

# Bible: The Sole Rule of Faith?

by John Vennari

The Protestant believes himself to be on solid ground, because he says he believes and accepts the Bible *and only the Bible*, as the sole rule of Faith.

This is the central Protestant tenet of *Sola Scriptura* — the Bible alone is the sole rule of Faith. It is the Bible and only the Bible that is the pillar and mainstay of truth.

So the first question we have to ask is: how tenable is this Protestant tenet in the first place? Is the Protestant really on solid ground when he says that the Bible alone is the sole rule of Faith?

There is a well-known convert to Catholicism in the United States named Scott Hahn — a Protestant minister who became Catholic. Part of his conversion story gives helpful answers to this question (I personally wish Dr. Hahn would have become more traditional after his conversion, but that does not diminish the strength of the story).

Dr. Hahn had been a Presbyterian minister who, in his seminary days, was vehemently anti-Catholic. Subsequently, as a minister, he did a tremendous amount of Scripture study, because he wanted his sermons to be permeated in Scripture.

But the more he studied Scripture, the more he came to see that the truths that the Catholic believes, particularly manifested in the teachings of the early Church Fathers — Saint Jerome, Saint Basil, Saint Augustine — are firmly rooted in Sacred Scripture. These Church Fathers were *Catholics*. Every one of them was celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass!

I'm not going to go through his whole story, but I want to spotlight a crucial event that clinched his conversion. It was something that took place while he was teaching class.

There he was, a Presbyterian Minister — a *Presbyterian Professor* — teaching young adults.

And one of the brighter students in the class asked him, “Dr. Hahn, you know the way we Protestants believe that the Bible alone is the sole rule of Christian faith, and we follow the Bible and *only* the Bible — not the Bible and Tradition?”

Hahn said “yes”.

The student said, “***Well, where in the Bible does it say that?***”

Hahn responded, “What a stupid question!”

As soon as Hahn said that, he said to himself, “You have never said that to a student before. You have never answered a student by insulting him.”

But the reason Hahn responded the way he did was because he knew he really didn’t have an answer.

Hahn said, “Well, there’s II Timothy, 3:16.”

But the student retorted, “No! II Timothy 3:16 says ‘All Scripture, inspired by God, is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, instruct in justice.’ It says Scripture is *profitable!* It doesn’t say we must believe in the Bible alone!”

So Hahn then said, “Well, look at what Our Lord says about Tradition in Matthew 15.”

Again, the student responded, “Well, no! Our Lord was not condemning *all* Tradition, but He was condemning the corrupt tradition of the Pharisees.”

So after a few more failed attempts at Scripture citations, Hahn announced that the class was out of time and they can pick up on this next week.

Now, Dr. Hahn *knew* that he had not answered the student’s question. *And the student knew* that he had not had his question answered.

So Hahn drove home that night in a cold sweat thinking, “What is the answer to that question?”

When he got home, he telephoned whom he said to be the top Protestant Scripture scholars in the United States. And he asked them, “Maybe I slept through this part of my seminary training, but you know the way we Protestants believe in the Bible alone and only the Bible, and not in Scripture and Tradition — where in the Bible does it say that?”

And to a man, each one of these Protestant scholars said, “What a stupid question!”

Then each of these professors invoked the same verse that Hahn had invoked: “Well, there’s II Timothy 3:16.” And Hahn responded as the student did, “No, this verse only says that Scripture is profitable, not that it must be the sole rule of Faith.”

Each of the professors also said, “Well, there’s Our Lord’s words in Matthew 15.”

And Hahn retorted, “No, Our Lord was not condemning all Tradition, but only the corrupt tradition of the Pharisees.” And further, Hahn said, Saint Paul instructs us in II Thessalonians 2:14 to stand fast and “**hold** the traditions which you have learned, whether by word, or by our epistle.”

And these tip-top scholars, these most eminent of Protestant theologians, had no answer.

It was then that Scott Hahn came to realize that the central, foundational principle of Protestantism — the Bible alone and only the Bible — *is not Biblical!*

This is a tremendous contradiction, it's one of the reasons why I could never be a Protestant. Protestantism claims to base its entire belief system in the Bible alone, but the principle of "The Bible alone" is a non-Biblical principle; it is a principle that is nowhere found in the Bible.

## No Basis in History

Secondly, the principle of "the Bible alone as the sole rule of Faith", cannot be a true principle of Christianity because it has no basis in the history of Christianity.

How did the early Christians learn their Faith?

How was the Faith communicated to them?

How did Our Lord tell the Apostles to communicate the Faith, the truths which must be believed for salvation?

He commanded them, "go forth and teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost". He said to Peter, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church." (*Matt. 16:18*) And Saint Paul taught clearly that it is the **Church that is the pillar and mainstay of truth.** (*1 Tim. 3:16*)

Our Lord gave to Peter authority, and He commissioned the Apostles to preach in His name. "As the Father hath sent Me, I also send you." (*John 20:21*)

Our Lord wrote no books. Nor did He say to His Apostles: "Sit down and write Bibles and scatter them over the earth, and let every man read his Bible and judge for himself", which is the essence of Protestantism — each individual reads the Bible and decides for himself what are the truths of Christianity. No! As I said, Our Lord established a Church to teach in His Name: "He that heareth you heareth Me, he that despiseth you, despiseth Me." (*Luke 10:16*) "And if he will not hear the Church, let him be to thee as the heathen and the publican." (*Matt. 18:17*)

The Church and the Faith existed *before* the New Testament. Only five out of the twelve Apostles wrote anything down at all! The Church was teaching and administering the Sacraments, the Apostles were forgiving sins, the Church was making martyrs for seven to ten years before one jot of the New Testament was set down on parchment.

The Church was spread throughout the entire Roman Empire before a single word of the New Testament was written. We had Catholic saints and martyrs *before* we had Gospels and Epistles.

The first Gospel was written by Saint Matthew, about 7 years after Our

Lord left the earth. The next was the Gospel of Mark, written 10 years after Christ ascended into Heaven. The Gospel of Saint Luke was written 25 years after Our Lord's Ascension, and the Gospel of John was written 63 years after Our Lord left the earth. The Apocalypse was written a good 65 years after the Ascension of Our Lord. And *all of this* was written, as Pope Leo XIII reiterates, under Divine inspiration.

So then, how did the early Christians become Christians and save their souls? By reading the Bible? No, because there was no New Testament.

We saw that the New Testament was not even completed until 65 years after Our Lord ascended into Heaven.

But this is not all.

For over three hundred years, the Church did not have all the books of the Bible compiled into one book.

And this brings us right to the question of Authority.

Because if you give me a book — call it *The Bible* — and you tell me that everything in that book is the infallible Word of God, the first thing I'm going to ask is, "*Who says?*"

Books don't write themselves. Books by multiple authors don't just compile themselves into one big book, and then proclaim itself to be the written Word of God.

No! Someone, or some social unit, which God Himself gave the authority to teach: to teach in His Name, to teach infallibly, must tell me this. Only an authority like that can tell me that this book is the written, infallible Word of God.

And it was the Catholic Church, at the Council of Carthage in 397 A.D., through the guidance of the Holy Ghost, that settled once and for all what was the Canon of the New Testament; that decided which books were divinely inspired and which were not.

You remember there were a number of other "Gospels" and "Epistles" circulating; some written by good and holy men but were not the inspired word of God (for example, the Epistles of St. Clement). Others were just plain fabrications, such as the so-called Gospel of Pilate or the Gospel of Nicodemus.

And it was the Catholic Church that decided which books were divinely inspired and which were not. It was the Catholic Church that put the New Testament together, joined it to the Old Testament, and gave the Bible to the world. It was the Catholic Church that produced the Bible, it was not the Bible that produced the Church.

Thus, as I said, the Protestant principle of the "Bible Alone" has no basis in history. The Catholic religion is the only religion that can answer the question: "Who Says?" — that is, "who says the Bible is the written word of God?"

## Let there be Gutenberg!

But the problems don't stop there. Because if it is necessary to read the Bible for me to be saved, if faith cometh only by reading the Bible, then faith cometh only by the invention of the printing press, which was not invented until the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century by Johannes Gutenberg.

Before that, all books were hand-copied. It was a laborious, time-consuming and expensive venture. It was not possible to get a copy of the Bible into the hands of every Catholic, or even one to every Catholic family.

We've only had Bibles widely distributed for a little more than 400 years. So what about the millions of Christians who lived before that, who would go through their entire lives and never even see a Bible or a printed text of the New Testament?

Now, the theory of "The Bible Alone" — that is, following the Bible alone as the path to salvation — presupposes that the Bible should have been available to all men from the foundation of Christianity. Well, we already saw that this is not the case. We saw that the books of the New Testament were not written until 65 years after Our Lord left the earth. And we saw that the Christian World did not even have a complete, compiled Bible until the year 397 A.D.; and were not even available for mass distribution until the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. So the principle of the "Bible Alone" has no basis in history.

## Conflicts with Reason

Finally, the principle of the "Bible Alone" is contrary to reason. Because if you give me a book, and you tell me that everything in that book is the written Word of God, and that I have to read it and believe the *Bible Alone* for salvation, then the first thing I say to you is, "Fine, then *you leave me alone*. You just give me that Bible, and *I'll* decide what is the true meaning of Scriptures."

This essentially is the Protestant system. If you go to a Lutheran congregation, you are only buying into Martin Luther's private interpretation of the Bible.

And if you go to a Methodist congregation, you are only subscribing to another man's private interpretation of the Bible — a character named John Wesley.

And if you go to a Presbyterian congregation, you've only bought into the private interpretation of John Knox, the founder of that group.

And if you are a member of a Protestant denomination, there is no reason why you could not stand up and say to the preacher: "Brother, I believeth you walketh not in truth. Your interpretation is wrong! I have

found the correct meaning.”

And if you are zealous enough, and eloquent enough, and determined enough, you could start to preach, and you could start your own Protestant congregation — ***because that is how they all started.***

And we see that this is the consequence of private interpretation of the Bible. Because, according to the Protestant system — every man reading the Bible and coming to his own interpretation — the logical conclusion of this is that there could be as many Protestant religions as there are individuals. There is no church for them established by Christ to teach in His name! There is no authority established by God to tell me that I might have made a mistake!

So this is one of the many reasons I could never be a Protestant. We see that the “Bible Alone” principle is contrary to Scripture, the “Bible Alone” principle is not supported by history, and the “Bible Alone” principle is contrary to reason; for it ends up in thousands of conflicting interpretations of Scripture, and is contrary to what Our Lord established His Church to be.

## **The Bible Made a Catholic Out of Me!**

One of the many Protestants who finally discovered this truth was a man named Paul Whitcomb.

Paul Whitcomb was a Protestant minister whose intense study of Sacred Scripture led him to accept the Catholic Church as the only true Church established in the Bible. This is all laid out in an out-of-print booklet *The Bible Made a Catholic Out of Me*.

Mr. Whitcomb studied Scripture through the “interpretation by correlation” method.

Here’s how the method works: He would focus on a given phrase in Scripture, such as “Son of God”, and he would search throughout the Scriptures and find every instance where that phrase was used, in order to come to the Biblical truth about what a given phrase means.

When Mr. Whitcomb used this interpretation by correlation method for the word “Church”, it led him to a discovery he did not expect (summarized here in four points).

- 1) His first discovery, he said, was that the “Church” defined in the Bible was to be “one body” — and not only a human body, but a Divine Body — the Mystical Body of Christ Himself.

“Again, He is the head of His body, the Church.”

*Colossians 1:18*

“Now you are the body of Christ, member for member.”

*I Corinthians 12:27*

“We are members of His body, made from His flesh and His bones.”

(*Ephesians 5:30*)

2) Mr. Whitcomb also discovered that this Church was not to be a disjointed body, but a *unified* body.

“There shall be one fold and one shepherd.”

(*John 10:16*)

“And the glory that thou, Father, hast given Me, I have given to them, that they may be one even as We are one.”

(*John 17:22*)

“You were called in one body ... one spirit ... one hope ... One Lord, one faith, one Baptism.”

(*Ephesians 4:4-5*)

Mr. Whitcomb saw clearly that this body — the Church — was to be constituted as *one*: one in membership, one in belief, one in worship, one in government.

3) Next, he saw that this Church is to be a *teaching* Church. And not only that, but an *infallible* teaching Church:

“All power in Heaven and on earth has been given to Me.

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

(*Matt 28:18-20*)

4) He saw that Our Lord pledged a divine protection to that teaching authority:

“These things I have spoken to you while yet dwelling with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your mind whatever I have said to you. When the Advocate has come, whom I will send you from the Father, He will bear witness concerning Me, because from the beginning you are with Me.”

(*John 14:25-26 and 15:26-27*)

He read further in I Timothy 3:15:

“I write these things to thee ... that thou mayest know how to conduct thyself in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and mainstay of truth.”

Now after reading all this, he noted, “I was disturbed by the discovery of this Biblical truth ... because [as a Protestant] I was not a member of a

teaching Church, much less an infallible teaching Church.”

This is because no such “church” even exists in the Protestant system.

Mr. Whitcomb continues:

“The church I was a member of, like all other Protestant churches, held instead that the Bible is the only divinely authorized dispenser and guarantor of truth, that if anyone would be saved he must learn from the Bible what is required of him to be saved.

“The sole responsibility of the Church, according to Protestant belief, is to make known and to provide the ‘saved’, those who profess Christ as Lord and Savior, with a place they can join together in the ‘fellowship of prayer’.

“This despite the fact that for the first four hundred years there was no published Christian Bible;

“This despite the fact that for the next one thousand years until the invention of the printing press, there were scant few Bibles;

“This despite the fact that those who have made the Bible their sole rule of Faith have come up with hundreds of conflicting rules of faith;

“This despite the fact that the Bible itself states that many who interpret it privately (*II Peter 3:16*) will interpret it wrongly.”

To make a long story short, Mr. Whitcomb explained that the only “Church” that fit the description of “Church” found in the Bible was the Catholic Church. (He also noted that the Bible does not say it all, since *John 21:25* tells us, “there are also many other things which Jesus did; which, if they were written every one, the world itself, I think, would not be able to contain the books that should be written.”)

It was the Catholic Church, vested with the infallible authority given it by Our Lord that gave us the Bible, and it is only through the authority of the Catholic Church that we know for certain that the Bible is truly the Word of God. This is why the great Saint Augustine, in the Fourth Century, said: “I would not believe the Gospel itself, if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me to do so.”

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