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LOGIC AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF PROTESTANTISM

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The Lutheran doctrine of sola scriptura is the basic tenet of the Protestant theological enterprise. Fr. Brian Harrison, drawing upon the richness of his own personal experience, demonstrates this non-scriptural doctrine to be hopelessly inadequate.



AS AN ACTIVE PROTESTANT IN MY MID-TWENTIES I BEGAN TO FEEL THAT I MIGHT have a vocation to become a minister. The trouble was that while I had quite definite convictions about the things that most Christians have traditionally held in common - the sort of thing C.S. Lewis termed “mere Christianity” - I had had some firsthand experience with several denominations (Presbyterian, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist) and was far from certain as to which of them (if any) had an overall advantage over the others. So I began to think, study, search, and pray. Was there a true Church? If so, how was one to decide which?

The more I studied, the more perplexed I became. At one stage my elder sister, a very committed evangelical with somewhat flexible denominational affiliations, chided me with becoming “obsessed” with trying to find a “true Church.” “Does it really matter?” she would ask. Well, yes it did. It was all very well for a lay Protestant to relegate the denominational issue to a fairly low priority amongst religious questions: lay people can go to one Protestant Church one week and another the next week and nobody really worries too much. But an ordained minister obviously cannot do that. He must make a very serious commitment to a definite Church community, and under normal circumstances that commitment will be expected to last a lifetime. So clearly that choice had to be made with a deep sense of responsibility; and the time to make it was before, not after, ordination.

THEOLOGICAL METHOD: ENDLESS RESEARCH VS. BETTER LOGIC

As matters turned out, my search lasted several years, and eventually led me to where I never suspected it would at first - to the Catholic Church. In this article I shall not attempt to relate the full story of how and why I “came home to Rome,” but will focus on just one aspect of the question as it developed for me - an aspect which seems quite fundamental.

As I groped and prayed my way towards a decision, I came close to despair and agnosticism at times, as I contemplated the mountains of erudition, the vast labyrinth of conflicting interpretations of Christianity (not to mention other faiths) which lined the shelves of religious bookshops and libraries. If all the “experts” on Truth - the great theologians, historians, philosophers - disagreed interminably with each other, then how did God, if He was really there, expect me, an ordinary Joe Blow (as we say in Australia), to work out what was true?

The more I became enmeshed in specific questions of Biblical interpretation - of who had the right understanding of justification, of the Eucharist, Baptism, grace, Christology, Church government and discipline, and so on - the more I came to feel that this whole line of approach was a hopeless quest, a blind alley. These were all questions that required a great deal of erudition, learning, competence in Biblical exegesis, patristics, history, metaphysics, ancient languages - in short, scholarly research. But was it really credible (I began to ask myself) that God, if He were to reveal the truth about these disputed questions at all, would make this truth so inaccessible that only a small scholarly elite had even the faintest chance of reaching it? Wasn't that a kind of gnosticism? Where did it leave the non-scholarly bulk of the human race? It didn't seem to make sense. If, as they say, war is too important to be left to the generals, then revealed truth seemed too important to be left to the Biblical scholars. It was no use saying that perhaps God simply expected the non-scholars to trust the scholars. How were they to know which scholars to trust, given that the scholars all contradicted each other?

Therefore, in my efforts to break out of the dense exegetical undergrowth where I could not see the wood for the trees, I shifted towards a new emphasis in my truth-seeking criteria: I tried to get beyond the bewildering mass of contingent historical and linguistic data upon which the rival exegetes and theologians constructed their doctrinal castles, in order to concentrate on those elemental, necessary principles of human thought which are accessible to all of us, learned and unlearned alike. In a word, I began to suspect that an emphasis on logic, rather than on research, might expedite an answer to my prayers for guidance.

The advantage was that you don't need to be learned to be logical. You need not have spent years amassing mountains of information in libraries in order to apply the first principles of reason. You can apply them from the comfort of your armchair, so to speak, in order to test the claims of any body of doctrine, on any subject whatsoever, that comes claiming your acceptance. Moreover logic, like mathematics, yields firm certitude, not mere changeable opinions and provisional hypotheses. Logic is the first natural "beacon of light" with which God has provided us as intelligent beings living in a world darkened by the confusion of countless conflicting attitudes, doctrines and world-views, all telling us how to live our lives during this brief time that is

given to us here on earth.

Logic of course has its limits. Pure "armchair" reasoning alone will never be able to tell you the meaning of your life and how you should live it. But as far as it goes, logic is an indispensable tool, and I even suspect that you sin against God, the first Truth, if you knowingly flout or ignore it in your thinking. "Thou shalt not contradict thyself" seems to me an important precept of the natural moral law. Be that as it may, I found that the main use of logic, in my quest for religious truth, turned out to be in deciding not what was true, but what was false. If someone presents you with a system of ideas or doctrines which logical analysis reveals to be coherent - that is, free from internal contradictions and meaningless absurdities - then you can conclude, "This set of ideas may be true. It has at least passed the first test of truth - the coherence test." To find out if it actually is true you will then have to leave your logician's armchair and seek further information. But if it fails this most elementary test of truth, it can safely be eliminated without further ado from the ideological competition, no matter how many impressive-looking volumes of erudition may have been written in support of it, and no matter how attractive and appealing many of its features (or many of its proponents) may appear.

Some readers may wonder why I am labouring the point about logic. Isn't all this perfectly obvious? Well, it ought to be obvious to everyone, and is indeed obvious to many, including those who have had the good fortune of receiving a classical Catholic education. Catholicism, as I came to discover, has a quite positive approach to our natural reasoning powers, and traditionally has its future priests study philosophy for years before they even begin theology. But I came from a religious milieu where this outlook was not encouraged, and was often even discouraged. The Protestant Reformers taught that original sin has so weakened the human intellect that we must be extremely cautious about the claims of "proud reason." Luther called reason the "devil's whore" - a siren which seduced men into grievous error. "Don't trust your reason, just bow humbly before God's truth revealed to you in His holy Word, the Bible!" - this was pretty much the message that came through to me from the Calvinist and Lutheran circles that influenced me most in the first few years after I made my "decision for Christ" at the age of 18. But as I dutifully attempted to obey this solemn injunction, the wearisome experiences which I have already related made it painfully clear that you just cannot avoid

“trusting reason.” You may start out with the intention of not trusting it, but you inevitably end up trusting it anyway, in your very attempts to decide between all those conflicting interpretations of the Infallible Book. The Reformers themselves were forced to employ reason even while denouncing it, in their efforts to rebut the Biblical arguments of their “Papist” foes. And that, it seemed to me, was rather illogical on their part.

LOGIC AND THE “SOLA SCRIPTURA” PRINCIPLE

Thus, with my awakening interest in logical analysis as a test of religious truth, I was naturally led to ask whether this illogicality in the practice of the Reformers was, perhaps, accompanied by illogicality at the more fundamental level of their theory. As a good Protestant I had been brought up to hold as sacred the basic methodological principle of the Reformation: that the Bible alone contains all the truth that God has revealed for our salvation. Churches that held to that principle were at least “respectable,” one was given to understand, even though they might differ considerably from each other in regard to the interpretation of Scripture. But as for Roman Catholicism and other Churches which unashamedly added their own traditions to the Word of God - were they not self-evidently outside the pale? Were they not condemned out of their own mouths?

But when I got down to making a serious attempt to explore the implications of this rock-bottom dogma of the Reformers, I could not avoid the conclusion that it was rationally indefensible. I submit to the reader that this is demonstrated in the following eight steps, which embody nothing more than simple, common-sense logic, and a couple of indisputable, empirically observable facts about the Bible:

1. The Reformers asserted Proposition A: ‘All revealed truth is to be found in the inspired Scriptures.’ However, this is quite useless unless we know which books are meant by the “inspired Scriptures.” After all, many different sects and religions have many different books which they call “inspired Scriptures.”

2. The theory we are considering, when it talks of “inspired Scriptures,” means in fact those 66 books which are bound and published in Protestant Bibles. For convenience we shall refer to them from now on simply as “the 66 books.”

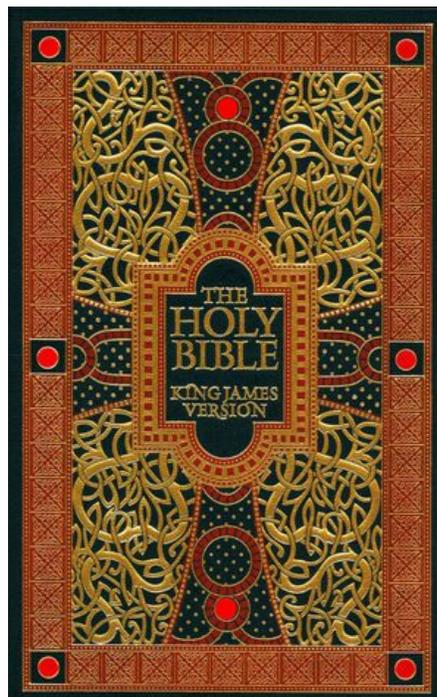
3. The precise statement of the theory we are examining thus becomes Proposition B: ‘All revealed truth is to be found in the 66 books.’

4. It is a fact that nowhere in the 66 books themselves can we find any statements telling us which books make up the entire corpus of inspired Scripture. There is no complete list of inspired books anywhere within their own pages, nor can such a list be compiled by putting isolated verses together. (This would be the case: (a) if you could find verses like “Esther is the Word of God,” “This Gospel is inspired by God,” “The Second Letter of Peter is inspired Scripture,” etc., for all of the 66 books; and (b) if you could also find a Biblical passage stating that no books other than these 66 were to be held as inspired. Obviously, nobody could even pretend to find all this information about the canon of Scripture in the Bible itself.)

5. It follows that Proposition B - the very foundation of all Protestant Christianity - is neither found in Scripture nor can be deduced from Scripture in any way. Since the 66 books are not even identified in Scripture, much less can any further information about them (e.g., that all revealed truth is contained in them) be found there. In short, we must affirm Proposition C: “Proposition B is an addition to the 66 books.”

6. It follows immediately from the truth of Proposition C that Proposition B cannot itself be revealed truth. To assert that it is would involve a self-contradictory statement: “All revealed truth is to be found in the 66 books, but this revealed truth itself is not found there.”

7. Could it be the case that Proposition B is true, but is not revealed truth? If that is the case, then it must be either something which can be deduced from revealed truth or something which natural human reason



alone can discover, without any help from revelation. The first possibility is ruled out because, as we saw in steps 4 and 5, B cannot be deduced from Scripture, and to postulate some other revealed extra-Scriptural premise from which B might be deduced would contradict B itself. The second possibility involves no self-contradiction, but it is factually preposterous, and I doubt whether any Protestant has seriously tried to defend it - least of all those traditional Protestants who strongly emphasize the corruption of man's natural intellectual powers as a result of the Fall. Human reason might well be able to conclude prudently and responsibly that an authority which itself claimed to possess the totality of revealed truth was in fact justified in making that claim, provided that this authority backed up the claim by some very striking evidence. (Catholics, in fact, believe that their Church is precisely such an authority.) But how could reason alone reach that same well-founded certitude about a collection of 66 books which do not even lay claim to what is attributed to them? (The point is reinforced when we remember that those who attribute the totality of revealed truth to the 66 books, namely Protestant Church members, are very ready to acknowledge their own fallibility - whether individually or collectively - in matters of religious doctrine. All Protestant Churches deny their own infallibility as much as they deny the Pope's.)

8. Since Proposition B is not revealed truth, nor a truth which can be deduced from revelation, nor a naturally-knowable truth, it is not true at all. Therefore, the basic doctrine for which the Reformers fought is simply false.



CALVIN'S ATTEMPTED SOLUTION

How did the Reformers try to cope with this fundamental weakness in the logical structure of their own first principles? John Calvin, usually credited with being the most systematic and coherent thinker of the Reformation, tried to justify belief in the divine authorship of the 66 books by dogmatically postulating a direct communication of this knowledge from God to the individual believer:

If we desire to provide in the best way for our consciences - that they may not be perpetually beset by the instability of doubt or vacillation, and that they may not also boggle at the smallest quibbles - we ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit.... For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit.... Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning.¹

The context makes it clear that in saying Scripture is "self-authenticated," Calvin does not mean to be taken literally and absolutely. He does not mean that some Bible text or other affirms that the 66 books, and they alone, are divinely inspired. As we observed in step 4 above, nobody ever could claim anything so patently false. Calvin simply means that no extra-Biblical human testimony, such as that of Church tradition, is needed in order for individuals to know that these books are needed. We can summarize his view as Proposition D: *"The Holy Spirit teaches Christians individually, by a direct inward testimony, that the 66 books are inspired by God."*

The trouble is that the Holy Spirit Himself is an extra-Biblical authority as much as a Pope or Council. The third Person of the Trinity is clearly not identical with the truths He has expressed, through human authors, in the Bible. It follows that even if Calvin's Proposition D is true, it contradicts Proposition B, for "if all revealed truth is to be found in the 66 books," then that leaves no room for the Holy Spirit to reveal directly and non-verbally one truth which cannot be found in any passage of those books, namely, the fact that each one of them is inspired.

In any case, even if Calvin could somehow show that D did not itself contradict B, he would still not have succeeded in showing that B is true. Even if we were to accept the extremely implausible 3 view represented by Proposition D, that would not prove that no other writings are inspired, and much less would it prove that there are no revealed truths that come to us through tradition rather than through inspired writings. In short, Calvin's defence of Biblical inspiration in no way overthrows our

eight-step disproof of the *sola Scriptura* principle. Indeed, it does not even attempt to establish that principle as a whole, but only one aspect of it - that is, which books are to be understood by the term "*Scriptura*."

ANOTHER PROTESTANT SOLUTION: LIMITED CHURCH INFALLIBILITY

Many of our separated brethren have come to recognize frankly that a strict *sola Scriptura* principle is untenable, for reasons such as those we have set out. Leading Anglican thinkers such as Hooker⁷ realised it centuries ago, and even Luther himself did not resort to Calvin's sophistry of claiming to know the correct canon of Scripture by direct inner enlightenment from the Spirit. Luther, never noted for clarity, stability, and consistency in his doctrines, could at times come close to recognizing that his own *sola Scriptura* was false, insofar as he was relying on the despised "Papists," and not only on the Bible, to some extent. (There was yet another inconsistency: why rely on the supposed "Antichrist" - in league with the "Father of lies" - for any information at all, much less for vital information?) In his *Commentary on John*, discussing the 16th chapter of that Gospel, Luther admitted:

We are obliged to yield many things to the Papists - that with them is the word of God, which we received from them; otherwise we should have known nothing at all about it.

At times Luther seemed ready to take the more radical, but quite logical, step of ceasing to rely on the Pope - whom he denounced as supremely unreliable - for his knowledge of which books belonged to the New Testament canon. At one stage, as is well-known, he was prepared to condemn the Epistle of James (an "epistle of straw," as he termed it) since it seemed clearly to contradict his doctrine of justification by faith alone (cf. James 2:24). However, he was prevailed upon eventually to leave it in the canon - for no better reason, it seems, than an awareness of the abyss of doctrinal chaos and scepticism which would open up if Christians were to start picking and choosing amongst the New Testament books. Luther thus lapsed back into the less dangerous inconsistency of trusting Catholic tradition at this point. Conservative Protestants have all followed him, while liberals have escaped either form of inconsistency by the simple "solution" of rejecting belief in any form of infallible authority. The Bible is seen as a collection of fallible human documents, none of which is seen as "inspired" in

the traditional sense of having God Himself as principal Author. For this school of thought, the New Testament has a privileged position over other early Christian documents only in the purely secular, historical sense of being a "primary source": it gives the best evidence of what early Christians thought, without guaranteeing in any way that what they thought was in accord with objective reality.

Some ecumenically-inclined Protestant scholars now seek to avoid inconsistency by the less drastic means of conceding a limited role to the Church as a bearer of revealed truth independently of Scripture. Recognizing that the New Testament canon was not settled and stable until about the fifth century, and that the Church depended a good deal on oral teaching and preaching in early times, these theologians put forward the view that the Holy Spirit gave the Church just enough infallibility to recognize with certainty which books were divinely inspired, but no more. Once the canon of Scripture was settled, it is suggested, this charism of Church infallibility was no longer needed, and was withdrawn. In any case, we are told, it never extended to the interpretation of the inspired books, only to their identification from amongst other early Christian writings.

This has always seemed to me a rather desperate attempt to "patch up" a theory which was seriously defective to begin with, instead of having the courage and intellectual honesty to reject the bad theory root and branch, once its falsity had been exposed. (This kind of "concordist" Protestantism is reminiscent of the virtuous sea-captain in "H.M.S. Pinafore" who "never, never" used bad language. To paraphrase Gilbert and Sullivan: "The Church never, never speaks infallibly!" "What, never?" "No, never!" "What, NEVER?" "Well ... *hardly* ever.")

We shall not attempt to deal fully here with this theory, but we can point briefly to some of its glaring improbabilities. What positive evidence is there in its favour? Is there any historical evidence that the 5th-century Church claimed - either implicitly or explicitly - to possess an infallibility which was limited to and identification of the inspired books? I have never seen any. (Catholics would say, of course, that by decisively anathematizing all sorts of doctrines purporting to come from Scripture, the Church throughout all the early centuries was implicitly claiming an infallible power of *interpreting* Scripture, even if the *word* "infallible" was not used at that time.

Also, the early Church, like the Catholic Church today, repeatedly insisted on the authority of unwritten tradition side by side with that of the inspired writings.) Is there any historical evidence that the 5th-century Church renounced some power which it possessed up till the settlement of the canon of Scripture? None at all.

The Protestant champions of limited infallibility would say, of course, that the fallibility of the Church after that date is proved by the fact that the later patristic and mediaeval Church came to impose beliefs and practices contrary to Scripture. Well, if that were true (which Catholics of course do not concede), the reasonable conclusion to draw would be that the Church was never infallible to begin with. “Infallible” means more than simply “inerrant”; it means “incapable of error,” so that, if the Church did come to err in her formal teaching sooner or later, she was always capable of error (and hence, non-infallible) from the beginning. Why should any rational person rely absolutely on the Church’s judgment regarding the canon of Scripture, if it was shown to be unreliable on other doctrinal matters? This point is particularly telling against the Protestant proponents of limited infallibility, in view of the fact that this same 5th-century Church whose judgment they are prepared to rely on unreservedly when it comes to the canon of Scripture already exhibited quite explicitly most of the Catholic doctrines and practices which Protestants have always rejected. Veneration of Mary and the saints, Popes claiming universal jurisdiction by divine right as Peter’s successors, the authority of tradition recognized as well as that of Scripture, purgatory and prayers for the dead, the sacrifice of the Mass and an order of sacrificing priests, monasticism, the veneration of images and relics, and so on - these were all well-established features of the Church’s life by the time the New Testament canon became fixed in the Church’s living tradition. Why suppose that the Holy Spirit should have guaranteed an accurate discernment of the canon to this 5th-century Church, while withholding from it the grace to discern and correct all these other “abuses” and “corruptions”? If there were some divine revelation telling us that the Holy Spirit did after all adopt this rather improbable course of action, it would no doubt be a different matter. But those

who postulate this limited infallibility theory cannot and do not claim to have any evidence of a special revelation of this sort.

Clearly, the theory in question is nothing more than a flimsy and gratuitous hypothesis. Its chief attraction would appear to be, not that it has any concrete or positive evidence in its favour, but simply that it seems to offer perplexed Protestants a possible refuge from the social and emotional traumas of either conversion to Rome or loss of faith, after they have come to see clearly that *sola Scriptura* - the original formal principle of all Reformation doctrine - has no logical coherence, and is thus simply untenable.

The use of logical analysis to show the fundamental flaw (or at least, a fundamental flaw) in Reformation Christianity does not of course prove immediately that the object of the Protestant protest - Catholicism - is true. I had ceased to believe in this key Reformation doctrine for quite some time before I was finally given the grace to see the truth of the Catholic Church. Various other problems and questions had to be faced before I reached that point. But refuting an erroneous position is always at least a constructive step along the road to truth: weeds and undergrowth need to be cleared away before we can begin planting a garden. What I have sought to highlight in this article is that in my personal experience an emphasis on examining the inner logic of the *sola Scriptura* principle led to a much more certain recognition that the Protestant Reformers were wrong than did the endless debates about specific doctrines (justification,

the Eucharist, the Church, and so on). Discussions of this sort seemed incapable of yielding anything better than opinions which were more or less probable, since they depended on the gathering of detailed factual data by prolonged research, and on the correct interpreta-

tion of the relevant documents. The very bulk of these erudite theological debates over the correct interpretation of the New Testament’s obscurities and seeming contradictions is, I believe, what prevents many learned and intelligent Protestants from seeing the great error that underlies their whole scholarly project. They simply cannot see the forest for the trees.



Moreover, there is that persuasive, but deceptive, parallel between the *sola Scriptura* criterion for Christian doctrine on the one hand, and good historical method on the other. When I confronted my elder sister (a highly intelligent and theologically literate Protestant) with my argument based on logic, she did not attempt to rebut it directly (how could she?), but side-stepped it by using a historian's argument. She replied in a letter, "It simply is not 'illogical' to base one's Christian beliefs on the original documents coming from those closest to Christ Himself, and to judge Catholicism's alleged 'developments' in later centuries in the light of these original texts."

Indeed, it would not be illogical to take this approach if Christian theology were simply a branch of history; that is, if it were a merely human inquiry into certain aspects of the history of ideas, and as such, an inquiry yielding only probable opinions which in principle are always subject to the possibility of correction as a result of future exegetical and historical research. But in fact, theology is not like this - and on the Reformers' own showing. They insisted as much as the Catholic Church that faith is not mere scholarly opinion, but humble acceptance of an infallibly declared divine revelation. And it is precisely Protestantism's basic structural incapacity to sustain a logically coherent account of *revealed* truth which we have exposed in our eight-step refutation of Reformation Christianity. The schizoid history of Protestantism itself bears witness to the original inner contra-

dition which marked its conception and birth. Conservative Protestants have maintained the original insistence on the Bible as the unique infallible source of revealed truth, at the price of logical incoherence. Liberals on the other hand have escaped the incoherence while maintaining the claim to "private interpretation" over against that of Popes and Councils, but at the price of abandoning the Reformers' insistence on an infallible Bible. They thereby effectively replace revealed truth by human opinion, and faith by an autonomous reason. Thus, in the liberal/evangelical split within Protestantism since the 18th century, we see both sides teaching radically opposed doctrines, even while each claims to be the authentic heir of the Reformation. The irony is that both sides are right: their conflicting beliefs are simply the two horns of a dilemma which has been tearing at the inner fabric of Protestantism ever since its turbulent beginnings.

Reflections such as these from a Catholic onlooker may see a little hard or unyielding to some - ill-suited, perhaps, to a climate of ecumenical dialogue in which gentle suggestion, rather than blunt affirmation, is the preferred mode of discourse. But logic is of its very nature hard and unyielding; and insofar as truth and honesty are to be the hallmarks of true ecumenism, the claims of logic will have to be squarely faced, not politely avoided.



NOTES

1 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. I, pp. 78-80.

2 Indeed, Calvin denounces this Catholic appeal to tradition as "sacrilegious" and "absurd," exclaiming, "As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended on the decision of men!" (ibid., p. 75). But this implies either a misrepresentation of Catholic doctrine or a begging of the vital question. If, by calling the Roman position "absurd," Calvin means that the Catholic Church herself acknowledges Church teaching about the canon of Scripture to be a merely human doctrine, he fails to understand our position, which is precisely that God speaks His Word to us through the Church's sacred tradition as well as through Scripture (cf. Vatican Council II, *Constitution on Divine Revelation*, nos. 8-10). If however he realises that Catholics hold this view, but maintains (contrary, Catholics would say, to the express word of Scripture itself - e.g., 1 Thess. 2:13, 2 Thess. 2:15) that it is false and "sacrilegious" to say that God ever speaks in unwritten tradition as well as in Scripture, then of course he needs to argue this, not merely assert it. Also, Catholics by no means hold that Church tradition confers on Scripture its status of being the inspired Word; only that as individuals we need the infallible tradition of the church in order to know which books are in fact the inspired Word. We do not make God's inviolable truth "depend on the decision" of the Church any more than the location of a city "depends" on a signpost which directs travellers towards it.

3As we have seen, Calvin simply asserts D dogmatically. But there are excellent reasons for doubting its truth:

(a) One should not appeal to direct and immediate actions of God to explain things unless more down-to-earth explanations have first been proven inadequate. But it seems to me that one can explain the traditional Protestant belief in the divine inspiration of the 66 books very readily and satisfactorily without postulating Calvin's exclusively "inward" or "secret" testimony of the Holy Spirit. As a Catholic I would not wish to insist that the Spirit has nothing to do with that belief, which is indeed true as far as it goes (Catholics of course also believe in the inspiration of seven additional books). But insofar as the Spirit is causally active in producing belief in Biblical inspiration among Protestants, he uses the agency of external ecclesial tradition and testimony, not the immediate, inner, secret enlightenment postulated by Calvin. As I know from personal experience, Protestant evangelicals tend to accept the divine authority of Scripture as part of a "package deal" conversion experience. What primarily moves them is the preaching or counselling of some other person connected with a Church group: this leads them to feel conscious of their own sinfulness and of their need to repent and believe in Christ as Saviour. And because the same people who proclaim these profoundly and personally moving truths also commonly insist on the more "abstract" or speculative doctrine that the 66 books are inspired by God, the new convert accepts this latter doctrine as a kind of corollary or normally expected accompaniment of being "born again." In other words, on this question of Biblical inspiration he is implicitly or unconsciously accepting Church tradition - in this case the tradition of Protestantism - as the authority for one of his religious beliefs (and one of the most central and important ones at that).

(b) Calvin's Proposition D is in itself very implausible. Is there really a kind of intrinsic quality present in each of the 66 books - a quality clearly discernible to any humble believer open to the Spirit's guiding - by which they become "self-authenticated," not merely as containing heavenly doctrine (many non-inspired, uncanonical writings and discourses of holy people may do that), but as being directly inspired by God as their very author? Take Paul's little letter to Philemon, for example: a few simple and holy thoughts mainly concerned with an incident involving a runaway slave. Frankly, I think Calvin (or anyone else) is deceiving himself if he thinks he can see, or sense, some intrinsic qualities in Philemon which show that it could not possibly have been composed exclusively by a human author. Calvin even goes so far as to assert that the Spirit makes it blindingly obvious which books have God as their author:

As to their question - How can we be assured that (the Scriptures have) sprung from God unless we have recourse to the decree of the Church? - it is as if someone asked: Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their colour, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste. (Institutes, loc. cit., p. 76.)

This is so manifestly false as to be hardly worth refuting. If discerning the inspired from the uninspired books were really so childishly easy, why was there not complete unanimity about the canon right from the beginning? Why do we not find any early Christians making Calvin's claim that inspiration is self-evident? Why, on the contrary, do we find that the entire Church adopted apostolic authorship as the main criterion for canonicity - something which was at times far from easy to discern, and in any case was never self-evident and had to be decided by a combination of criteria, including the extrinsic criterion of the tradition and testimony of local churches? Calvin's thesis of an inner, individual enlightenment guaranteeing Scripture could be empirically tested by presenting a number of unidentified religious texts - some of them books of Scripture and others patristic writings, let us say - to a group of devout, new converts from paganism who have not yet seen much of the Bible, having been led to believe just by the influence of missionary preaching. If they were asked to discern which were inspired by God and which were not, there can be little doubt as to how the test would turn out: there would be confusion, uncertainty, guesswork, with a great many wrong answers. Of course, claim that in any case it is as plain as black and white to him that the 66 books alone are inspired, even if the Spirit did not seem to make things quite so easy for others. But in that case, of course, all other believers, presumably, would have to rely on Calvin as an oracle in order to know which books they were to receive as God's Word. In that event he would scarcely have any right to criticize the Pope for claiming infallibility.

(c) The evident sophistry of Calvin's claim can only make us wonder why a theologian of such intelligence and learning could resort to it. The answer should be clear by now: he makes this preposterous claim that canonicity is self-evident for Spirit-led believers, not because he can offer any positive evidence for its truth, but simply because

he is driven into this desperate corner by the exigencies of his polemic against Rome. Once he admitted the common-sense fact that he couldn't know which books were inspired - or even whether any books at all were inspired - without relying on Church tradition (Roman Catholic tradition, in fact, at least for the New Testament canon), then Calvin's whole theological system would be in real trouble. Sola Scriptura would then have to be frankly abandoned in favour of the fragile hypothesis of limited ecclesial infallibility which we have criticized on pages 7-8. On this point Luther was more honest than Calvin (if also more blatantly inconsistent) in admitting frankly that, if it were not for the "Papists," "we should have known nothing at all about (the Word of God)" (*Commentary on Job*, ch. 16). *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, III: viii.

