

Sermon Notes / Follow-up

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Reformation 500 Series: Sola Scriptura – The Unique Glory of Scripture

These notes are not really from the sermon, but mostly from email conversations about the papacy I have had through the years with various folks interested in Roman Catholicism. These emails were part of larger discussions and have been slightly edited, though there is still a great deal of repetition. These emails do not necessarily represent the way I would make a case against the papacy from the ground up (for that, see the book I hope to someday finish, *Peter, Paul, and Mary – Or, Why I Am Not a Roman Catholic*). These emails are mainly responses to specific questions that were raised for me to address. I hope sharing them will prove to be helpful for those who are looking for more information on the recent sermons. I have been in countless discussions with Roman Catholics, including priests, educated laymen, people converting from Protestantism to Romanism (and the reverse) and people merely contemplating a conversion, for well over twenty years, going back to extensive discussions I had with a Roman Catholic priest when I was in college. I am certainly not the foremost Reformed expert or apologist for Protestantism, but I trust these notes will contribute to a wider discussion. Along the way, I touch on a few other issues, like Mary, praying to saints, and images, but much more would need to be said about those topics and that's beyond my purpose here. Note that most of these emails are several years old (e.g., most of these exchanges took place during the Pope Benedict era and reflect that) and since they interact with a wide variety of interlocutors, they deal with a wide range of issues from a variety of starting points.

An excellent book on Scripture vs. tradition, is Keith Mathison's *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*. Mathis distinguishes Tradition 0 (*solo Scriptura*), Tradition I (Scripture as supreme and only infallible authority), and Tradition II (a two-source view of revelation, with Scripture and tradition as co-equal). Mathison makes a very strong case for the Reformed position from both history and Scripture. In other words, *sola Scriptura* is not only the biblical position, it is also the ancient/traditional position of the church. The early church knew nothing of an infallible oral tradition after the apostles, or a universal bishop with infallible powers of interpretation.

I also strongly recommend Martin Chemnitz's work on Scripture and tradition. Chemnitz, an early Lutheran, not only shows incredible familiarity with the church fathers, but makes one devastating argument after another against the papacy. His work is indispensable to anyone who wants to grasp the Protestant response to Roman claims.

On the canon, Herman Ridderbos wrote the classic study, but it has now been superseded. Michael Kruger's works are outstanding, especially *Canon Revisited*. Kruger shows that the Roman claim, "You Protestants have a fallible collection of

infallible books, unless the church guarantees the contents of the canon," is specious at best. Historically speaking, that is not how it happened. There was papal or even conciliar decree in the early church that delimited the content of the canon. Instead, it was somewhat messy, but ultimately Spirit-led process that the church to a consensus. Kruger develops the Calvinian notion of Scripture as self-attesting revelation (which it must be in the nature of the case; cf. Calvin Book 1 of the ICR). To make canonicity subject to anything other than the witness of the Spirit, would be to relativize its authority, whether subordinating it to the church or the results of historical scholarship. While the historical date matters, it must be evaluated from within the circle of the biblical worldview. The church did not make Scripture canonical anymore than John the Baptist made Jesus the Messiah when he exclaimed, "Behold! The Passover Lamb!" Instead, the church recognizes the canon and submits to it as such. There is much more to say – so read Kruger's material. It is truly excellent.

Mathison and Kruger together provide a very strong one-two punch back against Roman claims about the necessity and historicity of the papacy. Protestants are on firm – indeed, firmly biblical! – ground.

Dear ZZZ,

On the one hand you argue that the papacy is essential to the church that Jesus founded. Without an infallible interpreter, we lost at a sea of skepticism, unable to know what God wants to communicate to us in the Scriptures. But when I challenged the papacy on historical grounds, showing no such office existed in the early days of the church, you resorted to a doctrine of development. Now, I do not know what seeds in the NT could have developed out of (refer back to our discussion of Gal. 2). But there is another problem I want to call to your attention. You simply cannot have it both ways. If an infallible interpreter is an epistemological necessity for us to know the mind of God, then it must have been there all along (going back even into the Old Covenant). In other words, your historical concessions (the doctrine of the papacy developed) and your epistemological claims (the papacy has always been necessary to knowing divine revelation) are simply incompatible...

Dear ZZZ,

The question of canonicity is not nearly as hard as you are making it out to be. Read F. F. Bruce's book for an historical study and look at Athanasius' festal letter from 367. The Jews were pretty well agreed on 22 books, comprising the Hebrew OT (identical to the Protestant canon, though there have been different orderings). As a lover of symbol and form/function harmony, you will enjoy noticing that there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet – one for each book – so the OT has a kind of completeness (God exhausted the Hebrew alphabet with these 22 books). Most importantly, Jesus also delimited the OT in Matthew 23

when he spoke of the first and last martyrs recorded in the Hebrew Bible, outing bookends around the old covenant revelation: he said the Pharisees would be held accountable for all the righteous blood in the old world, “from the blood of Abel [martyred in Genesis, the first book of the canon] to the blood of Zechariah [martyred in 2 Chronicles, the last book of the Hebrew canon].” There can really be no doubt these are the inspired books of the OT. The apocryphal books may be important historical works, and may even say many things that are theologically accurate, but they are not on par with Scripture and even admit such (e.g. Maccabees, which certainly disclaims any kind of inspiration).

As for the NT, well, clearly Jesus presented his own teaching on par with the revelation through Moses, the prophets, and the Psalms. Paul, Peter, and the others were clearly conscious of writing inspired Scriptures, on par with previous revelation as well. So Peter can speak of Paul as writing Scripture; it is possible that when Paul says Timothy has known the Scriptures from his infancy, he quite probably has in mind the earliest NT writings, as well as the OT (<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/biblical-horizons/no-56-which-sacred-writings/>); Paul makes reference to Luke’s gospel in 2 Cor. 8:18; etc. The notion of a canonical story in search of a canonical ending was a definite Jewish concept. Following a number of scholars, who argue from historical and/or theological grounds, I think a very, very compelling case can be made that the entire NT was completed before the destruction of the temple in 70 (I make this case elsewhere – no time for it here, but read J. A. T. Robertson, *Wenham on the dating of the synoptics*, etc.). While the process of canon recognition took some time, and there was occasional confusion over which books should be kept in (e.g., Hebrews, maligned because of a misinterpretation) or left out (e.g., Shepherd of Hermas), a very strong consensus emerged from quite early on.

Taking the 22 books of the OT, combined with the 27 of the NT, we have a completed canon of 49 (7 x 7) books! Quite neat and symmetrical, don’t you say. Including the apocrypha in the canon would ruin it!

Much more to say, but I’ve got to run...

We have to distinguish [a] praying TO saints in heaven from [b] asking them to pray for us (the way we would ask another believer on earth to pray for us).

I think [a] is definitely an act of idolatry. We are to direct our prayers to God alone. Jesus is the only mediator between God and man, and the one in whom and through whom we approach God. The saints in heaven do not have divine powers and cannot answer our prayers. They are not mediators between us and God, certainly not in the way Jesus is. To treat them as "gods" is false worship. The most obvious example of this kind of idolatry is the way the Roman Catholic church treats Mary.

I think [b] is at worst a distraction from what we should really be doing. On the one hand, it is true that in worship, we are in the presence of "angels, archangels,

and all the company of heaven." So we are "near" to the dead in Christ in some mysterious, mystical way. On the other hand, there is no biblical reason to think that the saints in heaven can interact with us directly, or hear us speak to them, anymore than saints in China can (with whom we are also in the presence of in worship, when we are arrayed around the throne). We do need other saints praying for us, but apparently God wants us to limit that to saints we can interact with on earth (just as these are the only saints we can love, serve, etc.). There are biblical prohibitions against trying to contact the dead; exactly how they apply in this case is hard to say, but there is certainly no biblical warrant or rationale for thinking that I can ask a dead, departed saint to pray on my behalf. As the Reformers said, we ought to seek God's blessings only where he promised to offer them (in Word and sacrament); there I no promise of blessing attached to the intercession of the saints.

Hope that helps a little.

RL

J. N.D Kelly demonstrates that the Reformed view of the uniqueness of Scripture goes back to the church fathers. Up until the fourth century, the Fathers were univocal in affirming Scripture as the exclusive source of Christian doctrine. Cyril of Jerusalem's words could just have easily have come from Luther and Calvin: "With regard to the divine and saving mysteries of faith, no doctrine, however trivial, may be taught without the backing of the divine Scriptures." Athanasius is also representative: "The holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth." The early fathers of the first four centuries did not treat tradition as an alternative *source* of doctrine (in addition to Scripture), but as a lens through which Scripture must be read (the *regula fidei*, essentially the Apostles Creed). But this tradition was considered essential precisely because it conformed to Scripture and derived from the apostolic writings, not because it acted as a supplement to the Bible. Now to be sure, by the fifth century, there were some Christians who began to contemplate the possibility that certain traditions or customs traced back to the apostles, even though they did not derive directly from the Bible. But this was a novel concept, and one that would not catch on widely until well into the middle ages. Even then, there were many medieval theologians who gave Scripture pride of place and viewed as it the church's solitary theological and practical norm, the norm that norms all other norms.

Carl Trueman argues that the papacy cannot solve "problem" of the Reformation because the failure of the papacy is what actually caused the Reformation. Indeed, Trueman shows that we need not apologize for the Reformation, as if it were to blame for the ills of the modern world (just the opposite is the case, actually):

<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/pay-no-attention-to-that-man-behind-the-curtain-roman-catholic-history-and-the-e.php>

Trueman at his rock solid best as an historian:

Perspicuity was, after all, a response to a position that had proved to be a failure: the Papacy. Thus, to criticize it while proposing nothing better than a return to that which had proved so inadequate is scarcely a compelling argument.

Yes, it is true that Protestant interpretive diversity is an empirical fact; but when it comes to selectivity in historical reading as a means of creating a false impression of stability, Roman Catholic approaches to the Papacy provide some excellent examples of such fallacious method. The ability to ignore or simply dismiss as irrelevant the empirical facts of papal history is quite an impressive feat of historical and theological selectivity. Thus, as all sides need to face empirical facts and the challenges they raise, here are a few we might want to consider, along with what seem to me (as a Protestant outsider) to be the usual Roman Catholic responses:

Empirical fact: The Papacy as an authoritative institution was not there in the early centuries.

Never mind. Put together a doctrine of development whereby Christians - or at least some of them, those of whom we choose to approve in retrospect on the grounds we agree with what they say - eventually come to see the Pope as uniquely authoritative.

Empirical fact: The Papacy was corrupt in the later Middle Ages, building its power and status on political antics, forged documents and other similar scams. Ignore it, excuse it as a momentary aberration and perhaps, if pressed, even offer a quick apology. Then move swiftly on to assure everyone it is all sorted out now and start talking about John Paul II or Benedict XVI. Whatever you do, there is no need to allow this fact to have any significance for how one understands the theory of papal power in the abstract or in the present.

Empirical fact: The Papacy was in such a mess at the beginning of the fifteenth century that it needed a council to decide who of the multiple claimants to Peter's seat was the legitimate pope.

Again, this was merely a momentary aberration but it has no significance for the understanding of papal authority. After all, it was so long ago and so far away.

Empirical fact: The church failed (once again) to put its administrative, pastoral, moral and doctrinal house in order at the Fifth Lateran Council at the start of the sixteenth century.

Forget it. Emphasise instead the vibrant piety of the late medieval church and then blame the ungodly Protestants for their inexplicable protests and thus for the collapse of the medieval social, political and theological structure of Europe.

Perhaps it is somewhat aggressive to pose these points in such a blunt form. Again, I intend no disrespect but am simply responding with the same forthrightness with which certain writers speak of Protestantism. The problem here is that the context for the Reformation - the failure of the papal system to reform itself, a failure in itself lethal to notions of papal power and authority - seems to have been forgotten in all of the recent aggressive attacks on scriptural perspicuity. These are all empirical facts and they are all routinely excused, dismissed or simply ignored by Roman Catholic writers. Perspicuity was not the original problem; it was intended as the answer. One can believe it to be an incorrect, incoherent, inadequate answer; but then one must come up with something better - not simply act as if shouting the original problem louder will make everything all right. Such an approach to history and theology is what I call the Emerald City protocol: when defending the great and powerful Oz, one must simply pay no attention to that man behind the curtain.

Given the above empirical facts, the medieval Papacy surely has chronological priority over any of the alleged shortcomings of scriptural perspicuity in the history of abject ecclesiastical and theological disasters. To be fair, Dr. Gregory does acknowledge that 'medieval Christendom' was a failure (p. 365) but in choosing such a term he sidesteps the significance of the events of the late medieval period for papal authority. The failure of medieval Christendom was the failure of the Papacy. To say medieval Christendom failed but then to allow such a statement no real ecclesiastical significance is merely an act of throat-clearing before going after the people, the Protestants, who frankly are in the crosshairs simply because it appears one finds them and their sects distasteful. Again, to be fair, one cannot blame Roman Catholics for disliking Protestants: our very existence bears testimony to Roman Catholicism's failure. But that Roman Catholics who know their history apparently believe the Papacy now works just fine seems as arbitrary and selective a theological and historical move as any confessionally driven restriction of what is and is not legitimate Protestantism.

As Dr. Gregory brings his narrative up to the present, I will do the same. There are things which can be conveniently ignored by North American Roman Catholic intellectuals because they take place in distant lands. Yet many of these are emblematic of contemporary Roman Catholicism in the wider world. Such, for example, are the bits of the real cross and vials of Jesus' blood which continue to be displayed in certain churches, the cult of Padre Pio and the relics of Anthony of Padua and the like (both of whom edged out Jesus and the Virgin Mary in a poll as to who was the most prayed to figure in Italian Catholicism). We Protestants may appear hopelessly confused to the latest generation of North American Roman Catholic polemicists, but at least my own little group of Presbyterian schismatics does not promote the veneration of mountebank stigmatics or the virtues of snake-oil.

Still, for the sake of argument let us accept the fideistic notion that the events of the later Middle Ages do not shatter the theology underlying the Papacy. What therefore of Roman Catholic theological unity and papal authority today? That is not too rosy either, I am afraid. The Roman Catholic Church's teaching on birth control is routinely ignored by vast swathes of the laity with absolute impunity; Roman Catholic politicians have been in the vanguard of liberalizing abortion laws and yet still been welcome at Mass and at high table with church dignitaries; leading theologians cannot agree on exactly what papal infallibility means; and there is not even consensus on the meaning and significance of Vatican II relative to previous church teaching. Such a Church is as chaotic and anarchic as anything Protestantism has thrown up.

Further, if Dr. Gregory wants to include as part of his general concept of Protestantism any and all sixteenth century lunatics who ever claimed the Bible alone as sole authority and thence to draw conclusions about the plausibility of the perspicuity of scripture, then it seems reasonable to insist in response that discussions of Roman Catholicism include not simply the Newmans, Ratzingers and Wotjylas but also the Kungs, Rahners, Schillebeeckxs and the journalists at the *National Catholic Reporter*. And why stop there? We should also throw in the sedevacantists and Lefebvrists for good measure. They all claim to be good Roman Catholics and find their unity around the Office of the Pope, after all. Let us not exclude them on the dubious grounds that they do not support our own preconceived conclusions of how papal authority should work. At least Protestantism has the integrity to wear its chaotic divisions on its sleeve.

Moving on from the issue of authority, we find that Dr. Gregory also argues that religious persecution is a poisonous result of the confessionalisation of Europe into warring religious factions. Certainly, the bloodshed along confessional lines in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was terrible, but doctrinal disagreements did not begin with the Reformation. The New Testament makes it clear that serious doctrinal conflict existed within the church even during apostolic times (I hope I am allowed, for the sake of argument, to assume that the New Testament is perspicuous enough for me to state that with a degree of confidence); and the link between church and state which provided the context for bloodshed over matters of theological deviancy was established from at least the time of Priscillian in the late fourth century. It was hardly a Protestant or even a Reformation innovation.

When it comes to the empirical facts of Catholic persecution, Dr. Gregory only mentions the Inquisition twice. That is remarkably light coverage given its rather stellar track record in all that embarrassing auto da fe business. Moreover, he mentions it first only in a Reformation/post-Reformation context. Yet Roman Catholic persecution of those considered deviants was not simply or even primarily a response to Reformation Protestantism but a well-established pattern in the Middle Ages. No doubt

the Spanish Jews and Muslims, the Cathars, the Albigensians, the Lollards, the Hussites and many other religious deviants living before the establishment of any Protestant state might have wished that their sufferings had received a more substantial role in the narrative and more significance in the general thesis. Sure, Protestantism broke the Roman Catholic monopoly on persecution and thus played a shameful and ignominious part in its escalation; but it did not establish the precedents, legally, culturally or practically.

Finally, the great lacuna in this book is the printing press. Dr. Gregory has, as I noted above, done brilliant work in putting self-understanding back on the historical agenda and thus of grounding the history of ideas in historical realities rather than metaphysical abstractions. The danger with this, however, is that material factors can come to be somewhat neglected. His thesis - that Protestantism shattered the unified nature and coherence of knowledge and paved the way for its secularization - does not take into account the impact of the easy availability of print. The printed book changed everything: it fuelled literacy rates and it expanded the potential for diversity of opinion. I suspect there is a very plausible alternative, or at least supplementary, narrative to the 'Protestantism shattered the unified nature and coherence of knowledge' thesis: the printing press did it because it made impossible the Church's control of the nature, range, flow and availability of knowledge.

Ironically, the printing press is one of the great success stories of pre-Reformation Catholic Europe. One might argue that it was a technological innovation and thus not particularly 'Catholic' in that sense. That is true; but for some years after it was invented it was unclear whether it would be successful enough to replace medieval book production. In fact, its success was significantly helped by the brisk fifteenth century trade in printed breviaries and missals and the indulgences produced to fund war against the Ottomans. In other words, it was the vibrancy of late medieval Catholic piety, of which Dr. Gregory makes much, that ensured the future of the printing press and thereby the shipwrecking of the old, stable forms of knowledge.

The Roman Catholic Church knew the danger presented by the easy transmission of, and access to, knowledge which the printing press provided. That is why it was so assiduous in burning books in the sixteenth century and why the Index of Prohibited Books remained in place until the 1960s. I well remember being amazed when reading the autobiography of the analytic philosopher and one-time priest, Sir Anthony Kenny, that he had had to obtain special permission from the Church to read David Hume for his doctoral research in the 1950s. At the start of the twenty-first century, Rome may present herself as the friend of engaged religious intellectuals in North America but she took an embarrassingly long time even to allow her people free access to the most basic books of modern Western thought. Women in Britain had the vote, Elvis (in my humble opinion) had already done his best work and The

Beatles and The Rolling Stones were starting to churn out hits before Roman Catholics were free to read David Hume without specific permission from the Church.

Of course, Dr. Gregory knows about the Index; but he seems to see it as a response to Protestantism, not as an extension of the Church's typical manner of handling deviation from its central tenets and practices which stretched back well before the Reformation. And therein lies the ironic, tragic, perplexing flaw of this brilliant and learned book: Dr. Gregory sets out to prove that Protestantism is the source of all, or at least many, of the modern world's ills; but what he actually does is demonstrate in painstaking and compelling detail that medieval Catholicism and the Papacy with which it was inextricably bound up were ultimately inadequate to the task which they set - which they claimed! - for themselves. Reformation Protestantism, if I can use the singular, was one response to this failure, as conciliarism had been a hundred years before. One can dispute the adequacy of such responses; but only by an act of historical denial can one dispute the fact that it was the Papacy which failed.

Thanks to the death of medieval Christendom and to the havoc caused by the Reformation and beyond, Dr Gregory is today free to believe (or not) that Protestantism is an utter failure. Thanks to the printing press, he is also free to express this in a public form. Thanks to the modern world which grew as a response to the failure of Roman Catholicism, he is also free to choose his own solution to the problems of modernity without fear of rack or rope. Yet, having said all that, I for one find it strange indeed that someone would choose as the solution that which was actually the problem in the first place.

- See more at: <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/pay-no-attention-to-that-man-behind-the-curtain-roman-catholic-history-and-the-e.php#sthash.WYnq1XND.dpuf>

Rod Dreher, writing from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, comments on Trueman's arguments:

Trueman points out that it's simply not true that Catholicism today offers a unified doctrinal front in the face of Protestant disarray. That really is true, and something that Protestants who despair of the messes in their own churches don't see when they idealize Rome. As Trueman points out, the Roman Catholic Church is enormous, and contains within it believers — even priests and theologians — who believe and teach things completely opposed to each other, and even to authoritative Catholic teaching. I have spoken to Catholics in Catholic educational institutions who are afraid to voice public support for Roman Catholic teaching on homosexuality for fear of being punished by the Roman Catholic authorities who run those institutions. The institution of the papacy has done little or nothing to arrest this. Maybe there's not much it can do. The

point is, though, that having a Catechism and having a Magisterium presided over by a Pope is no guarantee that your church won't fall into *de facto* disarray. Roman Catholicism *on the ground* in the United States is effectively a Mainline Protestant church.

That is not an argument against Catholic ecclesiology, strictly speaking. But it's something that Catholics who defend it against Protestantism must account for. And it's fair to ask why it is that having such a strong hierarchical and doctrinal system has produced at least two generations of American Catholics who don't know their faith, and who are no different from non-Evangelical Protestants, or non-believers.

Dreher goes on to point out that contemporary Romanism is in quite bad shape, and that Catholics in general certainly cannot be counted on to know their church's teaching, much less practice them. In other, the same Roman ecclesiology that failed in the run up to the Reformation is still failing. (Of course, Dreher is no friend to the Reformation, but he does provide another perspective.)

Trueman offers further thoughts on the state of the papacy here:
<http://christchurchreformed.com/a-tale-of-two-popes-carl-trueman/>

Dear xxxx,

A move to the RCC is a big deal, I think, and should be carefully considered, even with the paucity of other local options you have. To be sure, the RCC is part of the "visible body of Christ" and confesses the ecumenical creeds with us. I agree with Hodge on that point, so a move to Rome is not apostasy *per se*. Nevertheless, it is a huge step backwards, like seeking medical care from a medieval witch doctor when you could go to UAB hospital. You're just not going to get the same kind of pastoral care and teaching you will get in a good evangelical church, and your family will suffer because of it.

On baptism, I have written quite a bit showing that Rome's view is actually "watered down" compared to the Reformers. This is one of the ironies of the Reformation – the Reformers actually a much stronger view of baptismal efficacy than Rome, even though today most people would not know that.

The Lord's Supper, of course, is understood quite differently, though again, there is a range of views in Rome, and some are not as problematic as others. I think reading Jim Jordan's *The Liturgy Trap* (if you have not already done so) would be a good idea. Other aspects of Roman doctrine, such as merit-theology, their understanding of Mary and the papacy, non-paedcomm, etc. are problems. In addition, there is a disturbing trend towards pluralism in some strands of Roman Catholicism...

My counsel to you is similar. It's not that I don't care. It's that the problems are so great on *both* sides of the Prot/RC divide that if someone feels called to deal with the problems on one side of that line rather than the other, I can't say they

are absolutely wrong to do so. I would advise anyone in the Roman church to work hard for its reform. But I know that you are in a difficult spot given the other options. I have joked before, "Better Catholic than Baptist!" – though admittedly, it's easy for me to offer that in jest since I am more familiar with problems of baptistic American Christianity and deal with it more regularly.

That being said, I do have an issue with anyone who views Rome as *the* church or *the* answer to what ails us (in other words, anyone who actually believes Rome's self-claims). Rome's claims, even softened by V2, still strike me as over-the-top pretentious. I think Protestants still have good reasons for protesting (<http://www.leaderu.com/ftissues/ft9508/opinion/leithart.html>). The bottom line is that Rome is not what she claims to be, and her claims are actually a repeat of the Galatian crisis (cf. Gal. 2)...

Ultimately, I think the answer to your questions (insofar as there is an answer) is not going to be found in any of our traditions as they presently exist. The future of the church is not simply mass absorption into this or that form of the church as it presently exists. It's going to be something different. Something new. Or to be more precise, treasures old, treasure new kind of thing – rooted in tradition but also manifesting the freshness of the Spirit who continually leads his people to sing a new song. But we must be patient; we cannot force God's hand. I have often figured that, since any reunification of the church seems plainly beyond any human powers, that God is going to have to bring it about through some dramatic means – perhaps a massive persecution that forces true believers of all traditions to come together, or perhaps a benevolent dictator who, in Constantinian and Nicene fashion, drags together various Christian leaders from all over and requires them to work out their differences. Who knows what God might do?

In my opinion, the optimal form of the church is both reformed *and* catholic, rooted in the magisterial Reformers (who were the apex of the medieval church, ala Schaf) and open to new growth and maturation (especially from the best biblical theologians of the present era). I think churches that best approximate this are found in the CREC (hopefully TPC is one of them), the missional-liturgical wing of the PCA (e.g., Redeemer Austin), and among some conservative Anglicans.

You know the main issues to work through with Rome. I would assess them this way (in brief – each topic is worthy of a long essay):

[1] Liturgical

- It seems to me we now have better liturgies, hymnody, and sacramental theology available to us in Ref-cath circles. For me, going to Rome would be taking several steps back. (I also think what we have is superior to BCP worship, so I'd have the same problem with Anglicanism.)
- Rome is not open to paedocomm. Another huge step backwards for me.
- The issue of idolatry persists, even though Rome in many places has been greatly chastened by Protestantism. Jim's work on the 2nd commandment is still persuasive to me.

[2] Doctrinal

- Papal infallibility is just as misguided as extreme, hyper-individualistic versions of sola scriptura. It solves nothing and was a novelty (even Romanists admit that it was a "developing" doctrine – but if so, it cannot serve the epistemological function that so many anti-protestant polemics claim for it)
- The Marian doctrines go far beyond what biblical typology warrants (and I certainly hold to a high view of Mary; see, e.g., my 12/7/08 sermon and notes)
- In my opinion, Rome still lags well behind Ref-cath theologians in soteriology. They just don't understand Paul very well. As I said at lunch, I do not think Rome holds to a damnable version of justification necessarily – we are not averted by believing in the right doctrine. But I still find much crisper theology in our circles than theirs all across the board. Yes, the latest Pope [Benedict] is a brilliant man. But there are still better biblical scholars and theologians on our side.
- While V2 brought Prots closer (we're now just 'separated brethren'), it did so at the price of moving towards soteriological pluralism, even universalism. Rome is just way too fuzzy on too many things that matter. It's as if Rome went from too exclusive to too inclusive – and yet somehow still managed to keep non-Roman Trinitarian Christians at an arm's length when it comes to communion!

[3] Practical

- Rome's parish life, pastoral care, and community development are often lacking. "On the ground," where it most counts, I know very few Roman Catholic congregations that are anywhere near as healthy as a solid evangelical church. That's important when you're considering where to raise a family (or where you want your grandkids raised). Rome has shown she is no more willing to discipline than typical Protestant churches, and her policies with regard to things like divorce are often laughable, not only in how unbiblical they but also how unworkable they are. I would take the Roman church more seriously if her own membership took more seriously her positions on birth control, abortion, etc. I think if you were to go to Rome, and keep your eyes open, you'd end up just about as frustrated as you are right now.
- Clerical celibacy is not only stupid (Paul says demonic in 1 Tim. 4), it creates a host of practical problems. Why can't Rome repent of something so obviously misguided? It's already created a huge sexual scandal in the church – indeed several such scandals over the centuries. It also contributes to the global shortage of priests.
- While claiming to be 'catholic,' Rome has its own form of sectarianism. Indeed, that's what Rome is: one big sect, just as sectarian as any fundamentalist, KJV-only Baptist congregation. It has functionally excommunicated millions of baptized faithful Christians. Contra Rome's claim, it is obvious the fruit of the Spirit is being borne on other branches of the Christian tree. It's hard for me to see how this is not the Galatian heresy all over again. In this sense, we're out-catholic-ing the catholics because we are open to shared communion. For me, to become Catholic would be to become *less* catholic. Or to put it another way, I am too catholic to become catholic. And, yes, I did just ruin all those "is the Pope Catholic? Jokes – he may be Roman, but he is not catholic."

Now, there are certainly some areas where Rome far excels us. We should not

overlook these:

[1] Rome has produced an elite group of “culture warriors” who are doing a better job than anyone at fighting with the secularists on the front lines. Rome has produced many great writers, scholars, cultural critics, statesman, etc. Her size alone makes her formidable, and we can probably thank Rome for keeping political correctness off our backs for this long when it comes to church life. Rome acts as a helpful buffer between state-imposed egalitarianism and the rest of the church. We all benefit when Rome has a conservative pope.

In addition, Rome also continues to produce great, great men and women in all kinds of fields. You’re not likely going to find a PCA member make it to the Supreme Court. But Rome gets them there. They produce better art and literature, by far – largely as a result of a more holistic, sacramental worldview than you find in low church evangelicalism. (But remember that while the American permutation of the Reformation has gone in a low church, individualistic direction, this was not the stance of the original Reformers.)

[2] Rome is also better at mercy ministries, though thankfully this gap is closing some as Protestants recover the importance of deed ministry. Still, we’ve never had a Mother Teresa.

The social teaching and practices of the Roman church demand respect. Cooperation in this area (e.g., the March for Life) is very good to see.

[3] Rome is stronger governmentally, though not by much and not as much as it might appear. But still: There is no trans-national Prot body anything like Rome. Frankly, I am drawn to a heriarchical, episcopal/ conciliar structure of government. I would not even have a problem with giving the bishop of Rome pride of place in a conciliar model of government (but without all the infallibility garbage). So, while Rome goes too far in some ways, I am jealous of them in this area.

While I believe baptismal succession is more foundational, I have no objections to a doctrine of apostolic succession as well. What I *do* have a problem with is a doctrine of apostolic succession that is used to unchurch millions of faithful, fruitful believers. I believe in apostolic succession in a sense – but I also believe I belong to that succession every bit as much as Pope Benedict, and I would dare him or anyone else to prove otherwise. Paul claims he was the last of the apostles, but any church that is faithful to apostolic doctrine, practice, and mission (after all, the word “apostle” means ‘sent one,’ so an apostolic church is a missional church) is part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church – and in that sense, stands in succession to the apostles, building on their one and for all foundation.

I think the problem with a really hard doctrine of apostolic succession is that it objectifies the office of the ministry. When this happens, having the right credential ends up trumping other considerations, including moral and theological qualifications. You can see this perhaps more easily in Anglicanism,

but it's also a problem for Rome.

But, then, at the same time, church government has so degenerated in many branches of the Prot church that they have only a shadow of the ministerial office. So perhaps when it comes to apostolic office, we should speak of degrees of faithfulness, not simply an 'in' or 'out.'

I've had numerous email conversations on apostolic succession with high Anglican friends and I'd be happy to share them with you.

[4] Another attraction of Rome is its feel, its ethos, its history. This seems to be what is getting at you.

Rome is huge. There is something thrilling about being a part of something global and diverse.

It's more obviously ancient (even though Ref-caths trace their faith back to same origin – the history is messy, and I think more favorable to Prots, but this takes a lot of arguing to demonstrate). Roman Catholics never have to deal with the "Where was your church before the Reformation?" question (though they should have to deal with questions like, "Where was your Pope at Nicea? Oh wait, he wasn't!").

Rome is very alluring for this reason – it feels so weighty, so solid, so enduring, so indestructible. Nothing in the Prot world, not even Anglicanism, can generate that same sense of connectedness with history and the rest of the globe.

What's the verdict, then?

"On the balance and considering the alternatives..." I think there are legit reasons for wanting to go to Rome, but (to my mind at least) more compelling reasons for staying put. If I went to Rome, I would gain a few things perhaps, but I would lose many, many more important things. I have more of what I believe the church needs to have right where I am, and so I'm in place where I can patiently wait to see what God brings out of our present denominational mess. If a genuinely global catholic denomination forms, I'll be first in line to sign up. But such a church would undoubtedly have to look quite eclectic by today's standards, and certainly would not share the baggage of Rome's ecclesial claims.

Here's another hammer: You say you are drawn to Rome's strong sense of authority. But what about the pastoral authority you are under right now? Why not obey the pastor and elders you have in the church you are in? You don't have to go hunting for church authority; it is near at hand. In a sense, God's providence becomes a strong argument for not crossing the Tiber. God has placed you in a Prot context; the burden of proof is on making a switch, not staying put. Honestly, I'm not sure that enough arguments can be marshaled in favor of making the jump, no matter how frustrated you get with the Prot culture of which you are a part, and no matter how many of the Roman distinctives you find yourself persuaded to believe. I think there's bound to be something

sanctifying in striving for contentment (and perhaps a little reform) in your present context. My prayer for you is that you'll find a place where you can use your considerable gifts to bless others in the church body.

I think our tendency is to focus on, and even exaggerate, the errors of the place where we are, and to gloss over the errors of the place we'd rather be. But when I weigh the options in the balance, I still think the scale tips pretty heavily in the direction of staying in (or getting in, if possible) a Ref-cath church context, even if it meant driving a longer distance or moving to a new city. That's my counsel for anyone considering a move to Rome.

I could write endless emails and recommend countless books on these issues. But at the end of the day, what I really want to do with you is get together and pray. I want to be a true Spiritual friend to you, and that means seeking God together. I hope we can do that soon. This is far more than an intellectual crisis for you, and I would be very unpastoral if I reduced it to that.

My 2 cents,
RL

Rome uses Matthew 16 to make its claims for Peter as the first pope. Some evangelicals say that Jesus really meant he would build his church on Peter's confession, not Peter himself. But that's a stretch. The church is certainly built on Peter – and the other apostles, with Jesus as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20, 1 Pt. 2; Rev. 21-22). However, the foundation is laid once and for all. The apostolic generation was unique. Paul says he was the last apostle – that is, the last to be an eye witness to the risen Christ and commissioned by him (1 Cor. 15; Acts 9). Judas was replaced – there was a true succession. But after James died, later in Acts, there was no apostolic succession. But if there are no more apostles, there can be no new revelation (plug all the arguments for cessation I have developed elsewhere in here) and there can be no church officer who possesses infallibility (or universal jurisdiction).

Note that even in the first century, Peter did not have universal jurisdiction over the church. He and Paul agreed to a division of labor (or at least specialization – Gal. 2). In Acts 15, Peter is present at the Jerusalem Council, but James presides; indeed, James issues the decree with the "I judge..." as if he were speaking ex cathedra.

Further, Romans 11 proves that the church located in Rome has no guarantee of indefectibility and is just as susceptible to apostasy as the other churches (e.g., those addressed in Rev. 2-3). Indeed, the words of Rom. 11 are still very applicable in addressing the pride and presumption of the church that is based there.

Given your struggles, I think Philip Schaff's Principle of Protestantism may be just what the doctor ordered. Schaff's book is dated a bit (19th century), but still very relevant. He argues that the Reformation is the greatest act of the catholic church to date, that the Reformers stood in continuity with the patristic and medieval church, and the Reformation was an organic unfolding of the church's previous history. Good stuff. This book was recently reprinted by Wipf and Stock.

Specifically dealing with authority, I'd start with Keith Mathison's The Shape of Sola Scriptura. There are some other goos books, so if you're still a quandary after reading Mathison, let me know.

Take care,
RL

Note the sentiment expressed by C. S. Lewis after he received a letter from an acquaintance that was converting to Rome, "Though you have taken a way which is not for me I nevertheless can congratulate you - I suppose because your faith and joy are so obviously increased. Naturally, I do not draw from that the same conclusions as you, but . . . I believe we are very near to one another . . . In the present divided state of Christendom, those who are at the heart of each division are all closer to one another than those who are at the fringes . . . Let us by all means pray for one another: it is perhaps the only form of 'work for re-union' which never does anything but good. God bless you."

If Lewis, great churchman and medievalist that he was, saw no compelling to reason to convert to Rome (and that, despite his friendship with Tolkien), then why should I? You have failed to convince me that I am missing anything by not joining myself to the bishop of Rome, and the more I study these issues, the more I am convinced that to make that kind of move would actually be a net negative...

You say that reading the Nicene canons made you think the early church was more like Rome than anything in evangelicalism? I flat out disagree. Frankly, what happened at Nicea was more like the Westminster assembly than Vatican 2. Nicea was called by a magistrate like Westminster; the resolution that drove the creed was derived from a consensus reading of the Bible, just like the confessional material produced at Westminster; and the Pope was not present at Nicea, just as he was absent from Westminster. Checkmate, my friend! If you study your history, you will be a Protestant forever!

The church was far better off without the papacy. The pope's infallibility has solved nothing, and indeed, nothing holds Rome apart from the other two branches of the Church (Protestantism and Orthodoxy) more than its arrogant claims about a Petrine office. The church did far better in those early centuries, and was far more united, before the bishop in Rome arrogantly took to himself titles and supposed powers, never granted by Jesus.

That analogy only works if you assume that Protestant churches are no more legitimate than "home churches." I would strenuously object to that analogy, and for a variety of reasons (and I suppose you would as well). It all comes back to one question: How do you define/identify the church? I think Reformed bodies qualify (as do Roman and Orthodox parishes, for that matter). A "home church" (at least in the sense I am familiar with) would not. I think the basic marks of the church are fairly well established, so I think there's some ground to stand on in making that distinction. I know a church when I see one and a "home church" isn't one at all. His "communion service" is not communion at all, but a Bible study followed by a snack.

I think your response with your friend was the correct one, but when a Roman or Orthodox Christian says, "Sure, we'd love to take communion...just commit and become one of us first," that's an entirely different kind of thing. In the case of you and your friend, you are seeking communion "within biblical parameters," as you put it; basically you're saying you have to be in a church and his "home church" does not qualify, and there are strong biblical and historical reasons for saying that.

As a Reformed catholic, I believe I am duty bound to have fellowship with Christians with whom I may differ on any number of issues. The Roman and Orthodox communions are not catholic in that sense at all. They only allow fellowship on their own highly specified terms, which go far beyond the basic marks of the Christian life or the basic marks of the church. In light of Galatians 2, what would Paul say about a group of Christians who functionally excommunicate all other believers simply because they do not believe in the immaculate conception and assumption of Mary -- doctrines which I am quite certain Paul himself never heard of?! I think I know what Paul would say to that. I applaud Rome and the East for all that they have maintained from the early church, but I lament the way that have gone far beyond what the Bible warrants in their terms of admission/communion.

Let me add one more line of argument: What would Paul say to those who, following Unam Santam, claimed that salvation is only possible through union with and submission to the one who holds Peter's office and sits in Peter's chair? I think Paul would say, "Here we go again." Paul already fought that battle in Gal. 2. In that episode, Peter functionally excommunicated Gentile believers. In doing so, he denied the gospel. And so for a period of time, there were true believers (people who were "saved") who were certainly not in submission to Peter; and those who were with Peter, submitting to him and following him in

his error, were the ones guilty of denying the gospel and risking their own salvation. This is the most powerful anti-Roman apologetic I know. Unam Sactam is supposedly an ex cathedra declaration and yet it flatly contradicted by the circumstances described in Gal. 2.

Not at all a complete response, but all I can do at the moment...

RL

Ok, so were the claims of Unam Sactam true before that particular ex cathedra declaration. To me, it seems incredible that they were, given Gal. 2, in which it is precisely those who are out of fellowship with Peter (because he has excluded them) who are in the right, and Peter himself is walking out of line with the gospel. So what good was union with Peter during that period of time? It certainly wasn't necessary to salvation; indeed, union with Peter during that time period deeply obscured the way to salvation. So the apostle Paul would have pummeled the Unam Sactam decree had he encountered. He believed salvation was found in union with Christ, and Peter be damned if he is going to add requirements to the pure and simple gospel. Union with Peter was not part of Paul's message of salvation and to suggest such is laughable.

But then that means Unam Sactam has to be the outcome of a process of doctrinal development. But that would mean the requirements for salvation are fluid, changing over the course of history. How can that be? How can there ever be comfort in the gospel if the gospel is so malleable that it can be turned into a different message (indeed, its opposite message) over time?

Besides that, what possible justification can there be for the development of this kind of doctrine/ oh sure, I can see why greedy popes, wanting to expand their power and funding, would want to claim they control salvation is the way Unam Sactam suggests. But to pretend that this is "the church Jesus started" or that it has anything to do with the religion of the NT is just plain laughable.

There are a lot of other problems with Unam Sanctam. But I don't think you've provided even the least plausible defense of explanation fore it. Everyone agrees it was perhaps the most extreme statement of papal supremacy, but if you go Roman, you are stuck with it, and stuck defending it. You can join in with other Romanists playing games to make it somehow "work" with things like VC2, but I am not impressed with those attempts...

Where is Rome out of step with tradition? With the rest of the church?

Celibacy (differs from east and prots)

No paedocomm (differs from east and some prots)

Marian doctrines (differs from east, assumption vs dormition) - unheard of for

first 5 centuries (differs from most prots)
Veneration of icons, statues (differs from east somewhat, differs from prots radically)
Papal infallibility (differs from east and prots)
Universal bishop as opposed to conciliarism (differs from east and prots)
Praying to dead saints (would have caused controversy with Jews; radical difference with prots)
Transubstantiation - could not have been patristic explanation of real presence (differs from east and especially prots)

To dissent from Rome's position on one point makes you a Protestant, does it not? You have to submit your "private judgment" to the church, so to go Roman means you can no longer have any opinion, or even a stray thought, about these things. Your mind is bound to the mind of the church.

We prots are at least as in step with the early church as Rome – indeed, I would argue moreso. That's what I have been saying – history and tradition (the really, really old tradition is on our side)...

Rome is basically dispensational. The old covenant church did not have celibacy for priests, did not have a permanent office of infallible interpreter or universal jurisdiction, did not bow before images/icons, allowed children to the covenant renewal meal, etc. Rome is too full of novelties for me to ever buy in. It is certainly not what it claims to be – the church of the ages, the church Jesus founded, the one true church, etc.

Tolkien would not like this bit I'm going to do it anyway. What is the papacy?

"One apostle to rule them all, one apostle to find them, One apostle to bring them all and *in the darkness bind them.*"

Of course, all of that makes what you're doing with Romanism all the more difficult for me. Sadly, these types of issues can indeed come between close friends. I have to admit it's quite frustrating when I read things like what you say at the end of your email: "I don't see how Christianity makes sense without a Church to give you dogma." The reason I find it frustrating is that you are in a church that confesses dogma every Sunday of the year, using the ecumenical dogmas of the whole church, namely, the Nicene Creed, Apostles Creed, and Athanasian Creed. How you could say or imply that we Protestants don't have dogma just completely baffles me. ALL Protestant Christians, whether Presbyterian, Baptist, Ev Free, Bible church, etc., confess the same basic, core dogmas -- the Trinity, the divinity and humanity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ. The Westminster Confession (itself a dogmatic document

produced by the church) says "decrees and determinations" -- in other words, *dogmas* -- declared by synods and councils "are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the word of God, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God." The Greek term *dogmata* (often translated as "decree") shows up in Acts 16:4, with reference to the decrees of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Certainly Protestants have dogmas in that sense; we believe councils can and have issued authoritative decrees. But the dogmas of Acts 16:4 were not issued unilaterally by the pope (Peter) since James was clearly the chief apostle in the council, and the decrees resulted from church leaders (elders and apostles) working together to reach consensus by following the leading of the Spirit through the Word (in this case, Amos 9, which James quotes). At some point, you have to get past simplistic, naive slogans that do not come close to doing justice to the Protestant side. Even if you are inevitably going to become a Roman Catholic, you should want to avoid caricatures of Protestantism and make sure that you really understand what it is you're rejecting. To say things like, "Protestantism is built on sand" (as I've heard you say) is no more helpful or constructive than me saying "Roman Catholic priests are pedophiles." Real discussion requires making a real effort to understand and deal with the best representation of any given position. It also seems to me you're only looking at the supposed authority of Rome's dogmas (based on the claim of the pope's infallibility when speaking *ex cathedra*), and not paying much attention to the content of those dogmas (which is just as problematic as the claims of papal infallibility); obviously, I think that's a serious mistake. Rome's claims to authority have to be examined, of course, but that examination has to include an evaluation of what Rome has actually said when speaking with whatever authority she possesses....

Blessings,
RL

Look at Gal. 1:8-9. Look at Acts 17:10-12. Did the Galatian or Berean Christians need an infallible interpreter between them and Paul, or between them and the scriptures they searched? Why did they think they needed to test Paul's teaching against the scriptures and why did they assume they were competent to do so?

Who are the Galatians supposed to rely on in interpreting angels and apostles who corrupt the gospel?

Paul assumes basic interpretive competency. He does because [1] they had been taught (yes, taught!) the truth; [2] the basic message is perspicuous, so simple, even a child can get it (cf. 2 Tim. 3); [3] they possessed the Holy Spirit to lead them into all truth.

The phrase you've used, "the church must interpret scripture" -- what exactly does that mean? What is the meaning of the "church" in this phrase? Is it the

communion of the saints, as the nicene creed defines the church? Or just the clergy? Or more exclusively the pope? Or the pope when he speaks ex cathedra? And if the last, how do you KNOW when he is speaking ex cathedra?

Once the church interprets Scripture for me, where is this interpretation of scripture to be found? If i want to know what Psalm 27 means, for ex, where do I go? Isn't it convenient that the pope has never written an infallible commentary on a single passage of Scripture? But if not, doesn't that mean you lack an infallible interpretation of Scripture just as much as the guy down at the Bible church?

But let's say the Pope did produce a set of infallible commentaries. Would that solve the problem? Wouldn't the commentaries still have to be interpreted? And so we have just pushed it back a step – now instead of fighting over what the Bible says, we fight over what the Pope says the says. You can see where this is going – we are either going to have an infinite regress of infallible interpreters, never arriving at an answer, or at some point we are going to have admit we are thrown onto the fallibility of our own private judgment as to what the text means. Any interpretation still has to be interpreted.

But I do not think this leads us to a skepticism. Perhaps it would if there were no Holy Spirit, or if God mumbled his Word. But that's not the case. We have the Spirit to lead us into the truth. The Scriptures, in their essence, are clear. We do have a heritage of interpretation of the Bible in the church that can help guide us.

Frankly, I think conversation we are having will lack integrity unless you start answering questions I've raised. If you believe the RC position, or are inclined to it, or even want to "test drive" it, I do not think it is intellectually honest to evade the questions I have raised for you in email after email, plus in personal discussion. you said the burden of proof is on whoever makes a claim; ok, state your claim and then offer proof.

The papacy solves nothing.

Some questions: How do we know he can infallibly interpret the Bible? Where is that claim made and how is it proven? What historical examples do we have of the pope using his powers to actually settle a controversial matter? (There are none.)

How are the criteria for the pope's ex cathedra declarations known? Where is the canon of infallible pronouncements? How do we know when the criteria are met?

Who interprets what the pope says for us? Why should we think that god mumbled through the apostles but speaks clearly through their successors?

A dialogue, showing Romanists have solved the epistemological "who says?" issue:

"I won't be Catholic because I believe it's wrong to worship Mary"

"Catholics don't worship Mary"

"They do in Latin America."

"But they're not practicing *true* Catholicism. Priests from the US are trying to help them stop worshipping Mary"

"Latin American catholicism is not true Catholicism? Says who? How do you know? Wouldn't *they* say the opposite? I'm pretty sure they think they're being good catholics when they worship Mary."

"If you just read the documents on Mary from the pope, you'll see they carefully explain Catholics do not worship Mary, even though we honor her greatly."

"According to *your interpretation* of those documents. But Latin American Catholics obviously interpret them differently. Maybe Catholicism in the US has been corrupted by Protestant influence, and they're the *real* Catholics in Latin America."

"But if you just read the documents...."

"If you expect individual catholics to be able to interpret papal decrees, why can't you expect them to interpret the Bible? It seems you're laying the groundwork for the doctrine of sola Scriptura."

"Umm..."

"Question: If the Catholic church in American started to worship Mary the way Latin American Catholics do, would you remain Catholic and go along with the practice? Or stand against it? And on what basis would you stand against it?"

"Look, our priests know better. They will not allow Mariolotry."

"But the priests in Latin America don't object to it. It's priests vs. priests. The pope has not resolved it, so who are you to step in and make a judgment. It's almost like you're a functioning Protestant..."

"Umm...well...."

"Again: How do you know your priests are right? Has the pope make an infallible declaration that the US priests are right and the Latin American priests wrong? Not that I have seen. Have those priests and people been disciplined by the church's heirarchy? And what if the next pope is a Latin American who

decides Mariology is indeed the true Catholic practice? Or further reinforces her role as a mediatrix? Or even crowns her the fourth person of the Trinity (not a Quaternity)? What then?"

"Look if you'd just read the documents..."

"There you go again, invoking the Protestant doctrine of private judgment....Next thing you know you'll be advocating sola scriptura and sola fide!"

Calvin on apostles creed: "In order to have a perfect explanation of the faith, then, we must have before our eyes what there is in Christ which pertains to confirming faith. For when we know its matter and substance, it will be easy to understand all its nature and character, as in a painting. The apostles' creed will take the place of a painting for us; in it the whole dispensation of our salvation is so expounded in all its parts that there is no single point omitted..."

Whose to say which catholicism is the right one? Why just assume the white, wealthy, educated RCCs who oppose Mary worship are right, and the dark skinned, uneducated priests and catholics to the south are wrong? Is that racist?

Sure, the multitude of Prot denoms are a problem -- but there are many versions of Roman Catholicism too!

If you moved to Mexico would you stay Catholic? Mexican Catholicism is, of course, full of syncretism, I think. But how could you object to it once you have given up private judgment?

How do you know worship of Mary and the saints, as carried out in Mexico, isn't Catholic? Lots of people read Catholic documents and look at Catholic practices and conclude *that's what it means to be Catholic*

How do you know worship of Mary is wrong? From reading scripture? It cannot be from the church since the church has not corrected or stopped the practice.

If you desire epistemological certainty...I suggest the following....

Study the foundations and history of the papacy....it is anything but certain...it guarantees nothing.

Ask: should I why trust my judgment about the truthfulness of Rome's claims about itself but not about Scripture's claims for itself?

Consider: Papal infallibility solves nothing (ex: Marian worship among Catholics in Latin America -- their priests say it's fine, priests here do not -- who's right? It sounds imperialistic to say the wealthy white priests have it right! Who's to say? The current Pope [Francis] has not.

Finally: Do what the psalmist in times of doubt/epistemological crisis -- turn to God.

Dear zzzz,

I know I said I wouldn't pester you about this stuff with emails, but I did want to throw a couple more things out as a way of follow-up to our lunch the other day.

First, this quotation from C. S. Lewis:

"The Roman Church where it differs from this universal tradition and specially from apostolic Christianity I reject. Thus their theology about the Blessed Virgin Mary I reject because it seems utterly foreign to the New Testament; where indeed the words "Blessed is the womb that bore thee" receive a rejoinder pointing in exactly the opposite direction. Their papalism seems equally foreign to the attitude of St. Paul toward St. Peter in the epistles. The doctrine of Transubstantiation insists on defining in a way which the New Testament seems to me not to countenance. In a word, the whole set-up of modern Romanism seems to me to be as much a provincial or local variation from the central, ancient tradition as any particular Protestant sect is. I must therefore reject their claim: though this, of course, does not mean rejecting particular things they say."

I'm sure there are thousands of Catholic apologists on the web who have dissected this quotation and attempted to refute it. My only point in throwing it out there is to show you that my interpretation of Catholicism's novelties and sectarian nature is not unique to me. Lewis also rejected Catholicism because it was neither truly Catholic nor truly traditional. Lewis was a pretty good historian, especially of the medieval period, and he believed the Roman Catholic church had innovated in all kinds of ways, which amounted to serious departures from apostolic (and patristic) Christian faith and practice. Sure, each one of his criticisms of Catholicism in the quotation needs to be further unpacked (especially the stuff about Peter), but it's still a very good summary of the core issues in just a few sentences. The more Lewis learned about the Catholic church and the medieval period, the further he moved away from Catholicism and the closer he got to classical Protestantism -- much to the consternation of his Catholic friends, like Tolkien.

Second, I'm curious how you think Catholics would resolve an issue like the one that was briefly mentioned in our lunch meeting. You and I both agree that the Catholic church in Latin America practices open worship of Mary. As you pointed out, Catholic priests in the US object and are trying to correct that. They would say that Latin American Catholicism, with its Mariology, is not

representative of *true* Catholicism. *But how do you know the US priests are right?* Read the teachings of the Catholic church on Mary for yourself; I have and, frankly, I see why Latin American Catholics end up doing what they do, even if the documents can be interpreted in other ways by priests in the US. What if it were suggested that US Catholics generally don't worship Mary because Catholicism here has been corrupted by Protestant influence, whereas the Latin American Catholics are really being *more faithful* to Catholic teaching? Has the pope resolved the issue between the US and Latin Catholics? If so, where and how? And if he hasn't, what is he waiting for? Where's that infallible and universal authority when you really need it? Either US priests are falsely accusing Catholics in Latin America of idolatry, or Latin American Catholics really are idolaters. *Which is it?* Either way, it would seem resolution is crucial. If the point of having a papacy is to guarantee certainly and unity, it seems this is a case where the pope needs to act – and yet he doesn't, allowing practices at least as diverse as any of the differences amongst various evangelical groups, to go on unchallenged. Where is Rome's vaunted authority and unity?

Obviously, priests and laymen in Latin America think they're being "good Catholics" when they worship Mary. A US priest might say, "Well, they're not reading the church's documents on Mary correctly." But then it's just priest vs. priest, Catholic vs. Catholic. Whose "private judgment" interpretation of the church's teaching is correct, and how do you know? What good is an infallible interpretation of Scripture if that infallible interpretation is still in need of interpretation? Does it settle anything? How do we know which view of Mary represents *true* Catholicism? And how is this any less problematic than having to discern between varieties of Protestantism? Is it possible that conservative Catholics and Protestants in the US are actually closer to one another than Catholics in the US and Catholics in Latin America? And if so, doesn't that raise huge questions about what it actually means to be Catholic in a global sense? Is the truth of Catholicism relative to where one happens to live? Is the Catholic church in Latin America the one true church there, even if it persists in (what we would both call) idolatry, and even if non-idolatrous, fully Trinitarian Protestant options are available there? How far can Rome stretch before she breaks? (Or before we have to call her unity a sham?) Of course, we could do the same thing with a variety of other issues Roman Catholics widely differ over amongst themselves, and we would find that their differences actually mirror differences amongst evangelicals – except the range of Catholic belief and practice is even more wildly diverse than what you find in evangelicalism (e.g., Nancy Pelosi remains a Catholic in good standing; Catholics are all over the place on the Bible, from conservative theories of inspiration to higher critical approaches; etc.).

I would further ask: If Mariolatry were to become the official teaching of the church (assuming it isn't already), then what? What if the next pope comes from Latin America, and simply takes the next step in the church's ever-developing, ever-evolving teaching on Mary, and openly declares she should be worshipped as a goddess, as is already practiced by millions and millions of Catholics in other parts of the world? It's not that far fetched, really, since it's already happening on such a wide scale and fits with the trajectory of increasing Marian devotion in the Catholic church for the last 1000 years. On what grounds can

Catholics in the US consistently oppose the Mariology of the Latin church, especially as they find themselves more and more the minority in terms of global Catholicism? How do they know that they have Catholicism right, and what will they do if Catholicism changes in the future? Sure, it's easy to side with the wealthy, white, educated (Protestantized?) priests of the US, over against their darker, poorer Latin American counterparts, but to simply dismiss Latin American Catholicism as a corruption of the real thing smacks of imperialism. *How do you judge when it's Catholic vs. Catholic on such a major issue, without falling into the (supposedly incoherent) Protestant insistence on private judgment? Will the true Catholics please stand up?*

Again, I don't mean to push too hard on these issues, and I don't want to come on too strong, but we've opened the discussion, so we might as well have at it. There are a zillion things to discuss, and my main goal is to try to scratch where you itch, rather than just give my own reasons for not being Catholic. But our lunch meeting raised a host of questions I wanted to bring up with you over time, and I know we can only get together face to face every so often.

Thanks,
RL

The Pitre book has a lot of good material, though there are a few things I'd object to (as I'm sure you'd expect). No doubt, most of the good stuff in the book you've already heard in my sermons on the Eucharist over the years. The ironic thing is that this whole project of looking at the Eucharist in light of the old covenant has been something Reformed biblical theologians have popularized long before Pitre's book. Scott Hahn, who wrote the forward to Pitre's book, has written some very good books, but he was infamous for taking stuff he learned from men like Jim Jordan and David Chilton when he was still a Protestant, and then using it in his Catholic books -- without attribution, of course.

I'll look at the website. It certainly looks interesting. I did watch the first 15 or so minutes of this video on this page:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/09/called-to-communion-welcomes-david-anders/>

It sounds like a lot like Philip Lee's book *Against the Protestant Gnostics* -- though Lee's solution is that Protestants should return to their Reformed Catholic roots, rather than turn to the Roman Catholic church.

Of course, I agreed with most everything David A. said about Calvin's doctrine of baptism and how many of his modern "heirs" have departed from that view. The only thing I would point out is that both Calvin and the Roman church departed from paedocommunion, which was the universal practice of the early church (and both Calvin and the Council of Trent acknowledged paedocommunion was ancient so why they felt free to disregard such a venerable and well attested patristic tradition remains a mystery to me).

Anyway, on that point at least, TPC (and Eastern Orthodoxy!) are far more faithful to the patristic consensus than either Rome or Calvin.

After the stuff on baptism, David starts talking about how Protestants believed that even the regenerate are so depraved they cannot do any works that please God. That is manifestly false. Calvin talks about this all the time in his commentaries. There's also an extended discussion of this in book 3 of the Institutes, showing that God accepts the works of his people, is pleased with them, and even rewards them with blessing in this life and the next, e.g.:

[When God] examines our works according to his tenderness, not his supreme right, **he therefore accepts them as if they were perfectly pure; and for this reason, although unmerited, they are rewarded with infinite benefits, both of the present life and also of the life to come. For I do not accept the distinction made by learned and otherwise godly men that good works deserve the graces that are conferred upon us in this life, while everlasting salvation is the reward of faith alone...**

Finally, while they [the Sophists] repeatedly inculcate good works, they in the meantime so instruct consciences as to discourage all their confidence that God remains kindly disposed and favorable to their works. **But we, on the other hand, without reference to merit, still remarkably cheer and comfort the hearts of believers by our teaching, when we tell them they please God in their works and are without doubt acceptable to him . . .**

[T]he promises of the gospel...not only make us acceptable to God but also render our works pleasing to him. And not only does the Lord adjudge them pleasing; he also extends to them the blessings which under the covenant were owed to observance of his law. **I therefore admit that what the Lord has promised in his law to the keepers of righteousness and holiness is paid to the works of believers, but in this repayment we must always consider the reason that wins favor for these works.**

I'll try to watch more of the video later.

Thanks,
RL

Consider Rome's authority and Prot divisions. Does Rome have the solution to Prot fracturing?

In 1 Cor, what is Paul's answer to their divisions, described in chapter 1? Does he appeal to Petrine/apostolic authority? Does he say they should all join the Cephas party since Peter (Cephas) has universal authority and infallibility? No, he doesn't solve their divisions through brute force or an appeal to authority; instead, he calls on them to practice LOVE –the kind of love he goes on to describe in 1 Cor. 13.

In the Pastoral epistles, prepping the church for a post-apostolic future, there is no mention of or appeal to the chair of Peter as a way to solve issues. Instead pastor is to teach, refute error, uphold the form of sound doctrine already delivered to the church, and set an example for his flock. Nothing like the papacy is in sight.

Contrary to Unam Sanctam, I don't think God's view of me depends on me being in fellowship with the local pastor of a church near Rome, Italy -- just the thought of it is preposterous!

Thus, Rome wrongly treats us as second class Christians, e.g., excluding us from the table in a replication of the Galatian heresy.

Union with Christ, not with the papacy, is key. If I am united to Christ, what could I lack (cf. 1 Cor. 3)? What could becoming Roman add? Jesus is the only Apostle I need. Jesus is the only Pope I need.

Unam sanctam is not only an attack on sola scriptura (the unique authority of Scripture) but also solus christus (salvation found in union with Jesus)...

To really get what Rome says we need, you'd not only have to have an infallible interpreter of scripture, but also infallible discipline, etc. Otherwise, the pope cannot come close to bringing the kind of epistemological comfort you are saying you want.

Did the church act infallibly when it excommunicated the east? Or Luther? Or when it did not excommunicate pedophile priests? If there is no infallibility in these judgments (and no one claims there is), you cannot rule out that some of the actions were wrong. And if the pope wrongfully excommunicated Luther, then what?

You cannot escape fallible interpretation. But this does not lead to skepticism. Why not? Because we have the Spirit. Because Scripture is clear. Because we the regula fidei and tradition of the church to help us along.

Obviously, I agree with the basic gist: One does not have to believe in "justification by faith" per se in order to be justified by faith. Sole fide is indeed the ecumenical doctrine, and thus should impel us not only to preach the gospel to all, but also to embrace all those who trust in the Christ of Scripture, whatever their other theological shortcomings. When sola fide is actually lived and embodied, we become far more ecumenical than many TR types have imagined. The TRs fail to see this because for them sola fide functions as a kind of

ideological boundary marker -- which is, ironically, a denial of sola fide if pressed to its logical limit.

Each section of your essay does a nice job contributing to the overall thesis. I'm sure your use of the NPP reading of Galatians will trouble some readers, but I think you're right. The only thing I would add is that the Judaizers' deficient eschatology actually led to a soteriological problem. By continuing to insist on the conditions of an outdated covenant (e.g., circumcision, Sabbath observances, etc.) as marks of membership in the people of God, they were actually demanding the covenant on their own terms. In my opinion, this devolves into a kind of corporate Pelagianism in the end. And so while I strongly affirm the NPP exegesis of Galatians, at the level of application, I think the OPP still works. This is why I have never believed in a total antithesis between NPP and OPP readings. And this is also why I still think a lot of the analogies drawn between the Judaizers and Rome still have at least a measure of validity. For example, traditional Roman Catholics who believe one must be in submission to the Pope to be saved are guilty of the Galatian heresy, even if they profess a version of justification ever so close to the Reformers. Likewise, Eastern Orthodox who say that only baptisms performed by their priests are valid are also guilty of the Galatian heresy, even if they also believe in some version of justification by faith. In other words, there is much more to the whole discussion than simply whether or not these other communions are closer to us in their understanding of justification than the typical Reformed/evangelical person believes. The ecclesiology bears upon the soteriology and vice versa.

I certainly appreciate your attempt to root the Reformation in the catholic history of the church; as Schaff said, the Reformation was the greatest act of the catholic church since the apostles. Luther was simply unfolding the best of the historical church's theology, and further sharpening it with his additional exegetical insights. He was no anti-traditional radical, as some later historians painted him. Once we get this, we have to completely re-conceive the way we view the Reformation. It was not a "start from scratch" kind of movement, but a purifying and re-creating of what was already there. I agree with the Kreeft quote ("The split of the Protestant Reformation began when a Catholic discovered a Catholic doctrine [*i.e.*, Sola Fide] in a Catholic book"), but I would add that that means the Protestants were the true Catholics of the 16th century(!). As Luther and Calvin repeatedly pointed out, they didn't leave the church; rather the "church" left them.

I do think it's tempting for us to over-minimize the real differences that existed in the 16th century (and to a lesser degree today), and I think you come close to doing that. I don't believe the Reformation can be reduced to semantics or mutual misunderstandings. The war was (in part) over a proper understanding of Scripture, and the Protestants were basically right. Insofar as the Protestants and Romanists have made peace today, it is because Rome has moved much closer to the Reformational understanding of Paul. All that being said, I think your basic point about the history still stands, and you are correct to even point out that Rome's theologians can and have made valuable contributions to our understanding of justification.

I think my biggest disagreement with your first section is your following Letham on Orthodoxy. I thought Letham's book was way too gentle with some of the problems in Orthodoxy. (James Payton is even worse!) While the East does not like to use these categories, their soteriology really is Semi-Pelagian. That doesn't mean they cannot be saved by God's grace, but it does mean they have a woefully deficient understanding of grace, and that is a disagreement with significant consequences all the way down the line. Letham glosses over that, and I find that problematic (simply because it's inaccurate, if for no other reason).

Having now watched quite a few people convert from Reformed catholicism into Roman and Eastern communions, often with very negative consequences for everyone involved, I think we need to do more than just show that Roman and Eastern Christians can be saved by grace and justified by faith. Indeed, we have to do more than argue that these communions are part of the visible church. The differences we have with these communions are not without consequence, and I have more and more concluded that we are not doing our own folks any favors if all we do is make the argument for ecumenicity without also sounding the alarm about all that will be lost if one converts from a Reformed catholic congregation to a Roman or Eastern body. I always thought of my ecumenical project in terms of church-to-church relations, e.g., we should view Romanists and Orthodox as fellow Christians and appeal to them live accordingly, we can team up with them on "culture of life" type projects, we should recognize their baptisms and governmental action as much as possible, etc. But I've learned (perhaps the hard way) that soft pedaling the grievous errors of these communions often ends up confusing our own people who may follow the argument about ecumenicity, but then lack the sophistication needed to understand why "Protestants still protest" (to borrow a phrase from Leithart). At the very least, our appeals to fellow Protestants/evangelicals to take an ecumenical view of Rome and Orthodoxy should be accompanied by a critique of the sectarianism of those other communions, e.g., neither communion will admit us to the table and the Orthodox won't even recognize us as having churches. Your essay makes it seem as if only those on the "sola fide" side have struggled with sectarianism. In truth, Rome and the East are far more guilty of the Galatian heresy today than most evangelical Protestants. That point alone should help dissuade those who would read your essay and contemplate conversion. If you're right, the last thing someone should do is consider becoming Roman or Orthodox, even though we will certainly be led to take a far more generous view of those communions. I trust you follow what I'm getting at here.

Of course, all of this also takes us back to the real meaning of the historical Reformation. While I think sola Scriptura and sola fide were certainly key components in the Reformation movement, I think we have focused too much attention there, to the neglect of other vitally important aspects of the Reformation. Luther and Calvin took a highly nuanced, but (in my opinion, anyway) ecumenical view of Rome. They believed Rome to be within the one, holy, catholic visible church. But they also believed she was full of doctrinal error (far beyond sola fide), required all kind of extra- and anti-biblical beliefs for salvation (e.g., papal authority), and were deeply enmeshed in idolatry (second

commandment issues). Many of these same issues -- especially liturgical idolatry -- continue to plague the East as well. I think it is vital to make clear that taking an ecumenical view of Rome and Orthodoxy does not at all entail a view that those communions are just as healthy as Reformed catholic bodies, or that they are equally valid places to be as a Christian. What's needed now is an ecumenical *critique* of our brothers in these other bodies. Love without truth is not really love.

The question about ecumenicity always resolves into the same basic issue: If we're so close, why are we still separated? Why not just join the Roman or Eastern church and be done with it? I think if we want to be truly ecumenical, we will not hesitate to point out how unecumenical these communions are in their self-claims, and that Reformational Protestantism is really the only location in the visible church where the ecumenical problem can be solved. Here alone do you find the ecclesial humility needed to move forward without losing the past, and to embrace those who differ from us on secondary issues, while still maintaining firm boundaries. Thus we must not hesitate to bear witness against their errors, in doctrine and government, but especially in liturgy. I know all of that goes far beyond the scope of your essay, but they are things that I feel a burden to address since I have written and taught extensively on the Galatian heresy and the ecumenism of sola fide.

Blessings,
RL

In terms of sola Scriptura, the best book is Keith Mathison's *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*. Many of the kinds of arguments that educated Roman Catholics make against Protestants are certainly valid against a certain kind of Protestantism. But they do not hold up against classic Protestantism, which took the authority of the church seriously. The Reformers were actually the "middle way" in the 16th century, standing as a *via media* between Rome and the Anabaptists. Rome would not allow the church to be corrected by the voice of God speaking in the Scriptures. The Anabaptists treated Scripture as a kind of private revelation, with every man reading it for himself. (Luther said if every man reads the Bible for himself, we'll just all go to hell in our own way.) The Reformers insisted the church really does have an authoritative voice, but it is not the ultimate authority. Scripture is the ultimate authority because it is the only infallible authority. This is why Rome later (much later!) had to add papal infallibility to its list of doctrines. In fact, I would say the real debate is not so much over where is authority found (Scripture vs. church/tradition), but where is infallibility found (Scripture vs. the pope). Van Til and Frame really help sort out the epistemological issues here.

Besides all that, Rome's claim of papal infallibility really solves nothing. Rome claims that Scripture is not always clear, so we need the Pope to tell us what it means. But who's going to tell us what the Pope meant? Doesn't the Pope need an infallible interpreter as well? And doesn't that lead, obviously, to an infinite

regress? Or are we each left to interpret the Pope's words for ourselves? Besides that, why should God be allowed to speak more clearly through the Pope than through the prophets and apostles? Roman Catholics fight all the time over exactly what the Pope has said, e.g., in an encyclical, so this is not hypothetical. Some form of "private judgment" (like the Bereans) is inevitable and not problematic. Rome, historically, silenced dissent by force, rather than allowing conversations and variations. Protestant denominationalism is a huge problem, but also the somewhat inevitable outcome of freedom. Is a tyrannical church that demands conformity and uniformity really a preferable alternative?

I'm also not at all convinced that Rome has the early church on its side. There was no infallible Pope in the first several centuries. There was no icon worship. The Marian doctrines were not yet a part of the church's faith. There were no indulgences or penances. Priests/pastors and bishops were married. Etc. The Roman Catholic church is full of historical novelties. Again, I think careful study of the 16th century will show the Reformers were the true Catholics, and were much closer to the doctrine and practice of the early church than their Roman Catholic counterparts. There is a reason why C. S. Lewis once said the more medieval he became in his outlook, the further he got away from the Roman Catholic church. Schaff helps develop this point, showing the Reformers were rooted in both Scripture and history.

That's all too brief, but I hope it helps a little,
RL

The pope isn't really Catholic. I am Catholic. To become Catholic, I would cease to be Catholic. I am too Catholic to become Catholic.

I haven't read an outside critique of EO that I really like. Much of what I would say about EO comes from reading their own theologians, talking to priests and people in EO, and attending occasional services. Books like Letham's and Payton's certainly have their place -- but in some cases, they either missed deep flaws in EO, or gave such an overly generous account of EO that it was no longer really accurate. I think we're still in need of a book written from a Westerner's perspective that appreciates what we can learn from the East while also giving a resounding critique where appropriate. I know a pastor who could write such a book (after having several people defect from his church to the East) and I have told him he needs to undertake this project since he could do it well....I'm not sure if he will though.

If I had more time, I could assemble some quotations from Luther and Calvin which are both highly critical of Rome, but show they still regarded Rome as part of the visible church. This was also basically the view of Charles Hodge, though by his day it was obviously very controversial. A helpful book is Philip Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism*; if you have not yet read it, I would put it at the top

of the list.

You wrote, "My paper is really trying to balance the scales with what I have witnessed, which is more the negativism towards these bodies, so I am less concerned about what you have talked about simply because it isn't on my radar screen." I fully understand that, and I would not say that you need to change, or expand, the focus, of your essay. It's great as it is. But I have now seen quite a few converts from Reformed congregations to RC and EO (thankfully, only two from my congregation) and so I'm sensitized to that side of things. The negative consequences of conversion include a ridiculous degree of spiritual pride (based on the view that they have now found THE one true church) and the unchurched of all their old Protestant friends (more pronounced with EO converts, since RCs will at least admit that we have churches and some semblance of the sacraments). It is a painful thing when a friend will no longer regard your congregation as an actual church (functionally excommunicating you), get rebaptized (obviously indicating they no longer believe the baptism they received at your church was valid), and no longer consider you to be a pastor in Christ's church in any meaningful sense. I've seen families ruptured -- and the source of schism was definitely on the side of those who migrated away from the Reformed congregation. Now, I know that converts to anything often have an inflated sense of what they've just found. And no doubt, "cage stage" Calvinists have done a lot of damage as well with those they left behind. But in the case of, say, a convert to EO, dechurched their Protestant friends is a necessary aspect of conversion, not a temporary display of excess enthusiasm. Frankly, I've seen my catholicity used against me -- and I know other "reformed catholic" pastors who have as well.

I think the essay you linked says many, many good things. At an abstract level, I can agree with almost all of it. I certainly agree that our various traditions have their own strengths and weaknesses, and that should keep us humble and ecumenical in spirit. Indeed, I have no problem admitting other branches of the church may well do certain things better than us (e.g, Baptists are better at evangelism, Catholics are better at mercy, etc.). But I found the essay unhelpful in a pastoral context. Thus: would you really be as indifferent as he suggests we should be if you had a family member or close friend convert from your congregation to RC or EO? Would you try to talk that person out of it? Or just let them go? Can I say that a person could leave my church for EO or RC and be better off? In all humility and honesty, I just cannot bring myself to admit that. I think it would be a step backwards. Not apostasy. But certainly a net loss.

You wrote, "if we are stacking up points about who is more sectarian, I am not sure that RC and EO would lose the match merely because they do not admit Protestants to the table." This may be the one place where we really disagree -- or at least appear to disagree. For me, there is a world of difference between saying to someone in another body, "We believe you are in error, but you are still welcome to commune with us" vs. saying, "We believe you are in error, and therefore you are not welcome to commune with us." This whole discussion -- including your essay, as I read it -- is driven by Galatians 2. But the whole issue in Galatians 2 is table fellowship!!! Communion access is the test of catholicity.

Insofar as Protestants are willing to practice table fellowship with all other baptized believers, even RC and EOs, we are NOT sectarian, no matter how critical we might be of those believers in other ways. On the flip side, no matter how warm and cozy Rome gets with Protestants, no matter how many anathemas she retracts and no matter how many nice things she's willing to say about us, until she opens her communion table up to us, she is still guilty of the Galatian heresy. Here's the bottom line: Access to a church's communion table is the ultimate determiner of whether or not that body is "sectarian" or "catholic." In that sense, RC and EO (as well as a lot of Protestants, of course) are sectarians. Reformed catholics, who admit folks to communion on the basis of baptism, are true catholics. Again, Galatians 2 identifies the core issue as table fellowship, and that's how I see it.

To put it another way: The Protestant world is really the only place where the NPP reading of Galatians 2 can take root and shape a church's practice. Both Rome and the East will continue to be guilty of the Galatian heresy until they change their policy on communion access at an official level. What Rome and the East need is someone to come along and address their respective communions in the same way you are addressing Protestants. See what I mean? If catholicity is as important as we both think it is, why be indifferent when people convert into sectarian bodies like RC and EO? How is it really any better than joining a hyper-fundamentalist evangelical church that practices closed communion? Quite often, I get the feeling that Protestants are far harder on their own tradition than they are Rome and the East. But why are we so hard on sectarianism in our own circles, but then suddenly indifferent to it in these other bodies?

You mentioned Jordan and Wilson as using harsh, charged, inflammatory rhetoric when speaking about Roman and Eastern practices. While I might question the wisdom of that, in principle, I have no problem with it. I don't see them doing anything different than the Reformers. They are condemning error, but they would both still admit that RC and EO are part of the visible church. As far as I know, both would welcome RCs and EOs to their communion tables (though, of course, their own church authorities would not allow them to partake at a Protestant table!). I have no problem calling EO worship idolatrous because that's exactly what it is. Can it be forgiven? Sure. But can it be glossed over? No way.

At one point, you suggest that both Rome and the East are more "historically grounded." That may be true if compared to rootless modern American evangelicals, but it is certainly not the case for classical Reformed Protestants. After all, the 16th century Reformers ran circles around their Roman Catholic counterparts when it came to knowledge of the patristics. The Reformers were actually retrieving an ancient tradition the Roman church had abandoned. Rome is now committed to all kinds of historical novelties that have no historical grounding at all, e.g., papal infallibility. Things are no better with EO, who have a horrible tendency to retell (actually, reshape) the story of the church to justify their exclusive claims. They are certainly wrong on the history of iconoclasm, as even some of their more honest theologians admit today. The apostles did not bow before images, and the whole issue was hotly debated right through the so-

called "7th ecumenical council," which was not really all that ecumenical, and silenced dissent by force in its aftermath. That's hardly solid historical footing for anything!

I think I understand what you're doing in your essay: You want to make Protestants aware of their deeply rooted sectarian attitudes and call them to a more catholic, more generous, more humble stance towards believers in other traditions. I'm fully on-board with that, and have tried to do the same thing myself. But I've been at it long enough that I have now seen cases where the pendulum has swung too far in that direction, and needs to be pulled back to center. And the way to do that is, as I said, combining our call for ecumenicity with a robust critique of the errors in these other bodies. If we don't do that, our catholicity will actually devolve into relativism.

I don't have time to engage all the issues in the NPP/OPP debate. I'm not sure I follow all of your counter-suggestions, but that may be because I'm not able to give your thoughts the time and attention they deserve. One quick point: You say that on my approach "Pelagianism would simply be descriptive of whatever position happened to be false." That may well be right....but it may also be the point. In other words, while the Judaizers got it wrong in a very particular, historically conditioned way, I think their error was just one instantiation of the way fallen, unbelieving humanity ALWAYS gets it wrong, apart from God's grace. If this isn't the case, then it seems to me that Galatians has no applicability to the church today since no one is telling us we must be circumcised in order to be part of the true people of God. Galatians is only going to be applicable if the Judaizers' error has analogies with ways that unbelieving human beings always go off track. And I think there are such analogies. Thus, while I believe the Reformers largely failed to read Galatians in its proper first century context, and this missed some things, I still think their application of the book to the issues of their day was largely on target. (I think N. T. Wright agrees with that assessment.)

On the whole, I do think Doug Wilson has not given Wright and other NPP guys a fair shake; he has not really grasped what they do well in their reading of Paul. But I do think this paragraph from Wilson gets it exactly right:

This is why certain conservatives among the Reformed are making noise about the gospel being at stake. We must affirm that the gospel is the answer to the universal human problem, which is self-righteousness. If the gospel is entirely contextualized in a first-century setting, with no principle to guide us in extending it to our lives, then what shall we do? This is why there are reasonable men among the "truly reformed" who are worried because they believe that the New Perspective contains more than a few advocates who appear to be theologically brilliant but pastorally naive. The problem is that they fear we have let down our guard against this perennial temptation to self-righteousness because they think we have not emphatically stated that nationalistic bigotry is just one more species in the universal genus of legalistic self-righteousness. But once we have made that point clear—that the difference between the works of

Alexander VI and Caiphas is really the difference between dog-skubalon and cat-skubalon, both of them belonging to the same excremental genus—I think the reasonable guys in the conservative Reformed world would settle way down. However, the unreasonable fellows among them—the Pharisees of “true” heart conversion—will not settle down regardless of what is said or done.

Before that, in 2002, I published an article on Wright that included this footnote:

Again, the New Perspective teaches the basic problem with Judaism in Paul’s day, after the coming of Christ, was not that it was “self-righteous” or “legalistic,” but that it had an unrealized eschatology (that is, it clung to the old Torah-based ways of expressing fidelity to God which are now obsolete since the promised Messiah has come, opening covenant membership to the Gentiles). In other words, Paul’s critique of Israel is not, on the surface, what the Reformers took it to be – prideful, legalistic attempts at achieving self-salvation through meritorious “works of the law.” Paul, therefore, was not battling a form of proto-Pelagianism. Rather his opponents’ problem was that they wanted to turn back the clock of redemptive history; they were attempting to live “B.C.” in an “A.D.” world. However, what many New Perspective theologians fail to realize is that to continue to insist on circumcision, dietary laws, etc. as a means of relating to God after he has said these things are no longer pleasing to him and after they have filled their temporary redemptive-historical purpose is prideful and legalistic, considered from another angle. It is a form of self-salvation, since it demands the covenant blessing on one’s own terms, rather than submitting to God’s. So the old criticisms of Judaism are still there, but in nuanced form. Many New Perspective theologians have been too quick to draw an antithesis between their view of Paul’s argument and the Reformers’. Perhaps this is because they have failed to understand the basic nature of sin. Stott quips, “As I have read and pondered [Sanders’] books I have kept asking myself whether perhaps he knows more about Palestinian Judaism than he does about the human heart” (Romans, 29). See also Dan G. MacCartney, “No Grace Without Weakness,” Westminster Theological Journal Vol. 61, No. 1 (1-13). Nationalistic pride and exclusivism, as seen in first century Judaism, are just variant forms of the same basic self-righteous, legalistic stance that fallen human nature always assumes.

So this is what I’ve been saying all along. Maybe you’re more of a NPP purist that I am. But I see individual works-righteousness (Pelagianism) and corporate works-righteousness (Phariseeism, Judiazers) as two particular manifestations of the same basic problem. Again, wish I could say more, but hopefully what I have said is more helpful than harmful.

Blessings,
RL

Recounting a conversation to a friend about a convert to Rome:

YYYY thinks you have to have an infallible teaching authority in the church or you will end up with the chaos of Protestantism. It's either/or. You have to have a supreme court to interpret the constitution, so to speak, or you have anarchy. According to him, Protestants have no way to know they're right because they have no such authority -- it's just one person's interpretation against another's, hence the proliferation of denominations. Protestants can't call a council to settle anything amongst themselves. I challenged him on the papacy again, e.g., it's not in Scripture, not in the early church, not at Nicea, pope Gregory said any bishop claiming universal authority is "antichrist," etc. But for him it's really more of a philosophical problem, so the history and exegesis challenges don't get as much traction as they should. You just have to have an infallible magisterium or no one knows what to believe. Without the infallible magisterium, no controversy in the church can be settled. Without the pope/magisterium, Protestants cannot tell you where the church begins and ends, e.g., whether or not the Salvation Army is a church. Frankly, I think he's replacing sola scriptura with sola ecclesia -- the church alone will be his functional authority.

Of course, his critique of Protestantism carries weight because we do have a problem here. In our sin, we have so divided the church that we really can't speak with a united voice and we really have no mechanism for resolving our differences....

I did make a few counterpoints. Just because we think we need something like the papacy doesn't mean we have it. Why should the pope be believed on his own say-so if his claims to authority and infallibility do not withstand scrutiny? Plus, while, Rome has institutional unity, which is wonderful, it does not have likemindedness -- the deeper, richer unity Scripture calls us to. Roman Catholics are all over the map in terms of actual beliefs and practices, just like Protestants. Also, what good is an infallible interpreter of Scripture if there is no infallible interpretation anywhere to be found, e.g., the church nowhere tells me the meaning of Ecclesiastes or Galatians? (Of course, for YYYY it seems much more important that the pope has spoken to the issues of birth control and capital punishment than to the meaning of the biblical texts.)

He's not really all that interested in discussing particular doctrines, e.g., icons, indulgences, etc. Basically, everything flows downstream from the church's authority. Once you've settled that Rome is the true church, you simply accept what she teaches. When I asked how the church could ever be corrected, he admitted he didn't really know. When I asked where infallible authority was found during the high/late middle ages when there were multiple claimants to the papacy, and the papacy was corrupt (as he even admitted), he couldn't answer. But he says his Catholic friends would have answers....

I told him I think he still has far too many unanswered questions to make this jump, but it's obvious he disagrees. He just says, "I'm a Catholic. I buy into their claims." He does not see TPC as church; at best, we are "separated brethren."

I asked about his reading. He did read the Mathison book I recommended, but was not impressed with its arguments. He's read a lot on the Called to Communion website. (I have too.....but I have not been swayed by anything there.)

The other issue is clearly the prestige of the Roman church -- it's the church of Chesterton, Newman, Tolkien, etc. There are lots of scholarly / academic types who have gone from Protestantism to Catholicism but not very many who have gone the other way. Again, he probably has a point here -- I can't think of a lot of high profile conversions from Catholic to Protestant in recent years. But it still doesn't seem this is any way to determine the truth. And, personally, I do know some pretty smart guys who have made the move from Rome to Reformed, but they're not going to be people YYYY has heard of....

At one time years ago, I had started writing a book entitled *Peter, Paul, and Mary - Or, Why I Am Not a Roman Catholic*. Maybe it's time to dust off that manuscript and go back to work on it....

Thanks,
RL

So what is the Protestant view of Scripture in relation to church tradition?

Suppose the question is asked, "How do we know doctrine x is true?" the vintage Protestant way to answer is going to include a combination of Scripture, church tradition, and the work of the Spirit. Obviously, Protestants differ with Roman Catholics over how Scripture and tradition relate. This is largely because of where they locate infallibility, and thus *final* authority. But classical Protestants do not reject church tradiiton out of hand -- not at all. All one has to do is look at how much the Reformers revered the early church and the ecumenical creeds; or how much they quoted from the great patristic and medieval theologians; or how they vehemently disagreed with those who rejected venerable church traditions (e.g., Anabaptists).

It is important to remember that not all traditions are created equal. Traditions vary in age, breadth of consensus, and consistency with Scripture. The Jews in Jesus' day had many traditions they considered venerable and beyond revision, but Jesus trashed them by calling them "the doctrine of demons." On the other hand,. Paul could command the churches to uphold the traditions of the apostles even though they weren't even a generation old and still under debate in some quarters of the church (e.g., 1 Cor. 11, 14).

The role of church tradition in defending the doctrine fo the Trinity is quite different from the role of church tradition in explaining the meaning of "baptism for the dead" in 1 Cor. 15. In the case of the former, tradition weighs so heavily, its authority is functionally equivalent to Scripture (e.g., Protestants do not

entertain readings of Scripture that deny the Trinity as "valid") because we are as close to something believed "in all times places and all times" by Christians as we can get. But in the case of the later, tradition has very little to say, since there is not much discussion and no consensus on the issue.

Acts 15 is a perfectly Protestant model of how to resolve a church dispute over doctrine and practice. There is an appeal to tradition/experience. There is an appeal to Scripture, in this case Amos 9. And there is an appeal to the work of the Spirit. What there is not is an infallible pope who exercises universal jurisdiction. Peter is not even the main player; James is. And no one at the council claims to be anything like a "universal bishop." The matter is settled in good conciliar fashion -- and remember that at the time of the Reformation, the Protestants were just carrying forward ancient conciliar tradition that had flourished all the way through the medieval period, over against the evolving claims of the papacy -- process of evolution that did not really solidify until 1870, when the Roman church adopted the dogma of papal infallibility. Given that neither the Eastern church nor Western Protestants accept papal infallibility on historical grounds, much less biblical grounds, the papacy must be viewed as the single biggest hindrance to reunion of global Christendom.

There's no question the church was much better off without a papacy. The papacy stands in the way of ecumenical reunion today, and has been the occasion of the two biggest schisms in church history. Gregory the Great in 590 said any bishop claiming universal authority is anti-christ (or precursor to anti-Christ -- and this is why the Reformers were actually being very traditional when they called the pope the anti-christ (even though I think the biblical definition of anti-christ is quite different). The two biggest schisms in church history (with the east and with Protestants) were both caused by the arrogance of the papacy. The papacy cannot be the answer to the Reformation because the failure of the papacy caused the Reformation.

As we discussed, Nicea does not fit Rome's pattern -- indeed, it functioned as a proto-Protestant council. Going back further, Acts 15 does not fit the Roman pattern -- again as we discussed.

Matthew 16 does not justify the papal claims. They just aren't there. Yes, the church is built on the foundation of Peter, along with the other apostles (Eph. 2:20), with Christ himself as chief cornerstone (1 Pt. 2). Peter may have had pride of place amongst the apostles, but that still does not yield the specific claims the papacy makes for itself (succession, universality, infallibility, indefectibility). It would be odd to say these things are established in Mt. 16 given that Peter immediately afterwards falls.

Note that the reformers did not just believe in sola scriptura, they also believed in conciliarism, and in doing so, carried on a long tradition of conciliarism. (See Brian Tierney.) They believed disputes should be resolved not by each person reading Scripture on his own, but in the manner of Acts 15 -- a council of church leaders with open bibles and hearts open to the work of the Spirit. Look at that passage closely: In Acts 15, no single authority dictates a solution -- the solution

is arrived at through a conciliar process of deliberation leading to consensus. Further, note that the Scriptures provide the framework, basis, and ultimate authority for the answer that is given (Amos 9).

Yes, of course, post-apostolic councils are different in certain ways. We no longer have any infallible spokesmen guiding transition from old covenant to new covenant, but the basic pattern is there.

Also, private judgment is not a protestant invention – it's an inescapable part of humanity and a fundamental responsibility. You have reason so use it; sure, we have to submit to authorities but such submission is not supposed to be dehumanizing or irrational or fideistic. You cannot use reason and private judgment to climb the ladder up the papacy, only to kick the ladder away when you get there.

Here's an analogy I have used: Scripture is father (and has the final say), ad church as mother (a legit but subordinate authority). So the Protestant position is truly "sola scriptura conciliarism." We have a permanent model for resolving conflict in Jerusalem *Acts 15) and Nicea (325AD).

To reiterate: The fact is, some form of "private judgment" is inescapable. It's part of humanity, part of our responsibility which we cannot escape. I obviously believe Christians should read Scripture, not in isolation, but in community, dialoging with the church of the past and the present. (In my own case, I read from theologians from every age of the church. I believe I am quite informed about the church's tradition and history. Have you seen my library?!)

Even low church protestants uphold the regula fidei in some form: they uphold the Trinity, incarnation, etc. – all the doctrines found in the creeds – even if they don't regularly recite the creeds.

The rule of faith serves as a common core and hermeneutical lens for all of us. But the pope did not create the regula fidei – it evolved organically in the generations after the apostles, as the church had to distinguish orthodoxy from heresy....

Even low church prots want continuity with history, e.g. the Baptist "trail of blood." ...

The fact that Protestants have not always worked their differences out in a conciliar way, following Acts 15 and Nicea, does not prove conciliarism/protestantism is unworkable-- it just means our sin has gotten in the way of allowing it to work...The answer is not the papacy, but love and humility before our brethren and the Scriptures...

Papal infallibility is not the source of the roman church's unity since only about third of RCC members globally even believe in it (see wiki article); the source of

Roman unity more likely found in culture and claims to exclusivism, e.g., if you leave the Roman church you leave the place of salvation (this was nuanced by Vatican 2, but still the popular belief). Prots on the other hand almost never make such exclusivistic claims, so folks for more freedom to mix, move around. Prots believe the church has to be held together by love, not threat of damnation for leaving a governmental institution.... Yes, we affirm that outside the church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation (cf. WCF), but we insist we are part of the church and Rome has never proved otherwise (Calvin's defense of the Reformation in ICR is still very apropos – he compares the Reformers to the apostles who were kicked out of the synagogues for believing the gospel)...

Also, papal infallibility is rarely invoked, as is widely acknowledged; it only provides certainly on about 7 points, if even that, e.g., council of Chalcedon (very questionable), assumption of Mary, IC of Mary, etc. (see wiki article). Actually, when the pope has spoken ex cathedra is fuzzy and debatable – which would seem to indicate the papacy cannot provide a firm epistemological basis. To say the pope provides Roman Catholics with an infallible interpretation of Scripture is really overstating the case -- the pope's infallible declarations hardly even touch on scriptural teaching and when they do, e.g., council of Chalcedon, the authority can be established just as easily and securely by conciliarism....

The criteria which determine when the pope has spoken infallibly are debatable – which undermines the whole argument from epistemology. What good is an infallible interpreter if you don't know when he is speaking infallibly? Those criteria are debated amongst Romanists themselves and even if they were agreed upon, it would still be very difficult to know when they had been met...

In other words, history is much, much messier than Scripture, so the papacy can never serve the epistemological function you want it to serve...you have made an ideal out of certainty (a very modern thing) but your idol (the papacy) is going to fail you...

RCCs like to say the canon is grounded in papal infallibility, but the pope never made an ex cathedra decree about the canon, so Prots and RCCs are in exactly the same situation with regard to canon recognition: it's a matter of received tradition, as the Spirit led the church to a consensus...

It's not as if the pope has produced a commentary of infallible interpretations of the Bible -- he has hardly spoken with authority to any passages of Scripture and many of the declarations, e.g., the Marian dogmas, have nothing to do with biblical interpretation at all....

The pope does not solve canon issue or textual/manuscript issues...Perhaps you could say the canon issue was settled at Trent, but that's pretty late isn't it?...

Again, the history is messy. You are trying to get certainty in the worst possible way. Your arguments for the papacy stand on shaky ground – your own fallible historical knowledge (you admitted you have hardly read a book on this!)....Look, it is obvious that RCCs pick and choose from church history as

well, e.g., which councils have binding authority, e.g., choosing second Nicea (iconodulia) over council of Heiria (iconclast) even though Heiria was earlier...The truth is, we are all sifting through the mess of church history...Where exactly are we out of step with The Tradition?...

So what exactly does papal infallibility provide?... what further epistemic grounding are you looking for?...

TPC obviously has Scripture and tradition (we recite the Nicene Creed every week, etc.).....

So how can Rome be corrected by scripture? Even in an area where she is obviously wrong like clerical celibacy?....

The 2 biggest splits in church history are the fault of the papacy -- the great schism and the reformation, where the pope excommunicated those who disagreed with him rather than working to a solution. Why assume Rome was right in each case -- she fired the first shot, did she not? I appreciate your concern for unity, but Rome is not going to bring in a millennial ecumenism....

But consider Roman theologians who have sharp disagreements over just what Trent means -- Roman Catholics themselves no longer agree. Does it anathematize protestants or not? Did luther and calvin go to hell? In the 16th century everyone thought that's what Trent meant. Rome is engaging in revisionist history if it says otherwise today. It may not be a bad thing, but Rome's revisionary methods do not underwrite the kind of certainty you are questing for. If Rome has changed in the past, you can bet she will change again. Are you (and your great great grandchildren) going along for that ride?....

So in your PRIVATE JUDGMENT the Roman Catholic church is the best option? Even so, you have functioned as Prot (or a Berean) to get there....

The Roman church is one gigantic sect; it is a denomination too

Roman Catholics don't study the bible and why should they?...

Rome's way actually resolves nothing except for those who decide to submit on the front end -- so it all comes down to papal authority -- can a biblical or traditional case be made for it? We have already covered that ground....

Again, what part of tradition is missing at TPC? We're a very traditional church, e.g., creeds, paedocommunion, vestments, liturgy, etc. -- what more are you looking for? We are far more traditional than Rome at key points (paedocomm, celibate priests, pope as universal bishop)....

What happened at Nicea was conciliar, not magisterial or papal -- pastors and bishops with open bibles resolving a controversy -- and there was no "infallible successor to Peter" present who could speak and settle it. Indeed, name one controversy the pope has settled with an ex cathedra pronouncement...

But your search for the true church is foolish – you are assuming what you have to prove, namely that only one branch can be the church and the others must be false. The Prot way is better – even amongst true churches, there are degrees of purity and maturity....I would argue tat the true church is spread out in all 3 major branches....The problem is that Roman and Eastern claims are full of ecclesial hubris....Thus, it's a sin to look for the true church in the way you are going about it -- all claims to exclusivity are sinful and schismatic.

Again, the pope has been god's muzzle more often than his mouthpiece...

How do you resolve the differnces between Rome and East over Mary? What would you say to the charge that Rome innovated here? http://orthodoxbridge.com/?p=233&utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=response-to-w-bradford-littlejohns-honouring-mary-as-protestants...

How does it resolve use of icons vs statues? Hasn't Rome departed from "7th ecumenical council" by allowing veneration of statues....

Check it out for yourself. From wiki: [Brian Tierney](#), *Origins of Papal Infallibility 1150-1350* (Leiden, 1972). Tierney comes to the conclusion, "There is no convincing evidence that papal infallibility formed any part of the theological or canonical tradition of the church before the thirteenth century; the doctrine was invented in the first place by a few dissident Franciscans because it suited their convenience to invent it; eventually, but only after much initial reluctance, it was accepted by the papacy because it suited the convenience of the popes to accept it".^[45] (See also [Ockham and Infallibility](#)). The Rome-based Jesuit Wittgenstein scholar Garth Hallett argued that the dogma of infallibility was neither true nor false but meaningless; see his *Darkness and Light: The Analysis of Doctrinal Statements* (Paulist Press, 1975). In practice, he claims, the dogma seems to have no practical use and to have succumbed to the sense that it is irrelevant.....

But is Rome worthy of the claims she makes for herself? Think about how much garbage you have to overlook, e.g., do you approve of the way the Catholic church handled the paedophile priest issue? I hope not....

I still think these hymn lyrics apply:

*Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore opprest,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distrest,
Yet Saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, 'How long?'
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song.*

To conclude: The Roman church not traditional enough, not catholic enough, for me.

Here we go again....

On your quest for certainty, I would still point you to Van Til....

So we need an inspired judge, a referee? Well, yes, the Scriptures themselves play this role....

It seems you after something nostalgic. I know many people find that kind of thing appealing – they are looking for a past “golden age,” whether a Christian America, medieval christendom, or some idealized past era. But no such “golden age” exists in our past....

Not sure I follow. What is your definition of “church”? Are you identifying the church w/ the clergy? If you go back to the Reformation, you will find Luther didn't fight the church per se (the people in the pews), he fought the clergy (cf. Jesus fighting with Pharisees). Luther actually made his case with laypeople, e.g., he appealed to princes....

It seems that for you, “church” now just means the Roman institution....

"I will believe whatever the church says" – really? Isn't this implicit faith in the church abandoning your responsibility, doesn't it break your conscience? Further, how do you know you have properly understood what the church is saying (since you admit you cannot read and understand the Bible, why do you expect to read and understand papal decrees?).... To say "You can't use your own reason" is abdicating, not only irrational but immoral....

Go back to the Cyprian quote I shared at lunch -- every bishop is Peter....

I stand by my earlier claim: the papacy is historically indefensible

I suggest taking a lot at someone like Richard Hooker – he might scratch where you are itching....

A couple of quotes for us to discuss:

The Roman Church where it differs from this universal tradition and specially from apostolic Christianity I reject. Thus their theology about the Blessed Virgin Mary I reject because it seems utterly foreign to the New Testament; where indeed the words “Blessed is the womb that bore thee” receive a rejoinder pointing in exactly the opposite direction. Their papalism seems equally foreign to the attitude of St. Paul toward St. Peter

in the epistles. The doctrine of Transubstantiation insists on defining in a way which the New Testament seems to me not to countenance. In a word, the whole set-up of modern Romanism seems to me to be as much a provincial or local variation from the central, ancient tradition as any particular Protestant sect is. I must therefore reject their claim: though this, of course, does not mean rejecting particular things they say."

June 16, 1945

Letter of C. S. Lewis to H. Lyman Stebbins, "The Boldness of a Stranger"

We teach and [define](#) that it is a dogma [Divinely](#) revealed that the Roman pontiff when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme Apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding [faith](#) or [morals](#) to be held by the universal Church, by the Divine assistance promised to him in [Blessed Peter](#), is possessed of that infallibility with which the [Divine Redeemer](#) willed that his Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding faith or morals, and that therefore such definitions of the Roman pontiff are of themselves and not from the consent of the Church irreformable.

So then, should anyone, which God forbid, have the temerity to reject this definition of ours: let him be [anathema](#). (see Denziger §1839).

"

— Vatican Council, Sess. IV , Const. de Ecclesiâ Christi, Chapter iv

We have to distinguish sola Scriptura from solo Scriptura. Sola Scriptura does not, and never did, mean "reading the Bible without the church" or "reading the Bible without tradition." Sure, you can find a few nutty Protestants who have spoken that way, just like you can find a few (well, really a lot!) Catholics who don't think they ever need to crack open a Bible. But solo ecclesia is as messed up a view of authority as solo Scriptura. The church and Bible were always meant to work together, never one without the other.

The classical Protestants did not hold to solo Scriptura, but sola Scriptura, combined with historic conciliarism. All of the Protestant Reformers were hyper-concerned with making not just a case from the Scriptures, but also establishing their historical credentials. Just read them for yourself. Read Calvin's intro to ICR. Read Chemnitz. Etc. And I don't just mean they copiously quoted Augustine, Chrysostom, Bernard, and other great fathers, but these traditional authorities informed and shaped their reading of Scripture in deep ways. They were actually concerned to show real, organic continuity with the church of the previous 1500 years. I still find their arguments persuasive. "Where was my church before the Reformation?" is like asking a boy who was out playing in the mud but has now been bathed, "Where was your face before you washed it?" The Reformation carried forward many of the best features of the medieval church and recovered many aspects of the patristic and apostolic church that had been

lost. They saw things like the papacy, Marian devotion and doctrines, clerical celibacy, transubstantiation, and the system of indulgences, as barnacles that needed to be scraped off the hull of the ship that is the church. In each case, I think careful historical (and biblical) investigation shows they were correct to see these things as novelties. At the same time, they rightly saw the spirit of the early church had been compromised by greed, immorality, and the desire for political power. The Reformers, more than anything, were hoping to restore the vitality and purity of the early church; the Reformation was largely a project of historical recovery. Newman said, "To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant," but I would add, following C. S. Lewis (paraphrasing), "To be *really* deep in history is to become Protestant all over again."

Another thing to remember is that Protestants always believed in the ancient conciliar pattern of church authority, inherited by the apostles from the Jews. It is not enough for you to investigate the case for sola Scriptura against the papacy -- you also have to look at the biblical basis and history of conciliarism, over and against the papacy. The Protestants simply maintained and carried forward the conciliar strand of the church that had continued to press against the ever-growing claims of the papacy throughout the medieval period. That's why the early Protestants called so many assemblies, wrote so many confessions and liturgies, and so forth. In doing all of this, they were just acting like the church of the apostolic and patristic eras, which everyone agrees is the most united period of church history, and yet which functioned without a pope, or universal bishop, of any sort. As late as the 590s, Pope Gregory said that any bishop who claims universal authority is an anti-Christ (a label the Reformers picked up on the 16th century). Roman Catholic attempts to explain away his charges are just not convincing. Likewise, and even earlier, you have Cyprian, who (circa 250 AD) grants primacy to the Roman see, but not supremacy, and in fact says that *every* bishop is a legitimate successor to Peter's chair. He simply did not accept, or even know of, anything like what the Roman Catholic church upholds as the papacy today. And yet he is one of the most prominent fathers from the so-called "golden age" of the pre-Constantian church.

Catholics seem to forget that there was a very strong conciliar movement running through the medieval period, right up to the time of the Reformation. Conciliarists believed the church's authority was found in a council of bishops, not the singular pope. According to conciliarists, there could be a first among equals in the council, and that first among equals could even be the bishop of Rome, but authority itself was found in a plurality of churchmen, not one man. Conciliarism (re)gained strength in the 14th-16th centuries because of things like the Avignon papacy and the great papal schism (when there were multiple popes in multiple locations, all vying for authority, and no one could say for sure who the true pope was); the realization that the "Donation of Constantine," which had done so much to prop up the authority of the papacy, was actually a forgery; and, to be frank, the fact that many of the popes in the late medieval period were corrupt jackasses who clearly had no business holding any office in the church, much less the highest one....

Again, all this means it is not enough to study Sola Scriptura if you want to

understand how biblical and ecclesiastical authority relate in the Protestant mind. You also have to study conciliarism. The question is not just, "Does sola Scriptura work?" but "Does conciliarism work?" The place to start, of course, is with the first ecumenical council, in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15. Read Acts 15 and ask yourself, "Does look like what a Roman Catholic council would look like, given the role of Peter, James, and Scripture in the council's proceedings?" Of course, you also have to look at Nicaea in the 4th century, where the bishop of Rome played no significant role at all. What I find decisive about these two councils -- which are arguably the ONLY two councils that ever had any real lasting success -- is that they arrived at a universally accepted consensus in an entirely "Protestant" way. In other words, if you ask the question, "How do Protestants think church debates should be settled?" the answer is, "Just like they were settled in Jerusalem and Nicaea." But neither council had a pope! Both councils relied on godly men working towards a consensus, based on experience, tradition, and, obviously, the study of Scripture. The Holy Spirit in each of these cases gave the church what she needed apart from the whole Roman Catholic apparatus. We can trust the Spirit to continue to lead the church in similar fashion today.

If Roman Catholic arguments were going to get traction with me, they would need to (among other things) explain [a] how the early church got along so well without the institution of the papacy; [b] why the conciliar model used in Acts 15 and Nicaea should not continue to be the model for church authority; and [c] how Scripture can correct the papacy / church in Rome's model of authority. Appeals to Matthew 16 simply don't cut it -- though that's a discussion we'll have to save for another time. As you point out, it may often seem like Reformed and Roman Catholic apologists are talking past each other, or like they've heard everything the other side has to say already. And no doubt, to some degree that's true; our disagreements are hard to resolve because of so many differing presuppositions and paradigms. But that being said, I have never seen a Roman Catholic really give a good explanation of why conciliarism shouldn't be the model of authority we follow, especially in light of Acts 15.

Now, someone might ask, "Well, it's nice for Protestants to say they want to uphold the conciliar tradition. But it still hasn't kept them from continuing to split, leading to ecclesiastical anarchy. And besides that, how can there ever be an ecumenical council when the church is so fragmented?" First, while you have certainly heard me lament Protestant sectarianism many times over, I think it's also possible to exaggerate how bad things are. Protestants still have no problem, in general, distinguishing themselves from cults who deny the historic Christian faith. Even the lowest of low church backwood Baptists uphold the faith of the Apostles Creed, whether they recite it in church or not. They are Trinitarian all the way down. So there is still a common core of faith that is shared not only by *all* Protestants, but by *all* Christians. The situation we find ourselves with countless denominations is certainly less than desirable, but it is not pure anarchy. The very fact that terms like "Protestant," "evangelical," and "Reformed" identify specific groups and, yes, traditions, tells you that.

Besides, consider the dangers of the other extreme: From reading a lot of Roman

Catholic critiques of sola Scriptura (often, really, solo Scriptura), I get the distinct impression that a lot of Roman Catholic apologists really think it's dangerous for people -- even people who attend church regularly -- to read the Bible on their own. I see no way for Rome to avoid the conclusion, which has indeed been reflected in her practice for centuries, that the Bible belongs to the clergy and religious elite and not to the people of God (and when this happens, inevitably the common folk end up letting the church professionals do their religion for them). Is that a conclusion you're comfortable with? If people are simply told they can read the Bible themselves but not interpret it themselves, you can safely bet they won't read it at all. The history of the Roman church is standing proof of that fact. 500 years after the Reformation, a lot of Roman Catholic priests are finally talking about how important it is to get the Bible into the hands of the people, but it's not surprising that movement has been accompanied by widespread defections to evangelical Protestantism (about 1 million Roman-to-evangelical converts a year was the last figure I saw).

The fact that there is no way to call a truly ecumenical council today is troubling, but it is not just a problem for Protestants. It confronts Roman and Orthodox Christians as well. The possibility of a truly ecumenical council has not existed since at least 1054, and really even a few centuries before that. Sure, Rome and the East like to give a clean and tidy narrative of church history that shows how essential their particular versions of authority are to preserving unity, but the reality is that unity has *not* been preserved. The faith has been preserved, but unity has not been. There's just no way to get around the messiness of church history....unless you are willing to unchurch huge, huge numbers of apparently baptized and faithful people, which is exactly what Rome and the East end up doing in order to preserve their exclusive claims and their self-justifying stories of church history. Protestants rightly see that our sin (beginning with the papal excommunication of the East in 1054!!) has divided the church in unhealthy ways, but all we can do now is recognize that the true church exists in a plurality of institutions, spread across a variety of denominations. Of course, if we know the Bible well, we know this is not unprecedented: Israel and Judah broke off from one another in similarly tragic circumstances. But here's the thing: The one thing we SHOULD continue to do, even when governmentally fractured, is practice a common table (1 Cor. 11; Gal. 2). Israel and Judah should have (and to some degree did) continue to celebrate Passover and the other festivals together, even after their governmental/institutional breach (call it "open communion, old covenant style," if you wish). Many Protestants manage to do this, but Rome and the East do not. All that to say: Your friend's way of framing the question -- *which institution has preserved the true faith?* -- is misguided. The true faith continued to exist among *both* Israelites *and* Judahites after their separation. And it continues to exist among Rome, among the Orthodox, and among Protestants today. That may not jive with the way Rome (or the East) wants the church to work, and it may mess with their claims about church history and the papacy, but it is an undeniable fact. Sadly, the only branch of the church that really allows for the kind of messiness we find ourselves in is Protestantism (though admittedly Rome is moving in the right direction with Vatican 2; the East is still hyper-sectarian)....

I look forward to picking up the discussion with you more later on...

Thanks,
RL

....On another personal note, I have to confess that I went through a period some years ago where I really had to "double check" my Protestant convictions, maybe somewhat like your present struggles. I had to investigate both Rome and the East not only because I saw so many things wrong with Protestantism but because I found much in these other branches of the church that was undeniably attractive. As I explored Romanism and Orthodoxy, I found a great deal to appreciate. I learned a great deal from both traditions. But in the end, I decided I was in a better place as a "Reformed catholic." The errors of Rome and the East were just too big to swallow, and seemed to me to be far worse than the errors in Protestantism, all things considered. When I thought about where I wanted my family to be, where I could serve most faithfully, where I would get the most Bible and the best worship, I concluded I was bound to live and die as a Protestant Christian. I hope you'll come to the same conclusion.

Another thing I found odd/interesting in my explorations is that Catholicism seemed to be most vibrant in places where it was heavily influenced by, and forced to engage with, Protestantism. Likewise, Protestant converts to Catholicism were their best spokesmen, had more interest in the Bible than other Catholics, and showed more zeal to live a godly life. I grew up around a huge number of "cradle Catholics" and I cannot remember a single one who was faithful...the only ones who ever showed any signs of Spiritual life were the ones who eventually got involved in evangelical Bible studies, youth groups, and churches. Why is that? Can be there any doubt that the Reformation was necessary, and had a very salutary effect not only in the nations where it took root, but also even on the Roman church itself? My point is not just that the counter-Reformation was a kind of reformation of the church itself (though with very mixed results); my point is that especially in more recent generations Protestantism has a quite *direct* influence on Catholicism, to the betterment of the latter.

Protestantism in America is certainly a mess, but it's no where near as corrupt as, say, Catholicism in Mexico, South America, or even Italy. Why is that? If you lived in Mexico would the Catholic church, as syncretistic as it is, have any appeal at all? Why do so many "serious Christians" in the rest of the world (and even America!) find the need to leave the Catholic church to find decent parish life, worship, fellowship, and Bible teaching? Those were not the decisive questions for me, but they were important observations, and apropos to our previous discussion.

Even when I look at global Christianity today, I can't help but notice the evangelical Protestant church has far, far more vitality, fruit, and blessing than any other branch of the church all over the world. There will be a "next

Christendom," as Philip Jenkins has put it, but it will not be a Roman Catholic Christendom. Whatever other problems we see in Protestantism, the fact of its amazing power and vitality all over the world still has to be recognized. Is it possible that whatever evangelicalism lacks in ecclesiology (and, sadly, it does lack quite a bit!) it more than makes up for in other ways?

On to the issues....

I finally got to read on the "C to C" site a bit today but, honestly, I don't see what the big deal is. To me it looks like the same old recycled Roman Catholic arguments that (in my opinion) vintage Protestants have already answered quite effectively over the years (though I fully grant many of the criticisms I see on the website of American evangelicalism are fully valid, and I would share them!). Several of these guys, like Bryan Cross, have been doing this sort of "Catholic apologetics" thing on the web for years so I'm at least somewhat familiar with their appeal and how they argue. But I don't see anything different from what I've come across in the past. Frankly, on "C to C" I see a lot of misunderstanding of what *sola Scriptura* means and not very convincing arguments for the papacy, Marian doctrines, etc. Maybe I'm missing the posts that you have found compelling. Can you point me to a specific argument or post or article that gripped you? Obviously, I'll never have time to read everything on such a prolific blog so narrowing it down would help focus our discussion. (I went to print one article, only to find that, with comments, it was over 700 pages!!!)

My first priority is to listen to you and hear what you're thinking and pray with you. Along with that, I want to give the best possible responses to questions you've already raised about how *sola Scriptura* should work in practice, and how we should deal with Protestant fragmentation -- I know I have not addressed the valid concerns you've raised adequately in the past because I didn't really understand where you were coming from at the time. Of course, I have my own set of questions I'd like to pose to you as well, since I think many Roman arguments for their distinctive views are not very strong, biblically or historically. Like I've said (echoing C. S. Lewis), I'm a far more "traditional" Christian right where I am than I could be if I were in the Roman Catholic church, which would require me to adopt all kinds of positions which are both novel and unbiblical. But before getting to that, it'd be better for me to know more about what you find attractive and compelling about Catholicism. What do you feel you are lacking where you are at present and how does Rome address that? What is the strongest pull towards Romanism? What do you see as Rome's biggest strengths and weaknesses?

Some more specific questions of the sort I think you need work through: Have you read anything on the Protestant side that might be considered an argument in response to the "C to C" website? Something like Keith Mathison's *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* or his specific replies to the website? Or even better, Martin Chemnitz's response to the Council of Trent on Scripture and tradition? Or something on the history of conciliarism, to show how biblical and ecclesial authority actually worked for the first several centuries of the church, and again in the Reformation? Or something on the catholic/patristic roots of the

Reformers, like Philip Schaff's *Principle of Protestantism*? Or, regarding denominationalism, Lesslie Newbigin's take on how to identify the "true church" in light of historical schisms? Or Peter Leithart and Ephraim Radner on the ecumenical, evangelical ecclesiology of 1-2 Kings as a model for practicing catholicity in an era of institutionalized schism (e.g., <http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=19-04-017-f> -- an important article for CREC folks wondering if there's biblical/historical precedent for the odd situation we find ourselves in)? Or Roman Catholic scholar Eamon Duffy's sympathetic but still very troubling history of the papacy, *Saints and Sinners*? Or how to reconcile the changes in Roman soteriology, from Unam Sanctam to Trent to Vatican 2? And so on.

Further: How much have you looked at the role of the papacy in bringing about, and even causing, the split of the Great Schism with the east in 1054, and the 16th century split with Protestants (e.g., <http://www.geneveith.com/2010/11/01/who-split-the-church/>)? Is it possible the pope is the chief schismatic in history? Have you considered why there wasn't anything like the papacy, a universal bishop with infallible authority, at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) or the Nicene Council? Does the papacy really solve the authority issue, or does it achieve a "cheap unity" by excommunicating dissidents? At the same time, the Roman church has failed to discipline known heretics, the mafia, pro-choice politicians, pedophile priests, etc. -- so again, I ask, is this anything more than a "cheap unity"? Or what about the fact that many nations, like England, Scotland, and Germany, had long and rich histories of Christian faith before coming under the jurisdiction of the Roman bishop, and saw themselves as recovering those ancient, pre-Roman traditions at the time of the Reformation? (Studying the history of the church in England is instructive.) Have you considered why the Roman church felt the freedom to innovate and disregard the ancient, apostolic, and patristic custom of paedocommunion in the 12th century? Or why the Roman church invented doctrines about Mary and practices like clerical celibacy that have absolutely no basis in Scripture and were unheard of in the early centuries of church history? Etc.

I know it is facile to say that "Rome believes in salvation by works." That isn't so. There is more than enough gospel truth in the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church to save any who believe as Charles Hodge noted). At the same time, I think we should be very concerned about Rome's lack of clarity about how God saves us by his grace. The gospel is there, but muddled and crusted over, like barbacles covering the hull of a ship that need to be scraped off. And we should also be troubled by what Rome requires for membership in her communion. Look at Paul's opening statement to the Galatians in 1:8-9 and then Paul's confrontation with Peter in 2:11ff, and then ask yourself: What would Paul say about a group of Christians who functionally excommunicate massive groups of other baptized believers simply because they do not believe in the immaculate conception and assumption of Mary, or the infallibility of Peter(!) -- doctrines which I am quite certain Paul himself never heard of?! What would he think of Rome's closed communion practices? I think I know what Paul would say to all that, and it would look a lot like the speech he delivers to Peter in Galatians 2. If you disagree with me, I would like to know why and I'd like to

know how you read and apply Galatians 2 to today's church. If the question is asked: "What would Paul say to the Vatican today?" I think the letter of Galatians covers it. A devastating critique of Rome and the whole of the Reformation is contained in Gal. 1-2. I applaud Rome (and the East, for that matter) for all it has maintained from the early church, but I lament the way it has gone far beyond what the Bible warrants in its terms of admission/communion.

Bottom line: Are you really thinking this through or just reacting to perceived deficiencies in Protestantism? Is this a genuine and informed pursuit of truth or a quest for nostalgia? Is this just a feeling "the grass must be greener on the other side of the fence"? Are you sure you are hearing both sides of the Protestant/Romanist debate? Have you read the Protestant/evangelical equivalents of the "Called to Communion" blog, e.g., this kind of thing, <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2010/03/apostolic-succession.html>, or <http://www.swordandploughshare.com/main-blog/2011/8/29/why-i-wont-convert.html> or <http://reformation500.wordpress.com/2010/03/22/roman-catholic-church-obstruction-of-justice/>. In your mind, who has the burden of proof at this point -- the Roman side or the Protestant side? Why?

Those are the sorts of questions and the kind of reading you need to wrestle with. There's more of course, but that gives you a taste of the kinds of things I'm curious about hearing you address...

It's great that you are taking your time in making any kind of decision. Just make sure you use that time to consider the issues from both perspectives. There are flaws in Protestantism that raise questions, to be sure, and I will not try to defend the indefensible. Protestants have much to repent of. Our divisions do often bring shame to the name of Christ. But Rome has its own flaws and problems that raise questions. And given that Rome makes much, much stronger claims for itself than any Protestant church body, she has a much harder case to prove. If Protestantism looks screwed up at times...well, we expect that, because Protestants profess that the church has not yet arrived at the goal and thus is still sinful. Protestants are institutionally humble and believe the church is "always reforming" and "always in need of reforming." But if Rome screws up, all is lost because she has claims to be infallible and indefectible (arrogant, absurd, and easily disprovable claims in my opinion, but that's a discussion we'll have to have). Roman Christians should consider Romans 11. The apostle Paul has already addressed Roman ecclesial arrogance.

In my experience with people who consider conversion like this, or go through with conversion, in the end, it has a lot less to do with theology, and lot more to do with personal issues, existential issues, relationships, etc. I don't know what has driven you to the point you're at today, but I would be curious to know what you think going to Rome would do for you at a personal, experiential level. Again, what are you missing where you are right now that you think being Roman could give you? What's the "bigger picture" here? Why are you (quite suddenly from what I can tell, though I may be wrong) so discontent with your

present situation?

Frankly, I'm surprised / caught off guard by this whole thing, so I'm still trying to get a handle on where you are and what your issues are. I look forward to talking about it soon. Just try to help me narrow down what I should be reading so I can better scratch where you're itching. I really think that if you give the historic Protestant answers to your questions an honest, objective consideration, you'll end up finding renewed peace and comfort right where you are. I know in the end, you'll make your own "private judgment" about whether to join the Roman church or remain Protestant (ha!) and I can live with that, however this ends up...but as your pastor and friend, I just want to make sure you hear both sides fairly before you come to a conclusion. There's too much at stake....

Thanks,
RL

Protestants believe pastors and creeds and councils all have authority; they also believe all those authorities are accountable to God speaking in Scripture. Obviously, Rome does not believe the Bible is necessary to back up its teachings; the pope appeals (tyrannically, I would say) to his own bare authority to establish whatever he wants to establish, on pain of damnation. That's what the Roman version of tradition does: it makes tradition a distinct and independent source of revelation and what passes for "tradition" in Rome is often very novel (not altogether unlike the Pharisees who claimed their novelties went back to Moses through an oral tradition). Protestants, like the early Christians, believe the Spirit works when God's people charitably discuss the Scriptures and strive for consensus, just like the apostles and elders did in Acts 15 and just like the bishops did at Nicaea... If you think there's a better way to settle inter-ecclesial disputes, I'd like to hear it. Appeal to the papacy won't cut it; the papacy is an institution founded on myths and lies. The authority of the papacy either depends on a particular interpretation of Scripture (e.g., Mt. 16) which is highly questionable, and in which case Scripture is still the supreme authority anyway; or it depends on the papacy's own say-so, in which case there is no real reason to believe the pope is who he says he is or has the powers he so arrogantly claims for himself...

Thanks,
RL

One thing I meant to add to the discussion from yesterday. You mentioned that you read WCF 1, and it looked like solO Scriptura to you. I mentioned that the whole confession is the product of the an assembly / council that was intended to have authority, providing a binding confession for the nation and for the church of England, replacing the 39 Articles (although only Scotland ended up adopting it). So there's really no way the Westminster Assembly could have produced a

solO Scriptura document.

One further thing I meant to mention. The WCF actually has a separate chapter devoted to "conciliarism" -- chapter 31 on synods and councils. That would be the place to look, if you want definitive proof that the WCF does not teach solO Scriptura, but sola Scriptura + councils. It subordinates the results of councils to Scripture, of course, pointing out that councils have contradicted themselves, and so there must be a higher court of appeal. (Incidentally, when it comes to the history of councils, EVERYONE picks and chooses because the councils really did produce contradictions on a number of issues. After Nicaea, conciliar history gets a bit messy. It's just a fact.) What I find most interesting is that the WCF says the decrees and determinations of councils are to be received with reverence and submission NOT ONLY because they agree with the word of God, but because such councils are ordained by God. In other words, councils have REAL power and authority, power and authority that comes from God. Sure, councils partake of the church's "pilgrimage" character since the church is still a "church on the way." But in the meantime, God has appointed councils as the way to resolve disputes and handle cases of discipline. The councils don't supplant or replace Scripture, but help the church in both faith and practice along the way. I think to demand more than that is to ask for an over-realized eschatology. It's to demand something from the church that she will not possess until the glory of the resurrection.

Its very interesting to see how conciliarism played itself out in the 16th and 17th centuries among Protestants. We can wonder "what might have been." John Knox told Mary he was hoping for a pan-European council, with "the sect of Romanists" (yes, he considered Rome a sect) and Protestants meeting to resolve their disputes. Calvin and Cranmer made plans for just such a council, and Calvin, who did not take kindly to travel, said he would gladly "cross 10 seas" to attend such a gathering. Bucer was the same, and worked very hard behind the scenes to build unity among Protestant groups, and even with Roman Catholics. And there are many more stories like this. Political conditions, rather than a lack of will, kept these councils from happening. But the desire to follow out a conciliar model was certainly there on the part of the Protestants.

Are you familiar with the history of Regensberg? Its fascinating. Its the closest the 16th century actually got to a an ecumenical council. Leading Reformers, including Calvin, gathered with leading Roman Catholics to resolve their issues. They actually reached agreement in a few areas, including justification. But political conditions changed, the pope got nervous, and the council disintegrated. But it's still a fascinating episode in history.

RL

Dear ZZZZ,

You wrote,

After yesterday I had a couple of questions—
The first question regards what you said about Luther and Calvin being excommunicated for “faithfully preaching the gospel”. I’m not sure what you meant by that because to me that just illuminates the differences between Protestantism and Catholicism. Of course Protestants would think C&L were faithfully preaching the gospel, but the RCC would think they weren’t. Am I missing something there?

According to Galatians 1:8-9, you should be able to determine for yourself if Luther and Calvin were preaching the gospel, right? That's not a responsibility you can pass off to someone else. Paul expected the Galatian Christians to recognize and stand against corruptions of the gospel, even if promulgated by an angel from heaven or an apostle (including Peter, the "first pope," as Paul shows in Gal. 2:11ff). That being said, I don't see how there can be any question about Luther and Calvin being faithful to the gospel Paul received and passed on in 1 Cor. 15:1-4, or to the *regula fidei* (basically the Apostles Creed) of the early church. If you think otherwise, I'd be curious to know why. What definition of "gospel" must one have in order to deny that Luther and Calvin were preachers of the gospel?

Of course, the way you're asking the question about Rome's view of the Reformers does not allow for an easy answer because the history involved is so complex. In the 16th century, Trent supposedly anathematized the Reformers. Was that an infallible declaration? Can disciplinary actions of popes and councils be infallible, or only dogmatic declarations? And what is the status of the anathemas of Trent today? Has the Roman church reneged? From the 16th century until the mid 20th century, pretty much everyone on both sides agreed the Tridentine anathemas were aimed at Luther, Calvin, etc., as well all contemporary Protestants. But at least since Vatican 2, most Roman Catholic scholars seem reluctant to say that. Instead, Rome has moved in a Protestant direction with regard to its own teaching on justification and has, accordingly, softened its stance on Protestants. Thus, you have documents like the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," produced by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation, and, more informally, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together."

So I would say the situation is pretty muddled. It gets even more muddled if you try to figure out how Vatican 2, which calls Protestants (among others) "separated brethren," relates to the 14th century work (ostensibly infallible), *Unam Sactam*, which not only gives the pope the temporal sword, but also declares that "it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff." Is Vatican 2 just nuancing that, by saying Protestants are actually Catholics whether they know it or not? Or what? And does Rome have the humility to admit it has changed its mind about Protestants, if indeed it has? I think N. T. Wright's assessment of Rome is fair, and gets back to my question about how (if at all) the Roman church can be corrected or reformed, given the high claims it makes for itself:

"Trent, and much subsequent RC theology, has had a habit of never spring-cleaning, so you just live in a house with more and more clutter building up, lots of right answers to wrong questions (e.g. transubstantiation) which then get in the way when you want to get something actually done.

In particular, Trent gave the wrong answer, at a deep level, to the nature / grace question, which is what's at the root of the Marian dogmas and devotions which, despite contrary claims, are in my view neither sacramental, transformational, communal nor eschatological. Nor biblical.

The best RCs I know (some of whom would strongly disagree with the last point, some would strongly agree) are great conversation partners mainly because they have found ways of pushing the accumulated clutter quietly to one side and creating space for real life. But it's against the grain of the Tridentine system, in my view. They aren't allowed to say that but clearly many of them think it. Joining in is just bringing more of your own clutter to an already confused and overcrowded room..." (<http://young-anglican-thoughts.blogspot.com/2010/01/nt-wright-on-protestant-catholic.html>).

Up until Vatican 2, Rome was pretty free with its anathemas. Trent anathematized those who held to a particular doctrine of justification which, up until that time, had been one of several "acceptable" ways of teaching justification (remember, most of what Luther had to say he learned in the monastery from Staupitz). In 1870, after declaring the dogma of papal infallibility, the definition concludes, "So then, should anyone, which God forbid, have the temerity to reject this definition of ours: let him be anathema." Similar anathemas / condemnations were declared over the Marian doctrines in 1854 and 1950. It raises the question: Just what exactly does Rome believe is necessary for salvation, that is, to escape anathema? There are a lot of things encrusting and obscuring the simple gospel in the Roman Catholic church. This has hugely significant implications. Thus, for example, it's no surprise when you tell me about the worship of Mary going on Central American churches; Rome has set itself up for just that kind of thing, and who's to say they're "bad Catholics," while the "good Catholics" are the ones up here in the (heavily Protestant) U. S.? Obviously, the priests down there disagree with the priests up here. They're reading, interpreting, and applying the infallible teaching of the papacy concerning Mary in a different way. So the infallible declarations of the pope in 1854 and 1950 solved nothing, but just created an even bigger problem...and one that is not going to be resolved anytime soon. Marian worship is probably more likely to infiltrate Roman churches in the U.S. than it is to be halted in Latin America. The one hope I have for the Latin American church is that it is becoming Protestant evangelical at an amazing pace.

To sum it up: My problem with the Roman Catholic church is that it is not nearly traditional enough (having introduced all kinds of novelties, theological and otherwise, compared to the apostolic and patristic church) nor catholic enough (having drawn its lines of communion far, far tighter than the early church ever did). Maybe that's a counter-intuitive critique, but it 's precisely what the Reformers argued in the 16th century. They claimed to be the true traditionalists and true catholics. They didn't leave the church; the church left them (just as the apostles didn't leave the synagogues in the 1st century, but were abandoned by

them).

In terms of the historical credentials of the Reformers, Jaroslav Pelikan (great Lutheran-turned-Orthodox historian) might be helpful (even if he's a bit too prejudiced against Calvin!):

“In fact, recent research on the Reformation entitles us to sharpen it and to say that the Reformation began because the reformers were too catholic in the midst of a church that had forgotten its catholicity. That generalization applies particularly to Luther and to some of the Anglican reformers, somewhat less to Calvin, still less to Zwingli, least of all to the Anabaptists. But even Zwingli, who occupies the left wing among the classical reformers, retained a surprising amount of catholic substance in his thought, while the breadth and depth of Calvin’s debt to the heritage of the catholic centuries is only now beginning to emerge....There was more to quote [from the church fathers] than their [the reformers’] Roman opponents found comfortable. Every major tenet of the Reformation had considerable support in the catholic tradition. That was eminently true of the central Reformation teaching of justification by faith alone....That the ground of our salvation is the unearned favor of God in Christ, and that all we need do to obtain it is to trust that favor – this was the confession of great catholic saints and teachers....Rome’s reactions [to the Protestant reformers] were the doctrinal decrees of the Council of Trent and the Roman Catechism based upon those decrees. In these decrees, the Council of Trent selected and elevated to official status the notion of justification by faith plus works, which was only one of the doctrines of justification in the medieval theologians and ancient fathers. When the reformers attacked this notion in the name of the doctrine of justification by faith alone – a doctrine also attested to by some medieval theologians and ancient fathers – Rome reacted by canonizing one trend in preference to all the others. What had previously been permitted also (justification by faith alone), now became forbidden. In condemning the Protestant Reformation, the Council of Trent condemned part of its own catholic tradition....

Interpreters of the New Testament have suggested a host of meanings for the passage [Matthew 16]. As Roman Catholic scholars now concede, the ancient Christian father Cyprian used it to prove the authority of the bishop – not merely of the Roman bishop, but of every bishop....So traumatic was the effect of the dogma of papal infallibility that the pope did not avail himself of this privilege for eighty years. But when he finally did, by proclaiming the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on November 1, 1950, he confirmed the suspicions and misgivings of the dogma’s critics. Not only is Scriptural proof obviously lacking for this notion, but the tradition of the early Christian centuries is also silent about it....

In asserting their catholicity, the reformers drew upon the church fathers as proof that it was possible to be catholic without being Roman. Study of the fathers thus became an important part of the Protestant panoply as well. In fact, the very word ‘patrology’ as a title for a manual on the church fathers and their works is a Protestant invention, first used by Johann Gerhard (d. 1637). When

Protestant liberalism developed during the nineteenth century, one of its principal contributions to theological literature was its work on the fathers. The Patrology of the Roman Catholic scholar Johannes Quasten and an essay by the Jesuit scholar J. de Ghellinck both reveal the dependence even of Roman theologians upon the scholarly achievements of Protestant historians, the outstanding of whom was Adolf Harnack (d. 1930)..."

You wrote:

The second question: According to Protestants how do you tell the difference between theological opinion and dogma?

Of course, those are Roman Catholic categories that came in later. For Protestants, like the early church, the "rule of faith" is functionally supreme (basically, the Apostles Creed; see, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*; Tertullian, *Prescription Against the Heretics*). The *regula fidei* served to mark out the doctrinal boundaries of the church. It is the closest we can get to anything that conforms to the canon of Vincent of Lerins, namely, "what has been believed by all, at all times, and in all places." So it's "dogma." I don't think this epistemological issue is that difficult for the Protestant side.

I'm not just asserting this as the Protestant standard. It's historically verifiable. Luther took the creed as the sum of saving faith. Calvin did as well, and organized the 4 books of his *Institutes* around the 4 paragraphs of the Apostles Creed. His whole "system" of theology was just an unpacking of the Creed. The Westminster Assembly attached the Creed, along with the 10 commandments and Lord's Prayer to the Confession and Catechisms, and called the creed a "brief sum of the Christian faith, agreeable to the Word of God, and anciently received in the churches of Christ." In short, the *regula fidei* reflects the consensus of the historic church and cannot be contradicted in any legitimate profession of faith. The Protestant church stands squarely in that tradition.

Of course, this is our practice at TPC, and not just because we use the oldest ecumenical creeds in the liturgy throughout the year. We will accept any "mere Christian" for membership, as our membership vows show. Rome, on the other hand, has piled on all kinds of additional beliefs one must submit to that go far beyond the Apostles Creed (and even Scripture) in order to enter the full communion of the Roman church. Rome has actually rejected the *regula fidei* in practice

Protestants work with a pyramid of authority. Scripture is at the top, then the *regula fidei* as the summation of Scripture's core teaching and a hermeneutical guide, then the confessions from regional assemblies and synods (subject to error, but possessing the authority of consensus), then liturgical preaching (which the Reformers called the "word of God" in a qualified sense), then private teachings (books by individual theologians, Bible studies, blogs, etc.). Thus, I suppose the best way to answer your question would be to say the *regula fidei* is

"dogma" for us. But we really need more than just the categories of "dogma" and "opinion" (and, frankly, the Roman church does as well).

Protestant practice may not always match up to that model of authority, but then, Rome's practice doesn't match up to her belief system and structure either. We are all sinners....Lord, have mercy.

RL

You're better off relying on the Holy Spirit than the magisterium.

Ok, so conservative Catholics will say Pelosi, Bishop Benerdin, Kerry are not faithful, they're not good Catholics -- but is that their private judgment or the judgment of the church? How is any different than Protestants disagreeing with each other? How can they functionally take church discipline into their own hands?

Who interprets Scripture? Certainly not the Catholic magisterium -- what Scriptures have they commented on? Where is there infallible commentary of Habbakuk? And if there were, who would get to interpret it for us when we disagree on its meaning?

Look at Gal. 1:8-9 -- the ordinary Christian can stand against an angel or even an apostle (not to mention an apostle's successor) if he departs from the gospel.....which means every Christian must be able to arrive at a secure knowledge of the gospel apart from an infallible magisterium -- Paul expected the Galatians to be "Bereans" and test his own teaching against scripture.

Protestants on the whole have preserved the Nicene faith -- we disagree with each other on many things, but the core has remained intact -- thus Protestants are not as divided as it might seem -- we are recognizably Christian. If anything the fact that Dolan and Pelosi are both in the same denomination actually creates more chaos than you have in the Protestant world!

There was no infallible bishop with universal authority at Nicea -- in fact, the bishop of Rome wasn't even there! It was a bunch of bishops/pastors working together with an open bible to arrive at consensus -- just like what the reformers advocated. The papacy as Rome knows it today developed later (especially after fall of Roman empire, for political reasons to fill vacuum of authority). See Tierney on this, especially the rise of a doctrine of infallibility.

Dear YYYY,

Here's a link to that article I mentioned:

<http://ricochet.com/main-feed/American-Catholicism-s-Pact-With-the-Devil>

I butchered it at lunch because I've really only skimmed it to this point. I certainly don't agree with everything he says, but he gives an interesting "backstory" to explain how we got to where we are. I take this as the key sentence: "The weapon that Barack Obama has directed at the Church was fashioned to a considerable degree by Catholic churchmen." This is also telling: "The truth is that the priests in the United States are far more likely to push the "social justice" agenda of the Church from the pulpit than to instruct the faithful in the evils of abortion....I have not once in those years heard the argument against contraception articulated from the pulpit, and I have not once heard the argument for chastity articulated. In the face of the sexual revolution, the bishops, priests, and nuns of the American Church have by and large fallen silent. In effect, they have abandoned the moral teaching of the Roman Catholic Church in order to articulate a defense of the administrative entitlements state and its progressive expansion."

While I certainly respect and envy the fact that the Catholic church has an organizational structure that allows it to speak to the culture at large, I wonder if it's really all it appears to be at first glance. For example, as soon as Obama announced his "compromise" solution, Sister Keehan (a pro-choice Catholic) of the Catholic Health Association immediately gave it her support. Perhaps she doesn't have the same "rank" in the Catholic hierarchy as Archbishop Dolan, but she's certainly widely regarded as a spokesperson for the Catholic church. The problem is that the Catholic voice in the public square is not at all unified; it's really a plurality of conflicting voices (which as a Protestant, sounds all too familiar!). In fact, Obama has already pointed out that he has accommodated the concerns of the Catholic church precisely because he included Keehan in on the deliberations that resulted in the compromise!

Of course, I think this whole issue also relates back to the authority discussion we were having. For example, in the article I linked, Rahe (a Catholic) says Cardinal Bernardin propagated "heretical doctrine." Similarly, conservative Catholics will say that Nancy Pelosi is not a "good Catholic" because she pushes a pro-abortion agenda. But by what authority do these Catholics make these judgments about their fellow Catholics? These must be nothing more than "private judgments" since they are certainly not the judgments of the magisterium, e.g., neither Bernardin nor Pelosi were ever disciplined by the church. Is the "true" Catholic position represented by people like Dolan and Rahe or Pelosi and Keehan? How is this functionally any different than fellow Protestants disagreeing with one another? It's of a piece with the question I raised at lunch: If Catholics claim the magisterium interprets Scripture, where is that interpretation found? Upon closer inspection, the very claim that was supposed to bring epistemic security ends up contentless. There is no infallible commentary on, e.g., Habakkuk; thus, the Roman Catholic reader of Scripture is in exactly the same place as the Protestant when it comes to actually figuring out the meaning of the text. And even if there were such a commentary on Habakkuk, we'd have to ask who gets to interpret the commentary...and you'd have an

infinite regress. I'm sure I haven't heard every possible argument, but I do not think you'll find the kind of epistemic certainty you're looking for in the Catholic church. No time to flesh out the classic Protestant view, but I'd look to the role of the Holy Spirit in the church and texts like Matt. 11:25-28, 1 Cor. 2:4-16, Gal. 1:8-9, etc. We can discuss more later...

Thanks,
RL

You wrote:

I thought of an overarching question to frame this broad state of inquiry in which I have found myself for sometime: "Why am I NOT a part of the RCC?" I'm not suggesting that should be the driving question for everyone asking similar questions to mine, but it is the way I have realized is helpful to me and fits (very loosely) with the falsification philosophy of science that drives my kind of work.

In terms of your overarching question -- It's fine to frame it that way, of course, so let me provide a similarly succinct answer. "Why am I not a part of the RCC?" Answer: "Because the RCC is not what it claims to be." I'm not really sure that pinpoints the discussion any more than before, but I think it does call attention to the fact that the burden of proof here is reversible. When the claims Rome makes for itself, and makes for the papacy, and makes for the conditions under which the papacy speaks with infallibility, are examined, do they stand up under scrutiny? I say "no." Of course there is a further meta-question: How would one go about testing the claims of the Roman church? What role do biblical exegesis and historical investigation play? All of that is part of the discussion that has to be had.

Obviously, there are a host of other issues, but the authority issue -- framed, in this case, in terms of Rome's self-claims -- is probably the best place to focus attention since that seems to be where you're itching. I just would want to point out that Rome's claims to exclusivity and authority cannot be separated out from the wider issue of the *content* of her teachings and practices.

The issues of the church as an authority, our reliance on some creeds, councils etc did not seem to fit tightly into what you were discussing in the sermon [on 1 Cor. 12-14 and cessationism].

I don't think I'm following you here. What part of my "application" did not flow out of my "exegesis"? My sermon was "textbook," so to speak. Very predictable and formulaic and time-tested, if you will. Any Reformed treatment of those chapters draws the exact same applications I made, e.g. Gentry, Gaffin, Palmer Robertson, vanderWaal, Gardiner, etc., even if they differ on this or that

exegetical detail. The fact that Paul describes the completed canon of Scripture as "perfect" or "complete" does not mean the church will have no need for teachers, creeds, councils, etc. I think it does all fit tightly together....but maybe you can explain further why you don't think so when we get together. In the sermon I mentioned there are other authorities in church, state, family, etc., but those authorities are subordinate to Scripture (and Scripture recognizes them as such). How is that not a reasonable application of the exegesis I developed? Any time you're talking about revelation from, issues of authority come to the fore.

One thing I would suggest to you is spending a good bit of time studying, among other things, the pastoral epistles. I think they give a lot of insight into how Paul (the LAST of the apostles) envisioned the post-apostolic church functioning. I think you'll see it looks A LOT more "Protestant" than "Roman." And it gestures towards the way church authority will function when there are no apostles, which seems to be an issue for you...

Listen to Cyril, sounding like a proto-Protestant:

"For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell thee these things, give not absolute credence, unless thou receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures."

Or Hippolytus:

"There is, brethren, on God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source."

I could keep going, but you get the point. My patristic/Reformed view of Scripture's ultimacy and sufficiency part of the tradition we have been standing in all along and obviously flows out the texts I was preaching from....

Yes, you are right, there certainly is an analogy between the way pentecostals/charismatics seek after extra-biblical revelation, and the way Roman Catholics believe their magisterium provides the equivalent of extra-biblical revelation (or an interpretation of Scripture that is functionally superior to Scripture, even though they call it "tradition." I get that. ...

You wrote:

The application on matters of scripture as a replacement of tongues and prophecy appeared to be measured, clear, insightful and helpful. I had not heard an explanation of the passage in that way before, and so I appreciated it. The portion I found unhelpful was your the declaration that scripture stands alone/ sola scriptura and that the church is not

necessarily an authority in matters of interpretation.

What do you mean "the church is not necessarily an authority in matters of interpretation"? In the sermon, I actually DID say the church has authority to interpret Scripture and warned against "privatizing" our use of Scripture. I talked about how Scripture must be read in the context of the church and in conversation with tradition. I cited Luther: "If we each the Bible on our own, we'll each go to hell in our own way." I mentioned the importance of creeds, councils, synods, etc. But obviously I am also going to assert the uniqueness and finality of Scripture because I think that's the direct implication of what Paul says about the "perfect." There's also a linguistic connection between 1 Cor. 13 and 2 Timothy 3, on the sufficiency of Scripture, which is why I cited that text. If you disagree with my assertion that Scripture is our highest authority and in a category of its own, I would say you have already left Protestantism. So I ask again: Why is it unhelpful to assert that Scripture stands alone *in the sense I developed that claim*?

I guess what I would ask further is this: What exactly do you think sola scriptura means? What applications do you think would have been appropriate to draw from the exegesis I developed? Isn't Paul's description of the "perfect" revelation we have in Scripture a strong and explicit declaration that the Scripture stands in a category all its own in the post-apostolic, post-foundational, post-70 AD church? If not, what would such a declaration look like? What would Paul have had to say for me to be right?....

You have set up a false choice. If I only talk about the ultimate and infallible authority of Scripture, then you're bound to accuse me of a sola scriptura approach that is cut off from the teaching ministry and councils of the church. But if I do mention that the church has genuine, albeit subordinate, authority to interpret Scripture, then I'm accused of saying something that the text I preached from did not directly say. Well, fine, but no text says everything and it's entirely appropriate to bring other texts into play when making applications in order to avoid misunderstanding; Scripture interprets Scripture, after all. I think everything I said coheres just fine....I'm still not sure why you would disagree unless your mind is already made up. The way that I related Scripture to the church is *exactly* what you see playing out in the early church, e.g., Nicea, where there was no pope and no claim to ecclesial infallibility...

Ah, but what if the Roman church is wrong in their claim? Just think how offensive their claim must be to God if they aren't right!! What if they have wrongfully unchurched millions? What if ALL believers are part of the church Jesus founded? What if Rome has wrongfully divided the table, ala Peter in Galatians 2, when Paul opposes him to his face and tells him he is not walking in line with the gospel? How do you think Jesus feels about all of that? Do you think God loves people in the Roman church more, or views them differently than the rest of us? Did Jesus only die for Roman Christians or also for Protestants? Did his death accomplish the same for each? Do Protestants only have part of Christ, while Roman Christians have the whole Christ? How could that be? And if we have the whole Christ, what could be lacking? And what of

the Spirit? Do Protestants have the same Spirit, who guides the church into truth? Have you experienced the Spirit's work in your life in a Protestant context? If so, what does that say?

The Roman claim about itself is extremely strong; indeed, I find it arrogant and tyrannical and the source of all kinds of mischief in church history. It is not well grounded in Scripture or in the history of the early church (e.g., Nicea). I find the Protestant approach a bit messier to be sure, but also much humbler, not only because we do not claim infallibility for our institution/teachers but also because we recognize the true breadth of the church. Saying we are "separated brethren" rings hollow when they will not allow that our congregations are genuine churches....

Thanks,
RL

Scripture is now complete and it is God's inspired and infallible revelation. Athanasius believed revelation was sealed up after ad 70, and that was a common view. Thus, whatever kind of "doctrinal development" there is in the church, it must be growing into a better understanding of the apostolic truth already deposited in the Scriptures, not what would amount to an altogether new doctrine of revelation.

Your assessment of what it means to go Roman is exactly right – a consistent Romanist would have to say we are not a church. And like you, I do not see all paths through the visible church as equally valid or healthy. Some branches of the church are more faithful than others....

The fact is, the church did just fine without the papacy for several centuries. The church was fully united, about as much as could be hoped for in this world, at Nicea and the bishop of Rome wasn't even present!! The papacy is an institution built on myths and lies, with neither the kind of biblical nor historical support it would need to establish its astounding claims. Nor do those claims really provide what they're supposed to give us, namely an authoritative interpretation of Scripture. The pope has yet to produce an infallible commentary on any single text of the Bible – so what practical good is his supposed infallibility? Mostly, the pope's authority is used to establish doctrines and practices that have no foundation in Scripture – new revelations cleverly disguised as "traditions." I still fully believe the Reformers were right to see the papacy as a novelty in church history, and as a form of tyranny. Papists end up assuming the very thing they needs to prove...

I will not defend the indefensible and Protestant sectarianism is a problem....I've been on the short end of that stick and seen the damage it can do. But Rome is not the answer, not by a longshot....Rome has preserved a kind of institutional

unity (though they excommunicated the East and the Reformers to keep that "unity," so they are certainly guilty of major schism). But Rome's institutional unity, as wonderful as it is, has certainly not produced the deeper, richer unity Scripture calls us to, which is likemindedness. You probably know the stats: Over 90% of catholic women use birth control, over 50% are pro-choice, etc. etc.. You can find Catholics who believe anything and everything. The church does not have very much moral integrity....and that's why it continues to hemorrhage people at a very alarming rate, many, many of whom end up in evangelical churches...

ZZZ,

Interesting article. Bergman is wrong, but not for exactly the reasons Mohler suggests.

Two things are definitely happening on the American church scene, just on the surface. Mainline, liberal Protestantism is dying a slow death. There's no doubt about that. It's dead and dying. Second, some conservative evangelicals (including some academic types) are turning to Rome because Rome can, at least in a certain way, speak to the "culture war" issues that evangelicalism cannot because of its fragmentation, or will not because it's more committed to pop worship and religious entertainment than anything else. For those who prioritize the culture war above the gospel, Rome is an attractive option.

But the real picture is far more complex. The Roman Catholic church as a whole in America is not at all united on the "culture war" issues. 90%+ of Catholic women use contraception forbidden by their church, and are not about to pay a heavy price to stand with the bishops against Obamacare. Over 50% of Catholics are pro-choice (think of all the pro-choice Catholics who hold public office). And if one attends mass, the sermon is much likely to sound like something from the Democratic party platform than something from the apostle Paul. The way the church covered up the pedophile priest scandal is symptomatic of the deep corruption and compromise that afflict the Roman church, from the top down. This is one example of the kind of thing that's out there, written by Catholic, lamenting the real state of American Catholicism: <http://ricochet.com/main-feed/American-Catholicism-s-Pact-With-the-Devil>

When you get outside the US, the state of Romanism gets even worse. In places that never had a Reformation, like Italy, the rank and file Catholics are completely liberalized and secularized -- even more so than those in mainline American Protestant churches -- and in many places those nations are vulnerable to Islamic immigration. The church is basically dead and gone, only hanging on because of cultural momentum, not because of vibrant faith. In places like Latin America, Catholic faith and practice are hardly even Christian -- they're so completely syncretized and full of idolatry (especially Mary worship) that it's hard to distinguish Catholicism from paganism. Globally, the Roman Catholic

church is in big trouble. And if they get a liberal pope, especially a young one, watch out.

In America, we have seen several high profile conversions from evangelicalism to Romanism in recent years. But on the whole, there are far, far more Catholics leaving for evangelicalism than the other way around. If you took ex-Catholics and lumped them into a denomination of their own, they'd be the third largest religious group in America: <http://ncronline.org/news/hidden-exodus-catholics-becoming-protestants>. That article has some flaws but also makes some interesting point:

"One out of every 10 Americans is an ex-Catholic. If they were a separate denomination, they would be the third-largest denomination in the United States, after Catholics and Baptists. One of three people who were raised Catholic no longer identifies as Catholic....

Catholics who became Protestant also claim to have a stronger faith now than when they were children or teenagers.... Thus, both as believers and as worshipers, Catholics who become Protestants are statistically better Christians than those who stay Catholic. We are losing the best, not the worst.... If you believed liberals, most Catholics who leave the church would be joining mainline churches, like the Episcopal church. In fact, almost two-thirds of former Catholics who join a Protestant church join an evangelical church... ex-Catholics are not flocking to the evangelicals because they think the Catholic church is politically too liberal. They are leaving to get spiritual nourishment from worship services and the Bible...

That Catholics are leaving to join evangelical churches because of the church teaching on the Bible is a disgrace. Too few homilists explain the scriptures to their people. Few Catholics read the Bible.

The church needs a massive Bible education program. The church needs to acknowledge that understanding the Bible is more important than memorizing the catechism. If we could get Catholics to read the Sunday scripture readings each week before they come to Mass, it would be revolutionary. If you do not read and pray the scriptures, you are not an adult Christian. Catholics who become evangelicals understand this....

The Catholic church is hemorrhaging members. It needs to acknowledge this and do more to understand why. Only if we acknowledge the exodus and understand it will we be in a position to do something about it."

While Rome has institutional unity, which is wonderful, and which should make Protestants jealous, the reality is Rome's authority has not produced likemindedness. Evangelicals are institutionally fragmented, which is to our shame, but on most of the core cultural issues of the day, we're actually far more likeminded (e.g., abortion). The whole debate over Obamacare's contraception mandate is really just Catholic vs Catholic -- it's Timothy Dolan and the bishops vs. Catholics like Nancy Pelosi, Joe Biden, Carol Keenan (who Obama consulted with), Kathleen Sibellius, etc. I hope Dolan's side wins, of course. But if the Roman Catholic Church actually had the kind of deep unity Scripture calls us to (likemindedness) and if she actually had moral integrity, the whole debate never would have happened in the first place. I think those who, like Bergman go to

Rome looking for moral authority are going to be sorely disappointed in the long run, unless something really significant changes. You can tell which way the winds are blowing. Anyone who sees Romanism as anything other than a mess isn't really looking all that closely.

One more thing I've noticed from many conversations with Romans Catholics (including priests, theologians, professors, etc.): The Roman church is so big and so diverse, you basically can believe anything you want. You can easily hide in the Roman church and do as you please. Very few parishes have meaningful pastoral care and even fewer any semblance of discipline. The priests are still pretty poorly trained in both theology and pastoral praxis. So, yes, the Roman church does produce a lot of elite culture warriors on the conservative side – but it is not the best place to live the Christian life over the long haul. The most zealous Romanists I know are evangelical converts who brought their zeal for knowledge, fellowship, etc. with them from their previous church. It does not seem to be passed on from generation to generation easily in the Roman context.

All that to say: The Reformation is not over. Far too many churches in the Reformed/Protestant stream are not really being all that faithful to their heritage (e.g., the PCA), but they're still the most vibrant churches in the world, where you find the most Bible teaching and communal holiness out of any other options.

That's probably a lot more than you bargained for,
RL

Roman Catholics think they're being gracious by calling us "separated brethren." We're separated because we refuse to come under the Pope. But they won't call our assemblies churches because they and they alone are The Church. As Protestants, we don't believe the church has to be confined to one institution, so I would say Rome, the East, and Protestantism are all branches of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, with varying degrees of purity. We ought to be united of course, but so long as that is not a reality, we should still view and treat one another as charitably as we can.

A set of rapid fire questions to consider as you write your essay:

Has papal infallibility really settled anything?

Did unam sanctam, an ex cathedra pronouncement, settle the relationship of church and temporal power? For 99.9% of catholics its a dead letter (which is good), but how does the church have integrity when it picks and chooses amongst its own traditions?

Did papal authority settle the abortion issue, when so many Catholics and

especially Catholic politicians, are clearly pro choice, e.g., Catholics for Choice, Pelosi, Kerry, Keenan? We need to consider each version of the Christian faith in its best and purest form, but we also need to look at what these different branches of the church are like in real life, on the ground.

Did the authority of the Catholic church settle the issue of birth control when study shows 98% of Catholic women use birth control? Even if that number is high (I think it is probably is), the fact remains that most Catholics simply do not follow the teachings of their own church. Why doesn't anyone in the hierarchy do anything about it? Do they even care? How often do Catholic priests articulate from the pulpit an argument for the Catholic position on birth control? Or even chastity?

Did Trent settle the justification issue when the best roman scholars now read justification texts in Rom. 3-4 in a more Lutheran/Reformed way, e.g., as a forensic declaration? The Reformation pretty much won the debate and it is hard to argue otherwise. So what becomes of Trent? If it can be reinterpreted to accommodate the very positions and people it condemned, what good is it?

Did the pope's excommunication of the east, or of Luther, settle the status of those communions forever? What about VC2?

It seems about the only things definitively settled in church history were settled before the rise of the papacy, e.g., Nicea. Today, papal authority is a major source of schism (cf. the Higgins article I gave you).

You can find all the same opinions in Catholic church as Protestant – in other words, they aren't more unified in faith and morals, if anything they are less so than evangelicals. The Roman church has the same conservative/liberal spectrum.

Is the point of authority to guarantee unity? In the real world it hasn't done that. Maybe in some gnostic realm, but not in real life.

The papacy has kept the semblance of institutional unity, which is obviously important, but not the deeper, richer forms of unity that Scripture calls us to, e.g., "likemindedness."

The claim is that Protestants lack infallible authority and therefore we've split -- that may well be true, but Rome's infallible authority has not produced the kind of likemindedness scripture calls us to, either because there is not agreement on what the church has said or there is not submission to the church's authority.

We have to live with a fallible imperfect church. Yes, that takes humility, but that's what God wants from us.

I am scared to death of a church that stands over the Word of God, that cannot be

corrected by the Word of God.

I guess what I would say is that Roman Catholic Church doesn't provide the answers they think it does -- and all too often when it does provide answers, it gives the wrong ones.

The claim is made, "We need an infallible interpreter of Scripture or we'll just all read it in our own way, and end up divided." Well, ok....but who's to say the Pope is that interpreter? After all, the Orthodox claim the councils that do that for us, and can make a much better case from the history of the early church since there was no papacy like you have today for several centuries. Protestants trust the Spirit to lead the church into truth even if it's often messy business. But why is Rome's claim better than the other major traditions? And besides that, whose going to interpret this infallible interpretation of the Pope? Fallible people. We cannot escape our own fallibility. Roman Catholics want something NOW that God has promised for the future, not the present. Besides, Roman Catholics just end up fighting over what the Church has said....that's if they care at all (they usually don't). Protestants tend to split because they take their faith so seriously; Romans Catholics find it easy to stay together precisely because they don't. Maybe there's a bit of a caricature in that, but it also has more than a grain of truth.

I just don't think the claims made about the Pope stand up under scrutiny....Paul said he was the *last* to be appointed an apostle in 1 Cor. 15, so there aren't any more in the church who have apostolic authority....Peter was not the final authority at the first council in Acts 15, James was....the Pope was not even in present at the Council of Nicea, yet some somehow the church managed to write the defining Christian creed without his help....in 590, Pope Gregory said any bishop who claims universal authority is of the antichrist (which means his later successors who did claim universal authority for themselves are antichrists in his view!)....there were times in church history when there were multiple popes excommunicating each other, and no one knew for sure who the real pope was.....there were times when popes were openly corrupt....papal infallibility was not decreed until 1870, so if it's so essential, one has to wonder how the church got along without it for so long.....etc. The claims made for the Papacy are amazingly arrogant and not well grounded in the Scriptures or in history. The papacy is institution built on myths and lies, and its never healthy to buy into a lie.

Or look at it this way. Suppose they are right and I need an infallible interpretation of Scripture...where is that infallible interpretation found? The Pope hasn't written an infallible commentary on the Bible. In fact, the content of the Pope's supposedly infallible declarations have virtually nothing to do with Scripture at all. So the Roman Catholic reader of the Bible is really in the same place as the Protestant reader. We rely on what we know, on tradition as we understand it, and trust that God's Spirit will lead us into truth. What the Roman church can supposedly give you is an answer to questions that Scripture does not

definitively answer....like birth control. Or they use their authority to contradict Scripture, like forbidding priests to marry (what incredible disaster that has brought on the Roman church!), or making up doctrines about Mary. I can live with some "I don't know" if it means avoiding legalisms and tyranny. Sometimes we just have to muddle through without a tie-breaker, and just learn to love one another anyway....it seems to me that Rome's tie-breaking authority settles matters with sheer force rather than loving argument. But Rome's authority certainly has not produced the kind of likemindedness the Scriptures call us to. The reality is that the vast majority of Catholics in America and throughout the world ignore the teaching of their church anyway....most Catholic women use birth control forbidden by their church, the majority of Catholics in America are pro-choice, etc. Has the authority of the Roman church really solved anything? So long as Nancy Pelosi and Mother Teresa are in the same church, does it really mean anything to be a Roman Catholic?

More questions: Why did the Bereans search the Scriptures to test what Paul said in Acts 17? Doesn't that presume that the Bible can be understood by ordinary people, at least in its basic message? Whereas Roman Catholics put their faith in the institution to interpret Scripture, Protestants, rightly in my view, put their faith in the leading of the Holy Spirit and the clarity of God's Word. See also Galatians 1:8-9. The Galatians are supposed to be able to recognize a false gospel when they hear one, even if it comes from the lips of Peter (as it did in Galatians 2)!! Why did the Catholic church excommunicate Luther and others for preaching the gospel? No, Luther didn't want a split....Rome split off from from him. Rome is to blame for the schism of the Reformation (just as they were to blame for schism with the East in the year 1054....in fact the papacy has probably been the most divisive force in the church in all of her history!)

I guess I'm also impacted by the fact that I grew up surrounded by Roman Catholics and all I ever saw was nominalism. I know that not all Catholics are that way....there are many, many faithful Catholics who are fighting the good fight. But when Heather Dornan asked Georgia Claire why she prayed the rosary, Georgia Claire said, "oh, it's just words." When prayer is "just words" you're already moving into nominalism....which is a scary place to be. That's not fighting, that's caving into the enemy. Rome is not known for training strong soldiers.

I will not try to defend Protestant denominationalism....no point in defending the indefensible....it's huge problem, and due to our sin....But their grass is no greener than ours, and often less so.

ZZZ, you wrote, "How does confidence in Christ's saving power weaken because of location, membership, association,.....anything?" But you understand that no Roman Catholic would agree with you on that, right? The whole Roman Catholic claim is that your membership and association with the church of Rome is indeed everything. One of those tie-breaking, infallible pronouncements of the Pope says this: "Now, therefore, we declare, determine and pronounce that for every human creature it is necessary for salvation to be subject to the authority of the Roman pontiff." That to me is just the kind of legalism we need to fight

against. But what's even worse, YYY is compelled to say that TPC is no longer a church. Let that sink in. YYY, looking at us through Roman Catholic eyes, says we are not members of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, his body and bride. I am not a pastor or minister of the gospel. Our communion meals are not really the Lord's Supper. We are, at best, "separated brethren," because we are not in fellowship with the Pope. I asked YYY about this, and he did not hesitate to unchurch all of us. That means that YYY cannot return to you the charity you are showing to him!! You can say he's still in a place where Christ is at work and where he can get the means of grace, but he cannot say the same things about where you are. Again, I asked YYY about this, and he told me point blank he does not consider TPC a church anymore. So he really has embraced the Roman position. I find that deeply offensive, not just in the sense that it damages our friendship, but in the sense that it's just wrong to unchurch so many faithful, fruit-bearing believers. It's contrary to the gospel! Our communion with Jesus through his word, through baptism, through the eucharist is no longer good enough.

Finally, addressing the other side of this wide ranging discussion, I just don't buy into the "all branches of the visible church are equally valid" argument. Sure, all branches of the church have their problems....but I think Rome's atrocities are greater....much greater. It's like saying, well the US and Afghanistan both have problems, so there's really no difference. Wrong. Dead wrong. Sure, you can get to heaven from inside the Roman Catholic church, but there are more obstacles there -- the gospel is not as clearly set forth, the discipline is more lax, the culture is more worldly, the idolatrous practices of bowing before images and calling on saints in prayer are unchecked, the liturgy and music is usually pretty anemic, indulgences which oppress the poor are still part of the official teaching of the church, and so on. It's just not as healthy a place to be. A solid Protestant evangelical church like TPC is the equivalent of going to Brookwood Medical Center for health care, while going to a typical Roman Catholic congregation is like going to third world doctor for leeching.

RL

Nancy Pelosi is a Roman Catholic in good standing with her church, and also a proponent of tax-funded abortion and contraception. Sandra Fluke is also a Roman Catholic and is studying at a Roman Catholic institution. Do you think the Catholic church is going to do anything about this? No. And so while I hope the Catholic bishops who have challenged Obama on the contraception mandate will win, if it depends on the support of Roman Catholic church members, they will not because the vast, vast majority of Roman Catholics do not practice their church's view of contraception....or even chastity, for that matter. If the Catholics really want to be taken seriously in the public square, why don't the cut off *their own members* who hold to the very positions they are trying to stand against in the political realm.

I know the evangelical church is also in shambles in many respects, but I think

evangelicals are at least teaching their people on chastity. A Roman Catholic prof at Hillsdale said, "I have not once in those years heard the argument against contraception articulated from the pulpit, and I have not once heard the argument for chastity articulated. In the face of the sexual revolution, the bishops, priests, and nuns of the American Church have by and large fallen silent. In effect, they have abandoned the moral teaching of the Roman Catholic Church in order to articulate a defense of the administrative entitlements state and its progressive expansion." In other words, one is more likely to hear a sermon based on Democratic party platform in a Roman Catholic Church than something based on Paul's teaching on lust, sexual promiscuity, etc. That, my friends, is the modern day Roman Catholic Church. See <http://ricochet.com/main-feed/American-Catholicism-s-Pact-With-the-Devil>.

Questions for Romanists:

They say the church interprets scripture, and by "church" they mean the magisterium. But the magisterium has never produced a commentary on the bible -- so it hasn't done its job. Are we forever left without any true and proper knowledge of what Scripture actually means?

By placing faith implicitly in an institution they have created an idol and abdicated their responsibility to be good Bereans.

Romanists say that individuals cannot interpret the Bible. But Paul expected the Galatian Christians to be able to interpret the Scriptures well enough they could recognize a false teacher when they heard one (Gal. 1:8-9).

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer? Can the Spirit be trusted to lead the Christian, or the church, into an understanding of the truth?

Yes, we need teachers. Paul taught the Galatians, then expected them to diagnose and recognize false gospels when they encountered them. Timothy was taught the Bible from his infancy by his mother and grandmother. Scripture obviously tells us that pastors and teachers in the church will expound the Bible to the people. But (other than the apostles) there is no hint that any of these teachers are infallible. Does anyone want to claim Timothy's grandmother was infallible? So we can learn from fallible teachers. But if they are fallible, they are also testable and correctable – which is what sola scriptura is all about. What is this model of Scripture + fallible teacher missing?

You cannot escape private judgment, or your own fallibility -- even if you say we rely on the church's elite to interpret scripture for us, who's going to interpret what they said? You cannot escape your own fallibility.

Consider the papacy and early church.

Firmilian, 3rd century bishop of Caesarea, who wrote, "They who are in Rome do not observe those things in all cases which are handed down from the beginning, and vainly pretend the authority of the apostles";

Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome, wrote, "Therefore I fully affirm that whoever calls himself the universal Priest, or *wants* to be called that elevates himself to Antichrist, because he vaunts himself over all the others. Not only does this extreme arrogance lead to error, it's also perverse since this person wants to be seen as God over all people; thus whoever he is, who wants to be called the Priest alone, he exalts himself over all the other priests."

Etc.

All these recognize that the church has a genuine but fallible authority, under the supreme authority of the Scriptures.

I've read the fathers on Mary and I think I fully agree with them. But I'm not exactly sure what the point of those quotations you included is with regard to the debate over Mary between Protestants and Romanists. I might be missing where you're going, but it seems to me they don't address the issues that divide the two camps, e.g., Marian devotion. What exactly is the "comparison" you're trying to make? You'll have to spell it out for me. In the meantime, I'll spell out a little more how I see things.

Vintage Protestants have always believed Mary is the Second Eve (and Second Sarah, Second Hannah, etc.). We call her Theotokos/God-Bearer (though the Reformers wisely warned about misuses of this title as well). We see her as a type of Israel and the church. We see her, in her pregnancy, as the new Ark of the Covenant, bearing the Shekinah-glory of God in her womb. We do not object to using various typologies to explain her great role in redemptive history, or giving her appropriate titles. We know that we need to understand and appreciate Mary's role in order to have a fully biblical Christology because Mariology and Christology are correlated to one another. These are all legitimate ways of "honoring" her.

Remember that everything contained in those quotations that Newman cites from the fathers has been preached from the TPC pulpit; there is nothing distinctive to Roman Catholicism in those quotations, and I've cited at least one or two of the more eloquent ones myself. Sure, some Protestants are more restrained with their use of typology, but viewing Mary as a typological figure is commonplace. See my sermon from December 7, 2008 and the accompanying notes, available on the website. In those notes, I wrote this (following Lutheran commentator Art Just):

As Mary visits Elizabeth and pens the Magnificat, we find the movement of the story from promise to confirmation to praise. Mary is driven to reflect on God

choosing her to play this central role in salvation history. God has shown favor to her, though she had no claim on him. God has raised her up from a position of lowliness to blessedness. The pregnancy of Elizabeth confirms her own pregnancy and enables Mary to better grasp what God is doing and how the divine purpose is going to be fulfilled. The result of her fellowship time with Elizabeth (and probably lots of bible study!) is the magnificent Magnificat!

The entire scene is shot through with liturgical elements. Elizabeth “intones” her greeting to Mary (Just, p. 75f, points out this term is used in the LXX in conjunction worship before the ark of the covenant, e.g., 1 Chron. 15:28; 16:4, 5, 42) in a liturgical style. Elizabeth is able to discern the true meaning behind John’s dancing movements in her womb; hence, she gives voice to John’s response to Mary’s child. Her speech is dripping with blessing for Mary, a fact reflected in Mary’s hymnic composition (1:48). The words of Elizabeth reverse the standards of convention as the older blesses and honors the younger. The movement from Elizabeth to Mary is a step up to a higher plane of miraculous action.

Then the entire narrative pauses for us to listen in as Mary chants God’s praises in her highly inter-textual hymn. In her song, she looks ahead with total certainty to what God will bring about through her Son. Of course, the rest of Luke’s gospel, and indeed, the rest of the NT, spell out how Mary’s prophetic song comes to realization. **As Just puts it, Mary celebrates the realization that, “The entire OT hope is about to be realized...All of God’s prior saving activity finds its source and culmination in Christ...Mary stands as the one through whom the fulfillment is accomplished” (p. 64). Just fills this out with several typologies: Mary as new Eve (p. 68: “As Eve contained in her womb all humanity that was doomed to sin, now Mary contains in her womb the new Adam who will father a new humanity by his grace”); Mary as Israel (p. 65, 86); Mary as church (that is, both bride and mother; p. 65f); Mary as ark of the covenant (p. 72); Mary as tabernacle (p. 76); and Mary as new Abraham (p. 87). We could also view Mary as a new Sarah and new Hannah, though Elizabeth also fits these typologies in various ways.**

So there you have it. But nothing in those quotations from the fathers leads to the distinctively Roman Catholic dogmas and devotional practices regarding Mary. Nothing in the quotations suggest the points that Newman wants to draw from them, such as the claim that Mary “had a real meritorious operation.” Instead, everything about Mary’s own language in the Lukan account shows she is amazed by God’s grace and gift to her. She does not “merit” anything according to her own confession. (Presumably, Newman is going to jump, as some Romanists do, from the merit Mary earned to the worship she deserves. But I cannot imagine Mary herself approving of that kind of jump, and certainly nothing in the Lukan text warrants it.) Mary should certainly be honored for her humility and obedience, for saying “yes” to God’s proposal, but the whole passage emphasizes all that God is doing to fulfill his covenant promises, not Mary’s merit.

Further, and more to the point, nothing in the quotations from the fathers proves

Mary was or should be the object of "veneration" or worship. No one prays to her, or worship her image, or ascribes divine qualities to her any more than they do to her parallel, the first Eve. In fact, the silence of the fathers on just these points is telling. Mary was honored as a great saint who played a crucial role in redemptive history; her place in God's plan certainly was unique. But she was not venerated / worshipped by the apostles or the church fathers. That much is clear. If the fathers wanted to develop a whole system of Marian devotion, they could have done so in the places Newman is quoting; but instead they limit themselves to biblical types and titles. Sure, Marian devotion eventually popped up here and there, probably brought into the church through semi-converted pagans who were used to goddess worship. But the patristic consensus will not support the Marian devotion that the Catholic church advocates. It comes back to the same kind of question I keep raising: If things like papal infallibility and the immaculate conception are necessary for salvation (as the Catholic church claims they are, however much Vatican 2 nuances those claims), why are there are no traces of them in the early church's *regula fidei* and baptismal vows? No new convert had to commit to these things to receive baptism and enter the church for many, many centuries; by what standard and by what right did the Catholic church suddenly impose them upon the faithful as essential? I'm totally at home with saying doctrine develops, so the early church is not the end-all and be-all of Christian doctrine. But Rome's novelties have refashioned the very core of Christian belief, the very articles of doctrine that must be upheld in order to escape the wrath and curse of God. It's all very untraditional.

The earliest fathers know nothing of Mary's immaculate conception or assumption (or dormition), even if these eventually became widely believed doctrines. They are later accretions that have no solid foundation in the Scriptures or the earliest Christian tradition or the ancient creeds, and most certainly should not carry anathemas for those who do not consent to them, as the Roman dogmas of 1854 and 1950 pronounce. To require as a condition of salvation something that cannot be known from the Scriptures is entirely uncatholic and contrary to the most basic principles of the gospel (Matt. 15:7-9; Gal. 1:8-9). This is why holding to the *regula fidei* of the early church is so important. Some of the Reformers continued the medieval habit of believing things about Mary that I do not think can be established from Scripture, but they certainly did not make them tests or conditions of salvation and communion, and they avoided any kind of idolatry, so they were relatively harmless errors (at worst).

What do you do with a passage like Luke 11:27-28? (This is the passage the Lewis quote I sent you refers to.) Note how Jesus (mildly, perhaps, but still firmly) *rebukes* a person who "blesses" his mother. Yes, Mary is "blessed." But "**more than that,**" Jesus says, "blessed are those [including Mary] who hear the word of God and keep it." Consider what's happening in this text: When the woman in the crowd blesses Jesus' mother in 11:27, we may think back to the words of blessing spoken to Mary in Luke 1:28, 42, and 45. But now we find there is **an even greater blessing**, and it isn't just for Mary, but for ALL who trust in, obey, and follow her Son. That's the point of Jesus' response in 11:28. Those who follow Jesus find an even greater blessing than Mary found in giving birth to him. Even

for Mary, salvation was found not in birthing Jesus, but in trusting him. Why else would Jesus say there is greater blessing for his followers than for his mother (considered only in her motherly role, of course)? Clearly, Jesus is putting limits on the "blessedness" that can be ascribed to Mary simply in view of her role as Theotokos/Second Eve and pointing to a greater blessedness. The ultimate blessedness is found in discipleship.

What do you do with a passage like Luke 8:19-21, where Jesus redefines the family in terms of discipleship? He relativizes his "natural bond" to Mary as his biological mother and instead emphasizes that his *true* mother and brothers are those who follow him. Again, we see however great the blessing was that Mary received in *bearing* the messiah (and it was great!), there is a greater blessing to be found in *following* the messiah. In other words, Mary's role in redemptive history amounts to a means to an end, and the end is greater than the means. In those sermon notes, I concluded,

The ultimate way we can honor Mary is by imitating her faith and by trusting in her Son alone for salvation. We honor her when we say to God "let it be to me according to your Word" (echoing Lk. 1:38) and put into practice the things she sang about in her glorious psalm of praise. All of creation is feminine in relation to God; Mary's "yes" to God is the model creaturely response. We pay Mary the highest form of homage when conform our lives to her pattern of life and her song of kingdom justice.

So I'm all for honoring Mary, but we need to do it in the proper way. Roman Catholic devotion to Mary, in the US, but especially in other places in the world, goes far beyond what Scripture actually warrants. Whatever we think of the blessing bestowed on Mary in Luke 1, Luke 11 points to a greater blessing. Whatever we think of the holy family of Mary, Joseph, and their divine/human Son, Jesus himself points to and defines the true holy family in Luke 8.

Listen to that sermon and tell me what you think. I'm all for a biblically-grounded Marian typology. But I'm very opposed to claiming things for and about Mary that go beyond and even against the Scriptures, the creeds, and the fathers....which, I would contend is exactly what the Roman church has done as its theology and practices about Mary have evolved over the centuries.

RL

Newman, who said "to be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant." Lewis basically saw it the other way around from Newman. Basically, the more Lewis studied history the further he got from Rome. Iow, Protestants should not concede history to Rome but challenge Rome's claims on historical grounds.

Lewis also wrote to a papist correspondent who wondered why he wasn't Catholic, "By the time I had really explained my objection to certain doctrines which differentiate you from us (and also in my opinion from the Apostolic and

even the Medieval Church), you would like me less." In other words, for Lewis, the real problem with Rome is that she departed from the *apostolic* and *medieval* church -- she had encrusted the faith of the fathers with all kinds of novelties that were not rooted in the apostolic Scriptures or even the medieval period (I assume he means the early medieval period, but even things like papalism vs. conciliarism were running debates right up the eve of the Reformation, especially after the Great Papal Schism and Lorenzo Valla's proof that the "Donation of Constantine" was forged damaged the prestige of the papacy)....

...There is all kinds of stuff worth reading on the web that can serve as a counter to the Called to Communion website, e.g., triablogue blog, the beggar's all blog, even Doug Wilson's "Roman or Catholic" blog posts had some gems, like this one:

<http://www.dougwils.com/Old-Table-Talk-Articles/Peters-Boast.html>. Of course, my forthcoming book, "Peter, Paul, and Mary -- Or, Why I Am Not a Roman Catholic" will have all the answers!

ZXZX,

Remember, the Creeds are just as true and certain when we say them as when a Catholic or Orthodox Christian says them. They're true because they're true. The fact that we share the creeds in common should actually be a source of great confidence. Maybe we Christians aren't as divided as we look! Even on opposite sides of the Roman/Protestant divide, there are still many things we have in common!

A few quick follow-ups.

You'll find various versions of the Apostles Creed here:

<http://www.catholicapologetics.org/ap020300.htm>

Note that Hippolytus' version is used as a baptismal liturgy, so it's in question form. (We use this form in our baptismal liturgies at TPC.) It does not have the "descended into hell" line. It looks like that line doesn't come in until a couple of centuries later. I would keep the phrase in there because I think properly understood it makes a very biblical point and it's the "consensus" version of the church. But if there are Protestants like Piper who suggest taking it out, they are hardly revising the Christian faith. If anything, they're being more ancient and more traditional by using an older version of the creed!

I know Wikipedia is not exactly a highly reputable source, but it is usually thought of as relatively neutral and it's easily accessible. You'll find some interesting things on papal infallibility here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papal_infallibility

Several questions to ask based on the article:

1. There are 5 criteria for infallibility:

1. "the Roman Pontiff"
2. "speaks *ex cathedra*" ("that is, when in the discharge of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, and by virtue of his supreme [apostolic authority](#)....")
3. "he defines"
4. "that a doctrine concerning faith or morals"
5. "must be held by the whole Church" ([Pastor Aeternus, chap. 4](#)).^[15]

How do we know when these criteria have been met? Where did these criteria come from? They're not spelled out in Scripture; when and how did they develop, and how do we know they're right? How is an *ex cathedra* pronouncement distinguished from other things the pope says?

2. If papal infallibility is supposed to settle everything, why are Catholics not agreed on what statements by the pope are actually infallible? This is what the article says:

"Catholic theologians agree that both [Pope Pius IX's 1854 definition](#) of the dogma of the [Immaculate Conception](#) of Mary and [Pope Pius XII's 1950 definition](#) of the dogma of the [Assumption of Mary](#) are instances of papal infallibility, a fact which has been confirmed by the Church's magisterium.^[66] However, theologians disagree about what other documents qualify..... The [Holy See](#) has given no complete list of papal statements considered to be infallible."

If Catholics do not have a list of infallible declarations from the Pope, and do not agree amongst themselves which declarations meet the criteria of infallibility, how can the Pope's authority be the answer to everything? This goes back to the question above -- how can anyone know when the criteria of infallibility are being met? Or even what those criteria are?

3. How did the doctrine of papal infallibility develop in history? It is not found in the early church, certainly not with any consistency (remember what I said about the Nicene Council -- but there's much, much more evidence it was not a part of the faith of the early church). It was not declared dogmatically until 1870. It was not required as an article of faith for Catholics before then and was denied explicitly by many Catholics before then. How could it suddenly become a condition of salvation 1800+ years after Christ? Brian Tierney, who is a Roman Catholic historian and expert on these matters, says, "the doctrine of papal infallibility was first proposed by Peter Olivi in the [Middle Ages](#)." He concludes his study: "There is no convincing evidence that papal infallibility formed any part of the theological or canonical tradition of the church before the thirteenth century; the doctrine was invented in the first place by a few dissident Franciscans because it suited their convenience to invent it; eventually, but only after much initial reluctance, it was accepted by the papacy because it suited the convenience of the popes to accept it." Trust me; Tierney knows more about the history of the papacy than just about any living scholar. His conclusion has to be respected and dealt with. The facts show that papal infallibility was a late developing doctrine that never had wide acceptance in the early church, or even

the whole medieval church, for that matter (which means it fails its own criteria of universality!). In fact, it was controversial even among Catholics right up until it was declared in 1870...and then it split the Catholic church, with a group that became known as the Old Catholic Churches, breaking off because they rejected the novel doctrine of papal infallibility (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Catholic_Church). How do you know the Old Catholic Church isn't the place to be, since it has a stronger claim to being traditional?

4. Do Catholics *really* believe in Papal infallibility? Are they really united on this? This is what the article says:

"In 1822, Bishop Baine declared: "In England and Ireland I do not believe that any Catholic maintains the Infallibility of the Pope."^[82]

A 1989-1992 survey of young people of the 15 to 25 age group (81% of whom were Catholics, 84% were younger than 19, and 62% were male) chiefly from the United States, but also from [Austria](#), [Canada](#), [Ecuador](#), France, [Ireland](#), [Italy](#), Japan, [Korea](#), [Peru](#), Spain and [Switzerland](#), found that 36.9% affirmed that "the Pope has the authority to speak with infallibility", 36.9% (exactly the same proportion) denied it, and 26.2% said they didn't know.^[83]

In addition, before 1870 belief in papal infallibility was not a defined requirement of Catholic faith. The Church therefore accepted the oath required of Catholics in Ireland from 1793 for admittance to certain positions and which stated that "it is not an article of the Catholic Faith, neither am I thereby required to believe or profess that the Pope is infallible"^[82] The Irish bishops repeated their acceptance in a 25 January 1826 pastoral address to the Catholic clergy and laity in Ireland, stating: "The Catholics of Ireland not only do not believe, but they declare upon oath ... that it is not an article of the Catholic faith, neither are they required to believe, that the Pope is infallible, and that they do not hold themselves 'bound to obey any order in its own nature immoral', though the Pope or any ecclesiastical power should issue or direct such an order; but, on the contrary, that it would be sinful in them to pay any respect or obedience thereto."^{[84][85]}

The whole section in the wiki article on "Denial by Catholics" is very interesting. Now, just because at least a third of Catholics don't believe in papal infallibility doesn't necessarily prove anything.....maybe they're just bad Catholics. But, likewise, I would say Protestants who split off from one another are being bad Protestants since the original Protestant Reformers certainly didn't intend for the church to become so fractured and were very concerned for unity. If we judge Protestants by what they do in the "real world" then we should judge Catholics the same way. And we find a lot of messiness, sin, and division on both sides. Lord have mercy!

Here's another way to think about it. If Catholics are not likeminded on papal infallibility (and a zillion other issues), then they do not have the kind of unity Scripture requires from us, even if they're institutionally and governmentally united. Scripture doesn't just require "one church" in an institutional sense -- Scripture requires "likemindedness." At the same time, I'd say the problem we see with Protestant denominationalism today is not a sign that sola Scriptura has failed but that Protestants are sinners. The problem is not with the Bible; it's with us, because a true application of sola scriptura would not lead to such division.

But neither the papacy nor Protestantism can boast about their unity with much creditability.

5. I know you have also considered Eastern Orthodoxy. Both Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy claim infallibility, but Rome says the Pope is infallible and Orthodoxy says church councils are infallible. How do you decide which claim was the better one? And if you are not infallible, how do you know you made the right decision? In the end, the decision to become Catholic does not depend on papal infallibility, but on your own fallible judgment of the evidence. Right? How do you know you've interpreted the evidence correctly? The real issue is not papal infallibility but the fallibility of you. In the end all Christians, whatever church we're in, are utterly dependent on the Spirit of God to lead us into the truth. Our faith ultimately rests not in our reasoning or research abilities, nor in the church, but in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There's more -- waaaaay more. I feel like I could write almost endlessly on the problems with papal infallibility. We haven't even gotten into what the Bible says, or specifics in the church fathers. I wouldn't even say these arguments above are the strongest arguments against it. But these are some of the easier arguments and they'll at least help you see some of the questions you could raise in discussion.

Later,
RL

Where did Paul get the authority to correct Peter? You could argue Paul ranks higher - he's the last apostle, so shouldn't he be first?!

Peter may have been first ranking apostle - but nothing suggests he had a promise of infallibility or universal authority that other apostles did not have. Indeed, several strands of evidence point to an equality and division of labor amongst the apostles (e.g., Gal. 2).

Where did the Galatians get the authority to correct an apostle who preaches a false gospel? How can the pope be corrected by the people in RCC?

Mt 16 says nothing about infallibility, nothing about successors (note the foundation metaphor), etc. Other NT texts apply the same imagery used for Peter and same privileges given to Peter to other apostles, eg, Jn 20, Eph 2.20.

The greatest achievement of the Roman Catholic Church was the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation is really Rome's greatest legacy; it is the crown jewel of Western Christendom to this point.

What has the pope said infallibly? How do you know. What are the criteria? There disagreements over what counts as an infallible declaration (see Wikipedia), so then what?

What about the role of the pope in the historic schisms? The way to unity in the future is giving up papal infallibility since 2/3rds of Christendom disagrees with it.

Protestantism actually demands more – it requires submission to fallible authorities in the church. But it is also humbler.

If not Christ alone, then what? Union with Christ + union with papacy? Where do you get that?

Look again at Gal. 2. You still haven't answered. During that period of time when Peter had cut off the believing, baptized Gentiles from his communion table, were the Gentiles still part of the church Jesus founded? Even though they had been excommunicated by Peter? During that period of time, was Peter still part of that church? Was he the head of the church?

When we lived in Monroe, LA, my son was in an Episcopal school that had a very "high" liturgical service for chapel each week. Some of the kids bowed towards the altar before going forward. I explained to my son that we were not going to do that and gave him reasons why. (I also explained why we don't go forward but take the supper in a seated posture, of course.) I disagreed with many of the liturgical particulars in that church, but it did not stop me from communing there on occasion, and I was able to do without violating biblical prohibitions of liturgical idolatry.

I have also been to mass many times in the South where there was really nothing (or very little) overtly idolatrous, e.g., no bowing before man-made items. I get the sense that many RC parishes in the South are this way -- "light" on the things Protestants would consider idolatrous. I'm not sure if it's because so many RC's down here have been protestantized, or because they're trying to be sensitive to potential converts, or what. On most of those occasions, I have gone forward to receive a blessing from the priest even though I could not commune, per their table fencing instructions. In other words, I participated in the service to the fullest extent possible. It's the *Lord's* service and the *Lord's* table after all -- and I belong to the Lord and he belongs to me, so I should be at the table. By keeping folks like me away, Rome shows she is really having a "self-supper" rather than the Lord's Supper, to echo Paul's plaint against the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 11. But in those contexts, I'll do what I can to promote a biblical ecumenism/unity, even if they're being bad eucharistic "hosts" (is there a pun in there somewhere?!).

But again, let me circle back around to my main point: Closed communion is vital to Rome and the East in a way it is not to most Protestants who practice some form of closed communion, e.g., WELS Lutherans. For Rome and the East, closed communion is bound up in their highly exclusivist ecclesial claims; we're not allowed to partake because we're not *really* part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. I say that's absurd and I'm sure it ticks Jesus off. Of course, Rome and the East cannot both be right in their claims. But they can certainly both be wrong....as I think they are. Closed communion and their ecclesial claims seem to stand or fall together. When Rome allows Protestants to the table, the Reformation will be able to declare a final victory -- but of course, at that point, the Roman church will no longer really exist, at least not in the way she has for the past 500 years.

Question: Do you see any good biblical argument for the claim that a baptized and believing Christian has to be connected to a bishop who is connected to the bishop of Rome in order to take the Lord's Supper? This is the nub of the matter when it comes to our dispute with Rome. It would seem that Galatians 2, by spotlighting Peter, holds all the cards in the discussion once again. Is union with Christ enough, or must one also have union with Peter / 's successor (or a particular patriarch, as in the case of the East)? When Peter was out of fellowship with the Gentile Christians in Antioch, they were obviously still true Christians, even though they had been cut off by Peter, and they were presumably celebrating valid eucharists, albeit, without Peter's participation / approval. How can that possibly work on Rome's principles?

RL

Where is the earliest place in history the criteria of infallibility are spelled out? It's not the NT, it's not Nicea, it's not until much later. Read Tierney.

[Brian Tierney](#) agrees with Küng, whom he cites, and concludes: "There is no convincing evidence that papal infallibility formed any part of the theological or canonical tradition of the church before the thirteenth century; the doctrine was invented in the first place by a few dissident Franciscans because it suited their convenience to invent it; eventually, but only after much initial reluctance, it was accepted by the papacy because it suited the convenience of the popes to accept it".

As for description of and criticisms of CRW, I have to confess that not much you say really resonates with me. I have been in liturgically oriented Reformed churches for 15+ years and I just don't see or hear what you're describing, nor do I think the BH/CRW "movement" is saddled with the problems you've identified. I realize we're in quite different contexts so that may account for a

great deal of our difference in perspective. But I still tend to think you're overreaching and overreacting.

I don't think the issue is that CRW proponents actually use two opposed versions of the regulative principle. Rather, I think the issue is that they are good Protestants, and thus they make appeals to both Scripture and tradition. They appeal to Scripture to correct the tradition, and appeal to tradition to inform and bolster their reading of Scripture. I have no problem with the procedure as such, and indeed find it inevitable. I think your way of arguing against CRW in your email is so broad and abstract that really any worldview/philosophy/theological system could be critiqued as "unstable" in this way, including any and every form Trinitarian Christian faith. I don't find it a helpful approach.

If you have problems with CRW, I think you'd be better off critiquing the arguments/positions themselves. So: If you don't think Meyer's argument for a biblically mandated "shape" for the service from Leviticus 9 works, critique that particular argument and the hermeneutic he uses to make it. Get your hands dirty with the texts as he does and show the holes in his case. If you think Jordan's arguments for moving the *sursum corda* out of its position in the traditional liturgies don't work, then critique those specific arguments on their own terms. If you think what Jordan says about the use of the Psalter, or the way the Eucharist should be done isn't right, critique those specific positions, including his reading of the biblical texts. As it stands, I don't think your more "global" approach really works as a critique. The CRW guys are both sifting and building off an inherited liturgical legacy -- which is exactly what we should be doing theologically as well. To me, the logic of their particular "moves" (e.g., what they keep, what they discard, what they change) generally makes good biblical sense, so I can see why they do what they do with historic liturgies like St. Basil's or Chrysostom's. If you don't find their judgments convincing, I think you're going to be best served dealing with specifics and interacting with particular arguments, Scriptures, etc.

I am not sure that Dix can still be considered "seminal." His work was important, but I think it has been and continues to be superseded. He got a lot wrong. I also think you have to take into the work of scholars like Bradshaw, which shows the breadth of diversity in the early church, albeit within a largely shared framework. Of course, Bradshaw also shows we probably don't know as much about how the early Christians worshipped as we'd like to think we do.....

The people I know who advocate or practice some form of CRW perhaps have more flexibility (or catholicity) than the folks you've talked to...unless you've misunderstood them. In other words, I don't see anyone reducing liturgy to a "science," at least not in the pejorative sense of that term. And I have not seen our kind of liturgy have the effect of making people "restorationist" -- just the opposite. The only folks I know who became elitist were ones who moved on to Rome or the East where that kind of snobbery is much more welcome. While I think the case for CRW is very solid, I think it still leaves plenty of room for legitimate diversity. I know Meyers believes that as well. I also know that many guys who advocate CRW also really like works like Smith's *Desiring the Kingdom*.

I would offer some fairly trenchant criticisms of Smith's book, but overall I think it is a fabulous corrective. I just think he allows the pendulum to swing too far in the other direction....

What "harsh pronouncements about other traditions in Christendom" do you have in mind? Again, that really has not been my experience. From where I sit, I see CRW and CREC types showing an uncommon appreciation for different branches of the church. Sure they be critical, as we all must. But doesn't it all hinge on whether or not the criticisms are offered in love and actually have biblical validity?

I think the key to maintaining the gains (yes, I will put it that way!) of CRW in the CREC is not going to be responding to the criticisms you've raised, because I don't think they're all that valid. I think the real practical concern is going to be developing some sort of "Book of Common Prayer." Even if it does not become a matter of church law in the CREC, it'll be vital to preserving and growing our liturgical practices. Admittedly, there are big obstacles to such a work gaining acceptance any time soon, and thus far no one has stepped forward to put anything together, even though I have regularly pleaded for it.

I will try to read your essay on the relation of pulpit to Eucharist. I have dealt with some of these issues in a theological way here: <http://www.hornes.org/theologia/rich-lusk/some-thoughts-on-the-means-of-grace> (Incidentally, I have a revised and expanded version of this paper which could also be suitable for the book, if you're interested.) At my church, we view Word and Table as seamlessly integrated. I preach, and indeed conduct the entire liturgy, from behind the table; there is no separate pulpit. We see ourselves as combining, rather than choosing between, the catholic/Eucharist-centered and evangelical/Word-centered forms of worship.

The CREC guys you're interacting with and citing in your email may be making overinflated claims for CRW -- it's just hard to say without knowing more context of the conversation. I disagree with Wilson's statement that he'd step down if one of his children turned to the RCC or EOC, and unlike Jordan I do not necessarily equate those moves with apostasy, as I think each case has to be judged on its own. I think the way you link CRW churches to RC and RO is a bit confused. There is more to be considered than just continuity in liturgical forms. For one thing, while we certainly have more liturgical commonalities with RC and EO than typical evangelical churches, second commandment issues cannot be bracketed out. And, yes, I believe when RC's and EO bow before their man-made images, they are giving God the finger. It is idolatry, no matter the intention. But just as importantly, if someone moves from, say, my church, to RC or EO, he has to completely renounce us and no longer consider us to be a church. A move to an evangelical church will, generally speaking, not involve as much discontinuity because evangelicals, generally speaking, do not make such over-the-top, schismatic claims for their communions. It's the Galatians 2 issue we've already discussed. Thus, I would strongly, strongly take issue with your claim that a move to RC or EO is a "smaller shift." In some ways, it is smaller, but in other ways it is a much, much, much larger shift. Maybe that helps you see the

"logic" behind the claims of CRW advocates that a move to Rome or the East is one of "sharp discontinuity." And all of that should also give you some idea of how I would counsel your friend in the situation described in the email, though I'd have to know more about his present situation to actually provide counsel.

Thanks,
RL

On the one hand, it is surprising and ironic to see Stellan leave the PCA for Rome. On the other hand, maybe it isn't surprising at all. ZZZZZ told me that at one point during the trial, he told Stellan that Stellan was actually the one far closer Catholicism because of the way he treated the Confession. I read the transcript from the trial, and Stellan's complete disregard for, and even lack of interest in, the Scriptures was very telling. Stellan's use of the Confession had already exalted tradition over Scripture, which means he was already half way down the road to Rome. He just traded out one form of idolizing tradition for another. In Stellan's post, he sets up a false choice, a false dichotomy: you either have an infallible magisterium (at least under certain conditions -- but can anyone infallibly specify what those conditions are and when they have been met?!), or you have mere fallible human opinion. On that particular view, the Bible and the Spirit are not real players -- or they are bit players at best. The real authority will either be the individual or the magisterium. Stellan had treated the Confession as a paper pope; that failed so he went after a different sort of pope. I contend that pope will fail him as well because he is looking for epistemological certainty in the wrong way and in the wrong place.

It will be interesting to watch if Stellan modifies his R2K views in light of the ecclesiastical shift. It will also be interesting to see how the rabid anti-FVers react. Maybe anti-FV is the true "road to Rome" -- and FV itself still the antidote!

RL

For XZXZX, everything flows downstream from the papacy -- notice all those "who says?" questions (and note that answering those questions by appealing to Jesus or an apostle would NOT be a sufficient answer -- the only suitable answer is the papacy -- which is insane, but anyway...).

Thus, I think Galatians 1-2 are really the key since we find there [1] Paul expected the ordinary, non-ordained Galatian Christians to have a such a sure, secure interpretation of the gospel that they could stand up against angels and apostles who teach a counterfeit gospel (that is to say, their knowledge of Christ in the gospel has epistemological priority over everything else, including whatever Peter or another ecclesial authority figure might say contrary to it); and [2] Paul had to confront Peter for denying the gospel when he schismatically cut off Gentile believers, so fellowship with Peter cannot be considered the final

boundary marker of the church, contrary to Rome's claims.

Obviously, point [1] addresses the "who says?" question. Paul expected the Galatian Christians to be able to take a stand against anyone, any apostle or angel, on the basis of the gospel (1:8-9). Paul expects them to be able to defend the gospel, even against straying apostles. They didn't need a pope to interpret the Scriptures, at least in their core meaning, for them. He expected them to have basic interpretive competency, as they are led by the Spirit. And the reality is, that is what we have in the church today. While different branches of the church disagree over all kinds of things, pretty much everyone agrees the Apostles and Nicene creeds define the faith. And note that those creeds say nothing about the necessity of being in communion with particular popes or patriarchs, so to add those requirements for salvation or communion is to go beyond the apostolic and patristic faith. To answer the "who says?" questions with "the Pope says!" is likewise to go beyond the apostolic and patristic faith. If the Galatians Christians of the first century had gone "the Pope says" (or "Peter says") route, they would have inadvertently ended up denying the gospel!

Obviously, point [2] relates to Leithart's argument for catholicity (2:11-16). But you really have to go one or two steps further to meet the Parks head-on. The point is not just the post-Pentecost fallibility of Peter. Rome says we cannot commune with them because we are not under the authority of a bishop who is under the authority of the bishop of Rome; we are not part of "the church Jesus founded" because that church is headed by Peter (and his successors in Rome). But in Galatians 2 Paul considered the Gentile believers to be true Christians / church members and to have valid Eucharists, even after Peter had cut them off. In other words, these Gentiles were still true church members even when they weren't connected to Peter or approved by Peter. On Rome's principles, there's no way that should or could be the case. But it was. Ergo, Rome's principles must be false.

The Called to Communion website is a complete waste of time. The articles, and the comments that follow, are of such low quality, there's just not anything there worth interacting with. Take this article:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2012/03/how-not-to-defend-the-reformation-why-protestants-need-the-antichrist-2/>

He says that many Protestants have softened in their claims about the corruptions of the medieval church, and now see more continuity between the Reformation and earlier church history, e.g., we no longer view the pope as THE antichrist and try to make connections with the pre-Reformation church and traditions. That, he says, is no way to defend the Reformation! But the entire argument is reversible. The changes -- yes, changes!!! -- the Roman church made since Vatican 2, such as softening their stance towards Protestants (we are now merely "separated brethren" rather than heretics) and doing the mass in the vernacular (as the Reformers insisted!) are no way to defend the Roman church against the Reformation! Not to mention all the Roman Catholic Bible scholars who interpret Romans and Galatians on justification in ways that are much closer to the Reformers than the Council of Trent. One could argue that Rome is slowly conceding the case, piece by piece.

Or take this post:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2012/03/is-reformed-worship-biblical/>

It's just false. Calvin did not condemn the "liturgy of the hours" as such. Daryl Hart points out that "up until 1987 when it introduced its new *Psalter Hymnal*, the Christian Reformed Church's hymnals included Calvin's prayers for public and private worship, along with prayers for church assemblies. The prayers for families ran to only four in number, ones for the beginning and close of the day, and for before and after meals." How could Calvin have opposed morning and evening prayer if he wrote prayer forms for just those occasions? What Calvin opposed was the superstitious prayer practices of the medieval church, not set prayer times -- there's a big difference! Anders says that Reformed worship practices cannot be sustained on the basis of Scripture alone....well, fine, but that's not what Calvin or the Reformers ever meant by sola scriptura anyway. Just read WCF 1. It's pretty simple. Anders has tried to create an argument against the Reformers by pointing to inconsistencies, but it's a flawed argument all the way around.

There was another post a while back that tried to argue that sola scriptura could never lead to the conclusion that the apostles came to in Acts 15 that Gentile Christians were exempt from circumcision. Nonsense. Acts 15 shows the apostles themselves debated and argued from Scripture; a biblical case for the inclusion of the Gentiles as Gentiles had to be made. And more importantly, Paul's whole argument in Romans 4 is precisely about this -- he uses Genesis 15-17 alone to show that Gentile believers do not have to be circumcised or come under the law. It's elementary stuff. The sheer ignorance, biblical and otherwise, of the people who write for that website is astounding. Here's the link:

<http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2012/02/taking-a-stand-on-the-scriptures-against-the-traditions-of-men/>

....Bruce Springsteen once sang, "God have mercy on the man who doubts what he's sure of." That applies here. You have folks who are closing their eyes when the light is right in front of them. They've been given divine sureties and have chosen to doubt them.

RL

Do papal authority and unity really go together? History does not suggest that -- indeed, just the opposite.

The NT is filled with appeals to divided Christians to strive for unity. Why don't any of these appeals include a command to submit to Peter? Why didn't Paul say the Peter party in Corinth had it right? What was wrong with being of Cephas? The NT solution to division is not submission to Peter or the papacy but love. Yes, love.

From Doug Jones' Forward to *Sola Scriptura* by Keith Mathison:

"C.S. Lewis once quipped that the more medieval he became in his outlook, the farther from Roman Catholicism he seemed to grow. The history of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* tends to produce the same effect in many of us. Once one gets beyond the superficial, individualistic, confused accounts of this doctrine presented in contemporary Evangelicalism, this teaching becomes very natural, organic, medieval, and apostolic.

In contrast, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox accounts fall out of rather perfectionistic and rationalistic commitments that are alien to the earthiness of biblical reality. Submitting to an infallible magisterium requires relatively little faith; everything is, in principle, neat and clean, like a doctor's office or a robot husband. A perfect husband would make for a very easy marriage; faith wouldn't be hard at all... Submission takes on much more fascinating dimensions when marriage involves sinners...

In this light, the various widely publicized departures of many Evangelicals to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have the distinct aroma of youthful haste and short-term zeal. The Sanhedrin was far better organized than the fishermen, and it had a grand liturgy, an authoritative line of oral tradition, and a succession of leaders. In a healthy church, those forms are good and holy. But to have turned to the Sanhedrin at *that* time would have been to embrace apostasy. Truth, beauty, and goodness were with the fishermen."

Is the Apostles Creed true because it conforms to scripture or because the church says its true? Is it true because it conforms to reality/history or because of the papacy?

What criteria will be used to judge between the exclusive claims of Rome and the east, if not scripture? And isn't that judgment going to be a "private judgment" just like the one Protestants make?

The Roman church has certainly changed its view on priestly celibacy, eg, Peter was married. What are we to make of that change?

When a Roman Catholic says the church interprets Scripture, what does he mean by "church"? obviously, not "all believers" because that's what protestants would say. On the other hand, doesn't the consensus of the faithful matter? But then who are the faithful?

I think when your friend says the church interprets Scripture, he means the

hierarchy, magisterium, the pope. But that raises the question: does this mean ordinary Christians are not "the church"? Or does the claim need to be revised to something like "the magisterium" or "the pope" interprets scripture? But this latter position is unworkable for a variety of reasons, which you've heard me give:

- the magisterium has nowhere produced a commentary on scripture
- RCC teachers disagree with one another on exegetical points
- etc.

It is far more self-evident in the NT that the church is defined by word and sacrament than it is that Peter's successors define the church with infallible authority.

"For such is the value which the Lord sets on the communion of His church, that all who contumaciously alienate themselves from any Christian society, in which the true ministry of His word and sacraments is maintained, He regards as deserters of religion. So highly does He recommend her authority, that when it is violated He considers that His own authority is impaired." ~ John Calvin

Papacy did not arise to solve an epistemological or hermeneutical problem, but for political reasons. So to argue that the papacy is an epistemological necessity is just nuts.

Chief problem with the papacy:

How can it be so hard to understand the bible yet so easy to understand history? History is much messier than the Bible -- you won't find objectivity there. Quite obviously, the claims of the papacy changed over time -- so what do you do with that?

Here are a couple more quotations I use frequently in these discussions:

C S Lewis:

The Roman Church where it differs from this universal tradition and specially from apostolic Christianity I reject. Thus their theology about the Blessed Virgin Mary I reject because it seems utterly foreign to the New Testament; where indeed the words "Blessed is the womb that bore thee" receive a rejoinder

pointing in exactly the opposite direction. Their papalism seems equally foreign to the attitude of St. Paul toward St. Peter in the epistles. The doctrine of Transubstantiation insists on defining in a way which the New Testament seems to me not to countenance. In a word, the whole set-up of modern Romanism seems to me to be as much a provincial or local variation from the central, ancient tradition as any particular Protestant sect is. I must therefore reject their claim: though this, of course, does not mean rejecting particular things they say."

Doug Jones:

"C.S. Lewis once quipped that the more medieval he became in his outlook, the farther from Roman Catholicism he seemed to grow. The history of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* tends to produce the same effect in many of us. Once one gets beyond the superficial, individualistic, confused accounts of this doctrine presented in contemporary Evangelicalism, this teaching becomes very natural, organic, medieval, and apostolic.

In contrast, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox accounts fall out of rather perfectionistic and rationalistic commitments that are alien to the earthiness of biblical reality. Submitting to an infallible magisterium requires relatively little faith; everything is, in principle, neat and clean, like a doctor's office or a robot husband. A perfect husband would make for a very easy marriage; faith wouldn't be hard at all... Submission takes on much more fascinating dimensions when marriage involves sinners...

In this light, the various widely publicized departures of many Evangelicals to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have the distinct aroma of youthful haste and short-term zeal. The Sanhedrin was far better organized than the fishermen, and it had a grand liturgy, an authoritative line of oral tradition, and a succession of leaders. In a healthy church, those forms are good and holy. But to have turned to the Sanhedrin at *that* time would have been to embrace apostasy. Truth, beauty, and goodness were with the fishermen."

Your friend's question is: Which is the true church? Obviously this is an important question. But it also carries some problematic assumptions. First: Why assume there has to be only one institution that can be called the church? It was not this way when Israel split into North and South – so why must it be that way now? Yes, there is ONE church – but that just means our fracturing is sin (just as it was when the church fractured in various apostolic denominations in 1 Cor. 1). It does NOT mean there cannot be true believers or genuine ecclesiality in multiple branches of the one, fractured church.

To follow up: In 1 Cor. 1 there are 4 groups - Paul does not identify one as the sole true church, but addresses them all as part of the church and calls them to unity on that basis – and Paul does not tell them to all join up with the Peter party!

You make a private judgment that all private judgments are invalid.

You make a series of private judgments about Bible, history, the claims of papacy, etc. and then kick the ladder away once you get to the top. Epistemology just doesn't work that way.

You take on the Anabaptists is probably right: they called for divorce from heritage. But the Reformers were in the middle – a true middle way, in which tradition is both honored in its own right and subordinated to Scripture.

The Leithart post is just echoing Newbigin, who repeatedly stressed that the church provides a plausibility structure within which the gospel makes sense. The church's community life explains and embodies the gospel and the gospel interprets and declares the meaning of the church. The post says, "Which means, conversely, that ecumenism is not only about ecclesiology. It is also about apologetics, even epistemology." This is just a paraphrase, so to speak, of Jesus in John 13 (the world will KNOW you are my disciples by your love for one another) and John 17 (I pray you all may be one that the world might BELIEVE in the one the father sent). Our unity is not just for our own sake, that we might experience the joy of fellowship with other believers. It's also for the sake of the world, for through our unity and love for each other, the world encounters a living model of the Trinity and a demonstration of the love of Christ that has saved the nations.

That's not to say the church's fragmentation leaves the world with an excuse for its unbelief, but we must reckon with the fact that our ecclesial fragmentation hinders the mission assigned to us. Our mission will not be as successful as it could and should be apart from some kind of "evangelical reunion," as John Frame puts it -- that is, a reunion of Christians around the central facts and doctrines of the gospel. Mission and ecumenism go together. Of course, the point here is being developed on a macrolevel, e.g., the unbelieving world looks at the divisions amongst professing Christians and concludes no one really knows the truth and thus we are free to choose to believe whatever we want to about reality. The sin of the church obscures the clear word God has spoken into history. However, that's not the whole story. At the microlevel, we still have lots of opportunities to provide non-Christians with an apologetic of love, as we welcome them into our local congregational communities where they can see and experience the love of Christ firsthand. Indeed, today many folks will have to "believe before they can belong" -- they'll have to be integrated into the Christian community in various ways before their plausibility structure shifts and

Christian doctrines become readily believable. I think in our day, most conversions will happen in this way -- but it's nothing new, it's just the old pattern of "friendship evangelism" practiced in more corporate terms.

All of that being said, I have some familiarity with Brad Gregory's work and he has a vested interest in exaggerating the claims of his case (I think Leithart would agree with me here). His main goal is to show that the way out of the impasse is the authority of the papacy. Only Rome can save the church and world from a slide into skepticism and relativism; the pope is the answer to our epistemological crisis. But I think he's gone too far and vastly oversimplified the situation (not to mention, he's ignored all the problems with his claims about the papacy!). The reality is that Christians of all denominations, Protestants, Romanists, and Orthodox, really do share a common core of faith, as confessed in the Apostles Creed. The failure of unity is not so much doctrinal as it is simply a failure to love, a failure to practice ecclesial humility, a failure to keep our differences in proper perspective, a failure to treat one another as brothers even though we have conflicting distinctives. Contra Gregory, the reality is that only within Protestantism is there hope for a real reunion of Christendom because only there do you find a genuine ecclesial humility. Rome and the East have made it impossible for the church to repent without contradicting her claims about herself. Oh sure, some Protestants will tout the "our group is the only true church" line, but the vast majority know that the church is bigger than any one sect or denomination and that, in the end, the things we hold in common outweigh the things over which we differ, even if those differences make denominations a practical necessity at the moment. Moving out from that truth is the beginnings of a genuine restoration of the church's unity / catholicity.

It's not unthinkable that the church could be reunited. Remember, in the days before Nicea, the church was terribly fragmented. They weren't even organized enough to have different denominations; things were just a chaotic mess and there was no clear way forward for the church. How would the Arian party be dealt with? How would the orthodox define themselves and their beliefs? Then, out of nowhere, God raised up Constantine. He called a council (note: the bishop of Rome was not present!). The Nicene Creed was written. And Christians all over the empire found a new basis for unity. Perhaps the way forward is to pray for a new Constantine who through sheer authority and personal charisma will bring divided Christians to a common table where we'll be forced to work things through.

Wright is raising slightly different issues about epistemology than the ones Leithart's post addresses. I love his epistemological triad of faith, hope, and love, feeding into a "hermeneutic of trust," as an answer to post-Enlightenment privatization, autonomy, and, ultimately, skepticism, rooted in a "hermeneutic of suspicion." ZKZKZ mentioned Frame's DKG, and I'll second that. He makes Van Til understandable. Book 1 of Calvin's ICR, especially the stuff on Scripture is full of epistemological insight; Van Til does a nice job developing this in his Intro to Sys Theo. Newbigin has done some good work here, following on the heels of scholars like Polanyi; see his Proper Confidence (but note that Newbigin does not have a fully orthodox doctrine of Scripture). And Wright builds off on

Newbigin in his development of "critical realism" in NTPG. Esther Meek actually wrote a very fine book on knowing, though the name escapes me. If you just wanted one book on epistemology, that would be a good one to get. Longing to Know -- I think that's the title.

RL

The papacy has not resolved a single controversy.

The pope did not settle the arian controversy (Nicea did), did not pronounce on the canon (it happened organically), etc. In other words, history does not show the necessity of the papacy, nor does it support the kinds of claims you are making for the papacy.

Even the Marian doctrines were not decisively settled since non-Catholic Christians don't believe them.

I'll even go one step further: the pope didn't even settle the issue of his own infallibility since not even most Roman Catholics believe it.

If the issue is authority, I'd recommend Keith Mathison's *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*. If the issue is history, Philip Schaff's *The Principle of Protestantism* is well worth reading. I'd actually like to write a book on this myself, but obviously have never gotten around to it. I tell folks there are three reasons to not be Roman Catholic -- Peter, Paul, and Mary. Rome gets all three wrong.

This quote from Jeremy Taylor, a 16th century Reformed Anglican, sums up the classic Protestant perspective well:

"What can be supposed wanting in our Church in order to salvation? We have
> the Word of God, the Faith of the Apostles, the Creeds of the Primitive
> Church, the Articles of the four first General Councils, a holy liturgy,
> excellent prayers, perfect sacraments, faith and repentance, the Ten
> Commandments, and the sermons of Christ, and all the precepts and counsels
> of the Gospels. We Σ require and strictly exact the severity of a holy
> life. Σ We communicate often, our priests absolve the penitent. Our Bishops
> ordain priests, and confirm baptised persons, and bless their people and
> intercede for them. And what could here, be wanting to salvation?"

C S Lewis said the deeper he went in his study of medieval history, the more Protestant he became, and the further he got from the church of Rome. This is from the forward to Mathison's book:

"C.S. Lewis once quipped that the more medieval he became in his outlook, the farther from Roman Catholicism he seemed to grow. The history of the doctrine

of *sola Scriptura* tends to produce the same effect in many of us. Once one gets beyond the superficial, individualistic, confused accounts of this doctrine presented in contemporary Evangelicalism, this teaching becomes very natural, organic, medieval, and apostolic.

In contrast, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox accounts fall out of rather perfectionistic and rationalistic commitments that are alien to the earthiness of biblical reality. Submitting to an infallible magisterium requires relatively little faith; everything is, in principle, neat and clean, like a doctor's office or a robot husband. A perfect husband would make for a very easy marriage; faith wouldn't be hard at all... Submission takes on much more fascinating dimensions when marriage involves sinners...

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Lewis also wrote to a papist correspondent who wondered why he wasn't Catholic, "By the time I had really explained my objection to certain doctrines which differentiate you from us (and also in my opinion from the Apostolic and even the Medieval Church), you would like me less." In other words, for Lewis, the real problem with Rome is that she departed from the *apostolic* and *medieval* church -- she had encrusted the faith of the fathers with all kinds of novelties that were not rooted in the apostolic Scriptures or even the medieval period (I assume he means the early medieval period, but even things like papalism vs. conciliarism were running debates right up the eve of the Reformation, especially after the Great Papal Schism and Lorenzo Valla's proof that the "Donation of Constantine" was forged damaged the prestige of the papacy; he may also in mind the Marian dogmas).

Again, Lewis: "The Roman Church where it differs from this universal tradition [note: Lewis is suggesting the Roman church is not sufficiently catholic] and specially from apostolic Christianity I reject. Thus their theology about the Blessed Virgin Mary I reject because it seems utterly foreign to the New Testament; where indeed the words "Blessed is the womb that bore thee" receive a rejoinder pointing in exactly the opposite direction. Their papalism seems equally foreign to the attitude of St. Paul toward St. Peter in the epistles. The doctrine of Transubstantiation insists on defining in a way which the New Testament seems to me not to countenance. In a word, the whole set-up of modern Romanism seems to me to be as much a provincial or local variation from the central, ancient tradition as any particular Protestant sect is. I must therefore reject their claim: though this, of course, does not mean rejecting particular things they say."

A useful online resource is this

blog: <http://triablogue.blogspot.com/p/triablogue-topical-index.html> -- look particularly at the sections on the historical roots of the Reformation and the canon of Scripture.

The papacy is simply not the answer to what divides Christians today. The NT is filled with appeals to divided Christians to strive for unity. Why don't any of these appeals include a command to submit to Peter? Why didn't Paul say the Peter party in Corinth had it right? What was wrong with being "of Cephas" – especially if Cephas was the universal head of the church with unique powers of infallibility that could be passed on to his successors? The NT solution to division is not submission to Peter but love for one another. Galatians 1-2 are really key in showing that the Roman claims for the Petrine papacy are fraudulent.

Hope that helps, and I look forward to talking more.

Blessings,
RL

I would challenge the way you are thinking about unity. In Mark 9, a man is casting out demons in Jesus' name. Thus, he is not connected with 12, and certainly not with Peter – yet Jesus affirms his ministry. Take this account at face value over against Rome's claims to exclusivism and the necessity of being grouped in with Peter (Unam Sanctam). Rome is doing the same thing to Protestants that the 12 did with this man. The Spirit is clearly at work in our midst, and yet Rome wants to shut us down. We know what Jesus would say to that....

Take note of Peter Leithart: "Becoming Catholic or Orthodox would, in my estimation, make me *less* catholic, not more." Amen.

I always come back to Gal. 2, which is the best one stop refutation of the claims of the Roman Catholic church. Indeed, the Pope is still committing same error as Peter did there, refusing to eat with other Christians. In other words, Rome still refuses to walk in line with the gospel. Rome still has a Christ+ gospel - in this case Christ + connection with papacy.

The essence of being in the Roman catholic is being in communion with a bishop who is in communion with the bishop of Rome. It does not matter what you believe or how you live if you have this connection. Rome has totally objectified the Christian religion. But no objective sacrament or connection can substitute for

or guarantee subjective faithfulness – and that subjective faithfulness is necessary to salvation.

Your interpretation of the pope's words is fallible just like my interpretation of bible is fallible. I guess we need a super pope to infallibly interpret the words of the pope. Oh but wait – the super pope's words need to be interpreted as well. So I guess we need a super super pope. You can see where this is going...

The pope's words need interpreting? But I thought the pope was the interpreter! Yet here we are, fighting over what the pope has said...

"Is the pope a catholic?" No!

Rome is just a really big sect.

"Mere Christianity" is really evangelical – that is, it only works on evangelical principles. Rome and the East cannot do the "mere Christianity" thing because they make exclusive (and arrogant) ecclesial claims. I take this to be a surefire sign the future of the church is Protestant. Only Protestantism is flexible (and humble) enough to incorporate the best features of other traditions without committing suicide. Only Protestants can take the best of Romanism and Orthodoxy and yet still remain robustly Protestant; for the other branches to do this would require them to cease to be what they are.

The office of the papacy is a fiction.

Catholics teach the Immaculate Conception -- Mary was prevented from sinning by God's grace from the beginning of her life. When the angel addresses her in Luke's gospel as "full of grace" that's taken to mean she has always been so full of grace that the effects of original sin were totally mitigated in her life. The reason for this, of course, is so that she could bear the sinless Son of God as the New Eve.

But I think there are a lot of problems with that view. Here are a few of them:

1. Luke describes Elizabeth and Zechariah as blameless in Luke 1:6, but no one takes this to mean sinless. Likewise, there's no reason to think "full of grace" means sinless. Scripture says all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory

(Rom. 3), and nothing suggests Mary was exempt from that condition. See also 1 Jn 1:8, Heb. 4:15, etc. Jesus sinlessness is unique to him.

2. Mary went to the temple for cleansing after the birth of Jesus. If she was sinless, why did she need to offer sacrifice? To be unclean is not the same as being in sin, but the laws of uncleanness presuppose sin as a condition.

3. Mary seems to fail to understand what Jesus is doing at the wedding in Cana in John 2. She seems to get at least a mild rebuke from Jesus in Jn. 2:4. (Catholics would say Jesus fulfilled her request, so what she said must've been ok. But Jesus' answer suggests that she, like the other disciples, is not understanding the nature of Jesus' ministry the way she should have at that point in time.)

4. If Mary needed to be sinless to give birth to Jesus, why didn't her mom have to be sinless to give birth to her? It seems you'd have to trace this all the way back to Eve. Further, Jesus did not need to be born of a sinless woman in order to be sinless himself. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, who joined the Son of God to human flesh in her womb. She is the Mother of God, she may be rightly called the New Eve -- but none of her proper titles entail sinlessness.

5. Mary describes God as her Savior in Luke 1:47. Why would she need a Savior if she was without sin? (Catholics will say God saved her by preventing her from being contaminated with sin, but that doesn't work. When she describes her "low estate" that probably includes a confession of her personal sin, guilt, and need for redemption in the child God is sending into the world through her.)

6. The IC does not seem to have been taught by the earliest church fathers. It was not officially promulgated as Catholic dogma until the 19th century -- long after Marian worship had gotten way out of control in the Catholic church.

7. In addition to the IC, the Catholic church also teaches Mary remained a virgin her whole life. But you can't have it both ways: If she was married and never had sex with her husband, she was in sin according to 1 Cor. 7:1ff! Of course, there's also evidence Mary had other children besides Jesus (though Catholics would say these "brothers" were cousins or stepbrothers). It is true many of the church fathers and even Reformers believed in Mary's perpetual virginity, and I don't think my faith as a Protestant Christian would be shaken if it turned out that she was. But I'm a bit suspicious because so many of those who insist on her perpetual virginity simply have a sub-Biblical, quasi-gnostic view of sexuality. Certainly, many if not all of the church fathers who proclaimed Mary to be "ever virgin" believed virginity was a holier, purer state than being married. I don't think that can be established from the Scriptures and probably reflects Greek/pagan influence in the early church.

8. The IC leads to all kinds of other problems in Catholic theology -- that Mary "cooperated" in God's work of redemption, and so merited the status of "co-mediatrix" or "co-redeemer," etc. Pressed to its logical end, IC threatens the gospel itself.

And so on.

Certainly, we should respect Mary and be grateful for her willingness to bear God's Son. But Luke 11:27-28 puts in perspective the kind of honor we should show her.

Hope that helps,
RL

Yes, Mary was a kind of ark of the covenant. But only for 9 months.

Rome stays together because her unity isn't ideological, its institutional. It's objective, not subjective.

But we are commended to be like-minded -- Protestants take this seriously in ways RCCs do not, even if wed are not always successful.

I was looking for an article by Jim Jordan where he talks about the church fathers as "church babies" because I thought it might be a good antidote to some of what your friends are saying. Jordan argues that we should respect the fathers, but they are only a starting point. We should expect maturation and growth over time. It dishonors the ongoing work of the Spirit to try to freeze historical development at a particular point (which point always turns out to be arbitrary, anyway)...

Judging from what you said, if he was serious about the "only read pre-9th century stuff" comment, I think he's doing with the early church exactly what the anti-FV guys in the PCA are doing with the 1640s: Finding a period of history they're comfortable with and then making it into a "golden age." This is a way of trying to find security, but I think there's something very immature about it. It's like a kid who's growing up, but doesn't want to give up his blankie or stop sucking his thumb. Yes, the ecclesiastical world is a mess right now, but the mature, adult thing to do is face that world for what it is and play our part in healing its brokenness. History only moves in one direction and we can no more recreate the 9th century than the 17th century. And even if we could, it would be wrong to do so. We need to live in the time and place God has put us, not try to escape into a supposedly better, by-gone era. When Frodo told Gandalf he wished the ring had never come to him, Gandalf replied wisely: "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for us to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us." We don't live in the first 9 centuries and it's not wise to pretend we did or wish we did. We have to figure out how to "do church" in the 21st century, the "time that is given us" -- and we won't be able to do that if we ignore everything that has happened in the last

1000 years.

Besides that, isn't there something incredibly ironic about using a blog to say we should only read pre-9th century theology? Is there any other area of life where we'd want to that? And isn't it odd to use a blog to talk about ways we can purge ourselves of modernity?

Now, if EC is not really serious, you can disregard all this....but I do think those who long for the "something more" that EO or RC seem to offer have a tendency to live in a dream world. And what they often find is that entering those communions solves some problems, but actually creates a new set of problems at the same time (though they will often ignore or downplay these problems in order to justify their decision). When I talked to EC about Anglicanism, when he described what he was looking for, it was highly idealistic....that is, he was describing something that rarely exists in the actual world, if at all. I think JJ is doing a bit of the same thing with EO -- it's a romantic vision of being a part of an ancient church, where things are done just as they were 1700 years ago...but finding a healthy EO communion that really, faithfully embodies all the things that you'd want is hard to find. At the end of the day, we all live and move and have our being in the local church. And whatever advantages EO and RC might seem to offer at the theoretical level are often cancelled out by their shortcomings at the much more important practical level. You just have to hope the dose of reality doesn't come too late.

You and I probably share 95% of their frustrations with the Protestant world. But jumping into EO or RC to escape those problems is just not a real solution. Not only do you get a new set of practical and theological problems to deal with, you enter communions where change is almost impossible, where the local body is likely to have a lot less to offer, and where you have to unchurch millions of faithful Christians, all in the name "catholicity." I think it's a huge mistake. Not apostasy -- but a serious mistake. I still think being a "Reformed catholic" Christian is the best place to practice and embody the kind of church vision and catholicity God calls us to in his Word. We do not have to give up doctrines we believe the Bible teaches (like predestination or justification by faith), we do not have to embrace doctrines we believe the Bible doesn't teach (like Mary's perpetual virginity, bowing to idols, etc.), nor do we have to say that some branch of the church is not really a church at all (as RC, EO, and extreme Protestants all do to one another). The only problem is that there are not very many of us around right now.

Anyway, here's the email I sent to ...

----- Original Message -----

I'm not opposed to a succession of ordinations as such -- there may well be such a thing, and it might be useful to recognize it. I think it's pretty obvious that the Scriptures, creedal statements, the sacraments, and other customs have been passed down from one generation to the next. But I do not see "apostolic

succession" as belonging to the *essence* of the church. I'm not opposed to a succession of orders, so much as making that succession of orders into something it isn't. If it is argued that a succession of ordinations defines the church, I think we have a case of misplaced emphasis. And I say that as someone who holds the pastoral and episcopal offices in the highest regard -- but I think episcopal authority should not be grounded on historical a succession of orders (which may or may be verifiable), but on the *fact* of ordination itself -- as well as God's Word, the presence of the Spirit, and the integrity of the office holder. So: Would you prefer to sit under the instruction of a Roman priest who molests little boys, but stands in the right succession, or a Presbyterian minister who is known to have godly character and an exemplary family? Whose ministry has more "validity"? I realize those aren't the only options -- but it also seems evident to me that no historical succession of orders can serve to guarantee the fidelity of a particular man's ministry.

We also need to do justice to the unique, foundation-laying character of the ministry of the apostles themselves -- Eph. 2:20 + Mt. 16:18. The apostolic foundation was laid once and for all by the apostles -- in that sense, no one can duplicate the apostolic ministry (e.g., giving eyewitness testimony to the risen Christ), nor is there any need for it. Rather, their ordained successors (pastors and bishops) build on their foundation. Thus, there is certainly a concern in NT for raising up a new generation of faithful men to lead the church after the apostles (e.g., the pastoral epistles). There's a kind of "apostolic succession" there -- those who will serve as their delegates and continue their work of word, sacrament, and discipline. But none of this indicates the church is *constituted* by a succession of men who got ordained by the right men, who in turn ordained others.

I have a lot of questions about how apostolic succession is supposed to work. Which line is the "true" line? How do we decide? If there is such a line, why wouldn't I be a part of it (and other Protestant ministers)? Who gets excluded by an apostolic succession doctrine? (Jesus had hard things to say to his disciples when they opposed faithful teachers who were not part of the right "group." Insofar as a doctrine of apostolic succession has been used to serve sectarian ends, I have to oppose it.)

I don't think the "succession of baptisms" doctrine had any need to arise in the early church in an explicit way. For 1000 years, there was virtually no debate about the boundaries of the church, at least not the way there is now, after a great deal of fragmentation. So to ask if the church fathers taught such a thing is a bit anachronistic. There was no need to. I do think many, many of the church fathers understood that baptism is ordination into the royal priesthood of the church (see Peter Leithart's *The Priesthood of the Plebs*), and that's sufficient to make my point, really.

Frankly, I have no problem critiquing certain aspects of patristic doctrine. I do not think one will find a uniform view of apostolic succession in the fathers -- so we end up having to pick and choose even among them. And then when things like papal infallibility get brought in *much* later, it only muddies the water more.

So I think the biblical emphasis is on a succession of the Melchizedekal, not Levitical priesthood, or to put it another another way, the royal priesthood, rather than the servant priesthood. We are all priests by virtue of our baptismal union with Christ, the great High Priest (See Geddes MacGregor, *Corpus Christi*, Jim Jordan, *The Sociology of the Church*, and T. F. Torrance, *The Royal Priesthood*.) There are numerous biblical passages that emphasize the flow of water/Spirit out into the world (e.g., Ezek. 40-48, Jn. 7:37-39, Rev. 21-22, etc.) -- there is no such corresponding image for the succession of ordinations. The servant priesthood (clergy) arises from within the royal priesthood, and while critical to the life of the church (Eph. 4:1-11), does not define the church in the same way. Baptism is more basic to the church's identity than ordination. Baptism is "catholic" in a way ordination is not. Ordination does not make a man priest; rather it gives a man who is already a priest a special role within the larger priesthood.

I think that for many, the doctrine of apostolic succession fulfills a psychological, epistemological need. "How can I trust this man to give me God's forgiveness? To give me the body and blood? How can I know it counts? How can I know that he's God's instrument?" And then apostolic succession is whipped out to establish the man's credentials as agent of God. The historical connections supposedly prove legitimacy. I fully sympathize with those kinds of questions -- but I think ordination itself, apart from a genealogy, is sufficient. And, in fact, raising the genealogical issue can actually undermine confidence since, well, as we all know, the church's clergy have a rather checkered history. (I know one guy who set out to find the true succession of orders, and ending up concluding that there was no church at all in the world today! True story!)

Any view of apostolic succession that would make it impossible for a group of laymen stranded on a desert island to constitute a church is problematic. (In other words, congregationalist ordinations are valid, even if irregular.) I would warn anyone against joining a church that requires him to unchurch millions of baptized people. I don't see how doing that can help bring about an answer to Jesus' prayer for unity among his people.

This essay by a friend of mine, Craig Higgins (PCA, Rye, NY), pretty much sums up a lot of my own vision for a "Reformed ecumenicity" that respects the tradition while also making room to grow and mature within it:
<http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=13-01-021-o>

All too rushed, but I hope that helps a little,

RL

The issue with Rome is: Is Rome a part of the visible church? The elder teaching the class that caused offense answered in the affirmative -- Rome belongs to the visible church and our default position should be to treat them as fellow (albeit erring) brethren. That is my position as well. It was Calvin's position (Institutes

Book 4). It was Charles Hodge's position: http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/charles_hodge/is_the_church_of_rome_a_part_of_the_visible_church.htm. In fact, it was pretty much the position of all Reformed theologians until the 19th century, when some renegade southern Presbyterian theologians decided that Roman Catholic baptisms were no longer valid baptisms. That's become the view of many Presbyterians since, but it is not the "historic" view. It is a novelty. The Reformers all believed that Rome was very corrupt. But she was still a church. Thus, they desired to reform her, not start a new church from scratch (as in the Radical Reformation). They said many harsh things about the Roman church in their day, but on the whole, when everything is read in context, Luther, Calvin, and other leading Reformers still viewed Rome as existing within the "one, holy, catholic, church." I won't document that here, but it is well known among Reformation scholars that such was the case in the 16th century. Do we share a "gospel" in common with Rome? Well, what is the gospel? I think the best summary of the gospel is simply the Nicene Creed or Apostles Creed (especially the center paragraphs about Jesus). This is just an elaboration on the way Paul himself defines the gospel in 1 Cor. 15:1-11. The gospel is the story of Jesus, of what God has done in and through Jesus. Rome affirms those creeds, as do we. Therefore we "share" the gospel in that sense. That being said, Rome distorts and obscures the gospel in all kinds of ways. She does not articulate clearly the place of faith and works in salvation, nor their relationship to one another. She has a lot of false ideas about the sacraments. Many Roman Catholics commit idolatry by bowing before images or sacramental elements. She has a flawed understanding of Scripture, tradition, and church office. Etc. But God is gracious, and can forgive many of these flaws among his people, providing some measure of true faith remains. After all, God has to overlook a lot of characteristic Protestant sins as well. We could just as easily ask if we share a "common gospel" with Arminian, individualistic Southern Baptists. I cannot see how they're much worse off than the Romanists. Can you? And, yet there would be a lot of common ground as well. My advice: When it comes to "critics," don't follow the Roman Catholic rabbit trail. This is just a distraction from the real point in question, which is "What does the Bible teach?" People come to different opinions of the RC Church based on all kinds of factors. But it's best to keep any and all discussion focused on the Bible. The Roman question is an important one, but not the most important one. You can spend a huge amount of time just clarifying what Rome actually believes. One person can say Rome is an utterly false church, another that she is part of the true church -- and it turns out that they have completely different understandings of what Rome believes, so the discussion is moot. We must also acknowledge the presence of true believers in the Roman church, whatever errors and corruptions may plague the official teaching of the church and its hierarchy. We are not justified by our understanding of justification. We are justified by trusting Christ -- and no doubt, many who have trusted Christ genuinely down through the centuries have not had a deep understanding of justification. They just knew that Jesus died on the cross for their sins. But such a childlike faith should not be despised. There is just as much variety within the Roman church as in Protestantism. Thus, as Hodge points out, it is possible to find Roman theologians teaching a wide range of theological viewpoints, ranging from crass liberalism to something that very closely approximates evangelicalism. Like

us, they do not all agree on how to interpret their authoritative documents. This is another reason why giving some kind of blanket evaluation of Rome is difficult and dangerous. But again, there is more than enough true faith and understanding within Rome, as well as the creeds and sacraments, to justify the historic view that Rome is a true yet corrupt expression of Christ's body. Also consider this: If someone defines the gospel in a way that excludes the vast majority of the present day or historic church, then it just cannot be right. But that's what a lot of extremely vocal Reformed people are doing today. They are focused on the minutia of the mechanics of justification rather than the story of Jesus. They think God must parcel out grace to a tiny number who actually understand some very detailed points of theology - the gospel cannot be for "the masses" who do not understand the finer points of "imputation," or whatever. But that's not the way the gospel works in the NT. I'm afraid that particular definitions of "gospel" are being used in the current debates as weapons of power, intended to divide and exclude -- which is contrary to the true nature of the gospel (cf. Gal. 2:11ff). Only a small intellectual elite within the church can even begin to understand what all the current debates are about -- surely sorting through all these details is not necessary or even profitable for the rank and file Christian! If you want to hear me unpack what I think "gospel" means, listen to my sermons from Easter and the next couple of weeks from 2005, beginning at March 17. It's a 4 part series from 1 Cor. 15:1-11. April 17 is probably the key sermon. <http://trinity-pres.net/audio/sermonindex.php>. Thanks for bringing these questions to me. Let me know if I can do anything more.

Blessings,
RL

Some stats:

15% of those raised Catholic become Prots, 9% become evangelical

Just 3% of those raised Prot become Catholic

a Catholic is 5x more like to become Prot than reverse

[http://www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux\(3\).aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux(3).aspx)

"However, one-fifth of those raised Protestant have left Protestantism altogether; most of them are now unaffiliated (13%), with smaller numbers having become Catholic (3%) or members of other faiths (4%)."

80% born prot are still prot, only 68% of those born Catholic are still Catholic

I greatly appreciate his historic defense of the Reformation. The Reformers knew their history, and were far more grounded in apostolic and patristic faith and practice than their Roman Catholic opponents, who were committed to all kinds of historical novelties. In other words the typical Reformation narrative (e.g., the Reformers were great innovators and revolutionaries) one hears from both sides is precisely backwards.

However, I have a couple of quibbles. The article rightly safeguards against certain versions of divine passibility, such as process theology, but there is much, much more to be said on the positive side of the passibility issue -- both biblically (e.g., is the cry of dereliction to be understood as the cry of the human nature alone, or of the divine-human person?) and creedally (e.g., who is the subject of the verbs "crucified, dead, and buried" in the second paragraph of the Apostles Creed?). I don't think the article captures the true and complex richness of the biblical revelation and the patristic interpretation of it on this point...and there may be reasons for that. I think the Reformed have been very understated on passibility, and, yes, even slanted in Nestorian direction, if ever so slightly. "One of the Trinity suffered for us" is just as much a part of patristic faith as the absolute Creator/creature distinction. There are tensions between the Apostles and Nicene Creed on the one hand, and Chalcedon on the other hand. Those tensions can be worked out, but we need to do justice to both ends of the truth. Or to put it another way, while Moltmann is certainly off base in all kinds of ways, not everything he said about passibility was wrong!

I'd say the same about social trinitarianism. Granted, much of what passes for social trinitarianism in our day is a thin veneer for egalitarian bile. But I also think the life of the Trinity really is presented in Scripture as a model for humanity since we are made in the image of the Triune God. The Trinity, and inter-Trinitarian relations in particular, really do provide a model for human relationships in church, marriage, etc. I think the article is too quickly dismissive on that score. In other words, I think those with road rage probably should meditate on the Trinity a good bit -- it just might do the trick!

Otherwise, though, it's very good work.

RL

I tend to think the problems run even deeper, and are systemic in the "American experiment." While I am hugely grateful for America, and glad to be an American, I think American Christians have been largely duped into a privatized, individualized form of faith that was doomed to eventually capitulate to secularism because it lacks the presence of a strong institutional church.

Have you ever read Ken Craycraft's book *The Myth of Religious Freedom* (or

something like that)? Part of what he argues is there is no such thing as "religious liberty" in general because there is no such thing as "religion" in general. There are only *particular* religions, which have varying degrees of sanction or permissibility in any given society. For example, ancient Rome believed it had religious liberty even when it was persecuting Christians. After all, people could believe anything they wanted, and worship anything they wanted, so long as they also paid homage to Caesar as lord. But those pesky, rebellious Christians wouldn't burn incense to Caesar, so they were seen as subversive traitors in the empire and had to deal with accordingly. Of course, we have the same thing in our own day. China claims to have religious liberty; all you have to do is register with the state and you can "practice" your religion! In the US, we claim to be "the land of the free," but Mormons cannot practice polygamy, pagans cannot sacrifice cats, Muslims cannot legally wage *jihad*, etc.....we even circumscribe the sacramental liberties of Native American Indians. But I think limits on religious liberty are inescapable -- unless, of course, we think of religion in privatized, gnostic terms, where it's just a matter of ideology. That was Thomas Jefferson's view, and it's been the bane of America ever since. George Will wrote that the founding fathers

wished to tame and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe . . . [Jefferson] held that 'operations of the mind are not subject to legal coercion, but that 'acts of the body' are. 'Mere belief,' says Jefferson, 'in one god or 20, neither picks one's pockets nor breaks one's legs.'...[this view rests on Locke's principle . . . that religion can be useful or can be disruptive, but its truth cannot be established by reason. Hence, Americans would not 'establish' religion. Rather, by guaranteeing free exercise of religions, they would make religion private and subordinate....religion [in America] is perfectly free as long as it is perfectly private -- mere belief -- but it must bend to the political will (law) as regards conduct.

This is also the view of religious liberty found in many US state constitutions -- liberty is found solely in the conscience of the individual, and not in the church as a public body. But if you go back to Constantine's edict and the Magna Carta, they're not protecting the rights of the religious *individual* per se, but the rights of the *church* as an institution. When we individualized religious liberty, we put our liberty at great risk. Oliver O'Donovan once said the first amendment to the constitution was the symbolic end of old Christendom, and this is what he was getting at -- the loss of the church as a public institution, and therefore as a buffer against the potential tyranny of the state over the individual. What we are witnessing right now is the clash between two very different conceptions of religion and religious liberty. Is it possible at the moment to be a good Christian *and* a good American citizen? How much are those twin identities in tension with each other? I've been writing about these issues for years in an historical and theoretical way; now we're going to see the real war play out right before our eyes.

Of course, the church can be and has been tyrannical, as well as the state. But the church is still a much better guardian of liberty than the state. The state is at its

best when it recognizes the church for what she is without trying to usurp her role or control her.

Yes, Colson is always optimistic, even when giving dire warnings. I don't really know what to expect. If Obama holds his ground and there is no judicial overturning, what do you think the Roman Catholic bishops will do? At this point, if they caved, they would lose all credibility. But given that the vast majority of Roman Catholics do not practice their own church's view of birth control, it's hard to imagine them being willing to pay a steep price to stand against the health care law. But maybe they will -- and if so, what will it mean? What shape will civil disobedience take in this instance? I certainly hope and pray for a judicial overturning; it would be very naive to pretend like abortion, feminism, and homosexuality won't be forced upon us all in some form or fashion, more than they already are, if Obama wins this battle. In fact, I think if the healthcare law is not overturned, we're going to see the radical left get very brazen against folks like us.

The Catholics are in a real pickle. On the one hand, had more Catholics seen this coming (as some did), Obama would not have been elected in the first place. It's hard to imagine Obama winning the general election without carrying the majority of the Catholic vote in key swing states. Plus, there are so many very compromised Catholics out in the public square, e.g., Pelosi, who should have been subjected to the discipline of the church a long time ago, but instead thinks she's doing the church a great favor by bringing it "up to date." And, of course, a lot of this goes back to JFK, who helped cinch his election when he said his vision of America was of a place where

"where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners whom to vote for...I believe in a President whose views on religion are his own private affairs....I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic party's candidate for President who happens to be Catholic."

Well, ok we got the America JFK wanted. But now it turns out that faithful Catholics and evangelical Protestants realize they made a mistake, that they sold away the cultural authority of the church for the myth of individual freedom. We became more American than Christian. But, now, what do we do to reverse the flow of American history? How do we get Christendom back? The bishops have a major confrontation on their hands, which means faithful Christians have a great opportunity to redefine the terms of American religious discourse. We all need to pray they win.

RL

The health care debate -- it's not just about contraception, and it's not just about the Roman Catholic Church:

<http://www.battlefortruth.org/ArticlesDetail.asp?ID=457>
<http://www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/18734>
<http://www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/18674>

Quick note on indulgences (which is, as you said, still a part of official RCC teaching). Yes indulgences feed into a merit system that conflicts with justification by faith. But there are other problems that often go unnoticed.

How many 16th century widows gave away their last mites to build St. Peter's, when they thought they were freeing loved ones from purgatory?

Any religious system that allows benefits, spiritual or temporal, to be purchased with money is intrinsically oppressive to those who do not have money. And that the last thing Jesus would want his church to do – oppress the poor. A pay for play scheme – a benefits for money scheme – flatly contradicts the gospel.

A system in which spiritual or temporal benefit can be purchased with money, or in which relief for oneself or for ones loved one's can be purchased with money, is intrinsically oppressive to the poor -- and thus contrary to the gospel!!

Televangelists are known for doing the same thing today – “Send me your money and I guarantee God will bless you!”

On indulgences: The notion that paying money can in any way alter our spiritual status, lessen our punishments, or increase our standing before God (or the standing of another) is extremely dangerous -- even common sense tells us that. God cannot be bought off. Plus this system oppresses the poor who do not have the means to pay off temporal/purgatorial punishments -- it's just like the Pharisees, just like televangelists, either creating a spirituality for the wealthy elite, or robbing from the poor.

There is nothing in scripture anything like an indulgence – well, except for the system Jesus condemns in Mark 12.

Indulgences as Rome practiced them are NOT found in Cyprian -- and even if it was, Cyprian also believed in paedocommunion (so Rome is picking and choosing among the fathers just like Protestants!). Plus, it's not found anywhere else in the fathers, so it's hardly a consensus patristic doctrine – just the opposite.

Why I am not a roman catholic:

Peter-- the false claims of the papacy, divisiveness vs Prots and EO

Mary -- false worship, false claims made for her and about her, icons and prayers

Paul-- misreading him on salvation

It is odd that you don't hear much about conversions from Rome to evangelicalism, even though they are statistically far, far more common than the reverse (not just in the U.S. but globally). I have heard the claim that intellectuals are far more likely to move towards Rome from evangelicalism than the other way around, and there are certainly a number of high profile movements that suggest that, e.g., Francis Beckwith, Scott Hahn, etc. Most Roman Catholics who become Protestant move at least partly because they were catechized so poorly in their parish, whereas for an evangelical to be attracted to Rome he has to have a pretty high level of theological sophistication. But I have personally known some very smart, self-conscious folks who moved from Rome to a Reformed church, so the kind of move certainly does happen for the educated elite as well.

I like the Luther quote you included. I'm sure you can find something like the Lutheran doctrine of vocation in the church fathers, but it was certainly lost in the medieval church, both East and West, and was considered revolutionary when Luther and Calvin and the other Reformers began to teach it, and Western society was largely reshaped because of it. The Reformation was largely just a recovery of patristic and apostolic faith and practice, which had been largely eclipsed in the preceding centuries. But it can still appropriately be called *Luther's* "doctrine of vocation" because it was re-discovered and re-originated with him.

I think the psychology of these kinds of conversions is fascinating to investigate. I think the fact that many intelligent evangelical and Reformed folk find Rome or the East attractive is a sober reminder that the whole evangelical and Reformed world is a mess right now. Not saying that Rome or the East are actually better, because they have their own messes...but we could certainly stand to recover the high ecclesiology, liturgical theology, and sacramental theology of the early Reformers. Hopefully, TPC is a part of that recovery.

Blessings,
RL

I'm not quite as "sympathetic" as you with those who leave solid Protestant churches for Rome or the East because I've never seen or heard of someone who actually did so for what I would consider anything like biblical reasons. It's all culturally-driven (as you point out) or status-driven, not Bible-driven.

And then there's the fact that those who jump from low church evangelicalism to

Rome or the East never stop along the way to check out liturgical, missional Reformed (or even Anglican) churches like your and mine....

I actually have started working on a book on the issue of conversion to Rome. It's entitled *Peter, Paul, and Mary: Or, Why I Am Not a Roman Catholic*. I'd like to do one for Orthodoxy as well, but I don't have a clever title yet. I certainly have enough material.

RL

Roman Marian dogmas & salvation:

Even if you could find them in the writings of the church fathers, you will not find them required as a condition of salvation; and even if they were required as a condition of salvation in the fathers, they certainly aren't in the NT or the ecumenical creeds.

Rome introduced novelties concerning Mary.

It's the same with the requirement of loyalty to the pope - it's just not there in the fathers, it was never required as a precondition for baptism, not part of an ecumenical creed, etc.

Certainly Mary's "yes" to God is a typological counter to Eve's "yes" to Satan in the Garden. In her willingness to become the mother of our Lord, she plays her part in fulfilling Genesis 3:15, and she becomes the New Eve. But the full maturation of humanity is not found in Mary; it's found in Christ. The entire era of the old creation is a time of immaturity, preparation, and exclusion (Galatians 3; Hebrews; etc.). Only in Christ, do we enter into our majority (Galatians 4) and (re)gain access to the heavenly Garden-City (Heb. 10; Rev. 4-5).

TTTT,

I appreciate your essay. Obviously, I agree with the basic gist: One does not have to believe in "justification by faith" per se in order to be justified by faith. Sole fide is indeed the ecumenical doctrine, and thus should impel us not only to preach the gospel to all, but also to embrace all those who trust in the Christ of Scripture, whatever their other theological shortcomings. When sola fide is actually lived and embodied, we become far more ecumenical than many TR types have imagined. The TRs fail to see this because for them sola fide functions as a kind of ideological boundary marker -- which is, ironically, a denial of sola fide if pressed to its logical limit.

Each section of your essay does a nice job contributing to the overall thesis. I'm sure your use of the NPP reading of Galatians will trouble some readers, but I think you're right. The only thing I would add is that the Judaizers' deficient eschatology actually led to a soteriological problem. By continuing to insist on the conditions of an outdated covenant (e.g., circumcision, Sabbath observances, etc.) as marks of membership in the people of God, they were actually demanding the covenant on their own terms. In my opinion, this devolves into a kind of corporate Pelagianism in the end. And so while I strongly affirm the NPP exegesis of Galatians, at the level of application, I think the OPP still works. This is why I have never believed in a total antithesis between NPP and OPP readings. And this is also why I still think a lot of the analogies drawn between the Judaizers and Rome still have at least a measure of validity. For example, traditional Roman Catholics who believe one must be in submission to the Pope to be saved are guilty of the Galatian heresy, even if they profess a version of justification ever so close to the Reformers. Likewise, Eastern Orthodox who say that only baptisms performed by their priests are valid are also guilty of the Galatian heresy, even if they also believe in justification by faith. In other words, there is much more to the whole discussion than simply whether or not these other communions are closer to us in their understanding of justification than the typical Reformed/evangelical person believes.

I certainly appreciate your attempt to root the Reformation in the catholic history of the church; as Schaff said, the Reformation was the greatest act of the catholic church since the apostles. Luther was simply unfolding the best of the historical church's theology, and further sharpening it with his additional exegetical insights. He was no anti-traditional radical, as some later historians painted him. Once we get this, we have to completely re-conceive the way we view the Reformation. It was not a "start from scratch" kind of movement, but a purifying and re-creating of what was already there. I agree with the Kreeft quote ("The split of the Protestant Reformation began when a Catholic discovered a Catholic doctrine [*i.e.*, *Sola Fide*] in a Catholic book"), but I would add that that means the Protestants were the true Catholics of the 16th century(!). As Luther and Calvin repeatedly pointed out, they didn't leave the church; rather the "church" left them.

I do think it's tempting for us to over-minimize the real differences that existed in the 16th century (and to a lesser degree today), and I think you come close to doing that. I don't believe the Reformation can be reduced to semantics or mutual misunderstandings. The war was (in part) over a proper understanding of Scripture, and the Protestants were basically right. Insofar as the Protestants and Romanists have made peace today, it is because Rome has moved much closer to the Reformational understanding of Paul. All that being said, I think your basic point about the history still stands, and you are correct to even point out that Rome's theologians can and have made valuable contributions to our understanding of justification.

I think my biggest disagreement with your first section is your following Letham on Orthodoxy. I thought Letham's book was way too gentle with some of the problems in Orthodoxy. (James Payton is even worse!) While the East does not

like to use these categories, their soteriology really is Semi-Pelagian. That doesn't mean they cannot be saved by God's grace, but it does mean they have a woefully deficient understanding of grace, and that is a disagreement with significant consequences all the way down the line. Letham glosses over that, and I find that problematic (simply because it's inaccurate, if for no other reason).

Having now watched quite a few people convert from Reformed catholicism into Roman and Eastern communions, often with very negative consequences for everyone involved, I think we need to do more than just show that Roman and Eastern Christians can be saved by grace and justified by faith. Indeed, we have to do more than argue that these communions are part of the visible church. The differences we have with these communions are not without consequence, and I have more and more concluded that we are not doing our own folks any favors if all we do is make the argument for ecumenicity without also sounding the alarm about all that will be lost if one converts from a Reformed catholic congregation to a Roman or Eastern body. I always thought of my ecumenical project in terms of church-to-church relations, e.g., we should view Romanists and Orthodox as fellow Christians and appeal to them live accordingly, we can team up with them on "culture of life" type projects, we should recognize their baptisms and governmental action as much as possible, etc. But I've learned (perhaps the hard way) that soft pedaling the grievous errors of these communions often ends up confusing our own people who may follow the argument about ecumenicity, but then lack the sophistication needed to understand why "Protestants still protest" (to borrow a phrase from Leithart). At the very least, our appeals to fellow Protestants/evangelicals to take an ecumenical view of Rome and Orthodoxy should be accompanied by a critique of the sectarianism of those other communions, e.g., neither communion will admit us to the table and the Orthodox won't even recognize us as having churches. Your essay makes it seem as if only those on the "sola fide" side have struggled with sectarianism. In truth, Rome and the East are far more guilty of the Galatian heresy today than most evangelical Protestants. That point alone should help dissuade those who would read your essay and contemplate conversion. If you're right, the last thing someone should do is consider becoming Roman or Orthodox, even though we will certainly be led to take a far more generous view of those communions. I trust you follow what I'm getting at here.

Of course, all of this also takes us back to the real meaning of the historical Reformation. While I think sola Scriptura and sola fide were certainly key components in the Reformation movement, I think we have focused too much attention there, to the neglect of other vitally important aspects of the Reformation. Luther and Calvin took a highly nuanced, but (in my opinion, anyway) ecumenical view of Rome. They believed Rome to be within the one, holy, catholic visible church. But they also believed she was full of doctrinal error (far beyond sola fide), required all kind of extra- and anti-biblical beliefs for salvation (e.g., papal authority), and were deeply enmeshed in idolatry (second commandment issues). Many of these same issues -- especially liturgical idolatry -- continue to plague the East as well. I think it is vital to make clear that taking an ecumenical view of Rome and Orthodoxy does not at all entail a view that those communions are just as healthy as Reformed catholic bodies, or that they

are equally valid places to be as a Christian. What's needed now is an ecumenical *critique* of our brothers in these other bodies.

The question about ecumenicity always resolves into the same basic issue: If we're so close, why are we still separated? Why not just join the Roman or Eastern church and be done with it? I think if we want to be truly ecumenical, we will not hesitate to point out how unecumenical these communions are, and that Reformational Protestantism is really the only location in the visible church where the ecumenical problem can be solved. Nor will we hesitate to bear witness against their errors, in doctrine and government, but especially in liturgy. I know all of that goes far beyond the scope of your essay, but they are things that I feel a burden to address since I have written and taught extensively on the Galatian heresy and the ecumenism of sola fide.

Blessings,
RL

You wrote:

I have never had a problem with going forward for the eucharist - and prefer it

Yes, but I wonder why. Is this just a preference or is there an argument (biblical or otherwise)? As I read the Bible, I find 6 times Jesus performed feeding miracles and each time he explicitly commanded the people to be seated (Mk. 6, Mk. 8, Matt 14, Matt 15, Lk 9, Jn 6). At the Last Supper, the disciples were in a seated/reclining position. Jesus said at the table his disciples would sit as kings, and this is a royal feast, with a royal posture.

Moreover, it's evident from those miraculous feedings and from the Last Supper that Jesus did not personally feed each person, but that the elements of the meal were passed from hand to hand among the people. I want our way of doing the Supper to be shaped by Jesus' own way of feeding his people.

Sure, I'll take the Lord's Supper standing if that's how it's offered -- I did over the weekend! But I cannot see a good reason to prefer that posture, and I can see many reasons to partake seated as kings. If ritual is important, isn't it vital to do what Jesus said to do, and imitate his model, as much as possible?

I do not see error in venerating the host

Obviously, TPC allows for a wide range of views when it comes to the presence (or absence) of Christ in the Supper.

While I believe in a real presence (and use the strongest possible realist language in our liturgy), I am a classical Calvinist, so I do not believe in a local presence, per se. The work of the Holy Spirit, our ascension into the heavenlies, and all

that.

I do not think venerating the host is an apostolic practice, so it isn't truly ancient, even though it eventually crept in in some quarters.

I am ok with prayers for the dead (and, perhaps, to the dead as well)

I'd have to explore exactly what this means. We sing the doxology each week. "Praise him above ye heavenly hosts..." Sure, it's probably referring to angels (angelic hosts), but still.... We also use the ancient words of the sursum corda/preface, "...with all the company of heaven..." so there is no doubt we believe we are close to the dead in Christ when we are gathered for worship (cf. Heb. 12)....

I'm not convinced the dead saints can interact with us in such a way that they can hear us if we ask them to pray for us, and there are strict biblical warnings about contacting the dead (or trying to). If the apostles wanted this to be part of Christian practice, I think we'd see at least a shred of evidence of it in the NT. We do not.

Prayers *to* the dead fall into a different category, and are a much more serious issue... To cut to the bottom line, we have no divinely revealed assurances in this area, and we ought not to put our faith in places where we have no gospel promises. If prayer is an act of faith, and faith rests in divine promises, how can I faithfully invoke the saints in prayer? If praying to the dead were an important act of Christian piety, surely we'd have an apostolic example, no? I just don't see the warrant....

I think the best way we can venerate the saints is by continually giving God thanks for them and seeking to imitate their examples of faithfulness. That's what I want us to do at TPC. Of course, we can also venerate them by creating artwork in their honor -- but we dishonor the One greater than the saints if we bow before that artwork.

I have disagreed with TPC's communing those that identify themselves as Roman Catholic or Orthodox - not that it violates TPC's theology but that it likely violates historical Presbyterianism and clearly violates the teaching of the Communion that those parishioners are from. They are in rebellion of their vows and are effectively excommunicating themselves from their communion. I see it as a false union, a facade. (I have expressed this before)

I don't think you've understood our policy (nor do I recall you expressing this before -- not that it matters).

We do *not* tell people they should disobey their church authorities and commune with us. I've never said that and never heard anyone else say that at TPC. We've had one active member of a RC church visit us that I can recall, and he actually left the room during the Eucharist. The others who have visited regularly with us

from Catholic backgrounds have not been members of Catholic parishes for years, even decades, so rebelling against their vows is hardly an issue.

Here's what we do: As far as we are concerned, all baptized Christians (not excommunicate) are welcome to partake with us. Whether or not visitors from other traditions do so is up to them; it's a matter between them and their church. But they are invited. It is the Lord's table after all, and he issues the invitation. If their church forbids them to partake, they have divided the one eucharist, and the blame of schism rests on them, not us. We will not be guilty of the Galatian error.

By the same token, when I go to Mass, I long to partake with my Catholic brothers and sisters...but I am not invited, so I don't. However, the blame for division and lack of eucharistic hospitality rests on them, not on me.

See the difference between that and what you're saying? You can disagree with us, but I at least want you to know what it is you're disagreeing with.

I hope you'll carefully consider the closed communion practices of the EOC and RCC in light of Galatians 2Closed communion alone should be enough to keep reformed catholics from converting to RCC or EOC.

- I have longed to be part of a larger visible church communion - but have not because of errors that I could not overcome (papal infallibility and immaculate conception of Mary prevents me from going to Rome and the internal destruction of Anglicanism and lack of practical options have kept me from moving to that communion).

Me too. I very, very, very much desire to be a part of a more global and larger church structure. But God does not always provide that. David was the anointed one, but lived in wilderness for many years, while Saul and the other apostates were in the royal courts. Elijah and Elisha were part of a microdenomination even smaller than the CREC. Athanasius had to stand contra mundum, even more isolated than Luther would be 1000+ years later (at least Luther never lacked magisterial support). Etc. Whether or not I ever get to be a part of a larger visible communion in my lifetime rests on God's providence, but he knows the longings of my heart. I will humbly and patiently wait on his guidance and provision, not seizing anything before it is given. I take comfort knowing I am not the first to trod this path...

You wrote:

You wrote:

In this view the Church Fathers, old and new are given respected attention as those in the Spirit. Just as Holy Scripture is the book written by Holy Apostles, who were of the Spirit. The infallible source is the perfect and blamless Holy Spirit. It is the test of all doctrine.

The "just as" raises a question here about the place of Scripture in your (new?) epistemology. Is there still a uniquely authoritative role for Scripture? Is it infallible in a way the later fathers are not? Is the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures still the judge of all religious controversies for you? I would urge you to not denigrate biblical exegesis as many in the RCC and EOC do....Paul does, after all, constantly urge Timothy to study and teach the Scriptures...

You wrote:

In this view to call the Church Fathers theological "babies" is potentially arrogant and self-serving.

Obviously, the fathers don't agree on all things, which is why I think we need to use Scripture to sift through who's right and who's wrong among them.

To call the church fathers "babies" is not to disregard them. From another perspective, I am happy to call them "fathers." I just want to do justice to what the Bible says about the structure of church history (e.g., Gal. 3-4; Eph. 4:11ff) and where God is taking us over time. The Bible's cosmic narrative is clear: maturity comes later, not earlier. We are called to build on and grow from the work of earlier Christians, expecting God to lead future generations of the church into more corporate maturity than past generations. The fact that this happens in large scale fits and starts over many, many millennia often obscures the truth of it....

Given the way the East norms the first millennia of church history, it seems impossible for there to be further maturity. The church can fall from that standard, but never surpass it. Correct me if I'm wrong, but that's what I think I've heard Eastern teachers say....

You wrote:

EOC certainly will use confession and fasting as disciplines to die to self. But they are not ascetic.

As far as my charges of asceticism are concerned....I do not see how they can be a straw man. The EOC tradition calls itself ascetic and is largely built on a spirituality of asceticism. Yes, the fathers affirmed the goodness of creation, but did they do so consistently and thoroughly and biblically enough? Any tradition that makes an ideal of no marital sex 4 days a week and 4 liturgical seasons of the year; that privileges virginity as a holier, more highly esteemed state than marriage; that sometimes forbids women having their period to take communion; that does not allow married bishops; etc. is a tradition not fully in tune with the goodness of creation. At least in my opinion. There is nothing unholy about sex, no reason why marital relations the night before communion should interfere with a holy partaking, etc. Whatever this is in the Eastern tradition, it's not the kind of spirituality I find in the pages of the NT.

More significantly in my eyes is the Eastern insistence that to have a noetic, transcendent experience of God, one must adopt an ascetic form of life, which puts it beyond the reach of the "ordinary" lay Christian. If I'm wrong on that, please correct me, but it squares with what I've read, heard, and seen... The EOC claims such a noetic experience is the final grounding for Eastern ethical discernment and necessary to be a spiritual counselor. I also think it pushes the church towards an unbiblical "spiritual elitism" by dividing the church into those who have a certain experience and those who have not.

My point is not to denigrate all asceticism -- I think there is a very important role for fasting in the Christian life, we emphasize self-denial and cross-bearing as a way of life, we acknowledge Lent in various ways at TPC, etc. But I'm not convinced the asceticism of the EOC is the will of God. Nor am I denigrating the importance of Christian experience, even mystical experiences. But I think the Eastern tradition has "normed" some things that are either unbiblical or extra-biblical.

If I bow before a man because I recognize the image of God in him and show that respect then I am humble and righteous. If I bow before a man because I am saying the he is Lord, when he is not (think Ceasar) then I have rejected the faith and am a heretic. If I eat the food offered to idols but know that the idol is impotent and not God then I can be forgiven. If I eat to worship a foreign God then I am to be excluded from the communion of the faithful until I repent. If I kiss and bow before an icon of a dead saint believing that he is alive and in the Spirit then I bow to the Spirit and may be in obedience. If I bow before the icon of a man that is dead and believe he is dead or that he will save me apart from the Spirit and Jesus and the Father -- then I am an idol worshipper, just like those who burnt incense to the snake.

Here we get to the nub of the issue. I strongly disagree that intentionality is everything. Consider an illustration (that I know you probably won't like): If two unmarried persons really love and care for each other, and have sex as a way of expressing their deep love and mutual service to each other, their good intentions do not change the fact that their bodily acts are adulterous. There are some bodily acts that are forbidden, no matter the intentions or attitudes or emotions behind them. Some actions simply cannot be justified, no matter our intentionality.

Thus: If you kiss and bow before the image of a dead saint, no matter how much you intend to worship the Spirit, you are still an idolater. Your bodily action itself is idolatrous. This is just what the second commandment addresses: "You shall not bow to down to them..." The second commandment says nothing about the heart because this is not a heart issue; it's a body issue. Christian faith is not just a religion of the heart; it is also a religion of the body. This is why right ritual is so wonderful and wrong ritual so dangerous.

As I think I stated in a previous email, I think this line of justification for icon worship you are suggesting is really gnostic (a buzz word, I know, but I'm sure

what else to call it). You are suggesting that the *real* meaning of the act is not located in the physical realm but in the inner realm of the heart. That's dualistic. If your body bows before an icon, you are committing idolatry, even if you say you're heart is really doing something else. What you do with your body matters; what you do with your body is inevitable what your whole person does. You can't do one thing with your body, while intending something else with your heart. There's no dichotomy between the body and the heart; the second commandment proscribes a certain bodily action, with no "out" based on heart intentions. I can explain this a lot of different ways, but hopefully I'm "connecting" with you here...so far I do not think I have been "heard" by you...

In the case of bowing to a Caesar, because it's not forbidden (and actually required if Caesar commands it!), intentionality does become part of the moral evaluation of the act. But bowing before images is expressly forbidden in the second commandment, no matter one's intention or theology. I'm happy to hear counter-arguments against that, but in all my years of engaging folks on the issue, I've never gotten anything close to a worthwhile reply from a Christian who bows before images. I am utterly convinced this is a practice that simply cannot be justified. (Dogmatic, I know, but there you have it.)

To deal with another aspect of this: What is the argument for treating icons as "windows" to heaven, or "contact points" with heaven, or saying that the Spirit who indwelt the saint must also indwell his icon? There are huge theological claims being made for pieces of wood, stone, and paint...they need some exegetical, theological backing, or else they are just assertions. Again, taking the apostles as my ancient models, I do not see icon veneration as something that should be a part of Christian piety...and knowing the importance and power of ritual, it scares me to think how significant it can be to get this wrong....

Blessings,
RL

A few notes in reply to what I see here--

First, it is a commonplace to see Christ as the "art" of God (see Dorothy Sayers on this -- yeah, she's a Western Christian, but it's excellent stuff!). The Son is both Word and Image/Icon of the Father. No problem there.

Second, man is made in the image of God. Man is the God-made icon of God. Perhaps we should say Christ is God's Icon, while man is God's icon (note the upper and lower cases). There is no problem bowing to other human beings because humans are divine representatives and images (e.g., Mordecai was wrong to refuse to bow in the book of Esther).

Third, yes, God did command the making of the cherubim and the serpent. There is no problem with religious art, per se, as the tabernacle and temple show. But the EO wrongly think the Jews bowed to the cherubim. They did not. They

bowed towards the shekinah/ glory presence of God in the most holy place, dwelling ABOVE the cherubim (Ps. 18, 99). In the old covenant, the earthly sanctuary was localized in one place. That is not the case in the new covenant (read Hebrews, John 4:24, etc.). There is no earthly shekinah towards which we can bow because we now enter the heavenly sanctuary in worship.

Fourth, in Numbers 21, the Israelites did not bow before the serpent, they simply looked to it (a look that John 3 equates with trust/ faith in Christ). There's a big difference between looking and bowing (just read the second commandment). Later, when the serpent-icon was used in the wrong way, violating the second commandment, it had to be destroyed. If the EO church only looked at its icons as religious art/ symbols, there would be no problem. But if they bow before them, they need to do with them what Hezekiah did with the serpent in 2 Kings 18. Period.

A lot more can be said, and maybe I'm missing the point you want me to see. But I don't want you to be misled by the sloppy exegesis and reasoning I consistently see used by the iconodules of the East and West.

I agree the key is dismantling their claims to church authority, which are very much tied to their claims of preserving the early church. They'll say, "Hey the early church still exists and you can join it!" Of course, when I read the NT (and even early church history), I think, "Why would I want to join THAT church? It has just as many problems, divisions, etc. as today's church!" Would you really want to join the church at Corinth or Galatia?! The notion that the early church was a golden age that must be preserved is a myth. I'd much rather join a church that is maturing, as Paul describes in Eph. 4.

Plus, there is simply no way the traditions and line of the apostles have been maintained by the East. Are we really supposed to believe that the apostles bowed before and prayed to icons when there is not a hint of such in the NT? That would have created at least as big of a controversy with Jews as if the apostles had said children are no longer included in the covenant. The worship service described in Revelation does not include bowing before images. Paul makes no mention of it in 1 Cor. 11-16 where he seems to catalog all the other elements of the service. Paul says he bows before the Father in heaven, not before an icon (Eph. 3:14). The earliest mention of icons in the church fathers come around 300 AD, and many of the most notable early Christians clearly rejected them. Etc. Are we really supposed to believe Jesus and the apostles served the Lord's Supper with a spoon by dipping the bread into the wine (intinction)? Their actual practices have to be evaluated just like those of every other church. The EO liturgy is filled with all kinds of patently unbiblical practices, including some which carry on features of the old covenant that have been transformed by Christ (e.g., laity cannot go into certain areas that are reserved for the priest alone, behind the iconostasis, which functions like a most holy place).

Many of the EO arguments may have surface level plausibility, but they wither

under closer scrutiny. For example, they'll say the Jews bowed towards the temple/ark of the covenant, and there were images in the temple, so that justifies bowing before icons. But actually, they were bowing towards the shekinah glory. God really was localized and present in the temple in a special way. Today, Christians themselves are God's "house." We can bow to one another. But we have no such promises about any pictures. They're not links to heaven, etc., as is claimed.

The claims to exclusivism are much stronger than post-Vatican 2 Roman Catholicism. They are arrogant and divisive. I think it's the same error Peter made in Galatians 2 -- dividing the church by dividing the table. They certainly view Calvinism as a heresy -- usually it's seen as the "ultimate" heresy of the Western church. They see the whole of Western Christendom as in the grip of rationalism, whereas they allow for mystery, mystical experience, etc. One of the hardest aspects of arguing with people on the road to EO (or already there) is....well, they don't like to argue. They'll say talking and reading about Orthodoxy is a very "Western" thing to do, but for enlightenment you actually have to experience Orthodoxy, which means the liturgy. They see liberalism as the final outcome of Western Christendom....never mind the fact that the East did not exactly preserve a Christian culture in its part of the world!

EO believes everything was basically settled by the first 7 ecumenical councils (of course, they pick and choose which councils count as "ecumenical"). They do not have any sense of doctrinal development/maturation beyond the 7th council, so there is no openness to something like the Reformation. Those councils infallibly settled all important matters. I think their lack of eschatology in this sense mirrors what they're doing with icons. We will have an infallible church that has fully arrived doctrinally -- but not until the last day. To want that now is to demand something God has not promised for the present, but for the future. Likewise with icons. It'd be great to have a God we can see. But the beatific vision does not belong to history. It belongs to the resurrection state. The EO has an overrealized eschatology.

I certainly believe the Eastern Church is part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. We should not return their sectarianism with a counter-sectarianism. But I think it is a deeply problematic and unhealthy place to be. There is much we can learn from EO, to be sure, and I've benefitted from many of their theologians. There is much that is beautiful about their liturgies, music, art, symbolism and culture. But the price paid to actually become Orthodox is way too steep. One has to swallow way too much error and give up way too much truth to ever make it worthwhile.

I think the attraction of EO for people from our circles is certainly the sense of security that ZZZ mentioned. But I think it's also a sense of prestige and status. When you've spent all your life in a microdenomination, there is often something appealing about being in a church that feels and claims to be "ancient" and "global." I think this is especially true for those who are in academia, where so much weight is placed on having the right credentials and connections....

I remember Schlissel talking about a young man who ended up in Rome. He said when he went to talk about his struggles with Roman Catholic priests, they prayed with him. When he talked to his Reformed/Presby pastor, he gave him a book.

Hmmm....