the matter that union was only restored by Justin I in 519. The reconciliation received official sanction in a profession of Faith to which the Greek bishops

subscribed, and which, as it was sent by Pope Hormisdas, is known in history as the Formula of Hormisdas.

(12) In the sixth century the schism of Aquilea was caused by the consent of Pope Vigilius to the condemnation of the Three Chapters (553). The ecclesiastical provinces of Milan and Aquilea refused to accept this condemnation as valid and separated for a time from the Apostolic See. The Lombard invasion of Italy (568) favoured the resistance, but from 570 the Milanese returned by degrees to the communion of Rome; the portion of Aquilea subject to the Byzantines returned in 607, after which date the schism had but a few churches. It died out completely under Sergius I, about the end of the eighth century.

(13) The ninth century brought the schism of Photius, which, though it was transitory, prepared the way by nourishing a spirit of defiance towards Rome for the final defection of Constantinople.

(14) This took place less than two centuries later under Michael Cerularius who at one stroke (1053) closed all the churches of the Latins at

Constantinople and confiscated their convents. The deplorable Greek schism (see GREEK CHURCH), which still subsists, and is itself divided into several communions, was thus consummated. The two agreements of reunion concluded at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, and at that of Florence in 1439, unfortunately had no lasting results; they could not have had them, because on the part of the Greeks at least they were inspired by interested motives.

(15) The schism of Anacletus in the twelfth century, like that of Felix V in the fifteenth, was due to the existence of an antipope side by side with the legitimate pontiff. At the death of Honorius II (1130) Innocent II had been regularly elected, but a numerous and powerful faction set up in opposition to him Cardinal Peter of the Pierleoni family. Innocent was compelled to flee, leaving Rome in the hands of his adversaries. He found refuge in France. St. Bernard ardently defended his cause as did also St. Norbert. Within a year nearly all Europe had declared in his favour, only Scotland, Southern Italy, and Sicily constituting the other party. The emperor Lothaire brought Innocent II back to Rome, but,

supported by Roger of Sicily the antipope retained possession of the Leonine City, where he died in 1138. His successor Victor IV two months after his election, sought and obtained pardon and reconciliation from the legitimate pontiff. The case of Felix V was more simple. Felix V was the name taken by Amadeus of Savoy, elected by the Council of Basle, when it went into open revolt against Eugenius IV, refused to disband and thus incurred excommunication (1439). The antipope was not accepted save in Savoy and Switzerland. He lasted for a short time with the pseudo-council which had created him. Both submitted in 1449 to Nicholas V, who had succeeded Eugenius IV.

(16) The Great Schism of the West is the subject of a special article (WESTERN SCHISM); see also COUNCIL OF CONSTANCE; COUNCIL OF PISA.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13529a.htm>

I'm deliberately quoting from a partisan source. Not just a Catholic source, but the pre-Vatican II edition, which is very polemical. So by Catholic standards, by their own admission, church history has always been marked by severe divisions. This is their own biased version of events.

ii) In addition, what the Protestant Reformed exposed was the artificiality of the prior unity. The papacy forcibly superimposed a veneer of unity, but once the heavy hand of the papacy lost its steely grip, "the Church" split into many factions. Superficial conformity had camouflaged the underlying lack of agreement. That's what happens when force takes the place of persuasion and conviction.

Sola scriptura before Gutenberg

In this post I'm responding to a stock Catholic objection to sola scriptura, to wit: you couldn't have sola scriptura before the printing press (or the completion of the canon). I'm going to discuss the issue from both hypothetical and practical angles. There will be a bit of repetition in this post. For sake of completeness, I've collating various things I said on the subject—a few of which I've posted before—but much of this will also be new.

I. THE CATHOLIC ALTERNATIVE

A basic problem with the Catholic objection is that if it's valid against the Protestant rule of valid, then it's valid against the Catholic rule of faith inasmuch as you can create parallel objections to the Catholic rule of faith, based on the same principle. For instance:

i) Before the invention of the printing press, there were no mass copies of papal encyclicals, conciliar proceedings, Scholastic theologians, or church fathers.

So the Catholic alternative is no more or less dependent on the printing press than the Protestant rule of faith. The church of Rome also disseminates its dogmas in writing.

ii) A basic problem with claiming that sola scriptura couldn't be the rule of faith because the complete canon of Scripture didn't exist in the 1C, or because every Christian didn't own a private copy of the Bible, is that a parallel objection applies to the Catholic alternative.

The papacy, in its present form, didn't exist in the 1C, or early centuries of church history. Indeed, the papacy has undergone continuous internal development.

Consider medieval conciliarism. Consider ultramontaniam.

The relationship between the papacy and the episcopate was still a matter of heated debate during Vatican II. And "collegiality" continues to be debated in post-Vatican II theology.

If you're going to say sola scriptura can't be true because the canon didn't exist or wasn't accessible in the first century or first few centuries of the church, the very same logic applies, perforce, to the Catholic rule of faith.

II. WHAT'S THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLE OF SOLA SCRIPTURA?

i) There's an obvious sense in which you didn't have sola scriptura during the era of public revelation. Protestants grant that. That's not inconsistent with the Protestant rule of faith. We're not living in OT times or NT times.

ii) There's a certain equivocation concerning whether or not sola scriptura was operative in the OT or NT era.

What was always operative was the primacy of divine revelation. Moreover, sola scriptura was operative during the Intertestamental period.

The principle of sola scriptura was always operative inasmuch as the principle of sola scriptura is the primacy of divine revelation. The primatial authority of revelation is constant common denominator.

During the period of public revelation, you had prophets and apostles who spoke (as well as wrote) the word of God. But revelation, in that sense, is now confined to past revelation, committed to writing.

III. LIMITING CASES

Now I'm going to consider some hypothetical limiting cases. This is an argument from the greater to the lesser, as well as an argument from principle. If, in principle, sola scriptura is feasible even under these conditions, then it's feasible under less extreme conditions. For instance:

i) Take a Fahrenheit 451 scenario. Suppose ownership of Bibles was punishable by death. Not only you, but every family member—as a deterrent.

Suppose a Protestant community evades the ban by memorizing the Bible. Different members commit different books of Scripture to memory—before they destroy their copies to avoid detection. As a matter of principle, that community is still governed by sola Scriptura, even though it has no physical copies of Scripture.

The content of a book can be orally transmitted. Many people can memorize the same copy. A one-to-many relation.

Indeed, that's more than hypothetical. You have people like Alec McCowen and Max McLean who do that sort of thing.

That's different from oral history or oral tradition, where it's word-of-mouth all the way. By contrast, this is controlled tradition, because it has a written frame of reference. One

can double-check memory against the exemplar.
The standard exists.

ii) Now let's use an argument from analogy, in response to the objection that until copies of Scripture were readily available to the laity, it's not a workable principle. Let's take a comparison. This will be a limiting case, where I'm arguing from the greater to the lesser.

We don't have the original letters of Paul. By that I mean, we don't have the autographa. What we have are copies. Copies of copies.

The traditional aim of textual criticism is to retroengineer the urtext from our extant copies. By comparing and contrasting Greek MSS, by taking into account the types of mistakes which scribes make when they copy a text, we product a critical edition that approximates the original.

Even though the original no longer exists, the original is still the standard. That's the ideal in reference to which textual criticism proceeds. Because there was an original, that's the standard of comparison. That's the frame of reference in relation to which we retrace the process of transcription to arrive at the original wording. Even though the autographa are nonexistent, they remain the standard which is guiding the textual critic. That's the target.

Now, that's an extreme example. In the case of sola scriptura, Scripture exists. Copies of Scripture were always obtainable for some Jews and Christians. Moreover, Scripture was generally accessible via the public reading of Scripture. You didn't have to read it for yourself to hear it read aloud.

Now, if a nonexistent standard (i.e. the autographa) can still be a functional standard, then in the lesser case of an extant standard (Scripture), sola scriptura can be a functional standard even in situations where availability is limited.

IV. RECITING SCRIPTURE

Now let's shift from the principle of sola scriptura to the actual dissemination of Scripture before the printing press. Individual Jews and Christians didn't need to own private copies of the Bible to know the Bible. That's because a written text can be disseminated orally. Scripture was available to the masses vis the public reading of Scripture.

This could also be communicated by word-of-mouth. For instance, Timothy began learning the Bible at the knee of his Jewish mother and grandmother. Either they read Scripture to him, told him Bible stories, or both.

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient ([Exod 24:7](#)).

when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing ([Deut 31:11](#)).

There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them ([Josh 8:35](#)).

And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law ([Neh 8:3](#)).

Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him...Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ([Mt 12:3,5](#)).

Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female ([Mt 19:4](#)).

Have you never read, “‘Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise’?” ([Mt 21:16](#)).

Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes’? ([Mt 21:42](#)).

Have you not read what was said to you by God ([Mt 22:31](#)).

So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand) ([Mt 24:15](#)).

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read ([Lk 4:16](#)).

After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it” ([Acts 13:15](#)).

For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him ([Acts 13:27](#)).

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues. ([Acts 15:21](#)).

And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea ([Col 4:16](#)).

I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers ([1 Thes 5:27](#)).

I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well ([2 Tim 1:5](#)).

and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings ([2 Tim 3:15](#)).

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture ([1 Tim 4:13](#)).

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and

who keep what is written in it, for the time is near (**Rev 1:3**).

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things, Justin Martyr, First Apology, 67.

V. EARLY CHRISTIAN PUBLICATION AND DISTRIBUTION

Finally, let's consider how Scripture was copied, published, distributed in the early church:

The letters of Paul to his communities, the earliest extant Christian texts, were dictated to scribal associates (presumably Christian), carried to their destinations by a traveling Christian, and read aloud to the congregations. But Paul also envisioned the circulation of some of his letters beyond a single Christian group (cf. Gal 1:2, "to the churches of Galatia," Rom 1:7 "to all God's beloved in Rome" -dispersed among numerous discrete house churches, Rom 16:5,10,11,14,15), and the

author of Colossians, if not Paul, gives instruction for the exchange of Paul's letters between different communities (Col 4:16)...

To take another case, the Apocalypse, addressed to seven churches in western Asia Minor, was almost surely sent in separate copy to each. Even so, the author anticipated its wider copying and dissemination beyond those original recipients, and so warned subsequent copyists to preserve the integrity of the book, neither adding nor subtracting, for fear of religious penalty (Rev 22:18-19). The private Christian copying and circulation that is presumed in these early writings continued to be the means for the publication and dissemination of Christian literature in the second and third centuries.

It can also be seen when Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, had the letters of Ignatius copied and sent to the Christian community in Philippi, and had copies of letters from them and other churches in Asia Minor sent to Syrian Antioch (Phil 13). it is evident too in the scribal colophons of the Martyrdom of Polycarp (22:2-4)...

From another angle, the physical remains of early Christian books show that they were produced and disseminated privately within and between Christian communities. Early Christian texts, especially those of a scriptural sort, were almost always written in codices or leaf books—an informal, economical, and handy format—rather than on rolls, which were the traditional and standard vehicle for all other books. Also distinctive to Christian books was the pervasive use of nomina sacra, divine names written in abbreviated forms, which was clearly an in-house practice of Christian scribes. Further, the preponderance in early Christian papyrus manuscripts of an informal quasi-documentary script rather than a professional bookhand also suggests that Christian writings were privately transcribed with a view to intramural circulation and use.

It deserves notice that some early Christian texts appear to have enjoyed surprisingly rapid and wide circulation. Already by the early decades of the second century Papias of Hierapolis in western Asia Minor was acquainted at least with the Gospels of Mark and Matthew (Eusebius, H.E. 3.39.15-16);

Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna were all acquainted with collections of Paul's letters; and papyrus copies of various early Christian texts were current in Egypt.

The brisk and broad dissemination of Christian books presumes not only a lively interest in texts among Christian communities but also efficient means for their reproduction and distribution... Books were nevertheless important to them virtually from the beginning, for even before Christians began to compose their own texts, books of Jewish scripture played an indispensable role in their worship, teaching, and missionary preaching.

...larger Christian centers must have had some scriptorial capacity...Absent such reliable intra-Christian means for the production of books, the range of texts known and used by Christian communities across the Mediterranean basin by the end of the second century would be without explanation.

Just as the missionary proliferation of text-oriented Christian communities during the second and third centuries provided ample incentive to the

production and copying of Christian books, the close relationships and frequent contacts that were cultivated between those communities provided efficient means for their dissemination. This circumstance hastened and broadened the circulation of early Christian literature, giving it a vitality and reach that seem extraordinary for books moving through private networks. Harry Gamble, "The Book Trade in the Roman Empire," Charles Hill & Michael Kruger, eds. The Early Text of the New Testament (Oxford, 2012), 32-35.

Vetting creeds

Some evangelicals suffer from a superstitious reverence for the so-called ecumenical creeds, as if that's an electrified fence. If you dissent from anything in the so-called ecumenical creeds, you will be electrocuted. Technically, they admit the creeds are fallible, but in practice they act as though that's divine revelation. Yet all creeds need to be means-tested against Scripture.

The so-called ecumenical creeds are simply positions taken by some ancient bishops in some church councils. There's nothing intrinsically sacrosanct about the process or the product.

In his providence, God leads many people to saving faith by raising them in churches that are theologically orthodox in the main. God uses socially conditioning to save the elect. If they were born and bred in a different denomination, their theology might mirror that particular denomination. But there's a certain margin of error. Saving faith doesn't require theological infallibility.

I don't think every Christian has the same obligation to evaluate their hereditary indoctrination. It varies according to an individual's aptitude and opportunities. To whom much is given, much is required (Lk 12:48). Teachers are held to a higher standard (Jas 3:1).

But some Christians do have a duty to sift historical theology. Catholics say that's a "me and my Bible" hermeneutic. But even if that were true, the same could be said for the church fathers. "Me and my Bible" is truer the further back you go in church history. Athanasius, Ambrose,

Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom et al. are constantly making individual judgment calls in their exposition of Scripture. Them and their Bible.

But when someone like me is assessing the "ecumenical creeds," it's not just "me and my Bible". I have many theological consultants. Commentaries. Reference works. Systematic theologies. Exegetical monographs. And so on and so forth.

Could I be wrong? Sure. But the same could be said for a Catholic apologist, church father, or bishop.

Scripture and creedalism

You often hear professing Christians who make ancient statements of faith like the Apostles' creed the benchmark. If something isn't in the Apostles' creed or Nicene creed, then it's secondary and optional.

But God didn't command us to make those creeds the benchmark,. Creeds can function as useful and necessary digests of doctrine, but God commands us to believe his Word (the Bible). That's the primary frame of reference. Creeds are no substitute for faith in Scripture. That's the standard to live by and die by.

Is certainty a bad thing?

David Anders has done a rather strange post:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2012/08/is-certainty-a-bad-thing-certainty-infallibility-and-the-reformed-tradition/>

I'll make a few comments:

i) Anders is presenting a specious choice between certainty and uncertainty. Protestants don't concede that Catholicism offers more than Protestantism. Rome offers less. It's not a choice between Catholic certainty and Protestant uncertainty, for that's not a genuine choice. Rome can't make good on its offer. You might as well say it's a choice between believing in Jesus and believing in the Tooth Fairy. Well, that's not a real choice, is it?

Keep in mind that many cults claim to offer their followers certainty. Indeed, a common theme in both the OT and the NT is the danger of false prophets.

ii) Anders also contradicts himself. On the one hand says:

Why did some Reformed Protestants take the reductionistic path? Scripture does not call for theological reductionism. Paul could exhort the Corinthians "to agree on everything."

But then he turns right around and says:

What the Catholic Church promises, then, is not an answer to every question, but a principled way, established by divine authority, to differentiate dogma from mere opinion, and to do so in a way that allows for certainty in our act of faith.

So his Pauline proof-text notwithstanding, he doesn't think Catholics are required "to agree on everything." Indeed, it's not even possible for Catholics to agree on everything since, by his own admission, Rome has only defined a core of formal dogmas.

So that's the classic bait-n-switch you get from Catholic salesmen. There's the come-on, then there's what they really have in stock.

iii) Notice that having censured Protestants for their (alleged) theological reductionism, his Catholic alternative is reductionistic. Certainty is limited to formal dogmas.

iv) He also erects a false dichotomy between "mere opinion" and "certain in our act of faith." But that interjects a false dichotomy between opinion and knowledge. Yet some opinions count as knowledge. To put it a bit technically, nonaccidental true belief counts as knowledge.

v) Even if our interpretation of Scripture is fallible, Biblical teaching is often redundant. You don't have to interpret every verse correctly to have a correct understanding of a Biblical doctrine.

vi) Even if, for the sake of argument, we said Protestantism can't offer certainty, the same holds true for Catholicism. Remember, we don't concede that Rome has something we don't. Therefore, at most, it would reduce to a choice between competing uncertainties.

vii) Apropos (vi), a probable interpretation is still preferable to an improbable one. I'll take my probable interpretation of Scripture over your improbable interpretation.

viii) The fact that Christians are fallible doesn't create the presumption that Christians are wrong. This overlooks the special providence of God. If it's God's will that his people come to a saving knowledge of the truth, then God is both able and willing to guide them into a saving knowledge of the truth.

The process of divine guidance can operate at a purely subconscious level. God can arrange circumstances so that we will believe whatever he intends us to believe.

ix) We should defer to the level of certainty that God has promised.

x) Luke (Lk 1:3-4) and John (Jn 20:31) contain purpose statements assuring the reader that these gospels contain information sufficient to know who Jesus is and what he did-or will do. And, by parity of argument, that's also the function of Matthew and Luke.

Catholics defiantly refuse to believe in the adequacy of Scripture to accomplish what Scripture explicitly claims for itself.

Flying solo

A friend ask me to comment on some recent posts by Perry Robinson regarding sola scripture and private judgment:

<https://energeticprocession.wordpress.com/2017/05/25/are-you-flying-solo/>

<https://energeticprocession.wordpress.com/2017/09/20/the-wizard-of-straw/>

That is, the argument is not over epistemological issues (how can we know the correct interpretation of scripture?) but rather normative issues (what interpretation of scripture is binding or obligatory?)

Is Perry saying a normative (binding/obligatory) interpretation of Scripture is something over and above a merely correct interpretation of Scripture? If so, why should anyone accept that dichotomy? Why isn't a correct interpretation of Scripture obligatory?

Perry defines the right of private judgment thusly:

Any Christian individual is ultimately obligated to adhere to belief X, if and

only if they judge (determine, assess, etc.) that belief X is scriptural.

I disagree. We are obligated to believe a true interpretation of Scripture, whether or not we perceive it to be true. For instance, Mary Baker Eddy had her own hermeneutical filter based on homespun idealism. But her private judgment was unwarranted because it was dead wrong. We can't eliminate truth, or the relationship between truth and epistemic justification.

On the Protestant thesis of Sola Scriptura by contrast, I form a judgement in such a way that whatever the church determines, it can only obligate or bind me to believe it, if and only if, I agree with that judgement.

It's not the church that obligates belief, but truth. Of course, the church can be an important vehicle when it comes to teaching the truth.

Informally, my argument goes like this. Defenders of Sola Scriptura contend that that position doesn't imply that the conscience of the individual having greater authority than the whole church. That is, it is not the case, they contend, that Sola Scriptura

implies or entails that everyone is their own pope. This is so, they say, because they admit of subordinate or secondary authorities. But on the contrary, on Sola Scriptura by virtue of its essential constituent, the Doctrine of the Right of Private Judgment, none of the secondary authorities are superior to and can bind the conscience of the individual. They are authoritative if and only if that person assents to them, and not, if they don't. Hence ecclesial authorities, regardless of the number are subordinated to the conscience of the individual. This is just to say that the conscience of the individual is normatively superior to the normative judgements of the church. Hence, there is no substantial difference between Sola Scriptura and Solo Scriptura.

Now if the judgments produced by an individual is normatively superior than those produced by the church, relative to that individual, then there is no substantial difference between Sola and Solo Scriptura. This is because any subordinate authorities on Sola Scriptura are in the end, subordinated to the normative judgment of the individual. That means, that the authority of the

church stops at the doorstep of the individual and is only applicable to that individual if the individual agrees to be so bound and not if they don't.

i) I agree with Perry that the attempted distinction between sola scripture and solo scripture is unstable. I said that years ago.

ii) I don't know how Perry defines "the church" in this context. Is he using that a synonym for bishops in the seven ecumenical councils acknowledged by Eastern Orthodox theologians?

iii) A problem with casting the issue in terms of authority is how you ever get started. Suppose Perry uses ecumenical councils as his benchmark. If so, doesn't that just push the question back a step? By what authority does Perry determine which candidates for ecumenical councils are legitimate?

iv) This also goes to the question of whether Eastern Orthodoxy has formal criteria. Is there an identifiable, failsafe mechanism for determining the locus of normative authority? As I recall, John Meyerdorff denies that. He appeal to "living tradition". A kind of spiritual instinct.

v) What is meant by "the whole church"? All Christians, past, present, and future, in union with Jesus and the Holy Spirit? But that can't be the benchmark since we can't submit a questionnaire to all Christians, past, present, and future.

vi) I disagree with how Perry frames the issue. It's not in the first instance a question of authority but truth and evidence. We have a duty to believe revealed truth, and the evidence for some interpretations is better than others.

vii) Apropos (vi), it's meaningless to say, in the abstract, that an individual has more authority than the church or vice versa. Those are empty generalities. They can't be true or false because it depends on the specifics. Sometimes individuals are right while collectives are wrong. Sometimes collectives are right while individuals are wrong. There's no fact-free principle that's true in general. Rather, it depends on specific claims and supporting evidence.

It's enough to be right. You don't need a right to be right. To get it right is self-warranting.

viii) Perhaps Perry thinks you need some ecclesiastical authority source to be right or to be justifiably confident that you are right. If so, that becomes a question of how he verifies his authority source—which reverts to private judgment.

ix) In addition, individual responsibility is person-variable. Some Christians are held to a higher standard because they have greater aptitude and opportunities. There's such a thing as innocent error. Doing the best you can with what you've got. To be faithful to the situation God put you in. That varies from one individual to another. Richard Bauckham, F. F. Bruce, Alvin Plantinga, and Peter van Inwagen are held to a higher standard than the average layman.

x) It's God's intention that Christians often hold some erroneous beliefs. Christians in general are fallible. That's only unacceptable if it's supposed to be otherwise. But since

I don't think God has given us an infallible church, I'm content with the relative uncertainties of our situation, since that's the situation God has put us in. I disagree with high-church traditions that erect an artificial bar that Christians must jump over, then require us to use their stepladder. That's not a Christian duty. That's a man-made a priori stipulation. Our responsibility is to be individually faithful to the circumstances that God has providentially put us in.

Does not this come from that unpublished and secret teaching which our fathers guarded in a silence out of the reach of curious meddling and inquisitive investigation? Well had they learnt the lesson that the awful dignity of the mysteries is best preserved by silence. What the uninitiated are not even allowed to look at was hardly likely to be publicly paraded about in written documents (Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit, 27:66ff.).

Is Perry appealing to an unpublished, secret tradition? If so, why should Christians be answerable to that?

Sitting Orthodoxks

This is a sequel to my previous post:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2018/08/the-old-boy-network.html>

Perry is responding to James White. I have my own way of framing issues.

And this is true for for evangelical and Reformed bodies as well. Given the absence of any manifestation of the world as a good creation of God in the space employed for worship, the conclusion one can often draw from a spatial void is that God is everywhere in general but nowhere in particular. This is, needless to say problematic for a paradigm that turns on God not only creating the world, but acting in and through history. This is just to say that if you're view of worship is primarily about getting the right ideas into the heads of people, something is probably wrong and might just resemble incipient Gnosticism.

i) I disagree with the Puritans on the role of Christian art. I like traditional church architecture (Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic). However, I never confound religious art with the presence of God. Art is a human creation.

ii) I don't think God is literally anywhere. But he manifests himself, the way a painter is present in his artwork. I don't think God is more present in a sanctuary. In many cases, he's less present in a sanctuary. From a NT perspective, Christians are sanctuaries.

***and you speak of the soul as imprisoned
in the material body***

That goes back to Plato. It has no counterpart in Reformed theology.

***...individuals at Pulpit and Pen, who are
apparently bereft of any tact and grace...***

That's an understatement.

***So usually what is meant when one hears
about Orthodoxy and reason can be
grasped by the distinction between
propositional knowledge and knowledge***

by acquaintance...There are certainly things you know not because you read some text about it or how to do it, but because you experienced it.

That's a valid distinction, although I wouldn't apply that distinction to Orthodoxy.

Consequently, White is wrong to say that the issue at the Reformation was the sufficiency of grace, as if there was one concept of sufficiency to be had. Here he is clearly begging the question and making the matter a zero sum game as if it is a matter of grace only in toto excluding any human participation or activity.

In Calvinism, grace doesn't exclude human participation or activity. Sola gratia precludes human participation or activity in election, regeneration, and justification. Sola gratia enables human participation or activity in sanctification, but not in the libertarian sense that Christians independently cooperate with God at that juncture.

Lastly, with respect to baptismal regeneration and the sacramental system, certainly Augustine didn't take it to be antithetical to sola gratia so, White has to place everyone under anathema. Baptismal regeneration is not some late doctrinal development either. It is very early, long before Nicea (and evidenced in Nicea as well for that matter) finding ample evidence in the second and third centuries. What is more, if baptismal regeneration and a strong doctrine of the eucharist amount to a denial of the Gospel, then White has placed the Lutherans under Paul's anathema, which of course would include Luther. (If White is going to anathematize Luther, who am I to argue?).

The notion that saving grace is channeled through the sacraments turns grace into machinery. Moreover, it redirects the object of faith from Jesus to the font or wafer (or EO equivalents). And, yes, that's a serious defect in Lutheran theology.

Here I am picking out an essential constituent of the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, the Doctrine of the Right of Private Judgment (DRPJ). I've discussed this previously. (28) In sum, the DRPJ is the thesis that any Christian individual is ultimately obligated to adhere to belief X, if and only if they judge (determine, assess, etc.) that belief X is scriptural. A consequence of this is that no ecclesial body can ultimately bind the conscience of any individual. At the end of the day, the judgement produced by the individual is of superior normative weight relative to himself than any judgement produced by any church. A further consequence of this is that on Protestant principles, formally speaking no doctrine is beyond revision or negotiation and this includes the formal canon of scripture as well. The faith is an approximate construction produced every generation through their exegetical practices and beliefs.

i) An interpretation of Scripture, whether individual or collective, has no intrinsic authority. There is nothing inherently normative about individual interpretations or collective interpretations. What makes an interpretation normative or obligatory is not who the interpreter is, but whether the interpretation is correct.

ii) An interpretation is revisable if it's wrong.

iii) It's ultimately up to God what errors he allows Christians, individually or collectively (i.e. creeds, confessions, denominations) to believe. We're all at the mercy of divine providence in that respect—and others.

On the point of normativity, Richard Bauckham writes,

“The notion of the formal sufficiency of Scripture does not, of course, mean that Scripture requires no interpretation at all—a notion which anti-Protestant writers have frequently and easily refuted, thus missing the real point—but that it requires no normative interpretation. Protestant interpretation of Scripture employed all the ordinary means of interpreting a text, especially the tools which humanist scholarship had developed for interpreting ancient texts, and respected the views of theologians

and exegetes of the past as useful, but not normative, guides to understanding Scripture. The real difference between the classic Protestant and the classic Roman Catholic views lies in the Protestant rejection of the view that tradition, expressed in the teaching of the magisterium, possesses a binding authority against which there can be no appeal to Scripture.

It is important to be clear on this point. The reason is that other views take scripture to be the only infallible rule for faith and practice but do not amount to Sola Scriptura. And they do not do so because they do not include the DRPJ. So by contrast, take the view sometimes designated as Prima Scriptura. On this view, Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. All doctrine is to be derived ultimately from Scripture. But on Prima Scriptura, the church is the only infallible judge or interpreter of Scripture.

On Sola Scriptura, no interpretation of scripture could be ultimately normative or infallible, but on

Prima Scriptura, this is entirely possible. Ex hypothesi, nothing precludes the church from doing the work of exegesis and then interpreting the scriptures in an infallible manner. If God should share such a power with the church, then nothing precludes this taking place. If the church had such a power, then it would ex hypothesi be incapable of interpreting scripture incorrectly. It wouldn't make sense to pose the question of whether the church's interpretation were correct or not if such a view were true. So then the relevant question would be, is such a view true or not?

What does Perry mean by "the church" when he says "the church is the only infallible judge or interpreter of Scripture"? Does he mean church councils? But he doesn't regard all or most church councils as infallible, does he? So that appeal only pushes the question back a step. Who ascertains that a particular council is infallible—in contrast to all the fallible councils? Is there a mechanism?

This is why JW's discussion of Sola Scriptura is somewhat baffling. Against Hanegraaff, he deploys an argument that turns on a kind of falsification principle. Unless a view is capable of being falsified by a comparison with scripture, it is to be ruled out

a priori. JW's thinking here seems to be something like the following. If the church infallibly decides matters for you beforehand, this makes it impossible for you to be in a position to be corrected by scripture or to even find out what scripture teaches. There has to be some "objective, external standard" by which the church in toto is correctable.

The first thing to note is that this of course begs the question as noted above. He is assuming a premise that the Orthodox do not grant, namely that the church per se is fallible. So he is launching a criticism that only bakes bread with people who already agree with a Protestant ecclesiology. But we already knew that the Orthodox are not Protestant, as shocking as that may strike some. This is why his argument goes nowhere.

Other issues aside, there are rival claimants to be "the church". So even if (ex hypothesi) "the church" is infallible under specified (ad hoc) conditions, what's the mechanism to single out the true church, in contrast to the competition?

Second, is that falsification principle itself falsifiable by scripture? It seems doubtful at best. What is more, to say something is not falsifiable is not to say that it is unverifiable. If the church infallibly interpreted scripture this wouldn't preclude the church from offering proofs verifying its claims. White here seems to be mistaking the modal and normative strength of a judgement with whether proof can be given for that judgement. If the judgement is infallible then it can't be false and it would be ultimately normative, but that says nothing as to whether a proof could be given for the statements or propositions comprising the judgement. Take God speaking to a given prophet. Presumably God speaks infallibly but does this preclude God providing requisite proof for what he says? How about the apostles and the prophets speaking infallibly? I can't see how.

So what are the proofs for Eastern Orthodoxy?

Third, we can turn JW's falsificationist principle more generally against Christianity in a myriad of ways. An atheist could (and atheists have argued) that unless we measure the truth of Christianity against an "objective, external standard" and Christianity could in fact be proven false, then Christianity is unfalsifiable and therefore not to be considered. Or take a person of liberal theological persuasion who argues that unless White is open to the possibility of demonstrating that say Paul and James contradict and that Scripture is therefore not infallible or inerrant, he can never be in a position to know the truth. Why exactly is a falsifiability acceptable when White uses it, but not when it is used in other contexts? We aren't of course told.

That only follows if the falsification principle is supposed to be entirely general.

On a Presuppositional model what facts are and how they are interpreted is not theory neutral and so an incremental approach is precluded. (30) Facts are not brute and interpretation free. Facts are interpreted within a framework or a worldview. In this sense there are no worldview neutral facts out there. So if “objective” means paradigm neutral, then White is inconsistent. What scripture is and what it means is not paradigm neutral.

More directly, our experience of scripture through our senses and the use of our rational faculties is also not theory neutral. If we take say each verse or portion of scripture as a fact, it is interpreted as part of our worldview and not apart from it. What it can mean for us is therefore a function of our worldview. This does not imply some kind of Postmodern semantic nihilism. I am not denying that the text has meaning independently of what I think of it and so I am well within Realism here. But if we are to take Presuppositionalism seriously such that facts are not interpreted apart from a worldview and facts do not of themselves discriminate between worldviews (that is, they do not indicate which worldview is true of themselves)

then this will include scripture and our interpretation of any given part of it. And this is so because it will include our presuppositions about language, meaning, the nature of legal relations, metaphysics, and many other things.

One other thing it entails is that we cannot verify or falsify beliefs directly because of the way they are related to other beliefs we hold. We do not examine our beliefs one at a time as it were, in isolation and this includes our beliefs about what any given portion of scripture means. This does not imply that we cannot jettison beliefs or add new ones. We certainly do but we do so in a way relative to how much we are willing to sacrifice or admit. We don't pick out a passage and examine it in isolation from all our other beliefs and then ask, what semantic information does the passage all on its own give me? None of this of course denies that we can and do get to the meaning of the text.

i) Yes, the hermeneutical circle. The interpreter doesn't come to scripture as a blank slate. He has provisional methods and assumptions. But there are many cases in which he changes his mind as a result of reading Scripture. Again, though, it's ultimately up to God in his providence

where the interpreter can break into the circle or break out of the circle. There's no mechanism.

ii) Like the ship of Theseus, we can't rebuild our belief system all at once, but must replace rotten parts incrementally.

But there is another point here that is relevant to Presuppositionalism. If the meaning of facts is a function of a given worldview and there is no worldview neutral access to facts, and we are to interpret the facts according to the Christian worldview, would that be some kind of Christianity in general? If as was discussed above the notion of "Mere Christianity" is nothing more than a pragmatic constraint and is conceptually incoherent and historically untenable, then Christianity in general will not be tenable for the same reasons. So then the question is, which specific claimant to the Christian worldview are we to employ in interpreting facts, including scripture? Adherents of each theological model or schema will hold that theirs is

the fullness of Christianity and everything else is a deviation.

Many adherents of a particular theological tradition have that attitude. Speaking for myself, I view theological traditions as historical accidents. A theological tradition is a package, and it's usually the case that not all elements of the package are equally secure or entailed by other elements of the package. I think there's a need to disassemble and reassemble theological packages. Mix and match the best of different traditions. Be eclectic. But some theological packages are already much closer to the truth than others.

And each of course will interpret scripture according to their own schema. When faced with difficult passages they will choose between various ways of accommodation or elimination.

i) That can happen arbitrarily. However, the best schema integrates the most data. Has the most explanatory power.

ii) In addition, within Scripture itself there's internal prioritization in the sense that, for instance, a Bible writer may state an event, then go behind the scenes to explain the outcome by reference to predestination or God's overruling providence. In that case, the frame of reference is passages that reveal God's ulterior plans.

For example if some canonical book contradicts their core views, they will simply remove it from the formal canon.

Is Perry alluding to Luther? But Luther's position is idiosyncratic. That's hardly representative.

Or is he accusing Protestants of removing books from the canon? But in Western church history, there wasn't a received canon. With respect to the OT, there were two competing canons, represented by Augustine and Jerome. Protestants didn't remove anything, but simply ratified one of the two preexisting options.

Or they will employ various interpretive techniques to blunt its force. Or they will appeal to what specific terms mean in other contexts and claim that the usage in this one particular case is vague, unclear and so on, and so must be interpreted in light of "clear" usage in other passages. This of course simply moves the problem to those other passages. Such moves assume that we isolate semantic content and beliefs and take things in a one by one fashion and build up a model incrementally.

Actually, it frequently invokes larger blocks of text. For classical Protestants, Paul is the go-to figure on justification. That involves entire books (Romans, Galatians). That's one example. There's nothing ad hoc about that procedure. Some books, or portions thereof, are written with the express purpose of expounding a particular doctrine or correcting some misunderstanding or heresy. So it's quite logical to use that as a benchmark.

As to the first point of Protestantism being self-correcting, there is certainly some prima facia appeal in such a notion, but it should not be missed that this comes at a price. What it implies is that there is no fixity in doctrine beyond a pragmatic constraint. The fact that a given Protestant tradition hasn't seen substantial theological change or development in say, three to four hundred years has more to do with sociology and psychology than principles and any supposed self-correcting mechanism at work. The reason is simple. If all interpretations of scripture, along with all human traditions are in principle revisable, then it follows that no interpretation is beyond

revision...There is nothing in the notion of being self-correcting that implies progress toward a fixed goal.

i) I'd hesitate to say Protestantism is self-correcting. It always comes down to people. And the extent to which God does or does not preserve individuals (or denominations or theological traditions) from error.

ii) However, Protestantism is open to correction in a way that Orthodoxy is not. And there are theoretical as well as practical tradeoffs. If "the church" is actually infallible under specified conditions, then the Protestant position is a weakness. If, on the other hand, the church is not infallible, but some people labor under the illusion that it is, then errors become irreversible, and supply the premise for additional errors that build on seminal errors. By contrast, Protestants are free to reexamine traditional interpretations, and correct a trajectory that's increasingly erroneous. That's preferable to a doctrinal cascade effect.

And then we have to take into account cases where "self-correction" has been offered such as with for example the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) by such figures as N.T. Wright or the Federal Vision perspective. How is that received? So far it seems that advocating for such self-correction is not met with dispassionate

examination of a case on its merits, but more with ossified and intransigent prejudice such that advocating for it is a good way to get yourself put on trial for heresy, such as the case with Leithart.

A common knee-jerk reaction. That's because humans are social creatures, so conformity to one's peer group is powerful. That's an omnipresent danger and reality in every theological tradition. Absent divine intervention, there's no solution this side of heaven.

And why think that theology should “develop” in the first place?

- i)** It should develop in part because it's necessary to correct traditional errors and theological trajectories that went off the rails.
- ii)** It should develop in part because doctrinal understanding is often a dialectical process that takes place in confrontation with heresy or social demands and challenges. In that respect, doctrinal understanding tends to be piecemeal, to the neglect of other things in Scripture.
- iii)** There is, of course, no virtue in development for development's sake. When we hit upon a truth, that's the logical endpoint for that branch.

The Father eternally generates the person of the Son, noted as begetting and generates the Spirit noted as procession. The Filioque doctrine is the thesis that the Father and the Son eternally generate the person of the Spirit as from one causal principle.

I reject both single and double procession. I reject the whole paradigm. The Son and Spirit are not the product of the Father's action. I've defended my position elsewhere.

MacArthur doesn't actually hold to Sola Fide. And the reason he doesn't is that he takes faith to entail willing obedience as a constituent of faith. Consequently, MacArthur doesn't have the "empty hand" view of faith's relation to justification. As I noted previously, MacArthur's view, unless he has substantially changed it, amounts to the doctrine of formed faith, namely that faith is completed by obedience and is therefore justifying on that basis.

That's an interesting allegation. I assume Perry is alluding to MacArthur's position on Lordship Salvation. Since MacArthur is a popularizer and a reactionary, he may well be guilty as charged.

I've written here before about why I think parachurch ministries are unbiblical and frankly dangerous. They take resources away from churches and end up creating personality cults. The timing of the video is just more of the same in terms of gobbling up Hanegraaff's market share. The chief objection that RP fields is essentially that parachurch "ministries" are not licensed or instituted by scripture. (17:20 min mark and following) This of course would and should be a game stopper for those professing Sola Scriptura, especially a Reformed version of it. What is interesting here is that RP fairly clearly acknowledges that there is no scriptural justification for parachurch ministries. But what he argues is that there is such a great need for "specialists" who do this kind of work because the local pastor

simply can't keep up. So what licenses the existence of Alpha and Omega ministries is not scripture, but pragmatic demands that license them to go beyond scripture. This is the typical justification that is offered by all of the para-church "ministries."

i) In my blessedly limited experience, Pierce is incompetent. The case for parachurch ministry doesn't rise and fall on his pitiful ability to defend it.

ii) I don't draw a bright line between "the church" and parachurch ministry. I have a more decentralized view of the church. The church is what the church does. If someone is doing the work of the church (or doing something the church ought to be doing), then to that extent his labor is an expression of the church.

iii) Sola scripture doesn't mean we require specific biblical warrant for everything we do. There's a distinction between what Scripture mandates, prohibits, and permits.