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WHY EVANGELICALS ARE RETURNING TO ROME

The Abandonment of *Sola Scriptura* as a Formal Principle

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The February 2008 edition of *Christianity Today* ran a cover story about evangelicals looking to the ancient Roman Catholic Church in order to find beliefs and practices.¹ What was shocking about the article was that both the author of the article and the senior managing editor of *CT* claim that this trip back to Rome is a good thing. Says Mark Galli the editor, “While the ancient church has captivated the evangelical imagination for some time, it hasn’t been until recently that it’s become an accepted fixture of the evangelical landscape. And this is for the good.”² Chris Armstrong, the author of the article who promotes the trip back to the ancient church, claims that because the movement is led by such persons as “Dallas Willard, Richard Foster, and living and practicing monks and nuns,” that therefore, “they are receiving good guidance on this road from wise teachers.” This he claims shows that, “Christ is guiding the process.”³

Apparently, contemporary evangelicals have forgotten that *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) was the formal principle of the Reformation. Teachings and practices that could not be justified from Scripture were rejected on that principle. To endorse a trip back to these practices of ancient Roman Catholicism is to reject the principle of *sola scriptura* being the normative authority for the beliefs and practices of the church. In this article I will explore how modern evangelicalism has compromised the principle of *sola scriptura* and thus paved smoothly the road back to Rome.

NEW “REFORMATIONS” COMPROMISE *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

Today at least three large movements within Protestantism claim to be new “reformations.” If we examine them closely we will find evidence that *sola scriptura* has been abandoned as a governing principle—if not formally, at least in practice. To have a new reformation requires the repudiation of the old Reformation. That in turn requires the repudiation of the formal principle of the Reformation. That’s where we’ll begin.

ROBERT SCHULLER AND RICK WARREN

In 1982, Robert Schuller issued a call for a new Reformation with the publication of his book, *Self Esteem: The New Reformation*.⁴ Schuller issued this fervent call: “Without a new theological reformation, the Christian church as the authentic body of Christ may not survive.”⁵ He was apparently aware that his reformation was of a different type than the original: “Where the sixteenth-century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem! The fact is, the church will never succeed until it satisfies the human being’s hunger for self-value.”⁶ The problem is that Schuller based much of his self-esteem teaching on psychological theory and did not provide a rigorous Biblical defense of the idea.

Thus his reformation was a *de facto* denial of the Reformation principle of Scripture alone.

For example, Schuller criticized the Reformation for a faulty doctrine of sin: “Reformation theology failed to make clear that the core of sin is a lack of self-esteem.”⁷ But Schuller does not discuss the many verses in the Bible that define sin. For example: “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness” (1John 3:4). It is not hard to see that Schuller’s reformation constituted the abandonment of *sola scriptura* as a formal principle.⁸

In one sense, since Schuller’s call for a reformation based on self-esteem was made 26 years ago, one could argue that it never happened. Of course the idea of self-esteem is still around and taught by many evangelicals, but it never became the one key idea of the church. In another sense, however, Schuller’s reformation was broadened and transferred to others. In 2005 Schuller claimed the following as noted alumni of his institute: Bill Hybels, John Maxwell, Bishop Charles Blake, Rick Warren, Walt Kallestad, and Kirbyjon Caldwell. Bill Hybels himself credited Robert Schuller as a key person who influenced his ideas.⁹ Though Rick Warren disputes Schuller’s influence on his theology, he has carried forward Schuller’s idea of creating a church that meets people’s felt needs and thus attracts them.

But what interests us here is that Warren is now proposing yet another reformation:

And we’ve actually created what we call clinic-in-a-box, business-in-a-box, church-in-a-box, and we are using normal people, volunteers. When Jesus sent the disciples – this will be my last point – when Jesus sent the disciples

into a village he said, "Find the man of peace." And he said, "When you find the man of peace you start working with that person, and if they respond to you, you work with them. If they don't, you dust the dust off your shoes; you go to the next village." Who's the man of peace in any village – or it might be a woman of peace – who has the most respect, they're open and they're influential? They don't have to be a Christian. In fact, they could be a Muslim, but they're open and they're influential and you work with them to attack the five giants. And that's going to bring the second Reformation.¹⁰

The problem is that solving the world's five greatest problems as Warren defines them¹¹ using anyone willing to help regardless of religion, cannot be justified on Biblical grounds. If *sola scriptura* were the formal principle in Warren's theology, then he would provide vigorous, Biblical analysis using sound exegesis to ground his reformation on the authority of Scripture. But his teachings and public statements are not characterized by sound Biblical exegesis.

As I documented in my book on the Purpose Driven Movement, Warren's reformation compromises *sola scriptura* in many significant ways.¹² These include the use of loose paraphrases that go so far as to change the meaning of various passages, the integration of unbiblical, human wisdom, serious misinterpretation of Scripture, and an unbiblical philosophy of ministry. Warren has an orthodox statement about the authority of Scripture on his church Web site. In fact, most evangelicals other than those who convert to Roman Catholicism do not overtly reject Scripture alone. But is it practiced?¹³

There is reason to believe that Warren's reformation is the continuation of Schuller's in a modified form. Warren has made finding one's purpose the lynchpin of his teachings and practices. Finding purpose may not be iden-

tical to finding self esteem, but the idea is at least a first cousin. Also, both concepts derive their power from outside Scripture.

C. PETER WAGNER

Another proposed reformation of the church is C. Peter Wagner's New Apostolic Reformation. As I argued in a recent *CIC* article,¹⁴ Wagner sees the presence of apostles who speak authoritatively for God as the key to the church fulfilling her role in the world. He even speaks approvingly of the "apostles" of the Roman Catholic Church. Wagner and the thousands of apostles and prophets in his movement have shown as little regard for *sola scriptura* as any non Roman Catholic Christian group apart from the Quakers. So their reformation is a *de facto* repudiation of the Reformation. Their writings and messages show little or no concern for sound, systematic Biblical exegesis. If they were to adopt *sola scriptura* as a formal principle and rigorously use it to judge their own teachings and practices, their movement would immediately come to an end.

THE EMERGENT CHURCH

The third (if we count Warren's reformation as a current replacement for Schuller's) proposed reformation is that of the Emergent Church. In their case *sola scriptura* dies a thousand deaths. As we saw in the previous issue of *CIC*, Rob Bell denies it using the same arguments that Roman Catholics have used. The Emergent Church and its postmodern theology is noteworthy for being a non-Catholic version of Christianity that forthrightly assaults the type of use of the Bible that characterizes those who hold *sola scriptura* as the formal principle of their theology. The Emergent Church adherents reject systematic theology, and thus make using the principle impossible. For example, defending the doctrine of the Trinity using Scripture requires being systematic. I have read many Emergent/postmodern books as I write a new book, and each of them attacks systematic

theology in some way.

The Emergent Reformation rests on the denial of the validity of foundationalism. Gone are the days when Christians debated the relative merits of evidential and presuppositional apologetics—debates based on the need for a foundation for one's theology. Either one started with evidence for the authority of Scripture and then used the Bible as the foundation of one's theology; or one presupposed the Bible as the inerrant foundation. But today both approaches are mocked for their supposed naïveté. To think that one can know what the Bible means in a non-relativistic way is considered a throwback to now dead "modernity." The Emergent mantra concerning the Bible is "we cannot know, we cannot know, we cannot know." Furthermore, in their thinking, it is a sign of arrogance to claim to know. For the postmodern theologian, *sola scriptura* is as dead and buried as a fossilized relic of bygone days.

So the Protestant (if the term even means anything today) world is characterized by reformations that have either rejected or compromised *sola scriptura* as the formal principle for their theology. No wonder few voices of concern are raised at *Christianity Today's* proposed trip back to Rome to find beliefs and practices. Once *sola scriptura* has been rejected, there remain few reasons not to go back to Rome. If religious traditions can be considered normative, then why not embrace those with the longest history?

DALLAS WILLARD LEADS US BACK TO ROME

The cover of the *CT* article reads, "Lost Secrets of the Ancient Church." It shows a person with a shovel digging up a Catholic icon. What are these secrets? Besides icons, *lectio divina* and monasticism are mentioned. Dallas Willard, who is mentioned as a reliable guide for this process, has long directed Christians to monastic practices that he himself admits are not taught in the Bible.¹⁵ Willard pioneered the rejection of *sola scriptura* in practice on the

grounds that churches following it are failures. He writes, "All pleasing and doctrinally sound schemes of Christian education, church growth, and spiritual renewal came around at last to this disappointing result. But whose fault was this failure?"¹⁶ The "failure," according to Willard is that, ". . . the gospel preached and the instruction and example given these faithful ones simply do not do justice to the *nature of human personality, as embodied, incarnate.*"¹⁷ So what does this mean? It means that we have failed because our gospel had too little to do with our bodies.

The remedy for "failure" says Willard is to find practices in church history that are proven to work. But are these practices taught in the Bible? Willard admits that they are not by using an argument from silence, based on the phrase "exercise unto godliness" in 1 Timothy 4:7. Here is Willard's interpretation:

Or [the possibility the phrase was imprecise] does it indicate a precise course of action he [Paul] understood in definite terms, carefully followed himself, and called others to share? Of course it was the latter. So obviously so, for him and the readers of his own day, that he would feel no need to write a book on the disciplines of the spiritual life that explained systematically what he had in mind.¹⁸

But what does this do to *sola scriptura*? It negates it. In Willard's theology, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Biblical writers, forgot to inspire them to write about spiritual disciplines that all Christians need. If this is the case, then we need spiritual practices that were never prescribed in the Bible to obtain godliness.

Having determined the insufficiency of Scripture, Willard looks to human potential through tapping into spiritual powers: "It is the amazing *extent* of our ability to utilize power outside ourselves that we must consider when we ask what the human being is. The limits of our power to transcend ourselves utiliz-

ing powers not located in us—including of course, the spiritual—are yet to be fully known."¹⁹ So evidently our spirituality is to be discovered by various means that are not revealed by God in the Bible.

If the Bible is insufficient in regard to the spiritual practices that we need in order to become sanctified, where do we find them? Here is Willard's solution: "Practicing a *range* of activities that have proven track records across the centuries will keep us from erring."²⁰ This, of course leads us back to Rome. Catholic mystics spent centuries experimenting with spiritual practices without regard to the Biblical justification for such practices. If evangelicals are going to join them in rejecting Scripture alone, AGAIN they might as well not reinvent the wheel—go to the masters of mystical asceticism.

Willard admires the monastics and suggests that solitude is one of the most important disciplines. He says, "This factual priority of solitude is, I believe, a sound element in monastic asceticism. Locked into interaction with the human beings that make up our fallen world, it is all but impossible to grow in grace as one should."²¹ If it is impossible to grow in grace without solitude, why are we not informed of this fact by the Biblical writers? In Willard's mind *sola scriptura* is a false idea, so therefore God failed to reveal to us the most important way to grow in grace! Willard says that solitude is most important even while admitting that it is dangerous:

But solitude, like all the disciplines of the spirit, carries its risks. In solitude, we confront our own soul with its obscure forces and conflicts that escape our attention when we are interacting with others. Thus, [quoting Louis Bouyer] "Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and bust apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . . and discloses the fact that these abysses are haunted."²²

This danger was shown by the early desert fathers, some of whom came under demonic torment in their solitude. Before following people whose practices are dangerous and not prescribed in the Bible, wouldn't we be better off sticking to the safe ground of revealed truth?

SPIRITUALITY FOR THE UNCONVERTED

The fact is that the various ancient practices of the Roman Catholic Church are not unique to Christianity. The meditative techniques that make people feel closer to God work for those who do not even know God. Thomas Merton (who is recommended by Dallas Willard) went to the East to find spiritual practices. They work just as well for those who do not know Christ, probably better. Many ancient Roman Catholic practices were invented at times when many illiterate pagans were ushered into the church, sometimes at the point of a sword. Those pagans were not exactly the type to search the Scriptures daily in order to find the things of God.

But why are literate American Christians running away from *sola scriptura* at a time when searching the Scriptures (especially using computer technology) has never been easier? On this point I am offering my opinion, but there is good evidence for it. I believe that the lack of gospel preaching has allowed churches to fill up with the unregenerate. The unregenerate are not like "*newborn babes who long for the pure milk of the word*" (1 Peter 2:2). Those who have never received saving grace cannot grow by the means of grace. Those who are unconverted have not drawn near to God through the blood of Christ. But with mysticism, it is possible to *feel* near to God when one is far from Him. Furthermore, the unconverted have no means of sanctification because they do not have the imputed righteousness of Christ as their starting point and eternal standing. So they end up looking for man-made processes to engineer change through human works because they have nothing else.

Those who feel empty because of

the “pragmatic promises of the church-growth movement” as the CT article calls them, may need something far more fundamental than ancient, Catholic, ascetic practices. They may very well need to repent and believe the gospel. Those who are born of the Spirit will find that this passage is true: “*His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence*” (2Peter 1:3).

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the best antidote to rejecting *sola scriptura* and going back to Rome would be a careful study of the Book of Hebrews. It describes a situation that is analogous to that which evangelicals face today. The Hebrew Christians were considering going back to temple Judaism. Their reasons can be discerned by the admonitions and warnings in Hebrews. The key problem for them was the tangibility of the temple system, and the invisibility of the Christian faith. Just about everything that was offered to them by Christianity was invisible: the High Priest in heaven, the tabernacle in heaven, the once for all shed blood, and the throne of grace. At the end of Hebrews, the author of Hebrews points out that they have come to something better than mount Sinai: “*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel*” (Hebrews 12:22-24). All of these things are invisible.

But the life of faith does not require tangible visibility: “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1). The Roman Catholic Church has tangibility that is unmatched by the evangelical faith, just as temple Judaism had. Why have faith in the once-for-all shed blood of Christ that is unseen when you

can have *real* blood (that of the animals for temple Judaism and the Eucharistic Christ of Catholicism)? Why have the scriptures of the Biblical apostles and prophets who are now in heaven when you can have a real, live apostle and his teaching Magisterium who can continue to speak for God? The similarities to the situation described in Hebrews are striking. Why have only the Scriptures and the other means of grace when the Roman Church has everything from icons to relics to cathedrals to holy water and so many other tangible religious articles and experiences?

I urge my fellow evangelicals to seriously consider the consequences of rejecting *sola scriptura* as the formal principle of our theology. If my Hebrews analogy is correct, such a rejection is tantamount to apostasy.

END NOTES

1. Chris Armstong, “The Future lies in the Past” in *Christianity Today*, February 2008. I wrote a critique of Armstrong’s article here: http://www.christianworldviewnetwork.com/article.php/3174/Bob_De_Waay
2. Mark Galli, “Ancient-Future People” in *Christianity Today* February 2008, 7.
3. Armstrong, 24.
4. Robert H. Schuller, *Self Esteem The New Reformation*, (Waco: Word, 1982).
5. Ibid. 25.
6. Ibid. 38.
7. Ibid. 98.
8. I wrote an article some years ago about Schuller’s self-esteem reformation: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue18.htm>
9. Robert Schuller, *Your Church as a Fantastic Future*, (Ventura: Regal Books, 1986) On pages 227, 228 Hybels testifies of Schuller’s influence.
10. <http://pewforum.org/events/index.php?EventID=80> page 16. [Accessed 8/27/2005]
11. The five are spiritual darkness, lack of servant leaders, poverty, disease,

and ignorance.

12. Bob DeWaay, *Redefining Christianity—Understanding the Purpose Driven Movement*, (21st Century Press: Springfield, MO, 2006).
13. My claim is that *sola scriptura* no longer serves as the formal principle of their theology in practice. This is seen whenever important religious claims (such as the need for a reformation) are not accompanied by rigorous, systematic, Biblical exegesis on the topic at hand. I say that because by implication, Scripture alone means that beliefs and practices are normative if—and only if—they can be shown to be Biblical. Binding and loosing have to be in accordance with the teachings of Christ and His apostles. Warren’s practice belies his statement of faith.
14. <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue103.htm>
15. I critique Dallas Willard’s theology as taught in his popular book *The Spirit of the Disciplines* in CIC Issue 91: <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue91.htm>
16. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines, Understanding How God Changes Lives*, (HarperCollins: New York, 1991). 18.
17. Ibid. emphasis his.
18. Ibid. 95.
19. Ibid. 62.
20. Ibid. 158.
21. Ibid. 162.
22. Ibid. 161.

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