

# **The Bible and the Church: Both or Neither**

**Scott Hahn**

Many non-Catholic believers are convinced that the Bible alone is not merely sufficient, but exclusive as an authority for our faith and for our practice as believers. There are many Catholic theologians in good standing with the Church who might contend for the material sufficiency of the Bible: that everything we need to believe and everything we need to do is somehow contained in Scripture, either explicitly or implicitly. So it isn't just that the Protestants say, "The Bible is sufficient," because many Catholic theologians can contend that as well. But the non-Catholic, the Bible Christians, the fundamentalist says, "The Bible alone is our sole and exclusive authority. It is the only form in which we find the Word of God binding for believers today." I want to challenge the non-Catholic brother or sister in Christ to discover that that position is anti-Scriptural and it runs contrary to many different passages that are found both in the Old and New Testaments.

I also want to challenge Catholics to recognize the fact that it's the Bible and the Church, both or neither. Because one can't say, "I have the Church, I don't need the Bible," or, "I have the Pope and the blessed Virgin Mary and the holy Eucharist I don't really need to study Scripture." If you're saying that, then you're saying it in a flagrant disobedience to what the popes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and many other ages have declared, taught, and invited lay people to do.

## **Catholic Position Regarding Scripture**

Let's remind ourselves of what the Church teaches about Sacred Scripture. Perhaps the best place to begin is Vatican II. In 1965 we have one of the most important documents of the century issued, not just for theologians, not just for bishops and priests, but for the ordinary "Joe Six-pack" in the pews. In the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation chapter six, "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church," we read the following: "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the Body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the Bread of Life from the table both of God's Word and of Christ's Body." So there's an analogy here between the Eucharist and Sacred Scripture.

It goes on, "She has always maintained them, and continues to do so, together with Sacred Tradition as the supreme rule of Faith since, as inspired by God, and committed once and for all to writing, they impart the Word of God Himself without change." In other words, for the Catholic believer the Word of God alone is supreme. Recognize that we need to make it clear to the non-Catholic believers that we are bound by God's Word and God's Word alone. It's just that the Scriptures aren't the only source for God's Word, just as the Scriptures themselves declare.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15 Paul reminds the Thessalonian believers that they must hold fast to whatever the traditions are that the apostles have passed down either in writing or by

word of mouth. So Scripture insists that the Scriptures are not the only source for God's Word; we have Sacred Tradition as well, oral tradition as vouched, as attested by the New Testament itself. We do not believe in *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone, but we do believe in *solum Verbum Dei*, the Word of God alone. It's just wrong to say, "The Word of God is found in the Bible alone." It's contrary to Scripture itself.

Vatican II goes on to say that through Scripture "the Voice of the Holy Spirit resounds in the words of the prophets and the Apostles. Therefore, like the Christian religion itself, all of the preaching of the Church must be nourished and regulated by Sacred Scripture. For in the Sacred Books, the Father who is in Heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them." That, I believe is the heart of it all. It isn't simply that we receive the propositions we must believe; it isn't simply that we receive the moral instruction that we must practice; it's really that we as God's children hear the voice of our Father speaking to us from Heaven, through living oracles, so that we might develop a more intimate friendship with Christ. That's the overarching purpose for Sacred Scripture as the Church teaches it.

The force and power in the Word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church. So it's not just a love letter from our Father in Heaven, it's the force and the power believers and the Church needs to support its own life, the strength of faith for her own sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.

So how can Catholic Christians get away with neglecting Scripture, without flagrantly neglecting, rejecting the commandment of God that reaches us through the Church? It's the Church and the Bible, both or neither! We might say, "We believe that." But, does your lifestyle reflect that? Are you soaking in Scripture? Are you studying it? Are you reading it? If you won't study God's Word, you won't know God. St. Jerome declared, "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." We've got to read the Bible in the Church because this is the map of the City of God. If you want to know your way around the New Jerusalem, if you want to feel at home in Heaven, you better learn the map. If you want to understand what you receive in Holy Communion, if you want to understand how to communicate the truth of the Holy Eucharist to people who've departed from the Church, who've abandoned the Bread of Life, then you better study the menu, you better learn the ingredients, you better learn about the Passover and the recipe that God prepared for centuries before he finally delivered the Bread of Life in the Eucharistic Liturgy. We cannot excuse ourselves any longer.

One of the most astonishing statements that comes to us from a Doctor of the Church, St. Theresa of Avila: "All troubles of the Church, all the evils in the world, flow from this source: that men do not by clear and sound knowledge and serious consideration penetrate into the truths of Sacred Scripture." That's strong. This has been the consistent testimony of the Saints and Doctors and all the way back to the Fathers of the Church in the first few centuries. We cannot afford this neglect anymore.

I am not suggesting that the solution to our problem is more Scripture scholars. We've got boat loads of them, and that in many ways is a source of the crisis because so many Scripture scholars have drunk from the wells of rationalism or anti-supernaturalism or existentialism and now they end up de-historicizing God's Word, de-supernaturalizing the miracles in Scripture. We don't need Scripture scholars so much as we need Scripture junkies, people who are addicted to God's Word, people who don't want to live a day without at least meditating on a Gospel passage.

### **Challenges From Scripture and the Church**

Listen to the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12, "For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Do you want to know what Jesus Christ thinks of you? Do you want to live in a way that truly pleases Him? You can't know how to please Him without meditating upon the Gospels. You won't even know what Jesus Christ is like without contemplating the stories. You've got to get to know Him in a personal, intimate way and Sacred Scripture is essential for that.

Hebrews 5:11-14 says, "About this we have much to say which is hard to explain." The writer acknowledges that what he is about to talk about is difficult to understand. Why is that? "Since you have become dull of hearing." This is not a new problem. This goes back to the first century. People are easily falling into the temptation of dullness, of indifference towards Scripture. He says to them, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers...." In other words he's addressing people who have been in the Church for years and years. But he says, "No, you need someone to explain to you the very first principles of God's Word." The ABC's. "You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the work of righteousness, for he is a child. But solid food is for the mature." Do you want to grow up as a child of God? Do you want to mature as a son or a daughter of the Most High God? Do you want to have the power, the wisdom, patience, the skill in bringing back people that you love, people that you know, people that you work with to the Lord in His family?

In Matthew 22:29 Jesus declares in speaking to the Sadducees, "You are wrong because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." We have to know the Scriptures, but again, we need the power of God. We need the Spirit of Christ to illuminate the text to make it meaningful for us today. The popes have always declared that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the Mystical Body. That being the case, we have to read the Bible but we have to read it in the Church and with the Church and for the Church because the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures and illuminates them for our understanding, is the soul of the Mystical Body.

Listen to what happens to ancient Israel because they neglect God's Word and what happens especially when the priests neglect their tasks and duty of proclaiming and explaining God's Word. From Hosea 4:1-9: "Hear the Word of the Lord," Hosea declares, "for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land." That word in

Hebrew, for controversy, *reve*, is literally a covenant lawsuit. God has a covenant lawsuit to lodge against His people. "For there is no faithfulness or kindness, no knowledge of God in the land. There is, swearing, lying, stealing, committing adultery." Sound familiar? "Yet, let no one contend and let none accuse, for with you is my contention, O priest." He says, I'm not going to rebuke the people who are living like pagans, I'm not going to rebuke the hypocrites in the temple or the synagogue, my contention is with you priests. "You shall stumble by day and the prophets shall stumble with you by night, and I will destroy your mother [i.e. the city where they worship] for my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Do you hear what the Lord said? "My people" - in the Hebrew that word is *'am*, which literally means kinsmen. It means my family, my children, are wasting away, for what? Lack of knowledge. "Because you priests have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of God, I also will forget your children.... and it shall be, like people, like priest. I will punish them for their ways and requite them for their deeds."

I believe with all my heart this is a Word of God for us, for here and for now. We are going to be destroyed even as we are now being destroyed as a Church in this land. As a society embroiled in secularism and relativism and humanism, we are wasting away because we don't know God and we don't know God because we've rejected knowledge. We have found better things to do with our leisure time. We have found more entertaining things to do with our money and our energy. So don't blame anybody. We have not yet begun to love God's Word as we need and as others need us.

Pope Paul VI declared in the late sixties, "In accord with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, all Catholics now must regard Sacred Scripture as the abiding source of spiritual life." If you won't read Scripture and meditate on the Gospel, then you can kiss your spiritual life good-bye. You won't make it. Temptations are coming and when they come I can assure you one thing: if you have not stored up God's Word in your heart, you won't stand a chance. This is what Scripture teaches; this is what the Church repeats, "Thy Word have I stored up in my heart that I may not sin against Thee." We're going to be sinning against God without even knowing it.

St. John Chrysostom reminds us how we approach Scripture. We pray, we beg the Lord for the grace and for the Holy Spirit's light. He says, "To get the full flavor of an herb, it must be pressed between the fingers, so it is the same with the Scriptures; the more familiar they become, the more they reveal their hidden treasures and yield their indescribable riches." Scripture has indescribable riches.

When I read the Bible, and I have time to study it for maybe an hour or two, or three, the only word I can use to describe the state that I'm in at the end of it is inebriation. I discovered that the Fathers used to speak of *sobrietas inebria*, this sober inebriation, this sober intoxication, where you are drunk with joy, hearing God's Word and discovering His ways.

### **Scriptural Evidence for Bible Christians Regarding the Necessity of the Church**

Now what I'd like to share with you is basically designed to help you reach fallen-away Catholics, these Bible Christians. I want to give you a series of texts to understand why Bible Christians, to be consistent, must become Catholic Christians.

Matthew 16:17-19, perhaps the most important text of all: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my Church." Jesus says, I will build My Church upon this Rock, this Peter, this *Petros*. Not because of who Simon Peter is, but because of Christ's greatness. Christ can do the greatest with the least. If He can take a man as fickle as Peter was when he was Simon and establish the Church upon Simon, then we can be sure that no matter how bad a Pope is, Christ will maintain His Church. For He says, "I will build My Church." He doesn't say, "I will build my churches", or, "We will build My churches", or, "You will build your churches and My Holy Spirit will blow and bless." He says, "I will build My Church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

The gates of Hades symbolized the realm of the dead. The gates of Hades were the barred gates that kept in those who were in *Sheol*. Jesus speaks of *Gehenna* and how people will be there in fire forever "where the worm dieth not". But He speaks of Hades where people live in the shadowy, unpleasant state. The Jews have always prayed for their dead, and this statement reflects that. The dead who are awaiting the Messiah are in Hades, and when Christ builds the Church, He will give to Peter the keys to the kingdom so that the Church will reign over the gates of Hades. You see the connection: the gates of Hades and the keys of the kingdom. What do the keys fit into? The gates of Hades. So we, through Peter and his successors, can experience the release of souls in Hades/Purgatory. He goes on, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven, so that whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven." What is Jesus talking about? In order to understand this passage read Isaiah 22:20-23.

Isaiah 22 describes how the Son of David, the King of Israel, rules over all of God's people in the Old Testament. But he doesn't rule alone, he ruled with a cabinet of royal ministers. Just as Jesus, the son of David, the King of kings, appoints twelve apostles to be his royal ministers. That's why in Matthew 19:28 He says to the twelve, "You will sit on twelve thrones and rule the twelve tribes of Israel." The Israel of God is the Church of Christ, the Catholic Church. All twelve apostles are given by Jesus, in Matthew 18:18, the power of binding and loosing, but only Peter, Peter alone, receives the keys of the kingdom. Why? Isaiah 22 explains that here you have the King, the son of David, and here you have his royal cabinet ministers. But in between the King and the royal ministers, you have the prime minister. Who is the prime minister? The one to whom the King gives the keys to the kingdom. So when Jesus gives to the twelve the power to bind and loose, notice He gives to Peter and Peter alone the keys to the kingdom. A very clear Old Testament reference to the minister who is given primacy. So we have the primacy of Peter being instituted by Jesus Christ.

When you go back to Isaiah 22, you discover two more things. The keys are called the keys of the House of David, even though David died over a hundred years before. You

see, when David died he had a successor in Solomon. When Solomon died he had a successor in Rehoboam, and so on. But the king is not the only one who leaves a vacant office at death. When he dies a successor replaces him. But you discover that his prime minister also leaves a vacant office. How do you know the next prime minister? He is the one to whom the keys are passed. So besides Peter receiving primacy from Jesus, he also receives a symbol of dynastic succession in the keys of the kingdom.

The third element that is important in Isaiah 22 is when Isaiah declares that all the inhabitants of the kingdom shall call the one holding the keys (Eliakim the prime minister) "father." And you know that "Pope" is simply the Italian word for "father." That's why through the ages we have referred to the successor of Peter as Pope, as our Holy Father. All of this Jesus knew very well from the Old Testament. This was something that the early Church picked up on without any controversy or sense of novelty.

In Timothy 3:15 Paul reminds Timothy that "the household of God which is the Church of the living God is the pillar and foundation of truth." The pillar and foundation of truth is the Church. Now I used to defend *sola scriptura*. I used to attack the Catholic position. But I've got to tell you, I never had a single text explicitly teaching *sola scriptura*. But if I had a text anywhere in the Old Testament or the New Testament which said something like this, "Scripture is the pillar and foundation of truth," I would have begun all of my arguments with that text and I would have ended all of my arguments with that text. But you know the only text we have of that kind declares that the *Church* is the pillar and foundation of truth, the household of God. Literally the family of God.

You see, when you study the Bible, when you study Church history, what you discover is that the Church precedes the New Testament. Jesus never wrote a single word. Odd, isn't it? If He wanted the Scripture to be the exclusive source for our doctrine, why didn't He write down a page or a word? Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus command any of His apostles to write a single word. He says, "Go out and preach the Gospel." It's an oral communication. I am in no way down-playing Scripture as the written communication of God's Word. I am just showing that Scripture exalts Jesus' intention to build a Church, to send out apostles who are to preach, that is, communicate God's Word person to person through living oracles, in an oral way which is far more dynamic and interpersonal than simply what's on a page.

Notice that even when the apostles do write, how many of them write? We got Matthew, but Mark wasn't one of the twelve; Luke wasn't one of the twelve, but John was. So one half of the Evangelists were apostles. Look at Acts – Luke wrote that, not an apostle. Paul wasn't one of the original twelve. We've got James and Jude, apostles. First, Second and Third John. So we've got four or five apostles out of the twelve writing books. What about the other ones? Were they just too lazy? Disobedient? No, of course not. They understood Christ's commission and in it there is nothing explicit about writing Scripture. The Word of God is to be proclaimed, it is to be communicated orally, and also in a literary mode as well. But what is primary and foremost in Christ's mind and in His words, as Scripture attests, is preaching the Word of God.

In 2 Timothy 2:2, "What you've heard from me, before many witnesses..." Write down? No, "entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." It's an oral transmission. It's a family. It's the household of God; it's God's family. How much do you write down for your children when you teach them? How many volumes have you penned so far in raising your offspring? More is caught than is taught, and when you communicate orally, you communicate more effectively than when you write because you can put your whole person behind it. You can use your eyes and the inflection of your voice, hand gestures and hugs and whatever else you need to get your point across.

Titus 1:5 – "That is why," Paul says, "I left you, Titus, there in Crete..." That you might write some Scriptures so they have a source or an authority? No. "This is why I left you in Crete: that you might amend what was defective and appoint elders in every town." Why did Paul leave Titus in Crete? To spread around his letters? No. To write down a Gospel? No! To appoint elders in every town. Paul's concern is for the Church and for the *magisterium* of the Church, for the presbyters, for the priesthood, for the hierarchy.

The Church comes before the New Testament. Get this, the New Testament is alive and kicking. It's alive and worshipping and singing and praying and believing and practicing and preaching long before any of the books of the New Testament were written, much less gathered together and compiled in 393 AD. That's the first time we have an official collection of the New Testament books at the Council of Hippo, and then in 397 at the Council of Carthage. Imagine that, the Church waited for over three hundred years before 27 books were gathered together and formally compiled as the New Testament. What did they do for three centuries? They lived on the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of sacraments just as Jesus and the apostles teach. And so it is today. Again, I am in no way down-playing the importance of Scripture. I am just showing that Scripture itself highlights the Church's *magisterium*: bishops, priest and especially Peter and his successor. We are unfaithful to God's Word if we are disobedient or unsubmitive to the Pope, to the *magisterium* of the Church, and to the whole body of the Catholic Church as well.

In Luke 10:16, Jesus sends out the apostles and He says, "He who hears you, hears me. He who rejects you rejects me." So the apostles go forth with the very authority of Christ. The churches that they founded are all part of the Church that Christ builds. If we reject the bishops of the Church who are the successors to the apostles, we may inadvertently be rejecting Christ. People might look at the apostles and say, "I don't like the way he preaches. I can't understand his message. He hasn't showered in two weeks; I can't get near him." Or "He's a Galilean and I'm a Samaritan, and I'm offended by some Galilean neighbors I've got." They can come up with all kinds of excuses, but if you reject them, you reject Christ who sent them, as well as their successors.

John 14:26 – Jesus promises the apostles that He will send them the Holy Spirit who "will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you." He said to all twelve - remember, more than half of the twelve apostles didn't write a page of

Scripture, but he says to all of them, "The Holy Spirit will cause you to remember all that I've taught you." Everything, that's the way the Church thrived for centuries.

John 16:13 – "The Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth," so that you'll write it down? No, so that you'll proclaim it in your preaching.

John 21:25 – "There are many other things which Jesus did... the world itself could not contain the books." Does that suggest that, what Jesus said and did, what's not recorded in the Gospels and the New Testament, must not be important? No. But the Spirit will lead and guide the Church into remembrance of all that He has taught. There is a *sensus fidelium*, a sense of the faithful. The Holy Spirit animates the Body of Christ as the soul of the Mystical Body, bringing us to an awareness of many things that we may not even be conscious about. When the time is right the Holy Spirit will lead us to recall the things that Christ said and did which apply to our need, to our situation, without us even knowing it.

Acts 2:42 – "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching," not in writing but in their preaching.

Acts 8:31 – Here the Ethiopian eunuch says to Philip, "How can I understand the Scripture unless someone guides me?" He bears a faithful witness to everybody's need. We need guidance when we read the Bible. Christ knew it, so He gives us not just the Holy Spirit but the Church that is filled with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 20:35 – Here we discover Paul referring to a saying of Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Paul refers to this saying of Jesus but I dare you to search Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and try to find where Jesus said it. Acts 20:35 is the only place. Now, how then did Paul know that Jesus said it? Because oral tradition is maintained in the Church through the Holy Spirit.

Romans 10:17 – Faith comes from what is read? No. "Faith comes from what is heard." The point of the New Covenant then, is that the New Covenant surpasses the Old. The Old was written and so was the New Testament written. But the New Testament is more than simply written. It is alive and powerful in our hearts and in our lives.

2 Thessalonians 2:15 – "Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us either by word of mouth or by writing."

1 Peter 1:25 – Underline this one, "The Word of the Lord abides forever and that Word is the Good News which was preached to you." What is the Word of God? That which has been handed down through the preaching of the apostles and their successors. As Catholic Christians, we are bound to God's Word and God's Word alone. Not *sola scriptura* – that's "anti-scriptura" – but *solum Verbum Dei*, the Word of God alone. What is the Word? It is the Good News that was preached to you.

Certainly it is also the Word of God contained in the inspired Scriptures. But Scriptures are difficult to understand. The Scriptures themselves tell us that. 2 Peter 3:15: "There are some things in them," that is, the writings of Paul, "that are hard to understand," which, even back in the first century, Peter says, "the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do with the other Scriptures." So in every age there are people who are unstable in their beliefs, who trust themselves more than the Church that Christ built, and who say, "The Holy Spirit guides me." But they fail to hear Jesus say that the Holy Spirit is given to the apostles and their successors first and foremost to guide them "into all that I've taught you." If we want to follow the Word of God, if we want to obey Sacred Scripture, if we want to be illuminated by the Holy Spirit, then become slaves to Mother Church and learn whatever She teaches. Listen to whatever She declares. That's what it means to be a Bible Christian.

*This text is an edited version of a talk given by Scott Hahn at a conference in Long Beach, California in 1994.*