

Dave Armstrong

# A Biblical Defense of Catholicism

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## Dedication

To Father John A. Hardon, S.J., of blessed memory, a tireless, extraordinarily dedicated, saintly servant of God, who encouraged and exhorted thousands of aspiring Catholic catechists, writers, apologists, teachers, converts, and others to pursue their pastoral and evangelistic callings as laymen, and especially to write.

I shall never forget, and will always be thankful for, the many nights spent at the University of Detroit in the early 1990s, benefiting from the wise teaching of this singularly gifted and knowledgeable man, and observing the example of his manifest humility and kindness. By God's grace, I hope to live — as he did — by the maxim of the founder of the Jesuits, St. Ignatius Loyola:

*Teach us, good Lord,  
to serve thee as thou deservest;  
to give and not to count the cost;  
to fight and not to heed the wounds;  
to toil and not to ask for rest;  
to labor and not to ask for any reward  
save knowing that we do thy will.*

“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

1 Peter 3:15

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## Foreword

By Father John A. Hardon, S.J.  
(1914-2000)

Please allow me to introduce to you Dave Armstrong. I know Dave and his wife, Judy, personally. I received him into the Church on February 8, 1991, and baptized both their children, Paul and Michael. Dave has attended my classes on spirituality and catechetics. He was formerly a missionary as an Evangelical Protestant and has spent twelve years in intensive study of various theological topics. He carries this evangelistic zeal with him into the Catholic Church.

In particular, I highly recommend his work *A Biblical Defense of Catholicism*, which I find to be thoroughly orthodox, well written, and effective for the purpose of making Catholic truth more understandable and accessible to the public at large. Dave has edited and compiled much material from great Catholic writers past and present, interspersed with his own commentary and analysis. It is, I firmly believe, a fine book of popular Catholic apologetics.

Throughout his writing, Dave has emphasized the inability of Protestantism to explain coherently the biblical and historical data concerning Christian doctrine and practice. I feel

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this is very important in light of the inroads of Protestant thought into the hearts and minds of millions of insufficiently catechized Catholics.

*In our Lord,  
John A. Hardon, S.J.  
September 17, 1993*



## Acknowledgments

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks and deepest gratitude to my friends, my colleagues in the Catholic apologetics community, my mentors, and my family, who have offered me much needed encouragement and helped to maintain my hopes and dreams through the years, as I endured the usual frustrations and disappointments that writers in all fields experience.

Particularly I wish to thank Fr. Peter M. J. Stravinskias, Patrick Madrid, Marcus Grodi, Dr. Kenneth Howell, Fr. Ray Ryland, Dr. Scott Hahn, Steve Ray, Lynn Nordhagen, David Palm, Gary Michuta, Art Kelly, Robert Sungenis, Gerard Serafin Bugge, Don Ross, Diane Kamer, Stephen Hand, Leno Poli, John McAlpine, Pete Vere, Kristine Franklin, Michael Forrest, Shawn McElhinney, Paul Thigpen, John Betts, Andrew Holt, Dick Kelley, Jared Olar, Tom Wilkes, Chris LaRose, and two esteemed Anglican friends, Bret Bellamy and Fr. George Burns. There are many others as well. I hope no one feels left out if I didn't mention their names. They know who they are! Without their support, this book would not have seen the light of day.

Most of all, I want to express my love and profound appreciation for my one-of-a-kind, beautiful wife, Judy, and my three precious sons, Paul, Michael, and Matthew, for their undying faith in me and unending patience in allowing Daddy or hubby to work

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countless hours on his computer. Their support is crucial for my motivation and zeal. They will never know how much I love all of them, at least not in words, for no words are adequate to express how I feel.

It is written — proverbially — in Holy Scripture, that “a man’s enemies shall be in his own household” (cf. Matt. 10:36). That is most assuredly *not* the case in my house, and I will be eternally grateful to God and thankful to my wonderful family for this blessing (life provides more than enough frustrations as it is). They are (on an earthly, human plane) my joy, my hope, and my happiness.

## Introduction

During the course of 1990, I was actively and sincerely engaged in a lengthy historical and biblical critique of Catholicism (primarily having to do with papal infallibility) as a result of the ongoing dialogue taking place in an ecumenical discussion group I had initiated. I thought I might entice my Catholic friends out from under the alleged “yoke” of Rome. Little did I know that before the year was over, *I* would be the one to change *my* mind!

With heartfelt joy and a keen sense of discovery, I now attempt to uphold what I formerly attacked and to critique many of the Evangelical Protestant interpretations of Scripture that I strongly affirmed not long ago. Formerly, as an Evangelical countercult and campus missionary, I was committed to the defense of *mere*, or *generic*, Christianity. Now I seek to defend that Faith which might be called ancient or historic.

The present work endeavors to show that Catholicism can more than hold its own with regard to the evidence of the Bible, as it relates to distinctive doctrines that are considered unbiblical or even antibiblical by many evangelical Protestants. Our separated brethren often contend that Catholics (to understate it) are very unfamiliar with the Bible. This is, sadly, probably true as a general observation (although biblical illiteracy is certainly not confined to Catholics).

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Nevertheless, it has no bearing on the question of whether the Bible in fact upholds the teachings of Catholicism. Many Catholic biblical arguments and interesting exegetical conclusions are entirely unfamiliar to most Protestants (and for that matter, most Catholics as well).

I myself learned of the vast majority of these scriptural evidences in favor of Catholicism while engaged in the research for this book, which was itself originally intended as a defense of my newfound views, primarily for the sake of Protestant friends who were curious as to the rationale behind my conversion to Catholicism. The more I studied Catholic apologetic works (many of which were older books obtained at used bookstores), the more I realized what a wealth of biblical material existed in favor of Catholic positions on a number of “controversial” doctrines.

I was continually amazed at the depth and solidity of these arguments, and pleasantly surprised that the Bible, which I had loved and studied intensely for ten years, could so confidently be utilized as a bulwark in defense of the Catholic Faith. Catholicism, rightly understood, is — I believe strongly — an eminently and thoroughly *biblical* belief system. This was entirely contrary to what I had so cavalierly assumed as an Evangelical Protestant. Reputable Protestant commentaries often ignore, overlook, or present very unsatisfactory explanations for Catholic biblical evidences, sometimes offering no more than an unsubstantiated denial of the Catholic interpretation, with no alternative.

The weight of the evidence herein presented is all the more compelling, I think, by virtue of its cumulative effect, which is well-nigh overwhelming. Time and time again, I discovered that Catholicism is altogether consistent with biblical teaching. Many claim that distinctive Catholic beliefs are simply not found in Scripture. Often, however, those who present this charge have little or no understanding of the notion of the *development* of doctrine, *implicit* biblical evidence, or the complementary (and

biblically based) roles of Tradition and the Church. All of these factors and other related ones will be examined in this work.

Catholics need only to show the harmony of a doctrine with holy Scripture. It is not our view that every tenet of the Christian Faith must appear whole, explicit, and often in the pages of the Bible. We also acknowledge sacred Tradition, the authority of the Church, and the development of understanding of essentially unchanging Christian truths, as is to be expected with a living organism (the Body of Christ) guided by the Holy Spirit. A belief implicitly biblical is not necessarily antibiblical or unbiblical. But we maintain that the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”), on the other hand, is incoherent and — I dare say — quite unbiblical.

In fact, many doctrines accepted by Protestants are either not found in the Bible at all (for example, *sola Scriptura* and the Canon of Scripture), are based on only a very few direct passages (for example, the Virgin Birth), or are indirectly deduced from many implicit passages (for example, the Trinity, the two natures of Jesus, and many attributes of God, such as his omnipresence and omniscience).

I have no *formal* theological training, although I have done a great deal of independent study over the last twenty years. This work is intended primarily as a layman’s observations for other laymen, without pretending to be anything beyond that. C. S. Lewis, the great Anglican Christian apologist (and my favorite author) often made a similar claim for his own writings. He was formally educated in English literature, not in theology. To my knowledge, neither G. K. Chesterton nor Malcolm Muggeridge had any formal theological education either. They were journalists by trade and self-definition. Yet they — along with Lewis — are among the most celebrated Christian apologists of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, my relative lack of credentials might actually be somewhat of an advantage on my part, from the vantage point of

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Protestant assumptions about the perspicuity, or “clearness,” of the Bible (in terms of its outlines of the means whereby a man can be saved). Martin Luther made a famous remark to the effect that even a “plowboy” could interpret Scripture in the main without the necessary help of the Church. This is, then, largely a Catholic “plowboy’s” attempt to learn and to share from Scripture itself, although without in the least denying the authoritativeness of the Church and Tradition.

I am always wholeheartedly willing to interact with scholars and reflective and thoughtful nonscholars who hold opposing viewpoints. If, however, even superior theological education cannot suffice for an adequate, reasonable alternate explanation over against the Catholic interpretations of various portions of Scripture presented herein, then it seems to me that this would serve only to strengthen the case I have made as an ordinary layman.

The widespread existence of Evangelical Protestant commentaries and various lexicons, Bible dictionaries, concordances, and so forth, for the use of laypeople, is based on a presupposition that individuals without formal theological education can arrive at conclusions on their own. This is largely what I am attempting presently. The only difference is that I am willing to modify or relinquish any conclusions of mine that turn out to be contrary to the clear teachings and dogmas of the Catholic Church, whereas the quintessential Protestant *ultimately* can stand on his own (like Luther), “on the Bible,” against, if need be, the whole Tradition of the Christian Church. I formulate my conclusions based on the work of Church councils, great Catholic scholars, Fathers, Doctors, and saints, just as the conscientious Protestant would consult the scholars and great pastors and theologians of his own persuasion.

Far from having to force Scripture to conform to Catholic teaching, or to equivocate, or to rationalize away glaring contradictions, I’ve found that, invariably and delightfully, the converse

is true: Catholicism is indeed the round peg, so to speak, that naturally fits into the round hole of Scripture. I have not undergone any torments of conscience or “intellectual suicide” in this endeavor, and I am more confident than ever that the Catholic Church is the “Bible Church” par excellence.

This discovery will never cease to be wondrous and marvelous to me, as well as to many other fellow converts to the Catholic Church via Evangelical Protestantism. For it means that we can continue to be Evangelical in every proper and true sense of that word: to love and cherish the Scriptures, to follow Jesus with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to proclaim the message found in the Bible in its fullness and apostolic integrity, unmingled with the error of excessively individualistic interpretation and competing, contradicting denominational beliefs. Accordingly, this work cites hundreds of scriptural passages from 229 of the 259 chapters in the New Testament (eighty-eight percent), and more than 250 Old Testament references.

Catholicism is not a blind Faith, but rather, one that is altogether reasonable, as far as reason goes (without excluding at all the essential religious characteristics of mystery, miracle, supernatural revelation, and love). A Catholic need not forsake hermeneutical rigor or critical acumen in any way.

Catholics can, assuredly, learn much from many positive and godly attributes of Evangelicalism and Protestantism in general. Likewise, a Protestant can derive much benefit from Catholicism, whether he feels compelled to convert or not. The non-Catholic can — after grappling with facts and arguments such as those presented herein — eventually recognize that Catholics are able to put forth a very strong biblical case for their beliefs. Likewise, the average Catholic in the pew, who often suffers from a marked lack of spiritual confidence, can greatly benefit from an increased familiarity with the biblical arguments that bolster the Catholic position.

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Each chapter contains an authoritative definition and a relatively brief exposition of the Catholic doctrine to be defended, followed by extensive scriptural commentary on individual passages. Footnotes will direct the reader who wishes to pursue issues in greater depth to other relevant works and reinforce the arguments from scholarly sources, but will not interrupt the flow of the writing — intended to be popular and relatively nontechnical in style.

It is not my intention to minimize the importance of Tradition, councils, papal pronouncements, and suchlike at all. Rather, I seek to exhibit as many of the biblical evidences as can be brought to bear on any particular distinctively Catholic doctrine (at least all that I have found; certainly more exist). Doctrines held in common with Protestants and Eastern Orthodox Christians, such as the Trinity, the bodily Resurrection of Christ, Heaven and Hell, and so forth are not here dealt with.

All Christians agree that it is worthwhile to study and meditate upon the Bible — God's own inspired revelation for all mankind. Non-Catholics and even non-Christians might receive here some biblical food for thought, even if they are unconvinced by my arguments. It is a worthwhile endeavor to build bridges of understanding between Christians of all stripes, as commanded in Scripture. If this work causes the reader to delve more deeply into holy Scripture or into various Catholic sources, or to think more critically and deeply about the biblical evidences for various Protestant and Catholic doctrines, then it will have fulfilled its purpose.



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## Bible and Tradition

“Maintain the traditions . . .”

Catholicism and Protestantism differ fundamentally with regard to the relationship between sacred Scripture and sacred Tradition: the Bible on the one hand and the historical doctrines and dogmas of the Christian Church on the other. Protestantism tends to see a certain dichotomy between the pure Word of God in the Bible and the Tradition of the Catholic Church, which is considered to be too often corrupted by “arbitrary traditions of men” (in this vein Matthew 15:3-6, Mark 7:8-13, and Colossians 2:8 are cited).<sup>1</sup>

For Protestants, Scripture alone, or *sola Scriptura*, is the source and rule of the Christian Faith. As such, it is superior to and judges all Tradition. It is sufficient in and of itself for a full exposition of Christianity and for the attainment of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 4, ch. 10; G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture*, trans. Jack B. Rogers (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1975), 299-300, 306; Martin, Marty, *A Short History of Christianity* (New York: Meridian, 1959), 216.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 1, chs. 6-9; Clark Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971), 113-17.

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The concept of *sola Scriptura*, it must be noted, is not in principle opposed to the importance and validity of Church history, Tradition, ecumenical councils, or the authority of Church Fathers and prominent theologians. The difference lies in the relative position of authority held by Scripture and Church institutions and proclamations. In theory, the Bible judges all of these, since, for the Evangelical Protestant, it alone is infallible, and the Church, popes, and councils are not.<sup>3</sup>

In actuality, however, this belief has not led to doctrinal uniformity, as the history of Protestant sectarianism abundantly testifies. The prevalence of *sola Scriptura*, according to Catholic thinking, has facilitated a widespread ignorance and disregard of Church history among the Protestants in the pews.<sup>4</sup> Protestantism is clearly much less historically oriented than Catholicism, largely for the above reasons. Recently, several evangelical scholars have frankly critiqued the weakness of either *sola Scriptura* itself,<sup>5</sup> or else the extreme version of it, which might be called “Bible Only” (a virtually total exclusion of Church history and authority).<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Protestantism takes an either-or approach on this issue and many other theological ideas, Catholicism has a both-and

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Churches*, 1539; R. C. Sproul, “*Sola Scriptura*: Crucial to Evangelicalism,” in James Montgomery Boice, ed., *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1978), 109; Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 118-119; Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, 215-216.

<sup>5</sup> Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics*, 268-271, 286, 305; Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism*, 171; Marty, *A Short History of Christianity*, 206.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Ramm, “Is ‘Scripture Alone’ the Essence of Christianity?” in Jack B. Rogers, ed., *Biblical Authority* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 116-117, 119, 121-122.

perspective. Thus, Scripture and Tradition are inextricably linked: twin founts of the one spring of revelation.<sup>7</sup>

Tradition is defined as the handing on of beliefs and practices by written as well as oral means.<sup>8</sup> The Bible is part of a Tradition larger than itself, of which it is an encapsulation or crystallization, so to speak.<sup>9</sup>

The first Christians preached; they didn't hand out copies of the New Testament (most of which was not yet written, much less established in its final form). Catholicism claims that its Tradition is neither more nor less than the preserved teaching of Christ as revealed to, and proclaimed by, the Apostles. Development occurs, but only in increased *understanding*, not in the *essence* of this apostolic Tradition. Catholicism claims to be the guardian or custodian of the original deposit of Faith which was "once for all delivered to the saints."<sup>10</sup>

It must also be pointed out that the written word and mass literacy have been widespread only since the invention of the movable-type printing press, around 1440. Thus, it could not have been the primary carrier of the gospel for at least fourteen centuries. Christians before the time of the Protestant Reformation learned mostly from homilies, sacraments, the Liturgy and its year-long calendar, Christian holidays, devotional practices, family instruction, church architecture, and other sacred art that reflected biblical themes. For all these Christian believers, *sola Scriptura* would have appeared as an absurd abstraction and practical impossibility.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), par. 80; John A. Hardon, *The Catholic Catechism* (CC) (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 47-48.

<sup>8</sup> CCC, pars. 81, 83; John A. Hardon, *Pocket Catholic Dictionary* (PCD) (New York: Doubleday Image, 1980), 437.

<sup>9</sup> CCC, par. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Jude 3; CCC, par. 84; Hardon, CC, 41-43.

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### *New Testament evidence for Tradition*

Tradition, even in the extensive Catholic sense, permeates Scripture. Only an antecedent prejudice against such a notion or an undue concentration on Jesus' rejection of *corrupt* human pharisaical traditions, could blind one to the considerable force of the scriptural data. Put another way, Scripture does not teach *sola Scriptura*, a concept that constitutes the use of a document (the Bible) contrary to the same document's explicit and implicit testimony. In other words, Scripture alone should lead the impartial seeker to Tradition and the Church, rather than to a disdain of Tradition. G. K. Chesterton called Tradition the "democracy of the dead." It is foolish for any Christian to disregard what God has taught millions of other Christians throughout the centuries.

We must all do our best to avoid approaching Scripture with a philosophy that is itself not at all biblical, and forcing Scripture (and Christianity) into our own mold. The Bible itself has plenty to say about its own authority vis-à-vis that of Tradition and the Church.

### *The Bible is not all-inclusive*

In the New Testament, first of all, we find clear-cut testimony to the effect that Scripture does not contain the whole of Christ's teaching. Probably no one would deny this, but Protestants usually deny that any of Christ's teachings *not* recorded in Scripture could possibly be faithfully transmitted orally by primitive apostolic Tradition. Reflection upon the closeness of Jesus to his disciples and on the nature of human interaction and memory makes quite dubious any such fancy. Who could make the claim that the Apostles remembered (and communicated to others) absolutely nothing except what we have in the four Gospels?

We might compare the Bible to the U.S. Constitution, which is not coterminous with the constitutional law that derives from it (and ultimately from the natural law alluded to in the Declaration

of Independence). Nor is the Constitution workable in practice apart from judges who interpret it. The analogy is not perfect, but close enough to make the point.

The commentary in this chapter, it should be emphasized, is intended, not to denigrate Scripture in the least, but rather, to set it in its proper context within the living Christian community (the Church), and to accept it *on its own terms*. It seems that whenever the Catholic argues that the Bible is not the be-all and end-all of the Christian Faith, he is accused of disrespecting God's Word, etc. This is one of many unfortunate Protestant false dichotomies that will be dispelled in the course of our examination of Scripture.

**Mark 4:33:** "With many such parables he spoke the word to them. . . ."

In other words, by implication, many parables are not recorded in Scripture.

**Mark 6:34:** "He began to teach them many things."

None of these many things are recorded here.

**John 16:12:** "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

Perhaps these "many things" were spoken during his post-Resurrection appearances alluded to in Acts 1:2-3 (see below). Very few of these teachings are recorded, and those that are contain only minimal detail.

**John 20:30:** "Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book."

**John 21:25:** "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written,

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I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

**Acts 1:2-3:** “To [the Apostles] he presented himself alive after his passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God” (see also Luke 24:15-16, 25-27).

### *Paradosis* (“Tradition”)

The most important Greek word in the New Testament for *tradition* is *paradosis*. It is used four times in reference to Christian tradition:

**1 Corinthians 11:2:** “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.”

**Colossians 2:8:** “See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.”

*Paradosis* simply means something handed on or passed down from one person to another. This “tradition” might be bad (Matt. 15:2 ff.; Col. 2:8), or opposed to the will of God (Mark 7:8 ff.), or entirely good (1 Cor. 11:2 and many other passages below). This distinction must be constantly kept in mind in the debate over the utility and propriety of Tradition.

**2 Thessalonians 2:15:** “Stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.”

**2 Thessalonians 3:6:** “Keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”



Tradition in the Bible may be either written or oral. It implies that the writer (in the above instances, St. Paul) is not expressing his own peculiar viewpoints, but is delivering a message received from someone else (see, e.g., 1 Corinthians 11:23). The importance of the tradition does not rest in its *form*, but in its *content*.

*Word of God/Word of the Lord*

When the phrases “word of God” or “word of the Lord” appear in Acts and in the Epistles, they are almost always referring to oral preaching, not to Scripture. The Greek word usually used is *logos*, which is the title of Jesus himself in John 1:1: “The Word was God.” Indeed, this holds true for the entire Bible, as a general rule. Protestants, unfortunately, tend to think “written word” whenever they see *word* in Scripture, but even common sense tells us that the English *word* refers also to spoken utterances. The latter is a more common and dominant motif in Scripture than the former. Much of Scripture is a recording of what was originally oral proclamation (for example, the Ten Commandments, Jesus’ entire teaching — since he wrote nothing himself — or St. Peter’s sermon at Pentecost). Thus, the oral component of Christianity is unavoidable, and a position that attempts to undermine this aspect is self-defeating from the outset.

*Tradition according to Jesus Christ and St. Paul*

Colossians 2:8 (see above) has often been used by evangelical Protestants (especially fundamentalists) to condemn both philosophy and Tradition, but offers no support for either position. For St. Paul is here contrasting the traditions and philosophies of men with that of Christ. He isn’t condemning things in essence, but rather, in *corrupt* form. We’ve seen how St. Paul uses the same word for “tradition” positively in three instances.

Likewise, Jesus uses *paradosis* in condemning corrupt human traditions of the Pharisees (Matt. 15:3, 6; Mark 7:8-9, 13), not

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apostolic Tradition per se, since to do so would contradict St. Paul's use of the same word, as well as his own upholding of true Jewish teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. Notice, too, that in the instances above, Jesus qualifies the word *tradition* in every case by saying "your tradition" or "traditions of men," as does St. Paul in Colossians 2:8. When St. Paul speaks of apostolic Tradition, he doesn't qualify the word at all.

### *Paradidomi* ("deliver")

A related word, *paradidomi*, is used with reference to Christian tradition, in the sense of "deliver," at least seven times:

**Luke 1:1-2:** "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses . . ."

St. Luke is saying that these traditions handed down, or delivered, are not mere fables, legends, myths, or suchlike, but were dependable eyewitness accounts. Here also we have oral as well as written sources, with the former predominant at this point.

**1 Corinthians 11:23:** "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread . . ." (see also 1 Cor. 11:2 above; Rom. 6:17).

**1 Corinthians 15:3:** "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures."

It is striking here how Tradition and Scripture are one unified revelation, as in Catholic teaching. True Tradition can never contradict Scripture, but rather complements, explains, and expands upon it.

**2 Peter 2:21:** “For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.”

**Jude 3:** “Contend for the Faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

*Paralambano* (“received”)

The word *paralambano* (“received”) appears also at least seven times with regard to Christian or apostolic Tradition. Thus, there are three related concepts: the tradition or doctrine that is given or, literally, “handed down,” and the acts of delivering and receiving the tradition:

**1 Corinthians 15:1-2:** “I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast — unless you believed in vain” (see also 1 Cor. 11:23 and 15:3 above).

Note the reference to memory: the whole drift of the passage is an oral gospel and tradition transmitted by preaching and preserved by memory.

**Galatians 1:9, 12:** “If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. . . . For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

This sounds rather like the anathema<sup>11</sup> statements of the Council of Trent, which are so objectionable to many. Here St. Paul

<sup>11</sup> See page 58, fn.

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completely dissociates the gospel he received (which he elsewhere equates with Tradition) from traditions derived from men. The true Tradition originates wholly from above. *This* is the Tradition of which Catholicism claims to have been merely the custodian for nearly two thousand years. The next passage reiterates this:

**1 Thessalonians 2:13:** “When you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God” (see also 2 Thess. 3:6 above).

*Tradition, Gospel, and  
Word of God are synonymous*

It is obvious from the above biblical data that the concepts of *Tradition*, *Gospel*, and *Word of God* (as well as other terms) are essentially synonymous. All are predominantly oral, and all are referred to as being delivered and received:

**1 Corinthians 11:2:** “Maintain the traditions . . . even as I have delivered them to you.”

**2 Thessalonians 2:15:** “Hold to the traditions . . . taught . . . by word of mouth or by letter.”

**2 Thessalonians 3:6:** “. . . the tradition that you received from us.”

**1 Corinthians 15:1:** “. . . the gospel, which you received . . .”

**1 Galatians 1:9:** “. . . the gospel . . . which you received.”

**1 Thessalonians 2:9:** “We preached to you the gospel of God.”

**Acts 8:14:** “Samaria had received the word of God.”

**1 Thessalonians 2:13:** “You received the word of God, which you heard from us. . . .”

**2 Peter 2:21:** “. . . the holy commandment delivered to them.”

**Jude 3:** “. . . the Faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

In St. Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians alone, we see that three of the above terms are used interchangeably. Clearly then, *tradition* is not a dirty word in the Bible, particularly for St. Paul. If, on the other hand, we want to maintain that it is, then *gospel* and *Word of God* are also bad words! Thus, the commonly asserted dichotomy between the gospel and Tradition, or between the Bible and Tradition, is unbiblical itself and must be discarded by the truly biblically-minded person as (quite ironically) a corrupt tradition of men.

*Oral Tradition according to St. Paul*

In his two letters to Timothy, St. Paul makes some fascinating remarks about the importance of oral tradition:

**2 Timothy 1:13-14:** “Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me. . . . Guard the truth which has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.”

**2 Timothy 2:2:** “And what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”

St. Paul says that Timothy is not only to receive and “follow the pattern” of his *oral* teaching, in addition to his *written* instruction, but also to teach others the same. The Catholic Church seeks to do this with regard to the entire “deposit of Faith,” or the Apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42), in accordance with St. Paul.

*Church, not Scripture, “pillar and ground of truth”*

Almost any informed Evangelical Protestant, if asked to define the “pillar and ground of the truth” according to the Bible, would surely reply, “The Bible itself, of course.” Yet Scripture does not so pronounce; it states, in perfect accord with Catholicism and in opposition to *sola Scriptura*: “. . . the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

Other Bible translations render *bulwark* as “ground,” “foundation,” or “support.”

*Two sola Scriptura proof texts debunked*

**2 Timothy 3:16-17:** “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

This is the most-often-used supposed proof text for *sola Scriptura*, yet a strong argument can be put forth that it teaches no such thing. John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890), the brilliant English convert to Catholicism from Anglicanism, shows the fallacy of such reasoning:

“It is quite evident that this passage furnishes no argument whatever that the sacred Scripture, without Tradition, is the *sole rule of faith*; for although sacred Scripture is *profitable* for these ends, still it is not said to be *sufficient*. The Apostle requires the aid of Tradition (2 Thess. 2:15). Moreover, the Apostle here refers to the Scriptures which Timothy was taught in his infancy. Now, a good part of the New Testament was not written in his boyhood: some of the Catholic Epistles were not written even when St. Paul wrote this, and none of the books of the New Testament were then placed on the canon of the Scripture books. He

refers, then, to the Scriptures of the *Old Testament*, and if the argument from this passage proved anything, it would prove *too* much, viz., that the Scriptures of the *New Testament* were *not* necessary for a rule of faith. It is hardly necessary to remark that this passage furnishes no proof of the inspiration of the several books of sacred Scripture, even of those admitted to be such. . . . For we are not told . . . what the books or portions of *inspired Scripture* are.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these logical and historical arguments, one can also differ with the Protestant interpretation of this passage on contextual, analogical, and exegetical grounds. In 2 Timothy alone (context), St. Paul makes reference to oral Tradition three times (1:13-14; 2:2; 3:14). In the last instance, St. Paul says of the tradition, “knowing from whom you learned it.” The personal reference proves he is not talking about Scripture, but of himself as the tradition-bearer, so to speak. Elsewhere (exegesis), St. Paul frequently espouses oral tradition (Rom. 6:17; 1 Cor. 11:2, 23, 15:1-3; Gal. 1:9, 12; Col. 2:8; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6). The “exclusivist” or “dichotomous” form of reasoning employed by Protestant apologists here is fundamentally flawed. For example, to reason by analogy, let’s examine a very similar passage, Ephesians 4:11-15:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God,

<sup>12</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Essay on Inspiration in Its Relation to Revelation,” London, 1884, Essay 1, section 29, in Newman, *On the Inspiration of Scripture*, J. Derek Holmes and Robert Murray, ed. (Washington: Corpus Books, 1967), 131 (emphasis in original).

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to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are able to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

If the Greek *artios* (Revised Standard Version [RSV], *complete*; King James Version [KJV], *perfect*) proves the sole sufficiency of Scripture in 2 Timothy, then *teleios* (RSV, *mature manhood*; KJV, *perfect*) in Ephesians would likewise prove the sufficiency of pastors, teachers, and so forth for the attainment of Christian perfection. Note that in Ephesians 4:11-15, the Christian believer is “equipped,” “built up,” brought into “unity and mature manhood,” “knowledge” of Jesus, “the fullness of Christ,” and even preserved from doctrinal confusion by means of the teaching function of the Church. This is a far stronger statement of the “perfecting” of the saints than 2 Timothy 3:16-17, yet it doesn’t even mention Scripture.

Therefore, the Protestant interpretation of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 proves too much, since if all nonscriptural elements are excluded in 2 Timothy, then, by analogy, Scripture would logically have to be excluded in Ephesians. It is far more reasonable to synthesize the two passages in an inclusive, complementary fashion, by recognizing that the mere absence of one or more elements in one passage does not mean that they are nonexistent. Thus, the Church and Scripture are both equally necessary and important for teaching. This is precisely the Catholic view. Neither passage is intended in an exclusive sense.

**1 Corinthians 4:6:** “. . . that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.”



The clause emphasized above, which is used as a proof for *sola Scriptura*, is thought to be difficult in the Greek, so much so that one Protestant translator, James Moffatt, considered it beyond recovery and refused to translate it! Yet the meaning seems fairly clear when the whole context is taken into consideration (at the very least, verses 3-6). This basic principle of biblical interpretation (context) is often neglected, even by good scholars, presumably due to presuppositional bias. For example, the great Evangelical theologian G. C. Berkouwer, who writes many insightful and edifying things about Scripture, falls prey to this tendency repeatedly, in using this portion of a verse to imply the notion of *sola Scriptura*, in his *magnum opus* on Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

One simply has to read the phrase following the “proof text” to see what it is to which St. Paul is referring. The whole passage is an ethical exhortation to avoid pride, arrogance, and favoritism and as such, has nothing to do with the idea of the Bible and the written word as some sort of all-encompassing standard of authority apart from the Church. St. Paul’s teaching elsewhere (as just examined) precludes such an interpretation anyway. One of the foundational tenets of Protestant hermeneutics is to interpret obscure portions of Scripture by means of clearer, related passages.<sup>14</sup> St. Paul is telling the Corinthians to observe the broad ethical precepts of the Old Testament (some translators render the above clause as “keep within the rules”), as indicated by his habitual phrase “it is written,” which is always used to precede Old Testament citations throughout his letters. Assuming that he is referring to the Old Testament (the most straightforward interpretation), this would again prove too much, for he would not be including the

<sup>13</sup> Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics*, 17, 104-105, 148.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretations* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1970), 104-106.

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entire New Testament, whose Canon (that is, the list of books that belong to it) was not even finally determined until 397 A.D.

To summarize, then, 1 Corinthians 4:6 (that is, one part of the verse) fails as a proof text for *sola Scriptura* for at least three reasons:

- ♦ The context is clearly one of *ethics*. We cannot transgress (go beyond) the precepts of Scripture concerning relationships. This doesn't forbid the discussion of ethics outside of Scripture (which itself cannot possibly treat every conceivable ethical dispute and dilemma).

- ♦ The phrase does not even necessarily have to refer to Scripture, although this appears to be the majority opinion of scholars (with which I agree).

- ♦ If “what is written” refers to Scripture, it certainly points to the Old Testament alone (obviously not the Protestant “rule of faith”). Thus, this verse proves too much and too little simultaneously.

All “proof texts” for *sola Scriptura* are demonstrably inadequate and run up against biblical (and Catholic) teachings of Tradition and Church, as well as the insuperable difficulty of the Canon of the Bible, and how it was determined (by the Catholic Church).

Cardinal Newman, bristling with insight as always, gets right to the core of the issue in the following critique of Protestants' allegiance to *sola Scriptura*:

That Scripture is the Rule of Faith is in fact an assumption so congenial to the state of mind and course of thought usual among Protestants, that it seems to them rather a truism than a truth. If they are in controversy with Catholics on any point of faith, they at once ask, *Where do you find it in Scripture?* and if Catholics reply, as they must do, that it is not necessarily in Scripture in order to be true, nothing can

persuade them that such an answer is not an evasion, and a triumph to themselves. Yet it is by no means self-evident that all religious truth is to be found in a number of works, however sacred, which were written at different times, and did not always form one book; and in fact it is a doctrine very hard to prove. . . . It [is] . . . an assumption so deeply sunk into the popular mind, that it is a work of great difficulty to obtain from its maintainers an acknowledgment that it is an assumption.<sup>15</sup>

### *The New Testament Canon*

Although the question of the nature of the New Testament Canon is, strictly speaking, a historical one, we will examine it briefly, since it is obviously of crucial importance to biblical authority and to the notion of *sola Scriptura*.

For Protestants to exercise the principles of *sola Scriptura*, they first have to accept the antecedent premise of what books constitute Scripture — in particular, the New Testament books. This is not as simple as it may seem at first, accustomed as we are to accepting without question the New Testament as we have it today. Although indeed there was, roughly speaking, a broad consensus in the early Church as to which books were scriptural, nevertheless, enough divergence of opinion existed reasonably to cast doubt on the Protestant concepts of the Bible's *self-authenticating* nature, and the *self-interpreting* maxim of *perspicuity* (see Appendix One). The following overview of the history of acceptance of biblical books (and also nonbiblical ones as Scripture) will help the reader to avoid overgeneralizing or oversimplifying the complicated historical process by which we obtained our present Bible.

<sup>15</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Image, 1955), 296.

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## *The History of the New Testament Canon*<sup>16</sup>

### Explanation of Symbols:

- \* *Book accepted (or quoted)*
- ? *Book personally disputed or mentioned as disputed*
- x *Book rejected, unknown, or not cited*

### *New Testament Period and Apostolic Fathers (30-160)*

**Summary:** The New Testament is not clearly distinguished from other Christian writings

**Gospels:** Generally accepted by 130

Justin Martyr's "Gospels" contain apocryphal material

Polycarp first uses all four Gospels now in Scripture

**Acts:** Scarcely known or quoted

**Pauline Corpus:** Generally accepted by 130, yet quotations are rarely introduced as scriptural

**Philippians, 1 Timothy:** x Justin Martyr

**2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon:** x Polycarp, Justin Martyr

**Hebrews:** Not considered canonical

? Clement of Rome

x Polycarp, Justin Martyr

**James:** Not considered canonical; not even quoted

x Polycarp, Justin Martyr

**1 Peter:** Not considered canonical

**2 Peter:** Not considered canonical, nor cited

<sup>16</sup> Sources for New Testament Canon chart (all Protestant): J. D. Douglas, ed., *New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 196), 194-198; F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 232, 300, 309-310, 626, 641, 724, 1049, 1069; Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 109-112, 117-125.

**1, 2, 3 John:** Not considered canonical

x Justin Martyr

**1 John ? Polycarp / 3 John** x Polycarp

**Jude:** Not considered canonical

x Polycarp, Justin Martyr

**Revelation:** Not canonical

x Polycarp

*Irenaeus to Origen (160-250)*

**Summary:** Awareness of a Canon begins toward the end of the second century

Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria first use the phrase “New Testament”

**Gospels:** Accepted

**Acts:** Gradually accepted

**Pauline Corpus:** Accepted with some exceptions:

**2 Timothy:** x Clement of Alexandria

**Philemon:** x Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria

**Hebrews:** Not canonical before the fourth century in the West

? Origen

\* First accepted by Clement of Alexandria

**James:** Not canonical

? First mentioned by Origen

x Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria

**1 Peter:** Gradual acceptance

\* First accepted by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria

**2 Peter:** Not canonical

? First mentioned by Origen

x Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria

**1 John:** Gradual acceptance

\* First accepted by Irenaeus

x Origen

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**2 John:** Not canonical

? Origen

x Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria

**3 John:** Not canonical

? Origen

x Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria

**Jude:** Gradual acceptance

\* Clement of Alexandria

x Origen

**Revelation:** Gradual acceptance

\* First accepted by Clement of Alexandria

x Barococcio Canon, c. 206

**Epistle of Barnabas:** \* Clement of Alexandria, Origen

**Shepherd of Hermas:** \* Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria

**The Didache:** \* Clement of Alexandria, Origen

**The Apocalypse of Peter:** \* Clement of Alexandria

**The Acts of Paul:** \* Origen

\* Appears in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic translations

**Gospel of Hebrews:** \* Clement of Alexandria

Muratorian Canon (c. 190)

Excludes Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter

Includes The Apocalypse of Peter, Wisdom of Solomon

*Origen to Nicaea (250-325)*

**Summary:** The “Catholic epistles” and Revelation are still being disputed

**Gospels, Acts, Pauline Corpus:** Accepted

**Hebrews:** \* Accepted in the East

x, ? Still disputed in the West

**James:** x, ? Still disputed in the East

x Not accepted in the West

- 1 Peter:** Fairly well accepted
- 2 Peter:** Still disputed
- 1 John:** Fairly well accepted
- 2, 3 John, Jude:** Still disputed
- Revelation:** Disputed, especially in the East
  - x Dionysius

*Council of Nicaea (325)*

Questions canonicity of James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude

*From 325 to the Council of Carthage (397)*

**Summary:** St. Athanasius first lists our present twenty-seven New Testament books as such in 367. Disputes still persist concerning several books, almost right up until 397, when the Canon is authoritatively closed.

**Gospels, Acts, Pauline Corpus, 1 Peter, 1 John:** Accepted

**Hebrews:** Eventually accepted in the West

**James:** Slow acceptance

Not even quoted in the West until around 350!

**2 Peter:** Eventually accepted

**2, 3 John, Jude:** Eventually accepted

**Revelation:** Eventually accepted

x Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzen

**Epistle of Barnabas:** \* Codex Sinaiticus — late fourth century

**Shepherd of Hermas:** \* Codex Sinaiticus — late fourth century

Used as a textbook for catechumens, according to Athanasius

**1 Clement, 2 Clement:** \* Codex Alexandrinus — early fifth century (!)

Protestants do, of course, accept the traditional Canon of the New Testament. By doing so, they necessarily acknowledged the authority of the Catholic Church. If they did not, it is likely that Protestantism would have disappeared like almost all of the old heresies of the first millennium of the Church.