



Christianity Today Ditches *Sola Scriptura* and Takes up Church Tradition

By Bob DeWaay

In a cover article for *Christianity Today*, *The FUTURE lies in the PAST*, church history professor Chris Armstrong examines the trends in evangelicalism that have resulted in current evangelicals looking to ancient practices and teachings from church history from which to draw inspiration. He cites a D. H. Williams comment on “the almost overnight popularity of bishops and monks, martyrs and apologists, philosophers and historians who first fashioned a Christian culture 1,500 years ago,”^[i] and correctly identifies Robert Webber and Richard Foster as key early leaders of the movement that takes us back to ancient Christian practices and ideas.

In his article, Armstrong talks about individuals, unhappy with “the spontaneous style of free-church Protestant” groups, who were subsequently attracted to more liturgical churches such as Episcopalian, Orthodox, or Roman Catholic. It is true: some evangelicals have converted to Eastern Orthodoxy and even to Roman Catholicism. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church today has a number of ex-evangelicals who serve as apologists for Rome.

Webber, as cited by Armstrong, divided current evangelicalism into three categories: *Traditional evangelicals* focused on doctrine and Bible studies, *pragmatic evangelicals* focused on church growth, and the *younger evangelicals* who want something more “authentic.”^[ii] This “younger” thinking is expressed in the Emergent Church movement which unabashedly embraces ancient Roman Catholic practices and even has people experimenting with monasticism.^[iii] Armstrong points out that these “ancient-future Christians” reject both the “rigid propositional definitions” of some (people who believe true Biblical doctrine) and the “pragmatic promises of the church-growth movement” in favor of ideas and practices drawn from church history.

But where do they end up? My research suggests that mysticism is a key uniting factor amongst all the diversity of this movement. The “ancient-future Christians” want a spirituality that has no Biblically set boundaries. Armstrong writes, “From Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, and living practicing monks and nuns, they must learn both the

strengths and the limits of the historical ascetic disciplines.”[\[iv\]](#) Armstrong himself clearly approves of this process:

This is the road to maturity. That more and more evangelicals have set out upon it is reason for hope for the future of gospel Christianity. That they are receiving good guidance on this road from wise teachers is reason to believe Christ is guiding the process. And that they are meeting and learning from fellow Christians in the other two great confessions, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, is reason to rejoice in the power of love.[\[v\]](#)

I could hardly believe that this assessment came from a professor at a Baptist college[\[vi\]](#) and that it was published in *Christianity Today*, whose first editor was Carl F. H. Henry. Such movement away from the publication’s base is shocking. Henry wrote the six volume series *God, Revelation and Authority* that refuted ideas such as these in their earlier iteration, where it was known as neo-orthodoxy. Needless to say, no such article promoting Roman Catholic tradition as “hope for the future of gospel Christianity” would ever have been published in *Christianity Today* under Henry’s watch!

What Armstrong’s article introduces is bad enough, but what he fails to address is worse. Armstrong fails even to discuss the implications of the Reformation doctrine *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) in regard to the new mysticism. My question is this: Has the new evangelicalism fully abandoned *Sola Scriptura*? It appears that very few take it seriously. When I debated Doug Pagitt, a proponent of the type of spirituality discussed in the *CT* article, my key issue was boundaries.[\[vii\]](#) Are there boundaries to our religious practices? I claimed that there are. If there are boundaries, are they determined by God or man? I claimed that God determines the boundaries of how we come to God and how we serve Him. I further claimed that the boundaries are spelled out in Scripture. On that basis, I claimed that Pagitt’s “free-style” spirituality was false. His rejoinder was that I was guilty of “binary reductionism,” which means that my “either/or” statements failed to account for valid third or fourth options.

Let's step back and assess this logically. If boundaries exist, either God or man determines the boundaries (if they don't exist, then universalism is true and we do not need this discussion). The only other rational beings in the universe are the holy angels and Satan and his minions. The holy angels perfectly do God's bidding, so if they did set the boundaries, the boundaries would be His. On the other hand, it would be rather absurd to claim that Satan, who is God's enemy, would set valid boundaries for how we come to Him. So what exactly are these other options? There are none.

Continuing our examination, if God has set the boundaries, has He done so through Scripture? Here there are indeed options. God could have set the boundaries through the Koran, the Book of Mormon, or some other religious text. But this is supposedly a Christian debate so there really are only two options—either God has spoken once for all as the Bible claims in Hebrews 1:1, 2 or God continues to give binding revelation through the church.

This brings us to the debate at the time of the Reformation: has God spoken in a binding, authoritative way only through Scripture, or does He speak throughout history through the Roman Catholic Church and her traditions?

If the Reformers were correct, then the article in *Christianity Today* is senseless. Why would we believe “Christ” is guiding a process that is not spelled out in Scripture? Why consult church history rather than search the Scriptures for the beliefs and practices God has ordained?

The only answer to these questions is that these postmodern “evangelicals” have rejected the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. They want to reject “rigid propositions” but refuse to do the hard work of learning the Bible and learning how to determine what are or are not valid implications from Scripture. It never even occurs to the article's author to ask whether the Bible ordains asceticism and mysticism (they are condemned in Colossians 2 and Deuteronomy 18).

Armstrong claims that these spiritual innovators “are receiving good guidance on this road from wise teachers.” This statement only makes sense if one rejects Scripture alone as a valid principle. The “wise teachers” like Dallas Willard and Richard Foster are spiritual innovators who have only pragmatic tests to determine their practices.[\[viii\]](#) These new evangelicals may have rightly rejected the pragmatic promises of the church-

growth movement; but they have embraced a far more dangerous pragmatism where one uses experimentation to determine what sort of spiritual practices “work.” The world of spirits is a world where pragmatists who refuse to submit to the authority of Scripture become deceived.

So why did an earlier editor of *Christianity Today* write a massive six-volume monograph defending the validity of God’s propositional revelation in Scripture only now to publish a cover article about the supposedly positive development of a new mysticism in which the question of Biblical support for such a movement is not even seen as worthy of discussion? Armstrong writes, “Today’s ancient-future Christians have begun recovering buried veins of treasure—in exegesis, theology, spirituality, praxis, and ecclesiology—from the deepest deposits of our shared tradition.”^[ix] This assumes that the issue of whether these practices are Biblical is not important. Instead, it is assumed that as long as some living spiritual masters are guiding the process, we can consider ourselves safe on the journey back to Rome. Good reasons for the Reformation still exist. Casting aside *Sola Scriptura* can only lead to the demise of the evangelical movement that had been nurtured and watched over so tenderly by people like Carl F. H. Henry.

End Notes

^[i] Cited by Chris Armstrong, “The Future lies in the Past” in *Christianity Today*, February 2008; 24.

^[ii] Ibid. 26.

^[iii] For example see Karen E. Sloan “Emergent Kissing – Authenticity and Integrity in Sexuality” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones editors (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007)

^[iv] Armstrong, 29.

^[v] Ibid.

^[vi] Armstrong is at Bethel Seminary. When I studied there, Church History professor William Travis was one of my favorite professors. I had him teach a series on church history at our church which can be heard on line here: <http://www.cicministry.org/audio/history.htm> Travis never promoted mysticism and I took many classes from him.

^[vii] This debate was held at Twin City Fellowship in January 2006 before a live audience of 500 people.

^[viii] In this article: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue91.htm> I show how Dallas Willard’s pragmatic tests for spiritual practices are both unbiblical and illogical.

^[ix] Armstrong, 29.

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