

Drowning in the Tiber (Part 7)
Responding to Francis Beckwith's 2009 Book:
Return to Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic
-Sola Scriptura 1-

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Transcript of a Sermon Preached at Christ Church of Clarkson
by
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This morning I'm going to ask you to stand and open your Bibles to Psalm 119 (right about the middle point of your Bibles). We're going to read verses 1-16 together as we begin this morning.

Psalm 119, beginning in verse 1:

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart. They also do no unrighteousness. They walk in His ways. Thou hast ordained Thy precepts that we should keep them diligently. O, that my ways may be established to keep Thy statutes. Then I shall not be ashamed when I look upon all Thy commandments. I shall give thanks to Thee with uprightness of heart when I learn Thy righteous judgments. I shall keep Thy statutes. Do not forsake me utterly. How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Thy word. With all my heart I have sought Thee. Do not let me wander from Thy commandments. Thy word I have treasured in my heart that I might not sin against Thee. Blessed art Thou, O Lord. Teach me Thy statutes. With my lips I have told of all the ordinances of Thy mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of Thy testimonies as much as in all riches. I will meditate on Thy precepts and regard Thy ways. I shall delight in Thy statutes. I shall not forget Thy word.¹

[Opening Prayer]

I want to address a subject this morning that is near and dear to my heart and that is the Word of God, and particularly, its sufficiency and it being the standard for all truth. We're going to do that within the context of our continuing study that we've been calling "Drowning in the Tiber: A Response to Francis Beckwith's book, *Return to Rome*." Francis Beckwith was past president of the Evangelical Theological Society, who shocked the evangelical world in 2007 when he announced that he was no longer an Evangelical Protestant, but was reverting back to the Roman Catholicism of his youth. He has since come out with a book in which he gives the background and defense of his embracing the entire system of Roman Catholic theology. This series I've been doing is really

¹Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are taken from the New American Standard Bible (The Lockman Foundation, 1971).

more than about a book, it's about the Gospel. And one of the greatest threats to the purity of the Gospel throughout its history has been systems of works-righteousness. At the forefront of those systems is Roman Catholicism. To say it's about the Gospel is to say it's about the truth, and that is to beg the question, *what is the ultimate standard for truth?* That brings us back to God's Word. It's about truth; it's about authority.

Francis Beckwith writes that in his decision to embrace the Roman Catholic Church:

[T]he Marian doctrines and Purgatory—were not a big deal to me. That was because I reasoned that if the Catholic views on Church authority, justification, the communion of the saints, and the sacraments were defensible, then these other so-called 'stumbling blocks' withered away, since the Catholic Church would in fact be God' authoritative instrument in the development of Christian doctrine.²

That is really the crux of the issue. What is the foundation, what is the authority as it relates to truth? In other words, what is the standard for truth as it relates to our understanding of who God is, and what He requires of us?

For the purpose of our discussion, there are really only two options. You have the Word of God, Scripture, as being the sole standard. And then you have the institutional church as the standard. The differences between Roman Catholicism and the Evangelicalism that flowed out of the Reformation boil down to this issue. In fact, you could take all of the groups out there that, in one way or another, claim to be Christian, and most of them falsely, and put them in one of two categories: those that claim an authority outside of the Bible (and that would include the cults), and those who claim authority from the Bible alone. Now I'm going to argue that the nature of God's Word demands that it be the final authority on all matters pertaining to salvation. I'll further argue that this was the view of the early church and that anything other than that, historically, leads to a denial of the Gospel of Grace.

The great historian Merle D'Aubigne wrote that:

[W]ar was waged on the very question that is the principle of the Reformation, namely: "What is the sole infallible authority for Christians?"³

Well, for Rome, the authority is in the *interpretation* of the Bible and their traditions, not in the *mere words* of the Bible themselves. It's in the interpretive power that they believe they have over the Scriptures and over tradition. Now the reformers saw that it was all about power. If an institutional

²Francis J. Beckwith, *Return To Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 79.

³J.H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1883), 111.

church, like the Roman Catholic Church, can convince men that their souls are held captive to what the church says is truth, they could literally move kings and princes like mere game pieces on a chessboard, and that they did during the Middle Ages. But what was even worse, as far as the reformers were concerned, was that the Gospel was trampled underfoot in the process. You have to remember, we're talking about a time before the advent of the printing press, which was invented, at least in the west, by Gutenberg in 1440. Bibles were not a plentiful thing, neither were books. In 1505, the reformer Martin Luther began his monastic studies at Erfurth. They had one Bible in the convent and it was fastened with a chain, lest somebody walk off with it. But as the printing press became more widely used, books and Bibles became more available, and the cat was out of the bag, and the church, that is, the Roman Catholic Church, began to lose her power to keep men in their ignorance. One remembers Luther's well-known quip. When asked what would happen if all of these common people start to have a Bible that they can read in their own tongue, his reply was, "There will certainly be far more Christians." That's something that he understood, that apart from God's Word, clearly proclaimed, there is no Gospel.

We saw that in 1 Peter, chapter one, verses 23-25:

23 for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God. 24 For, "All flesh is like grass, And all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, And the flower falls off, 25 But the word of the Lord abides forever." And this is the word which was preached to you.

Once the chains fell off God's Word, one of the greatest revivals in the history of the church was unleashed. And as it relates to authority and truth, we call this unleashing the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which is a Latin phrase which means "Scripture alone." *Sola scriptura* became known as the *formal principle* of the Reformation. The formal principle refers to that which is written down as the basis for what one believes. The formal principle leads to the *material principle*, the central truth of what one believes, which in our case is *sola fide*, salvation by faith alone. And that's why I say there's a direct connection between one's view of the Bible as truth and what one believes as to the Gospel. *Sola scriptura* led to *sola fide*, and unleashed the Gospel. Those who believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible and its subsequent authority and sufficiency are far less prone to pervert the Gospel of Grace than those who don't uphold the authority and sufficiency and inerrancy and inspiration of God's Word. To deny those things is to cultivate fertile ground, out of which sprouts all manner of error.

We need to ask the question, "What is *sola scriptura*?" . . . [H]ow about a definition? I'll use the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith. It's in your outlines; you can follow along on some of these quotes that are longer:

1. The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is

necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary, those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

That's a long explanation. We could shorten it to the 1st line:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.

In other words, it is the plumb line. It's the standard by which we measure and gauge truth, particularly as it relates to the truth of the Gospel. The psalmist, Psalm one thirty eight, verse 2, declares that God has magnified His Word according to all that is His name. In Acts, chapter seventeen, we read about the Bereans, the Berean Christians who received God's Word with great eagerness and compared the words of the apostle Paul with those self-same Scriptures. That same apostle writes to his child in the faith, Timothy in 2 Timothy, chapter three:

. . . that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.⁴

Note that Paul reminds Timothy that these sacred writings (in this case he's talking about the Old Testament Scriptures) are sufficient to give the sinner all the wisdom needed to guide him or her to salvation in Jesus Christ. So the doctrine of sola scriptura rightly understood is a safeguard against myriads of false doctrines and perversions of the Gospel of Grace. When the Bible is misused, when it's ignored, when it's supplemented with traditions of men, it is to the peril of those who refuse to place themselves under Scripture's absolute and final authority. We can compare this to the Roman Catholic position on the Bible and authority and we find that the Roman Catholic position is two-fold. You have what they refer to on one hand as sacred Scripture. Then you have what they refer to on the other hand as sacred tradition. But I want to quote from their authoritative sources, beginning with the Council of Trent, the sixteenth century counter-reformation council, the Decree Concerning the Edition, and the Use, of the Sacred Books. This was the Fourth Session. The Council of Trent's decree is:

Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, It decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall,—in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine,—wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church,—whose it is to judge of the

⁴2 Timothy 3:15-17.

true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures,—hath held and doth hold; or even contrary to the unanimous consent of the Fathers; even though such interpretations were never (intended) to be at any time published. Contraveners shall be made known by their Ordinaries, and be punished with the penalties by law established.

So here you have the revival of the Reformation that's spreading throughout the empire and beyond, and the Roman Catholic Church, in trying to arrest this revival, comes out with a statement saying that no one can interpret the Scriptures on their own apart from that which the Roman Catholic Church has decreed as the interpretation, and that which, they claim is consistent with the unanimous consent of the Fathers—and we looked at that a few weeks ago—that the idea of "unanimous consent" is a misnomer. There really is no such thing as unanimous consent across the board as far as the Early Church Fathers are concerned. And furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church, in many instances, clearly violates the unanimous consent of the fathers, such as the case of Matthew, chapter sixteen and the identity of the "rock" in Peter's confession.

We could go on to Vatican I, Session three, the 24th of April, 1870, chapter two (on Revelation):

5. Now this supernatural revelation, according to the belief of the universal church, as declared by the sacred council of Trent, is contained in: written books [that's sacred Scripture] and unwritten traditions, [that's what they call sacred tradition] which were received by the apostles from the lips of Christ Himself, or came to the apostles by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, and were passed on as it were from hand to hand until they reached us 8. Now since the decree on the interpretation of holy scripture, profitably made by the council of Trent, with the intention of constraining rash speculation, has been wrongly interpreted by some, we renew that decree and declare its meaning to be as follows: that in matters of faith and morals, belonging as they do to the establishing of Christian doctrine, that meaning of holy scripture must be held to be the true one, which Holy Mother Church held and holds, since it is her right to judge of the true meaning and interpretation of holy scripture. 9. In consequence, it is not permissible for anyone to interpret holy scripture in a sense contrary to this, or indeed against the unanimous consent of the fathers.

Again, it is what the Roman Catholic Church says, regardless of what the voice of Scripture may mean to you or anyone else. I suppose that the Roman Catholic Church could come out and say that David killed Goliath with a slingshot filled with ammo which consisted of Twinkies, and if they said that and that was the final word, that is what you would have to believe regardless of what your reason or anything else would tell you.

Vatican I, as you saw from the quote reaffirmed the decree of Trent some 400 years earlier. Commenting on Vatican I, Roman Catholic theologian G. Van Noort writes:

The Catholic Church ... contends that the doctrine of salvation was not given to the Church in Scripture exclusively, and that it was not all written down under divine inspiration. And so it recognizes, in addition to written tradition, oral tradition also; and this latter it has come

to call simply Tradition, in a restricted sense. As the Vatican Council put it: "according to the belief of the universal Church, supernatural revelation is contained in books written [under divine inspiration] and in unwritten [uninspired] traditions." It acknowledges, then, two sources of revelation: the inspired Scriptures and divine apostolic Tradition.⁵

Same thing with Vatican II. Two sources: sacred Scripture, sacred tradition, which is whatever the church says it is:

Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching. ...

Now, note this,

... Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.⁶

Roman Catholic theologian John Hardon writes in his popular catechism:

59. Where do we find the truths revealed by God? We find the truths revealed by God in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

84. What is Sacred Tradition? Sacred Tradition is the unwritten word of God that the prophets and apostles received through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and, under his guidance, the Church has handed on to the Christian world. St. Paul told the Faithful: "Stand firm, then, brothers, and keep the traditions that we taught you, whether by word of mouth or by letter." (2 Thessalonians 2:15)

87. How has Sacred Tradition been handed on? Sacred Tradition, which is divine revelation in oral form, has been handed on by the Church's doctrine, life, and worship.

Now, specifically, you have to understand, this is referring to the Roman Catholic Church, not the universal church of believers, or the elect.

⁵Cited in David T. King, *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith* (Battle Ground, WA: Christian Resources, Inc., 2001), 1:49-50.

⁶Ibid., 50.

89. Why is Sacred Tradition of equal authority with the Bible?

Note, it's not asking, *Is it?* It's saying, *Why is it?* Answer:

The Bible and Sacred Tradition are of equal authority because they are equally the word of God; both derive from the inspired vision of the ancient prophets, and especially from the infinite wisdom of God incarnate who gave to the apostles what he came down on earth to teach, through them, to all of mankind.⁷

This whole issue of the relationship between tradition and Scripture is something that even Roman Catholic scholars have come to a disjuncture on. There's not agreement. They've basically divided on two views. There's the view that's called *material sufficiency*; then there's a view that's called *partim-partim*.⁸

The material sufficiency view is that *all* that the Roman Catholic Church teaches as dogma is found in the Bible. Either explicitly or implicitly, it's there. All of their authoritative teachings, in one way or another, come out of this book.

The partim-partim view is that part of what the church teaches is found in the Bible and part is found in tradition.

This can be illustrated this way:⁹

Partim-Partim View	Material Sufficiency View
Oral tradition is a separate and different revelation	Oral tradition does not contain other revelation
Oral tradition is necessary, inspired revelation	Oral tradition is necessary for the proper interpretation of the Bible
The Bible itself is materially insufficient	The Bible itself is materially sufficient

So if you look at the chart in your handout, you have the partim-partim view, oral tradition is separate and different revelation from the Scripture, where the material sufficiency view would say, oral tradition does not contain other revelation, it's just a clarification. Under the partim-partim view,

⁷John A. Hardon, S.J., *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).

⁸*Partim-partim* being Latin, meaning *partly, partly*).

⁹Adapted from James White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 1996), 80.

oral tradition is necessary, inspired revelation. Under the material sufficiency view, oral tradition is necessary for the proper interpretation of the Bible. And then, finally, under the partim-partim view, the Bible itself is materially insufficient. *It's not insufficient in and of itself.* According to the material sufficiency view, the Bible itself is materially sufficient, however it needs a magisterium, it needs an interpreter, which is the church of Rome.

Most of what you read, and even from what I've read—the Council of Trent and Vatican I and Vatican II and the Catechism—most of what you read strongly implies, if not outright demands, a partim-partim view: that they have this understanding that part of the authority comes from Scripture and part of it is through something that is not totally isolated, in their mind, but separate, and that is tradition. But then, you have the apologists, modern-day Roman Catholic apologists, and they like to deny that. They like to go to the Scripture and say, "No, everything that the Roman Catholic Church teaches is found in tradition, but it's also found in Scripture." Beckwith goes in that direction and he cites Vatican II's principle document, *Dei Verbum* (and I quoted part of that earlier) and he writes, now listen to this—this is Francis Beckwith and his opinion as he defaulted into Roman Catholicism—he says:

Moreover, the Catholic Church does not hold . . . that the infallibility of the Magisterium and the ex-cathedra papal pronouncements are of the same nature as the Word of God written. As *Dei Verbum* states (as translated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church): "Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. . . .

That is, by God's Word.

At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith."¹⁰

That is a misleading statement. It sounds like the Roman Catholic Church officially believes that the Bible is the final authority and everything the church teaches comes right out of the Scriptures. But then you have statements, such as that which we've read from Vatican II:

. . . the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.

So we say, Well, which in the world is it? On one hand, you read this authoritative document that says it's this, and another one that says it's this. I think it's pretty clear that the doctrines of the papacy, the Roman Catholic priesthood, celibacy for priests, the mass, purgatory, the sinlessness of

¹⁰Francis J. Beckwith, *Return To Rome: Confessions of an Evangelical Catholic* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 125.

Mary, her role as co-mediatrix who [prays] for the sins of sinners, her assumption into heaven, confessionals, praying a rosary, and indulgences—it's pretty clear those things don't find their genesis in the Bible. And yet, if we take the time—because it'll be argued, "Well, we can find them in tradition." And if we take the time to research what the Early Church Fathers meant by tradition, and even appealing to tradition, we find that the word simply means teaching. William Webster talks about this.

He writes:

... Irenaeus and Tertullian state emphatically that all the teachings of the Bishops that was given orally was rooted in Scripture and could be proven from the written Scriptures. Both men give us the actual doctrinal content of the apostolic Tradition that was orally preached in the churches, and every doctrine was derived from Scripture. There was no doctrine in that apostolic Tradition that is not found in Scripture. The apostolic Tradition for Irenaeus and Tertullian is simply the teaching of Scripture. It was Irenaeus who stated that while the apostles at first preached orally, their teaching was later committed to writing in the Scriptures, and the Scriptures have since that day become the pillar and ground of the Church's faith. His exact statement [that is, Irenaeus] is as follows:

"We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith."¹¹

Really, when you boil it down, and cut to the chase, what it comes down to is this, the Bible is one authority and the Roman Catholic Church is another, and the authority of the Roman Catholic Church tells you how to interpret and apply the authority of the Bible. The Bible becomes a code book, which is only as useful as the one authorized to be the code-breaker, Rome, and in the end you have *sola ecclesia roma*, solely by the Roman church.

But let's be clear about what we're not saying. Sometimes you can clarify what you mean by saying what you don't mean. What the doctrine of sola scriptura does not mean.

Sola scriptura is not a claim that the Bible contains all knowledge. It's not even a claim that the Bible contains all religious knowledge. John MacArthur writes:

... there are many important questions on which Scripture is silent. Sola scriptura makes no claim to the contrary. Nor does sola scriptura claim that everything Jesus or the apostles ever taught is preserved in Scripture. It only means that everything necessary, everything binding

¹¹Berean Beacon.

on our consciences, and everything God requires of us is given to us in Scripture. . . . Sola Scriptura simply means that Scripture is sufficient.¹²

Certainly we are all well aware of John the apostle's statement at the end of his Gospel, chapter twenty one, verse 25, he says:

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books which were written.

So the issue is one of sufficiency, not extent. Something can be sufficient without being exhaustive. Think of Deuteronomy 29:29:

The secret things [or the *exhaustive things*] belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

Secondly, sola scriptura is not a denial of the church's authority to teach. Church versus Scripture is not an either/or dichotomy. The true church of God's redeemed from every tribe, tongue and nation (Revelation 5:9) does have authority. That church is the pillar and support of the truth according to 1 Timothy 3:15. But Beckwith seems to think that the doctrine of sola scriptura means that it's every man for himself. Every man grab a Bible and make it say whatever you think it says, and the church isn't even relevant. That's not sola scriptura, that's been phrased *solō scriptura*. That's flying solo. And he writes in this regard, he says, on page 80 of his book:

. . . I began to even find the sola scriptura of the Magisterial Reformation not entirely satisfactory. It seemed to me to subtly and unconsciously incorporate into its theological framework all the doctrines that sola scriptura, without a settled canon or authoritative creedal tradition, could never have produced. out of whole cloth without the benefit of a Holy Spirit directed ecclesiastical infrastructure.¹³

In other words, he's saying, "How could we come up with all these full-flowered doctrines, such as the person of Christ in His two natures and the Trinity and so on and so forth without the Holy Spirit guiding the church?" And I don't have a problem with that. It's the Holy Spirit guiding the church into what the Bible teaches. The Holy Spirit does guide and direct the church, *not* an institution, like the Church of Rome. The Holy Spirit guides and directs the universal elect body of believers. Listen, the Bible wasn't given to an institution. It was given to those who are ordained to be the children of God; it was given to an elect church. Unregenerate men, no matter how religious, can't discern the things of the Spirit. So sola scriptura does not deny the necessity of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church. It is the Lord who gives understanding. 2 Timothy 2:7, Paul says:

¹²Cited in *Holy Scripture*, 1:43.

¹³*Return to Rome*, 80.

Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

And He does that through the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians, chapter two, verse 12:

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God.

Listen, the church does not invent the truth. The church isn't, itself, the truth. *The church is the pillar and support of the truth*, a truth that is ontologically, or essentially, separate from it, the truth of God's Word. The authority is grounded in Christ and in His Word. So we have a derived authority.

So sola scriptura is not a claim that the Bible contains all knowledge; it's not a denial of the church's authority to teach or the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the church.

And,

Sola scriptura does not mean that Scripture is the only authority on earth. Authority isn't monolithic. There are relative levels of authority, such as that which God grants to political heads, husbands, in authority over their wives, church leaders, such as elders and deacons. We see that in passages like 1 Peter, chapter two, verses 13-15; Ephesians 5:22-23; Hebrews, chapter thirteen, verse 17. Yet, all of these authority structures are secondary to the final authority of God and His Word. Scripture isn't the only authority, but, note this, *it is the final authority*.

So sola scriptura means that the canonical Scriptures, the thirty nine books in the Old Testament and the twenty seven books in the New, are sufficient to serve as the *regula fidei*, or the infallible rule of faith for the believer and the church.

There are really two issues: we talked about authority and we talked about sufficiency. The Scriptures are sufficient to lead us to salvation in Christ alone, 2 Timothy 3:15. I read that earlier. They are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith, which is in Christ. And not only sufficient to lead us to a saving knowledge of Christ and the Gospel, but sufficient to guide us in sanctification, that is, as believers, in our growth in holiness.

John 17:17, Jesus said:

Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth.

1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul commends the church at Thessolonica, and says:

And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

So neither the believers nor the church is bound by that which is not explicit or implicit in Scripture.
¹⁴ And all traditions and practices are subservient to the authority of Scripture.

If I might quote James White from his book, *The Roman Catholic Controversy*. He says:

The Bible claims to be the sole and sufficient infallible rule of faith for the Christian Church. The Scriptures are not in need of any supplement: their authority comes from their nature as Godbreathed revelation; their authority is not dependent upon man, church, or council. The Scriptures are self-consistent, self-interpreting, and self-authenticating. The Christian Church looks to the Scriptures as the only infallible and sufficient rule of faith, and the Church is always subject to the Word, and is constantly reformed thereby.¹⁵

Now what does Francis Beckwith do with all of this? Here is a "Christian leader" who renounces his self-professed Protestant beliefs for Roman Catholicism. That's no insignificant change in belief. As I said before, this isn't some lateral denominational move. I was Baptist, now I'm becoming Presbyterian. This is a move to a different religion! So you would expect one who is academically involved in Evangelicalism and professed to be an orthodox Protestant to weigh in on how his view of sola scriptura weighed in all of this. To leave that sphere of authority for another, the Roman Catholic Church—well, here's what he writes:

One may wonder where the Protestant doctrine of sola scriptura (or "scripture alone") factored in all this. To be blunt, it didn't, primarily because over the years I could not find an understanding or definition of sola scriptura convincing enough that it did not have to be so qualified that it seemed to be more a slogan than a standard.¹⁶

He could not find an understanding or definition convincing enough, that is, convincing enough to him—remember he's a Thomist, he has to be convinced, he's a rationalist—so he could not find an understanding or definition convincing enough that it seemed to be more of a slogan than a standard. And he later admits that he for some time accepted a weak form of sola scriptura, which he defines completely wrong. He defines it as:

. . . any doctrine or practice inconsistent with scripture must be rejected, though it does not follow that any doctrine or practice not explicitly stated in scripture must suffer the same

¹⁴Sometimes referred to as "good and necessary consequence."

¹⁵*The Roman Catholic Controversy*, 60.

¹⁶*Return to Rome*, 79.

fate, for the doctrine or practice may be essential to Christian orthodoxy. This seemed to me to be the only defensible understanding of sola scriptura, though it certainly left much to be desired.¹⁷

Yes, Frank, it did leave much to be desired! To say that sola scriptura meant that any doctrine or practice inconsistent with the Bible is to be rejected is fine, but on the other hand, to say that doctrines or practices not found in the Bible may be accepted, or even must be accepted, because some of those are essential to Christian orthodoxy, that's something altogether different. That's not sola scriptura. Listen, he believed, *while a Protestant*, that there are essential doctrines and practices—and you have to underline the word *essential*—that are not found in the Bible! Yet they're essential for the faith once for all delivered to the saints, something Jude wrote in the first century. The fact is, there are no doctrines or practices essential to Christian orthodoxy that are not found in the Scriptures. You might wonder, does he give any examples, and he does. He adds in a footnote, page 137, note 35, and this is a strange footnote, because he claims that it was:

As a Baptist colleague of mine said in an email to me in May 2008: "[M]any things essential to Christian belief and practice are not mentioned in Scripture—for example, prohibitions of euthanasia, abortion, pedophilia, necrophilia. Hence [is] the wisdom of the Catholic Church in regarding tradition, not as a contradiction but as an extension of Scripture, [such as] in its formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, etc. ...

He goes on, and this is under the auspices as far as the quote is concerned. I don't know if this is a misprint or not. But he goes on under the auspices of quoting a Baptist colleague. So he's quoting this Baptist colleague as saying:

Purgatory is therefore to be understood as an extension of the biblical doctrine of sanctification, for no one is permitted (or would want) to enter God's presence without being fully cleansed of all sin and thus to be fully sanctified.

Well, if you want to throw purgatory in there, I'll agree that's not found in the Bible. But I don't know how he can go from claiming that things like pedophilia are not spelled out in the Bible to justifying purgatory as an extension of the biblical doctrine of sanctification is beyond me. The Scripture is not silent on these issues. That's ludicrous! Scripture is not silent on any issue that we would put in the category essential to Christian faith and practice. And to argue that the doctrine of the Trinity isn't solely a doctrine of the Bible is ignorant and plays right into the hands of the cultists who will tell you the same thing. We find the Trinity, not only in the Bible, but as integral to the faith of the early church long before it was ever officially defined by a council. Long before the Roman Catholic Church ever came upon the scene, we have The Letter of Barnabas, dated to the early 2nd century, affirming "a Trinity of God the Father, Christ the preexisting Lord and Judge, and the Holy

¹⁷Ibid., 81.

Spirit who prepares hearts for salvation."¹⁸ Athenagoras (c. 177 AD) defended the doctrine as an essential part of the faith of the church. The Didache (*didache*, the Greek word for *teaching*), a document discovered in the late 1800s in Constantinople, indicates that the church believed in a Triune God.¹⁹ Irenaeus (c. AD190) wrote against the heresy of the Gnostics and claimed that the One Creator and Redeemer God subsists as Father, Son, and Spirit.²⁰ Tertullian (c. AD200) wrote extensively on the Trinity. He claimed that God is a unity of substance, with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit distinct divine persons within the substance of the one God.²¹ This is something that is taught in God's Word, that was recognized by God's people with the revelation of the New Testament.

But I think what Beckwith is doing is that he's confusing the teaching of the Scripture with the later clarifications that the church put together as it relates to the teaching of Scripture. In other words, that the church came together at later dates to fight against heresies and to clarify ("No, this is what we believe the Scripture means when we say this, when we say Christ is fully God, fully man, when we talk about the Trinity"). That the church came together and did that is no surprise. They did it under the providence of God. Statements as to truth arise when truth is threatened by error. That's the legacy of the early creeds. But they grounded their views in Scripture, not in some external authority, like a papacy, which didn't exist. So this hardly supports Beckwith's point. You go back to the days of Athanasius of Alexandria in the 4th century and it was said then while they were fighting against the heresy of Arianism, which was a denial of the divinity of Christ, it was said then, "Go to the Jordan and you will see the Trinity."²² What did they mean by that: "*Go to the Jordan and you will see the Trinity?*" The reference was to Matthew, chapter three, verses 16-17, the baptism of Jesus and the Three Persons of the Godhead. "Go to the Jordan River." It's another way of saying, "Go to the Bible. You'll find it there. Go to the Scriptures, see for yourself." This was no command to place yourself under the Magisterium of Rome so that they can tell you what you won't see, or can't see, for yourself.

So who do we place our trust in? The written Word of God or the word of men? I want to pick it up there next week. I want to, though, end on this note, again to quote the noted Reformation historian Merle d'Aubigne (1794-1872). He wrote that:

¹⁸Cited in Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 1:255.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Cited in W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2003), 224.

As we advance through the centuries ...

That is, as we go through church history, through the centuries after the apostles.

As we advance through the centuries, light and life begin to decrease in the church.

And he asks, *Why?* Why has that happened? His answer:

Because the torch of the Scripture begins to grow dim and because the deceitful light of human authorities begins to replace it.²³

You can't have two masters. Only one authority, *vox Dei*, the voice of God. And as I said, that sparked a great Reformation and for that we are thankful. We are a by-product of the wake of the Reformation and we're thankful for the truth of God's Word. As I quoted earlier from 1 Peter, it was that Word that came to us that saved us, that told us of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that's a precious, precious truth for me. It brought me out of the blindness of Roman Catholicism when I was eighteen years old and I saw for the first time that I was a sinner and needed a Savior and had to be born again. So I have no little investment in topics such as this. To keep the hearts and minds of men held captive by darkness of tradition is no little offense in my eyes and certainly not in God's. So we're thankful for that Word and the word of Grace, are we not?

[Closing Prayer]

²³Cited by Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 10-11.