

Sola Ecclesia:
A Rejoinder to Philip Blosser
By Steve Hays

Late last year, I wrote a response to an attack on sola Scriptura by Philip Blosser. In early January, he wrote a reply.¹

Due to other demands on my time, I haven't had the time to respond until now. So let's run through his reply, hitting the highlights.

I'll quote myself in red. I'll quote him in blue.

The color-coded quotes are for context. If you'd rather cut to the chase, the new stuff is in black print.

The other reason I did not respond to Mathison was that I had lost some of my initial interest in these sorts of arguments. It often happens, I think, that arguments of this kind serve a purpose on the journey of those en route to the Catholic Church, but subsequent to their conversion these concerns are supplanted by others as they become habituated to their new environs within the Church.

Up to a point, this makes perfect sense. But, by the same token, it also makes perfect sense for Blosser to take stock of his original reasons for converting to Catholicism in light of his subsequent experience. He knows more about it now than he did then. So the original reasons we had for a decision we made may not be the same reasons we have 10 or 20 years later.

Before plunging into the thick of things, I'd simply note that, as is so often the case, Blosser is a layman who comes to the defense of the Magisterium. The question this always raises is that if a layman can make a case for the Magisterium, who needs the Magisterium?

How is this not like arguing that defending the Bible makes the Bible superfluous?

They are not parallel. To the contrary, the analogy breaks down at the critical point of comparison. Catholicism denies the right of private judgment while Evangelicalism affirms it.

Therefore, if a Protestant defends the Bible, then this is consistent with his assumptions—but if a Catholic layman defends the Magisterium, then that is inconsistent with his assumptions.

No sorting needed. The Reformation was not a tragic necessity, but a simple necessity.

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http://catholictradition.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html#116811942690127319

This overlooks an important distinction between (1) reform and (2) schism. The Church has always needed reform: witness the reforms of Gregory I or the Cluny Reforms. The Church has always suffered schisms -- the hiving off of the Gnostics from the Church of Ephesus to start their own thing (cf. First Epistle of John on those whom the Apostle calls "antichrists), the Arians in the third century, the Cathars much later, the Photian schism, and protestant schisms still later, etc. The first is necessary housekeeping; the second is tragic loss.

No, this overlooks important distinctions between (a) heresy, (b) irreformability, and (c) denominations.

i) The Catholic church teaches false doctrine.

ii) In addition, the Catholic church is irreformable due to its pretensions of indefectibility.

iii) What Blosser is pleased to call "the Church" is simply *his* church, the Church of Rome. His church is simply a local church which, over time, became a denomination with delusions of grandeur.

The church of Rome is not the universal church. The 1C church of Rome was simply one local church among many. And it was not even the most important local church. That distinction obviously went to the church of Jerusalem.

Indeed, the 1C church of Rome wasn't even one church, but a collection of semiautonomous house-churches.²

The church of Rome gradually achieved its historical dominance for purely political reasons, due, on the one hand, to the fall of Jerusalem, and, on the other, to its strategic location in the capital of the western Roman Empire.

Since I feel no such sense of urgency, I'm happy to remain silent about its "tragic" dimension.

I find it sad -- even scandalous -- that you express no sense of "tragedy" over the broken Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ (i.e. the Church) was never broken. What we're talking about are faithful Christians who broke with a corrupt and irreformable denomination

During the Counter-Reformation, the Vatican did attempt to destabilize Protestant regimes.

² Cf. J. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (Doubleday 1993), 733-44; P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus* (Fortress 2003).

It seems to me there's more than enough political machinations to go around the whole table.

I agree. My comments were simply in response to the way in which Blosser imputes a conspiratorial mentality to Protestants.

It is almost as difficult for the Protestant to fathom the Catholic notion that the all-too-human Church of history could have anything like a divine nature or a real divine authority, as it is for an agnostic to fathom that the all-too-human Jesus could also be God Incarnate.

It's difficult for a suspicious Evangelical like me to draw a parallel between the Borgia Papacy and the hypostatic union, or a pedophile priest and the inspiration of Scripture.

This is certainly a leap for the most grotesque caricature of Catholicism imaginable: What about Pope John Paul II? What about Pope Benedict XVI? What about the countless good and holy popes in Catholic history? How about Mother Teresa of Calcutta? St. Francis Assisi? St. Francis Xavier? St. Ignatius of Loyola? St. Columba, who converted your European forefathers? What about Johan von Staupitz, Luther's confessor, who referred him to the Gospel of grace in Romans?

Several issues:

i) It is not a "grotesque caricature" of Catholicism for me to bring up the Borgia papacy or the priestly sex scandal. These are facts—facts which figure in the overall identity of the Catholic church.

Blosser is the one who attempted to mount an argument from analogy. So let's be very clear on some of the historical data which we need to plug into the Catholic analogue, and then judge the analogy accordingly.

ii) Now, Blosser's point may be that it's lopsided to judge an organization only by its worst examples rather than its best. Up to a point, there's some merit to that objection.

However, it's equally lopsided to judge an organization only by its best examples rather than its worst.

iii) And let's us also remember that the Catholic Church has raised by bar by making very lofty claims for itself.

Suffice it here to observe that if ever there was a safe truth, it is this: no higher

view of Scripture and its authority exists in all of Protestantism than that which is to be found in the Catholic Church.

I see. Raymond Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer have a higher view of Scripture than Gleason Archer or John Warwick Montgomery. Whatever.

This confuses Church teaching with private opinion.

i) This is a standard escape clause which is used by the Catholic apologist. But it comes at a cost. It insulates the Magisterium from accountability at the price of insulating men like Brown or Fitzmyer from accountability to the Magisterium.

Let's remember that Brown and Fitzmyer were both appointed by the Pope to the Pontifical Biblical Commission. In addition, they submit their publications to the *Censor Deputatus*. So we're not dealing here with rogue agents like Hans Küng or Dominic Crossan.

ii) To see what's wrong with this insulating strategy, suppose we draw a Protestant parallel. Let's say a Protestant denomination establishes a seminary. This is where prospective ordinands in said denomination must receive their theological training.

And let us further suppose that, over time, the seminary goes liberal.

Indeed, this is a real life scenario. It's played out on more than one occasion.

Now then, suppose, at this point, that various students and alumni point to the seminary as evidence that the denomination is moving to the left.

And suppose that the denominational leadership responds by saying that their complaint fails to distinguish between the official position of the denomination and the private opinion of the seminary professors.

Is that a satisfactory reply? To the contrary, the contrast between the officially conservative position of the denomination and the de facto liberalism of the seminary is precisely the source of the problem.

As long as the seminary is affiliated with the denomination, then, unless the seminary is answerable to the denomination, and unless the denomination intervenes to take disciplinary action and corrective measures when there is a widening gap between official teaching and informal teaching, then it is entirely appropriate to judge the theology of the denomination by how much it tolerates from those under its titular or nominal authority.

Likewise with your subsequent conflation of Vatican II documents with the positions of Grillmeier and Küng...But this ignores the specific difference

accorded the status of private opinion (what a theologian may opine) and Church teaching (what is *de fide*, binding upon the faithful because of its divinely delegated authority and indefectable truth). You can find a writer on theological issues who happens to be Catholic who may say just about anything. But this has no authority in itself. Neither can the decrees of councils in the Apostolic tradition be simply reduced to arbitrary human constructs (cf. Acts 15:28).

i) I don't know if Blosser suffers from reading incomprehension, but intentionally or not, he misrepresented the explicit context in which I cited Grillmeier and Küng. I did not cite them as theological *authorities*, but as historical *witnesses* to the behind-the-scenes proceedings of Vatican II. Is Blosser unable to absorb that fundamental distinction?

ii) But as long as he raises the issue, Grillmeier at least had the distinction of being a *peritus* to Vatican II. Blosser has no such distinction. So why should I regard Blosser as a more authentic interpreter of Vatican II than Grillmeier?

Even if Koenig's faction "carried the day" in Vatican II politics, the final documents are what count; and they are not inconsistent with ancient Church teaching.

Did Blosser even bother to read the material I cited? You'd think that a Catholic academic like Blosser would read up on the background of Vatican II.

The material I cited documents is a *shift* in the traditional teaching. Since Blosser can't be bothered with consulting *Catholic* sources on Vatican II, I'll reproduce the material myself. Remember, this is eyewitness testimony:

Any memory of old theories of verbal inspiration was to be omitted, and hence any form of an impersonal, mechanistic interpretation of the origin of Scripture... But this little word *veritas* that intruded here proved to be a living cell that continued to grow. But what did it mean? Only, "religious" or even "secular" truth, to use the language of the 1962 schema? This was the real problem that now had to be taken up with full force both inside and outside the conciliar discussion. This did not happen, and new suggestions for the solution of the inerrancy question, as modern research posed it, could be made only hesitantly.

Form F was worked out in the third session of the Council. The first change that strikes us is in the title of Article 11: "*Statuitur factum inspirationis et veritatis S. Scripturae.*" Inerrantia is replaced by the positive term *veritas*, which is notably extended in the text. In the course of the discussion on the schema in the autumn of 1964, various fathers from the Eastern and the Western Churches made important speeches on the necessity of an

interpretation of the inerrancy of Scripture that would be in harmony with the latest findings of exegesis. It was variously pointed out that the doctrine of inerrancy received its particular and narrower formulation in the 19th century, at a time when the means of secular historical research and criticism were used to investigate the secular historical accuracy of Scripture, and this was more or less denied - which had inevitable consequences for its theological validity. The teaching office of the Church sought to concentrate its defense at the point of immediate attack: i.e. to defend the inerrancy of Scripture even in the *veritates profanae* generally defending the claim of the Bible and of Christianity to be revelation. To defend scriptural inerrancy in this sphere of secular truths various theories were employed which sought to prove the absolute inerrancy of Scripture on the basis of these conditions and attitudes. Because of the apologetical viewpoint from which they started, they were in danger of producing a narrowness and a false accentuation⁷ in the doctrine of inerrancy. Also in the area of the interpretation of Scripture and the rules pertaining to this we can see a similar phenomenon, which the Council observed in different spheres of theology and endeavoured to nullify: namely, the tendency to an apologetical isolation and the claim to absolutism of a partial view. With this kind of motivation for the defense of the inerrancy of Scripture in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, there was a weakening of the awareness that Scripture as the inspired, written word of God is supposed above all to serve the preservation and expansion of the saving revelation and reality given through Christ in the world. Of course it was always realized that this was the real purpose of Scripture. In the question of inerrancy, however, the emphasis was placed on the one-sided and isolated - accentuation of the *veritates profanae*. This tended to create uncertainty rather than a joyful confidence that God's truth and salvation remain present in the world in an unfalsified and permanent form--namely through the inspired word. It was necessary to reawaken this awareness. The doctrine of inerrancy needed its own centre and the right accentuation.

In this respect the most important contribution was undoubtedly the speech by Cardinal Koenig on 2 October 1964. Several other fathers who took part in the discussion from 2 to 6 October either verbally or in writing came back to this point. The Cardinal first of all pointed out the new situation that exists in relation to the question of inerrancy. As a result of intensive Oriental studies our picture of the *veritas historica* and the *fides historica* of Scripture has been clarified. Many of the 19th century objections to the Old Testament in particular and its reliability as an account of historical fact are now irrelevant. But Oriental studies have also produced another finding: “ . . . *laudata scientia rerum orientalium insuper demonstrat in Bibliis Sacris notitias historicas et notitias scientiae naturalis a veritate quandoque*

deficere." Thus Cardinal Koenig admitted that not all the difficulties could be solved. On the contrary, in certain cases they have an urgency that is borne out by scientific research. His speech mentioned a few examples: according to Mk 2: 26 David had entered the house of God under the high priest Abiathar and eaten the bread of the Presence. In fact, however, according to 1 Sam 21: 1 ff. it was not under Abiathar, but under his father Abimelech. In Mt 27:9 we read that in the fate of Judas a prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled. In fact it is Zech 11: 12f. that is quoted. In Dan 1: 1 we read that King Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in the third year of King Jehoiakim, i.e. 607 B.C., but from the authentic chronicle of King Nebuchadnezzar that has been discovered we know that the siege can only have taken place three years later. Other geographical and chronological points could be quoted in this connection.

The fact that this speech could be held in a plenary session without any protest being made is surely significant... Thus Cardinal Koenig implicitly gives up that premise that comes from the aprioristic and unhistorical thinking that has dominated teaching on inerrancy since the age of the Fathers: if one admits that a sacred writer has made a mistake, then one is necessarily admitting that God has made a mistake with the human author. The actual aim of inspiration allows us to find a better solution: one can still maintain the true influence of God on the human authors without making him responsible for their weaknesses. These relate only to the form or the outer garment of the Gospel, and not the latter itself, however much the two might be inwardly connected- indeed, without this genuine humanity, with all its limitations, Scripture would appear like a foreign body in our world. But God speaks to us in this way, in our language, from out of our midst.

A number of Council fathers followed the example of Cardinal Koenig and refer to him as an authority: others, admittedly in the minority, produced the traditional statements, without, however, dealing with the new points raised by Cardinal Koenig.³

Notice that I'm not arguing on my own grounds, here. I'm measuring Catholicism by its own yardstick at this juncture.

The top brass has capitulated to the Historical-Critical method.

Not so. While Pope Benedict XVI (the former Cardinal Ratzinger) has been

³ H. Vorgrimler, ed. *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (Herder & Herder, 1969), 3:204-207; cf. H. Küng, *My Struggle For Freedom: Memoirs* (Eerdmans 2003), 366-68.

careful to avoid condemning all the methods of historical-critical scholarship, he has also been careful to avoid indulging the tendentious naturalistic ideological inclinations embedded in much of the historical-critical tradition, not to mention those conclusions that have been inimical to sound Christian doctrine.

Two problems:

i) All this means is that Benedict XVI is not as liberal as Bultmann. But it doesn't mean that Catholicism, at the highest echelons, hasn't moved to the left.

ii) And I've also commented on the problems with this face-saving distinction (see above). It is proper and even necessary to judge a religious institution as much by what it informally tolerates as what it formally promulgates.

Many Protestant denominations have gone liberal even though, on paper, they have very orthodox creeds. As long as credal orthodoxy is not enforced, it doesn't matter how orthodox they are on paper—that's a dead letter.

Is the Catholic priesthood generally distinguished by the quality of its expository sermons?

Some are; but many more are not than I would like to admit. This is a problem that seminaries are currently endeavoring to remedy. It is also not a problem proper to Catholicism. We have, and have had, great expository preachers, such as Archbishop Fulton Sheen, whose television and radio programs many Evangelicals used to enjoy.

Two problems:

i) It's quite true that mediocre preaching is not unique to Catholicism. There's plenty of mediocre preaching in Evangelicalism.

But let's also remember that Blosser was the one who cited preaching as a point in favor of Catholicism.

For him to backtrack and now say, "Well, we're not so hot, but neither are you!" represents an unacknowledged retraction of his original claim.

Remember that, to make good on his claims, he needs to demonstrate the *superiority* of Catholicism. *Parity* won't fill the bill.

ii) As far as Fulton Sheen is concerned, I remember watching him as a child. But I don't recall that he was distinguished for the quality of his *expository* preaching. He was a facile public speaker and gifted popularizer. But that is not the same thing as *expository* preaching.

Fourth, the Catholic Church's high view of Scripture is attested, ironically, at those points where her strict and literal interpretation is disputed by Protestantism. . . ." [Note: Here I have in mind such texts as John 6:53ff. (" . . . unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you . . ."), which Evangelicals tend to interpret symbolically, rejecting the literalism of the Catholic tradition.]

Strict literalism'? As in the way Ratzinger or Jaki take Genesis at "face value"?

I disagree with Ratzinger and Jaki on points of their Genesis interpretation -- which, by the way, is not a matter of dogmatically defined doctrine (which means it's open to legitimate differences of interpretation). The one thing that can be safely said about the first few chapters of Genesis, like the prophetic chapters of Daniel, Ezeiel and Revelation, is that they are a matter of ongoing debate within the Church and the larger body of Christians throughout the world. Not all Evangelicals are agreed upon the proper interpretation of first and last things either, as you well know. I do not know any reasonable Evangelical who would dispute this.

Once again, Blosser is backpedaling from his original claim. He will do this throughout the course of his reply. Is it asking too much of him that he be able to follow his own argument? Is it asking too much that he be held to the terms of his original argument?

His original claim is that the greater literality of Catholic hermeneutics is an argument in favor of Catholicism:

The Catholic Church's high view of Scripture is attested, ironically, at those points where her strict and literal interpretation is disputed by Protestantism. Despite what conservative Protestants may think about 'Catholic additions' to the 'simple Gospel' of Scripture, most of the Catholic distinctives that they criticize are rooted in taking Scriptures at face value. As James Akin points out in his contribution to *Surprised by Truth: Eleven Converts Give the Biblical and Historical Reasons for Becoming Catholic*, it is not the Catholic Church, but the various factions within Protestantism that clamor over alternative interpretations and spiritualizing metaphors for the straightforward meanings of the text, and it is the Catholics who take Scripture at face value.

Now, however, when I cite an obvious counterexample, he scales back his original claim:

It's not literalism in general, but only "doctrinally defined" literalism that counts.

He also reiterates his argument from equivalence, viz. there are parallel departures

from literalism in Evangelical circles. But equivalent “spiritualizing metaphors” for the “straightforward meanings of the text” in certain sectors of Protestantism is hardly an argument for the superiority of Catholicism.

So this is just one more case of many (see above and below) in which Blosser will lead with a sweeping claim, only to tacitly retract his claim when challenged, without—however—admitting that he lost the argument.

I realize, at a tactical level, why he’s not going to volunteer an admission of defeat. But notice how many times he’s going to back down without saying so.

The indissolubility of marriage and prohibition of remarriage (Mk 10:11; Lk 16:18; Mt 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor 7:10, 33).

Aside from the fact that Matthew and 1 Corinthians don’t teach the indissolubility of marriage or prohibit remarriage, there is the further fact that Catholicism entertains an extremely lenient version of divorce and remarriage by another name—annulment.

The first part of this sentence begs the question as to how these NT books should be interpreted without making an argument.

i) This is true. I didn’t argue for the Evangelical interpretation. What I did, rather, was to counter his question-begging assertion with a question-begging counter-assertion. Notice that he didn’t bother to argue for his Catholic interpretation of Matthew and 1 Corinthians. He simply stipulated the truth of the Catholic interpretation, which assumes what he needs to prove. Hence, I merely answered him at his own level. What is tendentiously affirmed may be tendentiously denied.

ii) But the other reason I didn’t attempt to mount an argument for my interpretation is that, needless to say, there are preexisting arguments for my interpretation. Leading evangelical NT scholars and commentators on Matthew and 1 Corinthians have argued thusly.⁴

Moreover, this interpretation isn’t limited to Protestant scholars and commentators. As the renowned Pauline scholar, Fr. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor frankly explains, under the heading of “A Justifiable Divorce,”

In the case where the unbelieving partner did not wish to continue the

⁴ E.g. D. Garland, 1 Corinthians (Baker 2003); C. Keener, A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew (Eerdmans 1999); And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament (Hendrickson 1991); J. Nolland, The Gospel of Matthew (Eerdmans 2005); A. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Eerdmans 2000);

marriage, Paul agrees that there should be a divorce...Paul says nothing about remarriage, because in his world the act of divorce was the authorization to contract another marriage.⁵

iii) In fact, it's quite likely that Paul, himself, as a divorcé. To begin with, a strong case can be made for the presumption that he married young, like most Jews.⁶ And the most plausible explanation for his subsequent bachelorhood is that his wife divorced him after he converted to the Christian faith.⁷ He would have been viewed as an apostate by the religious establishment, so there must have been enormous pressure on his wife (and children?) to leave him.

That probably lies in the background of 1 Cor 7.

While the last part of the sentence not only conflates divorce with the meaning of annulment without defining what Catholicism understands by their difference, but overlooks the reasons for the high number of annulments today – which has to do with abysmally poor catechesis of Christians today in the theology of marriage. Catholicism's prohibition of contraception, masturbation, and non-coital orgasm (e.g., *via fellatio*) look like medieval superstitions to those who have no inkling of Catholic theology of the body or nuptial meaning of the body mirroring the sacrament of the Eucharist (articulated so well by John Paul II). Many Christians today view marriage as a contract, which is as different from the marital covenant as prostitution is from matrimony. Where individuals enter into attempts at marriage with defective understandings, it stands to reason that there may often times be impediments to their marriage having been recognized as sacramental at the beginning – where, for example, a marriage vow was taken only provisionally, or with the intent of not having children, or with the intent to contracept, and so forth.

i) The reason I “conflate” annulment with divorce and remarriage is that, as Blosser originally framed the issue, this was an *exegetical* question of who took Scripture more literally (or, at face value). But the passages he cited (Mk 10:11; Lk 16:18; Mt 5:32; 19:9; 1 Cor 7:10, 33) don't draw a distinction between licit annulment and illicit divorce/remarriage. Indeed, they're silent on the whole category of annulment. So Blosser can only invoke annulment by abandoning his original claim.

ii) In his reply, he also introduces oral sex into the discussion. Once again, though, the Bible is silent on oral sex. While it would quite likely be illicit outside of marriage, the moral status of consensual oral sex within marriage is a separate

⁵ J. Murphy-O'Connor, 1 Corinthians (DBC 1998), 63.

⁶ J. Murphy-O'Connor, Paul: A Critical Life (Oxford 1996), 62-64.

⁷ F. F. Bruce, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free (Eerdmans 1984), 270.

question.

iii) He drives an artificial wedge between a covenant and a contract. A covenant *is* a contract, with such contractual features as contracting parties, stipulations, and sanctions for noncompliance.⁸ Blosser is attempting to redefine marriage as a *sacrament* rather than a *covenant*.

iv) As a matter of fact, “catholicism’s prohibition of contraception, masturbation, and non-coital orgasm (e.g., *via fellatio*) not only *looks* like a medieval superstition,” but it literally *is* a medieval superstition—based on medieval gynecology, or the lack thereof. As Anthony Kenny points out:

Aquinas, in the *Summa contra Gentiles*, in a chapter on “the disordered emission of semen” treats both masturbation and contraception as a crime against humanity, second only to homicide. Such a view is natural in the context of a biological belief that only the male gamete provides the active element in conception, so that the sperm is an early stage of the very same individual as eventually comes to birth. Masturbation is then the same kind of thing, on a minor scale, as the exposure of an infant...But the view that masturbation is a poor man’s homicide cannot survive the knowledge that both male and female gametes contribute equally to the genetic constitution of the offspring.⁹

Although Sir. Kenny eventually left the priesthood, I don’t think one can plausibly accuse him of being an ignoramus where Catholic theology is concerned. Certainly his curriculum vitae stacks up tolerably well against Blosser’s credentials—to say nothing more.

[Note: I referred to the Catholic Church teaching against contraception.]

Since Scripture never says that contraception is sinful, how does the Catholic prohibition reflect a high view of Scripture?

By reasoning from Revelation entrusted to the Church to conclusions compelled by logic. If you want a thing to flourish, you treat it according to its nature. You water tomato plants, you put gasoline in cars; not vice versa. The purpose of sex is babies and bonding. You want marriage to flourish, you foster the purposes of sex, which are to promote these two ends. When you take a by-product of sex (pleasure) and make it the end (purpose) of sex, so that the formal purpose of sex (babies) is turned into an accident (which you try to prevent by contraception), you are thwarting the nature of the thing that God created when He instituted marriage

⁸ Cf. NIDOTTE 1:747ff.

⁹ A. Kenney, *What I Believe* (Continuum 2006), 92-93.

and commanded us to be fruitful and multiply. (See my essay, "[Answering Robert W. Jenson on contraception](#)")

Several problems here:

i) Remember that his original appeal was a *Scriptural* appeal. But now, as is his wont, Blosser deserts his original argument. He is shifting ground from *revealed* theology to *natural* theology—to wit: a *natural law* argument against contraception. This is not what he said before.

ii) I'd add that while natural law arguments often have some value, they also tend to prove too much, and thereby prove too little. Ironically, the natural law appeal has exposed the Catholic position to natural law objections.¹⁰

[Note: I referred, in passing, to Church teaching against autoeroticism.]

Since Scripture never condemns masturbation as sinful.

This overlooks a long tradition of interpretation related to the biblical theology of Onanism (spilling of seed on the ground), long condemned by Protestant Reformers as well as Catholic tradition (not to mention Judaism and Islam). (See: [Autoeroticism in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam](#))

Several issues:

i) I find it decidedly odd that he would look to a Christian heresy like Islam for moral guidance.

ii) The fact that masturbation may be condemned by Protestant tradition is irrelevant. Tradition, including my own (Calvinism), is not our rule of faith. Protestant tradition is not our rule of faith. Scripture is. Protestant tradition is subject to Scripture. And it is, by that same token, revisable in light of better exegesis.

iii) As for Judaism, has Blosser ever consulted a Jewish commentary on Genesis? The standard Jewish commentary is by Nahum Sarna:

The death of Er without a son made Onan subject to the levirate law. Marriage between a man and his brother's wife is strictly forbidden in the Pentateuchal legislation of Leviticus 18:16 and 20:21. The only exception to the prohibition occurs when the brother dies without a son. According to Deuteronomy 25:5, a man has an obligation to his widowed sister-in-law.

¹⁰ E.g. J. Feinberg & P. Feinberg, *Ethics For a Brave New World* (CB 1993), 174-75.

This institution is known in Hebrew as yibbum, or “levirate marriage.”¹¹

The levirate institution long antedated the Pentateuchal legislation. In fact, it is widely documented in one form or another in several extrabiblical sources. The compendium of laws from the Middle Assyrian Empire (15-14C BCE)...The Hittite laws (14th-13C BCE)...A contract from the town of Nuzi from the middle centuries of the second millennium BCE...¹²

[Thus], she would be assured of livelihood and protection. The surviving brother became a surrogate for the deceased husband who posthumously gained a child, socially acknowledged to be his progeny and heir.¹³

The callous refusal of Onan to perpetuate the line of his brother may have been due to a lack of sense of duty to the dead. An even more powerful motivation would have been the fact that with the death of the first-born, Onan inherits one-half of his father’s estate. However, should he provide an heir to his brother, his portion would be diminished.¹⁴

Genesis Rabba 55:5-6 understands that he practiced a primitive form of birth control through coitus interruptus...Clearly, society at this time had made no provision for voluntary renunciation of the levirate duty as is found in Deuteronomy 25:7-9.¹⁵

The text does not make clear specifically why Onan incurs divine wrath. The development of the narrative favors the explanation that it is due to the evasion of his obligation to his dead brother rather than because of the manner in which he acts. By frustrating the purpose of the levirate institution, Onan has placed his sexual relationship with his sister-in-law in the category of incest—a capital offense. The unusual emphasis given to the particular socio-legal background of the story clearly shows that the point at issue is the levirate obligation and not the general topic of birth control.¹⁶

iv) As for Catholicism, Blosser seems to be out of touch with contemporary Catholic scholarship:

In the tradition of the Church’s teaching on masturbation, moral principles were drawn primarily from the interpretation of two Scriptural passages.

¹¹ The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis (JPS 1989), 266.

¹² Ibid. 266.

¹³ Ibid. 266.

¹⁴ Ibid. 267.

¹⁵ Ibid. 267.

¹⁶ Ibid. 267.

The first, Genesis 38:8-10...Although onanism was traditionally used as a synonym for masturbation, Onan's act could be more properly described as "withdrawal." Moreover, from the biblical author's point of view, Onan's sin was his refusal to fulfill the important responsibility involved in the levirate law (cf. Dt 25:5-10).¹⁷

The second passage, 1 Cor 6:9-11, is a list of vices, or more specifically, "unjust persons"...during the patristic period and the medieval ages, some commentators thought the term $\mu\alpha\lambda\alpha\kappa\omicron\iota$ meant "masturbators."¹⁸

In common usage often taken to mean improperly completed intercourse or even masturbation. The word is taken from the story of Onan in the Book of Genesis...This was in accordance with the custom of Levirate marriage...Popular usage of the term onanism is based on the assumption that the evil for which the Lord took Onan's life was his unchastity. This, however, is by no means clear from the text, in which his refusal to conform to the prescribed marriage custom can be seen as the wickedness that brought vengeance upon him. Consequently, no certain argument can be based upon this text to prove the sinful character of either improperly completed intercourse or masturbation. Evidence for this must be sought elsewhere.¹⁹

Maybe Blosser would simply dismiss this as the private opinion of the Catholic contributors. Of course, one could say the same thing about his exegesis of the traditional prooftexts. In any event, some private opinions are better argued than others.

This is one of those clear-cut cases in Roman Catholicism where some fixture of faith and morals was justified on the basis of faulty prooftexting, and even after the exegesis has been corrected, the erroneously derive conclusion remains intact.

That's the problem with dogmatic tradition. It freezes erroneous interpretations in place. Even after the mistake has been detected and openly admitted, a superstructure has been erected upon the fissured foundation this primitive error, so that it's impossible, without loss of face, to tear down the misplaced edifice.

A blanket ban on masturbation does enormous moral, emotional, and spiritual harm to single men in their sexual prime.

This is the view taken by many secularists and even Evangelicals such as James

¹⁷ "Masturbation," New Catholic Encyclopedia (CUA, 2nd ed., 2003), 9:315b.

¹⁸ Ibid., 315b-16a.

¹⁹ Ibid. 10:600a.

Dobson. However, I would ask any of you avid Christian masturbators out there to ask yourselves honestly whether masturbation does not in fact cultivate lust, a prurient appetite pornography, and a predatory view of other human beings.

Several issues:

i) To say that *autoeroticism* fosters a *predatory* view of *other* human beings is oxymoronic. In fact, the stock objection to masturbation is that it's *self*-oriented rather than *socially* oriented.

ii) Notice that he's attacking masturbation, not because it's intrinsically evil, but because it may lead to evil. The classic domino theory.

iii) I agree with Blosser that pornography is a serious problem—more than ever. But this makes me wonder what he thinks about all that risqué art commissioned by the papacy—some of which is even tinged with homoeroticism. Michelangelo is a case in point. As Sir Kenneth Clark observes:

The Medici Chapel is peculiar in Michelangelo's sculpture in that two of the chief figures are women. We know, from a quantity of evidence, that Michelangelo considered the female body inferior to the male. Not a single drawing of a woman done from life has come down to us, and his studies for female subjects, such as the *Leda*, are invariably drawn from men. It is true that in the Sistine ceiling he had been compelled by his theme to introduce the naked body of Eve...but the compulsion had been dramatic rather than formal, and it is at first hard to know why, of his own free will, he should have introduced the female body into a work so oppressively personal as the Medici tombs. One answer may be that he felt the need to a contrast to the emphatic muscularity of the other figures, and since this was the period of his life when he was most troubled by his erotic feelings for young men, he may not have trusted himself to include in the Chapel a male embodiment of softness and grace. There was also, in the emotional atmosphere of the Medici Chapel, a passive character that the female body could express better than the male. This distinctively feminine pathos had been recently revealed to Renaissance artists by the discovery of a splendid and moving work of antiquity, the so-called *Ariadne* of the Vatican; and although neither of Michelangelo's figures imitates her pose, both sustain the same flow of languid movement. But in spite of a feminine rhythm, they are entirely without those basic sequences of form by which, as we saw in an earlier chapter, artists have given a plastic order to physical passion. The breasts, for example, which from the 5C onward had been intermediaries between geometry and the senses, and in the profoundly sensual art of India are made to dominate the whole body, are reduced, in the *Night*, to humiliating appendages; and the stomach, instead of being a

soft modulation of the other spheres, is a shapeless trunk, cut across by four horizontal furrows.²⁰

Several preliminary studies from the *Night* have survived. They are done, as usual, from male models and show how much more at ease he was with the rocky male thorax and abdomen.²¹

iv) I agree with Blosser that masturbation can degenerate into a compulsive-addictive behavior. Of course, one could say the same thing about sex in general, or eating disorders, or gambling, &c.

At the same time, this overlooks the potentially positive side effects of masturbation as a sexual safety valve for single young men—as well as the potentially negative side effects of unfounded guilt. In the words of a standard Christian reference work, after discussing “certain circumstances” under which it may be maladaptive:

Masturbation may be one of the most important ways individuals learn about their own sexuality...Other authors contend that suppression of the natural tendency to masturbate is far more likely to lead to an emotional or sexual problem. The history of popular and professional opinion about masturbation has often been one of ignorance, pseudoscience, and hysteria...These arguments have been carefully critiqued by a number of Christian authors...As Jones and Jones (1993) observe, “There is probably more suffering caused in Christian circles by overreactions to masturbation than there is by the practice itself.”²²

And since you bring him up, let’s remember that Dobson is a professional pediatrician and child psychologist with decades of experience, so his considered opinion should not be dismissed out of hand. He also discusses the potential risks, but that’s not the whole story:

First, let’s consider masturbation from a medical perspective. We can say without fear of contradiction that there is no scientific evidence to indicate that this act is harmful to the body. Despite terrifying warnings given to young people historically, it does not cause blindness, weakness, mental retardation or any other physical problem. If it did, the entire male population and about half of females would be blind, weak, simpleminded and sick. Between 95 and 98 percent of all boys engage in this practice — and the rest have been known to lie. It is as close to being a universal

²⁰ K. Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (MJF Books 1956), 251-52.

²¹ *Ibid.* 252.

²² *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling* (Baker 1999), 726-27.

behavior as is likely to occur. A lesser but still significant percentage of girls also engage in what was once called “self-gratification,” or worse, “self-abuse.”

As for the emotional consequences of masturbation, only four circumstances should give us cause for concern. The first is when it is associated with oppressive guilt from which the individual can’t escape. That guilt has the potential to do considerable psychological and spiritual damage. Boys and girls who labor under divine condemnation can gradually become convinced that even God couldn’t love them. They promise a thousand times with great sincerity never again to commit this “despicable” act. Then a week or two passes, or perhaps several months.

Eventually, the hormonal pressure accumulates until nearly every waking moment reverberates with sexual desire. Finally, in a moment (and I do mean a moment) of weakness, it happens again. What then, dear friend? Tell me what a young person says to God after he or she has just broken the one-thousandth solemn promise to Him? I am convinced that some teenagers have thrown over their faith because of their inability to please God on this point.

The second circumstance in which masturbation might have harmful implications is when it becomes extremely obsessive. That is more likely to occur when it has been understood by the individual to be “forbidden fruit.” I believe the best way to prevent that kind of obsessive response is for adults not to emphasize or condemn it. Regardless of what you do, you will not stop the practice of masturbation in your teenagers. That is a certainty. You’ll just drive it underground — or under covers. Nothing works as a “cure.” Cold showers, lots of exercise, many activities and awesome threats are ineffective. Attempting to suppress this act is one campaign that is destined to fail — so why wage it?

I would suggest that parents talk to their 12- or 13-year-old boys, especially, in the same general way my mother and father discussed this subject with me. We were riding in the car, and my dad said, “Jim, when I was a boy, I worried so much about masturbation. It really became a scary thing for me because I thought God was condemning me for what I couldn’t help. So I’m telling you now that I hope you don’t feel the need to engage in this act when you reach the teen years, but if you do, you shouldn’t be too concerned about it. I don’t believe it has much to do with your relationship with God.”

What a compassionate thing my father did for me that night in the car. He was a very conservative minister who never compromised his standards of

morality to the day of his death. He stood like a rock for biblical principles and commandments. Yet he cared enough about me to lift from my shoulders the burden of guilt that nearly destroyed some of my friends in the church. This kind of “reasonable” faith taught to me by my parents is one of the primary reasons I never felt it necessary to rebel against parental authority or defy God.²³

[Note: I mentioned Church teaching on abortion.]

Why are Catholic judges and legislators who promote abortion never excommunicated?

This is a problem, and a more public discipline may be forthcoming, we hope. However, one of the difficulties is that a priest distributing Holy Communion may not be in a position to know the state of the soul of the person approaching the altar. Has he been to confession before approaching? One could cynically hazard a guess, but who knows? One can go to confession in any parish, to any priest. One simply doesn't know. This has something to do with what St. Augustine said (against the Donatists) about the importance of letting the tares grow together with the wheat until the final harvest of Judgment. If you want a perfect society of saints, you won't find it in the Catholic Church. On the other hand, it's saints who know they are sinners, and sinners who think they are saints.

The problem with this reply is that it's an admission that anything resembling systematic church discipline is impossible given the presuppositions of Catholic theology.

And what makes that a problem is that it disqualifies a Catholic apologist like Blosser from drawing invidious comparisons between Catholic and Protestant practice. He wags an accusing finger at abuses and excesses within Protestantism, but when Protestant points out parallel abuses and excesses within Catholicism, he turns to the parable of the wheat and the tares. Okay, but both sides can invoke that parable. Why is the weedy field scandalous for Protestantism, but okay for Catholicism?

[Note: Here Hays repeatedly focuses on the Catholic sex scandal, sodomy, and other sins of the Church.]

Fair enough: there's plenty of sin to go around. I could mention the no less appalling (if less publicly broadcast) scandals and related statistics within Protestant communions. Such scandals widely occur within Protestant circles, although Protestant clergy make less lucrative targets of litigation, since they do

²³ <http://www.focusonyourchild.com/develop/art1/A0000553.html>

not tend to be tied legally to large diocesan (episcopal) corporations. But what you won't find in the Catholic Church is popes declaring that sodomy is a "sacrament," or councils of bishops declaring that sin is virtue. You have to distinguish between *doctrine* and *discipline* in the Catholic Church. There has been a need for reform within the Church's history at many junctures because of lack of *discipline*; but the Church's defined *doctrines* (dogmas) are irreproachable. You may disagree with them, but there is no lack of integrity in their consistency or promulgation, or their arguable defensibility in terms of fidelity to Scripture.

Several issues:

- i) To begin with, I'm discussing a *pattern* of sin, such as the subculture of pederasty in the Catholic priesthood. And not just the actual perpetrators, but the bishops who were complicit in their crimes. To my knowledge, the complicity of the hierarchy has been almost unexceptionable. I believe the late Archbishop of Washington DC was a singular exception.
- ii) Blosser is, once again, resorting to the argument from moral equivalence. But doesn't the *true* church need to be a cut above us schismatics?
- iii) I've already pointed out the problems with driving a wedge between doctrine and discipline (see above). Fidelity to the gospel involves *practical* fidelity as well as *doctrinal* fidelity. To be *doers* of the word as well as *hearers* of the word.
- iv) How do you reform a topdown organization when the rot starts at the top?

The OPC, PCA, WELS, SBC, and LCMS (to name a few) have a much better record on sodomy, to say nothing else, than Catholicism.

First, just in terms of mathematics, you're comparing Protestant denominations, some of which number less than 25,000 members (like the OPC) with the Catholic Church, whose membership is over 1,000,000,000,000 (1 billion). Is that fair?

Well, now, this does, indeed, raise a very interesting question:

- i) Is it fair to compare Protestant denominations, some of which are miniscule, to Catholicism?

A large part of Blosser's attack on sola Scriptura consists in drawing invidious comparisons between Catholicism and Protestantism. He's has no hesitation about comparing the two as long as the comparison is onerous to Protestantism.

But as soon as the comparison is onerous to Catholicism, then the comparative method is suddenly "unfair."

ii) Perhaps, though, we could try to refine his objection a bit. Maybe his objection is that it's unfair to compare with best of Protestantism with the worst of Catholicism.

But the beauty of Protestantism is that we can be selective. We are a liberty to cherry-pick the ripe fruit, and discard the rotten or poisonous fruit. We are not shackled to a corrupt institution.

Second, you're also talking about scandal, but not teaching, which was the question at issue. The Catholic Church has never taught that sodomy was not a sin. On the other hand, which of the denominational bodies you have referenced has not compromised itself on some matter or other, following the Anglican church's policy, for example, of opening the door to contraception in 1930, thus severing the link between sex and procreation, undercutting the argument against recreational uses of sex, or the acceptance of masturbation, or divorce and remarriage, etc.? Yet all of these were ancient prohibitions of the Church. See the Evangelical writer, Charles D. Provan's book, *The Bible and Birth Control*.

A few basic issues:

i) When he cites divorce, masturbation, and contraception as examples of moral and theological compromise, he is simply *assuming* the Catholic frame of reference rather than *arguing* for that standard of comparison.

ii) He is also taking an all-or-nothing approach to the alternatives. For example, there's no doubt that some Protestant denominations have moved to the left—fatally so. But to assume that opening the door to any form of divorce and remarriage (to take one example) is a form of moral or theological compromise is just that—a question-begging assumption.

There are principled arguments for these positions, drawn from the exegesis of Scripture. Exegetical arguments that do distinguish between Scriptural grounds for divorce and unscriptural grounds for divorce.

It is quite inaccurate to insinuate that only liberals question tradition, or that once you allow *anything*, you thereby allow *everything*.

To take one paradigmatic example, the Mosaic law does not take an all-or-nothing approach to every single issue. It doesn't pose every moral issue as a choice between a blanket prohibition and unfettered license.

[It is incumbent upon the Protestant to] show from Scripture that God's will throughout history has been to commit wholly to writing all revelation and instruction that He intended as an ongoing authority for the His people and their salvation.[25].”

Sola Scriptura is tied to the end-stage of progressive revelation—the point at which all revelation to be inscripturated has been inscripturated.

How does this show that the Protestant need not “show from Scripture that God’s will throughout history has been to commit wholly to writing all revelation and instruction that He intended as an ongoing authority for the His people and their salvation”?

Note that Blosser is now reversing the question. He originally said, it is incumbent upon the Protestant to] show from Scripture that God’s will throughout history has been to commit wholly to writing all revelation and instruction that He intended as an ongoing authority for the His people and their salvation.

But in response to my reply, he now says, it is incumbent upon the Protestant to show from Scripture that God’s will throughout history has *not* been to commit wholly to writing all revelation and instruction that He intended as an ongoing authority for the His people and their salvation.

Other issues aside, is it incumbent upon the Protestant to prove a negative? Wouldn’t the very absence of such evidence mean that there is no presumption to disprove?

Paul demands that his readers 'stand firm and hold to the traditions' they have received 'either by word of mouth or letter' (2 Th 2:15).

Evangelicals don’t deny that apostolic tradition is authoritative. But we don’t have any oral apostolic tradition.

That’s because you assume that all of apostolic tradition has been subsumed into biblical tradition, which begs the question. But even if that were true, *ex hypothesi*, it would not follow (as Cardinal Newman shows) from the material sufficiency of Scripture that the Bible is formally sufficient. One would need extra-biblical criteria for identifying what *counts* as Scripture. Even that is a matter of Catholic tradition – one which Luther denied when he excluded the books of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation from the books he considered canonical in the first edition of his *Deutsche Bibel*.

i) What makes him think that I need to assume that? I don’t not assume that all of apostolic tradition has been inscripturated.

Rather, my position is that God has inscripturated as much apostolic tradition as is necessary for the duration of the church age.

ii) Even if we needed *some* extrascriptural criterion to identify what counts as Scriptura, that is not contrary to sola Scriptura. Blosser is operating with a

reductionistic caricature of sola Scriptura.

Let's remember that "sola Scriptura" is merely a popular slogan. You cannot extract the doctrine of sola Scriptura from the dictionary definition of a two-word catch-phrase.

Let's take a classic definition of the doctrine in question: "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture"²⁴

This definition does not exclude external criteria to identify the rule of faith. Maybe they're needed, and maybe not. But that's a separate issue.

Given Scripture, then sola Scriptura is the supreme just of all religious controversies. Blosser is confusing the *identification* of Scripture with the *function* of Scripture. The rule of faith is concerned with the function of Scripture, and not with how we identify the rule of faith (i.e. what counts as Scripture) to the necessary exclusion of extrascriptural criteria or truth-conditions.

For example, sense knowledge is needed to identify Scripture. But sense knowledge doesn't figure in the definition of the *regular fidei*.

iii) Since I'm not Lutheran, the onus is not on me to defend the canon on Lutheran principles.²⁵

[Note: I refer to the verse that calls the Church the "pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Tim 3:15).]

1 Tim 3:15 doesn't refer to "the Church," but to a local church.

There is no reason why "household of God" cannot refer to the universal Church. The local church does not and cannot subsist on its own, any more than the branches can subsist apart from the vine from which it draws its sustenance.

This is a central and traditional Catholic proof-text. So we need to be very clear on what it means and how it applies.

Several problems:

i) The fact that the local church is *logically* related to the universal church is

²⁴ WCF 1:10.

²⁵ For a brief example of how that is done, cf. R. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (Concordia 1970), 1:304-06.

irrelevant to intended linguistic referent in 1 Tim 3:15. No one denies the logical relation between the local and the universal church. But that's beside the point.

Blosser isn't *exegeting* the text of 1 Tim 3:15. And this is typical of a Catholic apologist. What counts in Catholicism is historical theology rather than exegetical theology.

Once you deny sola Scriptura, then it's easy to become very lazy about exegesis. For, at the end of the day, exegesis isn't driving Catholic theology.

Blosser is operating at the level of systematic theology rather than exegetical theology. But that is too high a level of abstraction, for systematic theology is, itself, abstracted from exegetical theology. To *start* with systematic theology, and map that back on any particular verse of Scripture is viciously circular. The proper relation between exegetics and systematics is first to analyze each author on his own terms, and then proceed to the plane of theological synthesis.

To operate in reverse is building on a foundation of thin air, for it assumes that you already know what the verse means according to systematic theology. But where is systematic theology getting its information? Exegetical theology needs to be feeding into systematic theology.

ii) Blosser's allusion to Jn 15 compounds the problem:

a) There is nothing ecclesiastical about Jn 15. This is a good example of how Catholic theological method proceeds by cumulative error, piling one mistake atop another.

b) Even if Jn 15 were talking about the church, you cannot simply use one author to interpret another author unless one author is alluding to another author. To use the botanical metaphor in Jn 15 to construe the meaning of 1 Tim 3:5 is superimposing an extrinsic hermeneutical grid onto the Pauline text.

iii) As usual, Blosser's contention is out of step with contemporary Catholic scholarship. The two standard Catholic commentaries on 1 Timothy are by Msgr. Quinn and Luke Timothy Johnson. Let's take a look at how a Catholic NT scholar does serious exegesis:

A church, in both 3:5 and 5:15, has a local aspect as a home has an address...the anarthrous usage in this chapter in Timothy may be a way of indicating *ἐκκλησία θεοῦ* is to be heard for all practical purposes as a name (see BDF §257.2), perhaps one current already in Ephesus. The use of the phrase here would constitute a delicate compliment to the local usage, encouraging the house churches there to welcome the Pauline directives of this correspondence as they prided themselves on a

specifically Pauline name for their Christian assembly.²⁶

God's house, understood in this fashion, can be described further as *the church of the living God*. Just as the οἶκος as a sign was the actual, local assembly of believers, that same local assembly could be called God's church (as in 3:5 above).²⁷

The organization, such as we can reconstruct it, does not resemble the hierarchical arrangement of the clergy described in Ignatius's *Letters*. It comes closer to the synagogal structure of Diaspora Judaism, an organizational arrangement that, in turn, closely resembled that in Greco-Roman *collegia*. Such arrangements were available in Paul's milieu. No long period of internal development was required for them to emerge.²⁸

There is a complete absence of legitimation of any organizational element in these letters. Leaders are not designated as priests, and none of their functions are cultic in character. Instead, they are given the sort of secular designations used in clubs, and their functions are practical and quotidian...Nothing in the letters supports the idea that structure is in the process of creation.²⁹

The elements of church structure found in 1 Timothy and Titus are far closer to the elements suggested by the undisputed letters of Paul than to the ecclesiastical arrangements outlined by Ignatius of Antioch.³⁰

It may be well to begin a consideration of Paul's instructions concerning the supervisor by restating two basic points. The first is that the designation "church order in the Pastorals" is misleading. Titus has only a handful of verses that appear to meld the position of elder and supervisor (Tit 1:5-9). 2 Timothy gives no attention to church organization. A better designation, then, is "church order in Ephesus as it can be inferred from 1 Timothy."...[Second], the best recent study of institutionalization in Pauline churches within the conventional developmental framework reveals how little there is to support the picture of institutional development, once those theological underpinnings are removed and the data are read fairly.³¹

The structure suggested by 1 Timothy is simple. I mention first several key

²⁶ J. Quinn & W. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Eerdmans 2000), 262-63.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 311.

²⁸ L. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Doubleday 2001), 75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 76.

³¹ *Ibid.* 217-18.

Greek terms that will recur in the discussion. The leadership is exercised by an *ἐπισκοπος* who functions as part of a “board of elders” (*πρεσβυτεριον*, 4:14).³²

Such a collegial leadership, with a single figure serving as supervisor or coordinator, is the basic structure for intentional groups in the 1C Mediterranean world...In 1 Timothy, we have the board of elders, a leadership position called the supervisor, and subordinate officials—probably both male and female (3:11)—called literally “helpers” (*διακονοι*). The correlation of offices to functions is not revealed. But we learn that the community carries out certain activities that match those we know about in the Diaspora synagogue. It performs public prayer together with reading and exhortation (4:1-3; 2:1-3). It makes charity distribution to widows (5:3-16). It exercises hospitality (3:2). It hears and settles disputes (5:19-20).³³

The assumption that exactly the same structure prevailed everywhere from the beginning is implausible. We should think rather of patterns of organization that share elements with diverse local expressions.³⁴

Paul’s allusion to the *πρεσβυτεριον* (board of elders) in 4:14 and his comments on elders and widows in 5:1-25 clearly have an ad hoc and circumstantial character. It is possible at this point, therefore, to take stock.³⁵

For the most part, however, we see a simple collegial governance: older men form a board with a supervisor and have some helpers for practical assurance. We note again that none of these titles or roles is theologically legitimized. The leaders are not given religious titles and are granted no particular spiritual power. Their tasks appear to be organizational, didactic, and practical rather than cultic or liturgical.³⁶

This brings us to my fairly unusual translation of 3:15. If “pillar and foundation of truth” is taken in the usual way, as standing in apposition to “the church of the living God,” there are two unfortunate results. The first is that Paul’s metaphor is fractured. The church cannot logically be both the house *and* a pillar of or foundation for the house. The second is the unhappy inference that some ecclesiologies have not been slow to draw: to

³² Ibid. 218.

³³ Ibid. 218-19.

³⁴ Ibid. 222.

³⁵ Ibid. 234.

³⁶ Ibid. 234-35.

equate the church with “the foundation of truth.” The translation I have suggested, however, avoids both problems and makes better sense of the rhetorical function of the passage.³⁷

These verses can be tailored to a Protestant pattern, but the resulting fit is never quite natural. As Kreeft says, ‘We are not taught by a teacher without a book or by a book without a teacher, but by one teacher, the Church, with one book, Scripture’ (Kreeft, 275).

A straw man argument since Evangelicals don’t deny the role of teachers in the life of the church.

How is this a straw argument, since what you mean by teacher is severed from the teacher referenced: namely, the Church. Accordingly, you have *many* teachers and face the problem of factionalism referenced by Paul in 1 Cor. 1.

- i) It is only severed from “the Church” according to your Catholic brand of ecclesiology.
- ii) It is anachronistic for you to retroject your Catholic brand of ecclesiology back into 1 Cor.
- iii) Paul is talking about a popularity contest. Judging by personalities.
- iv) Yes, we have to choose between many teachers. It’s a question of going with the best argument. Even a Catholic has to do that in order to adjudicate the claims of rival theological traditions.

So the onus is on the Catholic to literally document the existence of oral tradition. But if it’s documentary, it’s not oral.

Nonsense. The fact that something is later attested in writing doesn’t mean that it was not first oral tradition.

Which misses the point. You need factual evidence to establish a factual claim. It isn’t enough to merely *posit* prior oral tradition. This is what liberal form critics do.

Nor does the fact that something was first in writing mean that it didn’t subsequently become oral tradition if the original writing was lost. 2 Chronicles 29:25 and 35:4 both reference liturgical instructions according to the command of the Lord in Scriptures that are lost to history.

³⁷ Ibid. 237; cf. 231-32.

Two problems:

i) You continue to miss the point. If you can cite specific, trustworthy evidence for a specific, oral tradition, fine.

That hardly justifies an unbridled appeal to oral tradition for which you have no corresponding documentation.

ii) You are now claiming that these liturgical instructions were originally *Scripture*, and these Scriptures have subsequently been *lost*.

But the verses you cite make no such claim. Where is your supporting argument for this identification?

If these were once inscripturated, the fact remains they were extra-biblical traditions by the time the canon we now have was passed down to us.

You are trading on equivocations, where you seem to equate *writing* with *inscripturation*. As you ought to know, there is more to inscripturation than committing an oral communiqué to writing. Even if you committed a divine revelation to writing, that wouldn't make it Scripture. Scripture is not merely a *written* record, but an *inspired* writing. Perhaps, though, you have more liberal views of inspiration.

Likewise, there are no preserved written liturgical instructions for the early Church, and there is hardly enough material in the NT from which to infer how the early Church worshipped.

True. And what should we infer from that?

i) A Catholic like Blosser takes the argument from silence to authorize the use of sacred tradition in order to supplement the many questions left unanswered by Scripture.

ii) But a Protestant takes the argument from silence to indicate that this is a point of liberty. Our worship must be *consistent* with Scripture, but where Scripture is silent, we are free to be creative.

Everything doesn't come down to an utterly stark, binary choice between right and wrong. There can be more than one morally licit option.

iii) If God thought it was important for us to worship according to a particular formula or blueprint, he was certainly in a position to inspire and preserve a set of liturgical instructions.

iv) Indeed, the OT is far more detailed in this respect than the NT. God didn't leave it to mere tradition to fill in the gaps.

v) But there's another reason why the NT takes this laissez-faire attitude. Why is it so important for Catholicism to nail down the right rite? In order to assign sacramental actions to the proper church officer, that's why.

Yet the NT doesn't operate with Catholic assumptions. The NT is fairly silent on these issues because it doesn't come out of the blue. Rather, there is OT precedent to go by.

Who presided at the Passover—which was the foundational OT “sacrament.” Was it a priest? No, a layman. The pater familias.

What is more, it's unlikely that a Levitical priest was always around to circumcise a man-child on the eighth day. Not everyone lived in or near Jerusalem.

Likewise, there's no evidence that a priest had to perform the marriage ceremony. And, once again, it's unlikely that a priest would always be on hand.

Yet there are ample extra-biblical traditions. There is no evidence that these were encoded in writing until several centuries had passed, for the first written canons of the Mass did not appear until after the Edict of Milan.

Which is a problem for verification.

But there are some written indications in extra-biblical sources of what these liturgical traditions from the time of Christ down to the first encoded canons of the Mass must have been like from writings such as the *Didache* (Greek, 'teaching', for *Teaching of the Apostles*) [fragment depicted, right], which speak of the Christians meeting for the 'sacrifice,' and so forth.

i) Among other issues, one of Blosser's oversights is the assumption that Apostolic *practice*, even if we could retrace subapostolic tradition all the way back to the apostles, is automatically normative for the church at all times and places.

But Blosser himself is bound to believe that a certain amount of apostolic practice is culturally conditioned. For example, does Blosser infer from Acts 21:17-26 that Temple attendance or the Nazirite vow is obligatory for all believers? A *practice* is not a *command*.

ii) Yes, with its reference to “sacrifice,” one can see why Blosser would find this extrascriptural tradition appealing—as a bridge on the way to the sacrifice of the Mass. But as one scholar points out:

The use of the word θυσια (sacrifice) in this connection is not to be understood as a reference to the sacrifice of Christ. The word was a common description of prayers, alms and gifts in the usage of the time. It is the “sacrifice” of the people to which reference is being made.³⁸

In addition, how does Catholicism verify that an oral tradition is apostolic or dominical?

This is an important and fair question and deserves a fair answer. It touches on the question of authority, which is differently understood by Protestants (for whom religious authority is ultimately the Bible as they interpret it) and Catholics (for whom religious authority ultimately resides in the Church as interpreter of Divine Revelation, which primarily but not exclusively resides in Scripture). Newman is good on this, and I don't have more time than to briefly reference him here. Protestants see the Prophetic Office as having ceased with the close of OT times -- by which they mean the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, preceding what they term the "intertestamental period." Catholics see it as an ongoing office reposing in the Pope and universal college of bishops within the Church, which constitute the infallible Magisterial (teaching) authority of the Church. (See Cardinal Newman's essay on the "[Lectures on the Prophetic Office of the Church](#)," which, though written before his Catholic conversion, contains many insights.)

I've read his lectures. And in the course of his lectures he defends the Protestant rule of faith while faulting the Catholic rule of faith. So how, exactly, is this appeal supposed to support Blosser's contention?

First, if all bindingly authoritative oral instruction ceased with the death of the last apostle, and if the early churches did not have copies of all the NT books until well after that time, who spoke for the Lord Jesus and the apostles in the interim?

This makes unwarranted assumptions about the rate of dissemination. We know, for example, that Paul had couriers who transported his letters a considerable distance. We also know that some letters were always meant to widely circulate (e.g. Gal 1:3; Col 4:16; 1 Pet 1:1).

How does this make “unwarranted assumptions about the rate of dissemination”? You state that “Paul had couriers who transported his letters a considerable distance, and that we “know that some letters were always meant to widely circulate (e.g. Gal 1:3; Col 4:16; 1 Pet 1:1).” But how does this remotely suggest that every church – or even most of them – within the universal Church were in possession of all the NT books? My question still stands unanswered.

³⁸ ZPEB 2:125a.

Several issues to sort out:

i) My response needn't be any more precise than the objection it addresses. When Blosser uses a very vague descriptor like "well after that time," it's adequate for me to point out that, both in principle and practice, NT documents could disseminate at a very rapid rate. That was certainly the case when an apostle wrote a letter to local church. Indeed, Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson makes that very point:

From the very beginning, as well, writings were exchanged between churches for the purpose of being read aloud in the assembly. The practice is reflected in Act 15 where the apostolic letter is sent to gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (Acts 15:23). Second Corinthians is sent to "all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia" (2 Cor 1:1). Galatians is written for all the churches of that province (Gal 1:2). The Colossians and Laodiceans are to exchange the letters Paul wrote to each (Col 4:16). Ephesians and 1 Peter are circular letters, intended for numerous churches thoroughly a particular region.³⁹

ii) Does this prove that the entire canon of the NT disseminated at a rapid rate? No. But remember that Blosser's claim is equally unverifiable. To say the early churches didn't have the NT books "until well after that time" fails to specify the interval during which they were without the canon.

iii) And let us draw attention to another obvious objection that Blosser overlooks. For one can raise a parallel objection to the rate of *oral* dissemination.

Whether in writing or by word-of-mouth, both the written word and the spoken word employ a personal medium to disseminate the message—whether it's a speaker or courier.

Why does Blosser think it would be more difficult to get a document (or copy of a document) into the hands of the churches than it would be to transmit oral tradition? In both cases, it requires a contact person to communicate the information.

iv) Indeed, one of the primary reasons that we have the NT correspondence is because the letter writer couldn't be everywhere at once.

v) We also need to clear away the straw man argument that oral apostolic

³⁹ L. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Fortress 1999), 597; cf. M. Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Century," R. Bauckham, ed. *The Gospel for All Christians* (Eerdmans 1998), chapter 2.

communication lost its binding authority the instant the last apostle died. Is Blosser even attempting to seriously represent the Protestant position?

Evidently, it is necessary for Blosser to caricature the opposing side in order to justify his conversion to Rome.

But for those of us who wish to be serious, one needs to draw some basic distinctions:

a) If *I* were a personal disciple of, let us say, the Apostle John, and he taught *me* something in private conversation, that would be binding on *me*, and it would continue to be binding on me after he died.

b) But to say it is binding on a third party who wasn't privy to that conversation is a very different claim. At a minimum you would need to establish a rigorous chain-of-custody, with a reliable series of tradents for every link in the chain.

And even then, it would not be on par with Scripture, for oral tradition, however conscientious the process of transmission, is not inspired.

Memory is better at some things than others. Better at recalling events than words.

iv) Blosser also tilts the scales by insisting that all the churches have all the books of the NT. But when should we accede to this all-or-nothing demand?

Blosser originally said: [the apostles died centuries before the NT was fully canonized, and well before each church had copies of all the books that would later make up the NT. Yet someone had to be 'in charge' during these years who had the authority to declare, "This is orthodox," and "That is heterodox."?](#)

Is he claiming that it would be impossible to say *anything* about what is orthodox or heterodox unless a pastor or layman had the complete canon of Scripture? How does that follow?

If an early church pastor only had the Gospels and Pauline Epistles—in addition to the OT—would he be unable to pronounce on matters covered in these documents—even if he would be unable to pronounce on matters unique to other NT books?

And assuming, for the sake of argument, that this would render him incompetent to discharge his pastoral obligations, does Blosser have any evidence that *all* the early churches had a body of *oral* tradition which duplicated the content of *all* the NT documents?

v) Blosser also betrays a rather atomistic understanding of how the NT originally

circulated. It circulated in blocks of material, not individual units (except for Revelation):

The New Testament, as mentioned in chapter 1, began life as four collections (Gospels, Paul, Acts+Catholic epistles, Revelation) in its earliest recensions.⁴⁰

As David Trobisch has documented in some detail, canonical transmission and textual transmission went hand in hand. These were not separate or subsequent processes. For example:

It does not matter when or where the MS was written, whether it is a majuscule or a miniscule, whether the text was written on papyrus or on parchment; and it does not matter whether the text is taken from the Gospels, the letters of Paul, or the Revelation of John. Any MS of the NT will contain a number of contracted terms that have to be decoded by the reader: the so-called nomina sacra, sacred names.⁴¹

Aside from the characteristic notation of nomina sacra there is another fascinating observation concerning the canonical edition: from the very beginning, NT MSS were codices and not scrolls.⁴²

The arrangement and the number of NT writings in the oldest extant MSS of the Christian Bible provide the most important evidence for describing the history of the canon. Methodologically, varied sequences of the writings in the MSS demonstrate that the writings circulated separately at first and were combined to form different collections later. This statement may also be reversed: if the same number of Gospels, letters of Paul, general letters, &c., are presented in the MSS in the same order, it follows that these MSS are based on an established collection.⁴³

The four oldest extant MSS [Codex Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, & Ephraemi Rescriptus], which at the time of the production presented a complete edition of the NT, were produced during the 4-5C.⁴⁴

It seems that none of the four MSS served as a master copy for any of the others and that they were produced independently. Furthermore, each of

⁴⁰ J. Barton, *Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* (WJK 1997), 150.

⁴¹ *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford 2000), 11.

⁴² *Ibid.* 19.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 24.

these four MSS constitutes a complete edition of the Christian Bible. They all contain the writings of the OT followed by the NT.⁴⁵

By comparing the sequence of the writings in the four oldest extant editions of the NT, the four collection units of the MS tradition are easily identified: The four-Gospel Book, the Praxapostolos [i.e. Acts], the Letters of Paul, and the Revelation of John.⁴⁶

Because most of these MSS were produced after the 5C, at a time when the number of the 27 canonical writings had been firmly established, the division of the NT into collection units does not attest to different stages of the canon. The reason for such a division is probably a purely practical one. Smaller books were easier to bind, transport, and read. In case of loss or destruction, only the affected volume had to be replaced. Moreover, readers were not equally interested in each of the four units; some were clearly more popular than other.⁴⁷

Examining the titles of the NT writings, one of the first observations is that they are transmitted with few variants. They are structured the canonical edition in this way: Gospels, Praxapostolos [i.e. Acts], letters of Paul, and Revelation of John.⁴⁸

The titles serve to group the individual writings into collection units. The organizing function is clear for those letters that are numbered: the letters to the Corinthians, Thessalonians, and Timothy, and the letters of Peter and John.⁴⁹

Three additional groups are easily discerned: the four Gospels, the seven general letters, and the letters of Paul. The titles of the remaining two writings, Acts and Revelation, contain a genre designation in their first part, just like the titles of the three groups do.⁵⁰

The archetype of the collection most probably was entitled *he kaine diatheke*, 'The New Testament.' Due to their fragmentary character, the oldest MSS do not preserve the title page. The uniform evidence of the extant tradition, however, strongly suggests that this was the title of the

⁴⁵ Ibid. 25.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 38.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 41.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 41.

archetype.⁵¹

How is one to plausibly imagine the transition from the partially oral framework of authoritative instruction (OT + teachings of Jesus and apostles) to a wholly written framework (OT + NT) required by this hypothesis? Gregory Krehbiel offers a wry scenario: ‘One imagines all the churches dutifully obeying Paul’s oral instructions on the Eucharist [1 Cor 11:34] and anxiously awaiting the publication in the Antiochian Post of the last apostle’s obituary, at which point they are to rewrite their book of church order and eliminate everything based on oral instructions.’[31] The whole idea, of course, seem ridiculous, but scarcely more so than some of the assertions commonly made in this connection (see n. 30).

What is ridiculous is the assumption that orality preceded textuality, as if you had to have an oral stage of transmission prior to a textual stage.

Nothing. What is implausible is the assumption that the textual tradition absorbed everything intended for the ongoing governance of the Church from the tradition of oral teaching and instruction -- as suggested in Krehbiel’s wry scenario above.

Notice that he’s changing the subject. He originally asserted a two-stage process from orality to literality: **how is one to plausibly imagine the transition from the partially oral framework of authoritative instruction (OT + teachings of Jesus and apostles) to a wholly written framework (OT + NT) required by this hypothesis?**

i) My reply was directly responsive to that claim. Now, having been answered on the terms of the original question, he changes the question—which is a tacit admission that his original objection fell flat.

ii) And I’ve already addressed Krehbiel’s straw man argument, adopted by Blosser (see above).

[Note: skipping over some of Hays’ arguments, I pick up where he takes Newman’s oft-quoted statement (“to be deep into history is to cease to be Protestant”) and inverts it to read: “To be deep in Bible history is to cease to be a Catholic.”]

But this is nonsense, as any careful reading of the patristics will show. It was Newman’s own reading of the patristics that convinced him that he, as an Anglican, stood on the wrong side of the divide between the Athanasius and Arius on the question of authority. It was also Newman who discovered that there was more evidence among the patristics for belief in things like Purgatory than there was for belief in the Trinity. Of course, he embraced both; but the point is that the record of patristic history is an empirical one open for the inspection by all willing

⁵¹ Ibid. 43-44.

to examine it, and that it confutes the historical conceits of most Protestants. I would encourage each reader to examine it carefully and honestly for himself and draw his own conclusions. My view is that the Catholic Church's credentials, at this point, are utterly irrefutable.

i) How is this the least bit responsive to what I said? What I said is that to be deep in Bible history is to cease to be a Catholic. What Blosser does is to defend Newman's original formulation rather than my reformulation. But appealing to the church fathers to show that Catholicism has a better claim on Athanasius than the Anglican via media is irrelevant to my own claim.

ii) In addition, disproving Anglicanism wouldn't prove Catholicism. There are more than two options. How does invoking a Greek Father like Athanasius (to take his own example) select for Roman Catholicism rather than Greek Orthodoxy?

Catholics have no historical consciousness or groundedness when it comes to the history of the NT church or the covenant community in OT times.

I'm afraid the writer of such words has little acquaintance with the historical biblical scholarship of Catholics. The French and Spanish and German and Italian scholarship here would take pages to relate. However, even sticking to Catholic converts, one may reference numerous biblical scholars who found the OT and NT data confirmatory of their Catholic convictions – including Kenneth Cooper (former NT professor at Covenant Seminary, St. Louis), Kenneth Howell (former NT professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, MS), William Farmer (Prof. of NT at the University of Dallas), Scott Hahn (graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and author of many biblical studies), Robert Sungenis (graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary and author of many biblical studies), not to mention the likes of John Henry Newman, Ronald Knox, Henry G. Graham, etc. – none of whom anyone in his right mind would accuse of “having no historical consciousness.” So it is difficult to find your generalization credible.

i) And name-dropping is not an *argument* to the contrary. If name-dropping carries the day, then we could cite far more Evangelical Bible scholars who have not crossed the Tiber.

ii) Blosser must also be a pretty desperate to cite anyone as erratic as Robert Sungenis. And if he's going to cite Scott Hahn, why not add Gerry Matatics to the list. Oh, but Matatics is a Presbyterian turned sedevacantist, so that wouldn't be rather subversive to the point that Blosser is trying to make.

iii) For a real life example of how the lack of historical consciousness or groundedness infects and afflicts the very highest echelons of Catholic deliberations, just consider the following insider's exposé:

What we hardly ever heard in Rome as students, but what I have already worked out in my Tübingen inaugural lecture, is that the New Testament, patristic and in part even the early mediaeval understanding of the church had a different orientation: not on a monarchical head but on the community of believers—the *communio fidelium*, and the ministries in the service of the community.⁵²

Even now, 40 years later, I get extremely angry when I once again pick up my original Council documents and begin to thumb through the large-format volume of the revised draft of the Constitution on the Church, bound in grey. The questions that I raised at the time are in the margin: objection after objection. How could such a deeply contradictory second draft decree come into being between the sessions? And what were the disputed point? Today I recognize even more clearly than at the time that the issue was not and is not the finger points of theology but the basic question whether the *communio* model of the church oriented on the Bible, or the mediaeval absolutist pyramidal model, would again win through. A look behind the scenes shows how this contradictory Council constitution came about.⁵³

The new draft is a compromise product... Of seven alternative drafts, that by Monsignor Philips of Louvain prevails—why?... The small ‘Belgia working party’ (*squadra belga*) from the University of Louvain, very efficiently supported by the Rector of the Pontifical Belgian College, Monsignor A. Prignon, have collaborated admirably. And in their primate, Cardinal Suenens, they have probably the best strategist and orator of the Second Vatican Council, who moreover is responsible for the schema on the church in the Co-coordinating Commission between the two sessions.⁵⁴

But Gérard Philips has made the main contribution, problematical as it is... Though far from having the theological stature of Congar, Rahner or Schillebeeckx, the short friendly prelate surpasses them all as a tactician and formulator of consensus texts (tested by long years in the Belgian Senate)... Monsignor Philips sees himself as the indefatigable mediator between Curia (call ‘minority’) and Council (called ‘majority’), between ‘integrist’ and ‘progressives,’ old schemata and new efforts.⁵⁵

But at whose expense? Today more than ever I am convinced that this is at the expense of the truth—above all the truth of the Bible, the foundation document of the church. For one thing unfortunately escapes even the

⁵² H. Küng, *My Struggle for Freedom: Memoirs* (Eerdmans 2003), 348.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 349.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 349.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 350.

learned and wily Louvain dogmatic theologian: a solid knowledge of the current state of discussion in New Testament exegesis. He uses biblical texts dogmatically, supported by one or two traditional exegetes.⁵⁶

Once in an aisle of St Peter's I put to Philips the test questions: 'Who really celebrated the eucharist in the community of Corinth when the apostle Paul was abroad (say in Ephesus)?' Philips—unfortunately like Congar and others later—proves perplexed, and innocently asks what I mean. I tell him that it is clear from 1 Corinthians (and this isn't just the Tübingen perspective but that of critical exegesis generally) that in Corinth there was no bishop or Presbyter (Timothy or Titus) whom Paul could have addressed when abuses at the celebration of the eucharist were reported to him... In his letter to Corinthians Paul doesn't address any official but the community as a whole: "Wait for one another" and so on. What does that mean? It means that the community of Corinth celebrated the eucharist even without the apostle, and even without a bishop or presbyter. And what follows from that for today? It follows that according to the New Testament, Catholic communities, say in Communist China, indeed if need be any group of Christians today, can celebrate a eucharist which is theologically valid even without a priest, even if perhaps it is also illegal according to church law! And Protestant communities with pastors who don't stand in the apostolic succession of ministry can celebrate the eucharist in a quite valid way.⁵⁷

And our scheme on the church? It completely ignores such fundamental problems. Philips? I get the impression that he isn't clear about the scope of these questions.⁵⁸

This is the sort of thing that was feeding into an ecumenical council—the very top of the food chain. What came out reflects what went in.

But then, in all seriousness, what is the partisan of *sola scriptura* to say about those who remembered the oral instructions of the apostles—concerning, say, the Eucharistic liturgy—who perhaps even wrote down and preserved these, even though they never made it into the NT canon?

That's irrelevant to the epistemic situation of a 21C Christian.

How is it "irrelevant to the epistemic situation of a 21C Christian" whether a partisan of *sola scriptura* can say whether oral instructions concerning, say, the

⁵⁶ Ibid. 350.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 350-51.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 351.

Eucharistic liturgy, made it into the canon or not? Partisans of non-liturgical traditions of worship (what the historian, Joseph Strayer, called “four walls and a sermon”) may consider liturgy an arbitrary matter, but Catholics do not, because they believe God is to be worshipped, not as *we* wish, but as *He* wishes -- in a manner divinely revealed through Sacred Tradition, which involves at its center the sacramental presentation of the once-for-all, atoning sacrifice of Christ.

i) And if the right worship of God depends on a particular liturgy, then God was more than able to *inscripturate* dominical or apostolic instructions to that effect.

ii) I'd also reiterate that there's no way to verify oral tradition at this distance from the events.

The writings of the early Church are filled with extrabiblical sayings of Jesus, practices of the Christian community, liturgical and Eucharistic formulas, and so forth, which presuppose the divine origin and authority of these things.[32]

You replied: “[The writings of the early Church are] filled with apocryphal sayings.”

Since, most Protestants disagree with Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox over what constitutes the authentic canon of Scripture, they have different understandings and usages of the term "apocryphal." Catholics, for example, do not traditionally equate the *Deuterocanonical* books with "apocryphal" writings (see "Apocrypha," *Catholic Encyclopedia*). Accordingly, you neglect to distinguish between “apocryphal” sayings, here, which Catholics also recognize as "apocryphal" (i.e., *pseudepigrapha*, falsely attributed writings professing to have been written by biblical personages or their associates) and extra-biblical writings, which not only Catholics but many other Christians accept as perfectly orthodox, if non-canonical, writings, such as the patristic *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, and so forth.

This is not simply a Catholic v. Protestant issue. For a premier Catholic scholar like John Meier devotes a lengthy chapter to historically suspect quality (to put it charitably) of the *Agrapha* and the Apocryphal Gospels.⁵⁹

As is often the case, Blosser is equally unreliable in accurately representing either the Catholic or the Protestant side of the debate.

What is the Protestant Partisan to do with [ecclesial] instructions and practices that claim to be apostolic but were never put in writing in the NT?

Blosser is also operating with a rather quaint and outmoded notion of tradition, as

⁵⁹ J. Meier, *A Marginal Jew* (Doubleday 1991), volume 1, chapter 5.

if sacred tradition has reference to a fixed body of extrascriptural instructions which Christ privately communicated to the Apostles.

Catholics distinguish between lower-case “tradition,” which refers to everything that is passed down to us from the past, and upper-case “Tradition” (as in “Sacred Tradition”), which refers to that part of tradition (such as the decrees of the ecumenical councils) which are understood to be binding upon Christian faith. There’s nothing curious or outmoded or odd about this. It’s simply a result of the Catholic recognition of an authoritative interpreter of tradition, competent to sort out what is binding from what is not. We believe in what was passed down from Athanasius (the trinitarian dogma), not what is passed down from Arius (a denial of Christ’s divinity).

Observe the blatant equivocation of terms as he shifts ground from the definition of tradition in terms of apostolic instruction or practice never put into writing (by them) to the redefinition of tradition in terms of authoritatively interpreted tradition. In appealing to tradition, a Catholic apologist will alternate between these two very different traditions, trading on one when they mean and other, and citing evidence for one when they mean another.

There is no reason to suppose that early Church practices are contrary to apostolic teaching or were intended to be only temporary, simply because we can find no explicit description of them in Scripture today.

There’s no reason to assume that [early Church practices] weren’t [contrary to apostolic teaching or intended to be temporary].

But there is. From the beginning right up through the Middle Ages, Catholics were constantly set on reconciling and justifying their beliefs and practices with Scripture. Anyone versed in early fathers such as Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine, and Chrysostom knows this. And this is true even where the beliefs and practices in question are alien to Evangelicalism, such as beliefs concerning prayers for the dead, purgatory, Mary’s perpetual virginity, etc., etc.

This is viciously circular. For when, by his own admission, tradition becomes the hermeneutical prism through which the Bible is viewed, then, by definition, tradition can never be in conflict with Scripture since there is no direct access to Scripture, since Scripture must be filtered through the tinted lens of tradition.

[Note: Hays next proceeds criticize my reference to Krehbiel’s citation of 2 Chronicles 29:25 and 35:4 (as a biblical example of a reference to extra-biblical divine commands now lost to history) by stating that it represents an “anachronistic definition of sola Scripture . . .” He also claims that I equivocate over the meaning of “tradition,” even though “Blosser knows perfectly well that

not all tradition ranks as sacred tradition.” He then says that it’s irrelevant that ancient kings of Israel had access to “non-canonical” sources of information, because we don’t have those sources anymore.

First, how Krehbiel’s or my definition of *sola scriptura* is “anachronistic” is not explained.

That’s because I already explained what I meant at an earlier point in the same rejoinder:

Sola Scriptura is tied to the end-stage of progressive revelation—the point at which all revelation to be inscripturated has been inscripturated.

Second, it’s true indeed that I know perfectly well that not all tradition ranks as sacred tradition. But, in the first place, how does this square with your earlier dismissal of my appeal to “sacred tradition” as “a rather quaint and outmoded notion of tradition, as if sacred tradition has reference to a fixed body of extrascriptural instructions which Christ privately communicated to the Apostles” (a distorted caricature of my view);

Simple: Blosser equivocates, depending on which definition is apologetically expedient at the moment.

I’m not accusing him of conscious duplicity. Rather, the duplicity is built into the way in which modern Catholicism attempts to retrofit traditional Catholicism. Modern Catholicism can’t make a clear break with the past without loss of face. So there are these indigestible tensions in modern Catholicism.

And, in the second place, since you conflate “sacred tradition” with that which accords with what you happen to find in Scripture, the possibility of a normative extra-biblical category of “Sacred Tradition” is excluded a priori and without the warrant of credible argument.

Two problems:

i) I don’t conflate Scripture with sacred tradition since I don’t operate with the category of sacred tradition in the first place.

ii) I deploy a number of arguments for my position.

Third, you classify the divine commands referenced in 2 Chronicles 29:25 and 35:4 as “non-canonical” since the commands are nowhere to be found in our present OT canon, but you thereby also assume a principle at odds with the cited texts, which clearly assume that the commands of the Lord can be conveyed through the recollected words of prophets long deceased and implemented as

having a continuing binding authority, even though no written records of these commands survived in Scripture.

I classify them as non-canonical for three reasons:

- i) Blosser has presented no evidence that these instructions were ever *written*.
- ii) Blosser has presented no evidence that these were ever *inscripturated*.
- iii) Blosser has presented no evidence that these were ever *canonical*.

Also take note of the fact that what we have here is an ascending order of two necessary conditions which must be met to form a sufficient condition:

- i) Something cannot be canonical unless it is in the canon.
- ii) Something cannot be in the canon unless it is inscripturated.
- iii) Something cannot be inscripturated unless it is written down.

(iii) is a necessary, but insufficient condition, of (ii). Commitment to writing does not, ipso facto, make something Scripture. But commitment to writing is a prerequisite for inscripturation. Oral scripture is oxymoronic.

ii) is a necessary, but insufficient condition, of (i). Not all inspired writing is canonical. In the providence of God, not all inspired communication, whether spoken or written, is preserved for posterity.

Blosser merely stipulates that these traditions were written traditions, Scriptural traditions, and canonical traditions—subsequently lost in process of transmission.

Aside from the complete lack of evidence for any of these interlocking assumptions, whether individually or collectively considered, Blosser's position ironically represents the classically cultic version of church history, according to which there are long *lost* books of the Bible which must be restored or rediscovered by modern prophets like Joseph Smith or modern scholars like the Jesus Seminar or Bart Ehrman.

Was Blosser a ghostwriter for *Stigmata* or *The Da Vinci Code*?

In other words, Hezekiah and Solomon accepted as “Sacred Tradition” the commands of God nowhere recorded in the OT. Your view would exclude such a possibility. You would have to disregard any extra-biblical tradition such as they referenced as though it had no binding authority.

More of Blosser's confusions:

i) My view does not exclude such a *possibility*. But my faith isn't built on bare possibilities.

Many things are abstractly possible. Yet that is not reason to believe that they are true.

ii) And, yes, absent a record, there's no reason to believe in the existence of unrecorded traditions. That's a pretty basic rule of evidence.

iii) Blosser's attempted counterexamples prove my point rather than his. He can only illustrate his contention by citing scriptural evidence for the temporary existence of these extrascriptural traditions.

That in no way validates appeal to extrascriptural traditions for which we have no extant documentary evidence, much less scriptural evidence.

iv) He also ignores another distinction I already drew, and that is, I reiterate, the distinction between the period of public revelation and the terminus of public revelation. Citing examples of extrabiblical traditions during OT times—or NT times, for that matter—is irrelevant to the post-biblical situation.

Naturally, during the life and times of OT prophets and NT apostles, you would have a living memory of some things they said which were never committed to writing. If Samuel issues a divine directive to Saul, or Nathan issues a divine directive to David, that oracle has binding authority on Saul or Nathan. But it doesn't have the same binding authority on a third-party, centuries after the fact, when the prophetic provenance or verbal accuracy of an attributed saying can no longer be verified.

Another illustration of the same principle can be found in the Book of Acts. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) imposed upon the first Christians in Antioch the prohibition of blood and the meat of strangled animals, and this decree of the bishops in Jerusalem was identified with the will of the Holy Spirit. In the absence of any biblical text rescinding this decree, would you understand Christians in Antioch as still bound by this prohibition, and, if not, why not? Would it be a transgression of God's will for a citizen of Antioch, say, traveling in the UK to sample Scottish Black Pudding (blood pudding)? Catholics, who understand the Church as embodying an ongoing and living prophetic office, have no problem with such questions, since the Church is understood as having the authority to rescind decrees pertaining to matters of discipline (not dogma), such as the prohibition of eating meat on Fridays, etc. But how would an advocate of *sola scriptura* adjudicate the matter?

i) How is this an illustration of the same principle? It's a completely different

issue.

ii) Notice that, according to Blosser, the subapostolic church (i.e. church of Rome) has the authority to rescind Biblical commands.

iii) I would consider the implicit or explicit rationale for the decree. Is the rationale culturebound or transcultural in time and space? What problem is it targeting?

And here I'd follow the exegesis of Ben Witherington.⁶⁰

That's the principled way of answering these questions: through painstaking exegesis rather than the *deus ex machina* of arbitrary, ecclesiastical authority.

Sola scriptura represents a minority position among Bible-believing Christians; and historically it is a relative novelty, entertained by nobody explicitly prior to Wyclif in the 14th century

Historically, most Christians were illiterate. Historically, most Christians didn't own private copies of the Bible. So to talk about the majority or minority position among "Bible-believing" Christians is pretty anachronistic.

The question of what percentage of Christendom was literate or owned copies of the Bible is altogether irrelevant to the question of whether or not they believed the Bible to be the exclusive authority over faith and morals. The expression "Bible-believing Christians" as applied to Evangelicals may be anachronistic as applied to ancient and medieval Christians. Indeed, I willingly assert that it is. However, it is not anachronistic to suggest that they believed the Bible. St. Jerome: "Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ." However, the view that the *Bible alone* was to be regarded as authoritative in faith and morals is historically a relative novelty, entertained by nobody explicitly prior to perhaps Wyclif in the 14th century" and Hus in the 15th.

i) Blosser has very odd rules of evidence, which no doubt accounts for his conversion to Rome.

Far from being *altogether irrelevant* to the question at hand, when he claims that sola Scriptura represents the minority position among Christians, &c., it strikes me as *wholly relevant* for me to point out that most Christian prior to the modern era never read the Bible—but got all their information secondhand. As such, they were in no position to render an independent judgment one way or the other.

ii) Blosser's claims makes about as much sense as saying that most members of a

⁶⁰ B. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans 1998), 461-67.

religious cult believe that a particular box contains the true baby tooth of Jesus. Mind you, 99% of the Holy Christic Baby-Toothers (the *Toothers*, for short) have never had a chance to look inside the box to see for themselves. Rather, they take the word of the cult-leader, who's the great-great-great-great grandson of the patriarch, by unbroken genealogical succession.

Indeed, even the current cult-leader, despite being the High Priest of Dentology, has never seen what's inside the box. He is taking the word of his great-great-great-great granddad, who's taking the word of his great-great-great granddad, who's taking the word of his great-great-great granddad, who's taking the word of his great granddad, who's taking the word of his granddad, who's taking the word of his dad, who—according to family lore—bought the relic at a Coptic bazaar on the outskirts of Cairo.

On the other hand, there are a handful of doubters who suspect the box is empty. Indeed, their suspicion is a historical novelty in the venerable history of the cult.

Does Blosser really think the best way to decide whether there's a baby tooth of Jesus inside the box is to tabulate the number of people who believe there's a baby tooth of Jesus inside the box, even if 99% percent of the Toothers have never seen the inside of the box?

Perhaps this is the fundamental difference between Catholics and Protestants. Catholics never lift the lid and peer inside, whereas a Protestant will insist on opening the box to check for himself. Hideously individualistic, I know.

The claim that Scripture is 'self-interpreting' is self-serving and sophistical at this point, because conflicting interpretations make this claim.

What is sophistical is Blosser's assertion that sola Scriptura is equivalent to the claim that Scripture is self-interpreting. But sola Scriptura doesn't depend on that claim.

Have I asserted that *sola scriptura* is equivalent to the claim that Scripture is self-interpreting? Where? I could be wrong, but I don't think I make that equation anywhere. They are two different (though not unrelated) assertions. Having said that, it is not I but my seminary professors at Westminster Theological Seminary who repeatedly drew the connection between these two items for me from the Protestant Reformers on up through contemporary Reformed theologians.

He makes the statement about how self-serving and sophistical is a belief in the self-interpreting character of Scripture in the context of an attack on sola Scriptura. If there's no connection between the two in his own mind, then, by his own admission, it's irrelevant to his case against sola Scriptura.

And how does Blosser establish [the authority that the Catholic Church claims]?
By what non-circular evidence?

Anybody who knows anything about the nature of logical demonstration knows that there is no disinterested way of conclusively establishing in a cogent way that will be accepted by all rational people (1) the existence of God, (2) that the world is more than five minutes old, having popped into existence with all the appearance it then had of age, (3) the existence of other minds, (4) the reliability of the deliveries of our sense perception of a sensible world external to our minds, let alone (5) *sola scriptura* or (6) the authority of the Catholic Church.

This isn't to say that rational decisions about these sorts of questions cannot be made. They can and should. But any Protestant who has read Plantinga's work should know that the days of simple foundationalist evidentialism are over. That theory is unequal to its task. There is an important place for evidence, to be sure, and I have already spoken for the empirical record of Church history; but the picture is more complicated by that. I refer interested readers to the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar Of Assent*.

i) The illative sense does not select for Roman Catholicism. There is nothing in Newman's explication of either the nature or range of the illative sense which, ipso facto, points us in the direction of Roman Catholicism. Referring us to the illative sense does not, in any measure, refer us to Catholicism.

There are men like Michael Polanyi, George Mavrodes, and Basil Mitchell who operate with a similar epistemology. But this has not led them to Rome.

ii) Moreover, the illative sense is less concerned with public evidence than private evidence. Not, what is the evidence for Roman Catholicism? But, how do individuals arrive at what they believe?—which is intransitive and person-variable. Indeed, Newman himself is explicit on both of these points:

In these provinces of inquiry egotism is true modesty. In {385} religious inquiry each of us can speak only for himself, and for himself he has a right to speak. His own experiences are enough for himself, but he cannot speak for others: he cannot lay down the law; he can only bring his own experiences to the common stock of psychological facts.⁶¹

iii) The question of how, if at all, Blosser is able to establish the claims of Rome is hardly a side issue. Is this the best he can do?

Imagine, for example, how an Armenian or Orthodox or Coptic Christian would often agree with Blosser's conclusions, but simply plug his own church into the

⁶¹ <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/grammar/chapter10-1.html>

premise.

Indeed . . . just as there is, not far from here, a Gooch Gap Turkey Covian Baptist Church -- a denomination unto itself -- which likely claims to be *the* true Church of Christ. However, there is a *grammar* of assent, as Newman not only claims but argues persuasively. One must adjudicate between the conflicting claims, assessing each on its own terms. Do the Eastern Orthodox Christians do justice to the claims of their early Church fathers regarding the See of Rome, for example? The fact that questions such as these are hotly contested, you should agree, does not make us relativists who deny there is no final answer to these matters.

Let's remember what I was responding to. This was Blosser's original claim: The Catholic is not asked to submit to the Church because the Church says so, but because God says so, and because God has appointed the Church and her lawfully ordained leaders as administrators of His commission.

To which I asked: **Once again, how does he establish that claim? And how does he identify true Church?**

Imagine, for example, how an Armenian or Orthodox or Coptic Christian would often agree with Blosser's conclusions, but simply plug his own church into the premise.

How does Blosser's present reply begin to answer the question?

Sola scriptura is self-referentially inconsistent also because the Bible contains no inspired index of its own contents and cannot even be identified as a Revelation except on extrabiblical grounds of tradition, in violation of sola scriptura.

This is either simplistic or tendentious. (1) True, the Bible lacks a formal index. But the Bible has an informal index in the form of intertextuality. The Bible is a highly cross-referential work; (2) the Bible also falls into various units, as a concentric subset of larger units . . . ; (3) there are the individual claims of individual books – [one] doesn't need a collective claim to establish a collection if one can establish the collection distributively, one book at a time; (4) to say that we cannot identify the Bible, or individual books thereof, as divine revelation apart from tradition is simply question-begging; and (5) It also invites an infinite regress. How do we identify authentic tradition?

How does any of this get you a complete biblical canon? Granted, Peter obliquely references certain "difficult writings" of Paul as 'scripture', but he doesn't say which. Further, as mentioned earlier, Luther was ready to throw out four of the NT books as "non-canonical," because he saw them as theologically opposed to his own understandings. I leave it to the reader to judge what is "simply question-

begging” here. How do we identify authentic tradition? If there is a prophetic office, we don’t need to. The Church has done that work for us throughout the entirety of her long well-attested tradition.

Several issues here:

i) Blosser is evidently ignorant of what I mean by intertextuality. Here’s an example:

Intertextuality is the study of links between and among texts. Many written texts, especially biblical ones, were written with the full awareness of other texts in mind. Their authors assumed the readers would be thoroughly knowledgeable of those other texts. The NT books, for example, assume a comprehensive understanding of the OT. Many OT texts also assume their readers were aware of and knowledgeable of other OT texts.⁶²

Intertextuality can either be *explicit*, as, for example, the verbatim quotation of Micah 3:112 in Jeremiah 26:18, or *implicit* as is shown in Isaiah’s question, “Who is this one who comes from Edom?” (Isa 63:1). In this passage, Isaiah’s description of the bloodied warrior wreaking revenge upon God’s enemies contains many textual clues that link the passage with the poetic texts of the Pentateuch. The reader who is in touch with the themes and images of the Pentateuch will have no trouble answering the question “Who is this one?”... Intertextuality can also consist of allusions such as Isa 1:9, “Unless the Lord of Hosts had spared us a remnant, we would have been like Sodom and like Gomorrah,” referring to the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19.⁶³

Sailhamer gives many other examples to illustrate the principle. Intertextuality is not a rare, incidental feature of Scripture, but a pervasive, multilayered phenomenon, based on the progressively unfolding principle of promise and fulfillment.

Any major commentary on any book of the Bible will isolate and identify many examples of intertextuality, for that is a key feature to the interpretation of the book.

Intertextuality is intratestamental (between OT *or* NT books) as well as intertestamental (between OT *and* NT books).

Will intertextuality get you every book of the Bible? Will it include every

⁶² J. Sailhamer, Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach (Zondervan 1995), 212-13.

⁶³ Ibid. 213; cf. 237-39.

canonical book and exclude every noncanonical book? Not necessary. But this doesn't mean that we can dismiss the importance of intertextuality in establishing the canon of Scripture.

a) The fact that a particular line of evidence may be insufficient to establish a complex proposition doesn't mean that this particular line of evidence is useless. It may be one among several lines of evidence in a cumulative case.

b) Intertextuality also shows what is wrong with a purely extrinsic approach to the canon, as if the only evidence is external evidence.

c) Apropos (b), the canon of Scripture is not an arbitrary anthology of unrelated books. Intertextuality documents the degree to which these books hang together in an intricate pattern of weave and crossweave.

ii) Another line of evidence, as I said before, is the evidence for each individual book. And this, in turn, is also part of a cumulative case. If you could establish one book at a time, then eventually you could establish all 66 books. This procedure has two different aspects:

a) Internal evidence

b) External evidence

Will this stepwise method get you every book of the Bible? Not necessarily. But as with intertextuality, we are not confronted with an all-or-nothing dilemma. Blosser likes to act as though, if one tool won't do everything, it won't do anything.

Intertextuality can supplement the stepwise method.

iii) Suppose, for the sake of argument, that these lines of evidence fall short of the complete canon. Would that make it a failure?

Failure in reference to what? What's the alternative?

Blosser's alternative is the Church. The Church can establish the canon.

But, of course, this only pushes the question back a step. How does he establish the Church?

Can he establish the Church apart from the Bible? Suppose, for the sake of argument, that all of his prooftexts for Catholicism (e.g. Mt 16:18; Lk 22:22; Jn 11:51; 21:15-16; Acts 15; 1 Tim 3:15) do, indeed, single out Catholicism as the implicit or intended referent.

But this assumes that Matthew, Luke, John, and 1 Timothy are canonical. Yet, if only the true church can establish the canon, then how can it authorize the canon, and then invoke the canon to authorize itself?

Although a complete canon is better than an incomplete canon, even an incomplete canon is better than a nonexistent canon. Something is better than nothing.

After all, the OT Jews frequently functioned with an incomplete canon. For example, the Exodus generation only had the Pentateuch.

One of the problems with Catholicism is not that it can't give us *everything*, but that it can't give us *anything*.

I happen to think that between intertextuality and the stepwise method, you can get the full canon of Scripture. But even if we couldn't, consider the alternative:

The choice which confronts us is not between everything and something, but between something and nothing.

[Note: When I asked how the partisan of *sola scriptura* establishes the canonicity of individual books, whether by individual guidance by the Holy Spirit, or tradition, but without recourse to ecclesiastical authority, Hays did not answer the question. Instead, he replied as follows.]

I don't employ either approach, but to answer the question on its own grounds, why is it unreasonable to suppose that God would witness to the Church, but not to individuals? And doesn't Blosser's belief in the indefectibility of the Church boil down to a subset of individuals within the church, viz. the papacy and episcopate?

i) Except that, in my reply, I *did* answer the question. I answered it the negative. And I presented my alternative. That is certainly an answer.

ii) At the same time, Blosser poses a false dichotomy, twice-over.

a) To begin with, one can very easily appeal to tradition without recourse to ecclesiastical authority. Tradition can function as a historical witness.

Using the church fathers in this way is no different than using Cicero, Josephus, Tacitus, or Julius Caesar to help us reconstruct Roman history.

But this does not assume the authority of tradition. To the contrary, you need to sift tradition. To take one example, what was a church father in a position to know given his time, place, education, and circle of contacts?

b) From a Protestant perspective, the evidential value of the church fathers is not all of a piece. On the one hand, some of the church fathers may be important historical witnesses because they are close enough in time and/or place to the Apostolic era that they may enjoy some direct knowledge of the apostolic era, or nearabouts (e.g. Justin, Ignatius, Papias, Polycarp, Clement of Rome).

c) The other church fathers, being later in time, lack this chronological proximity, but some of them compensate by being very well informed (e.g. Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Eusebius, Jerome, Julius Africanus). Indeed, some of our information about the early church fathers comes to us from later church fathers.

d) Then are also church fathers who shed much light on the state of the subapostolic church (e.g. Cyprian, Epiphanius).

e) Finally, you have a number of Nicene and Post-Nicene fathers who, with a few exceptions (e.g. Jerome, Eusebius) are simply too late to be of much value, if any, as historical witnesses to the apostolic era.

f) Moreover, there's a big difference between what a church father actually claims about apostolic teaching, and claims made for the church father on the basis of his association with the Apostles.

For example, a Catholic apologist will cite Ignatius in support of the monarchical episcopate. And then, based on Ignatius' timeframe, he will backdate that to the apostles.

Notice, though, that Ignatius himself doesn't make that attribution. Ignatius doesn't impute his views to this or that Apostle. If he did, he would be quoted to that effect. Rather, the Catholic apologist is making that imputation on behalf of Ignatius. Putting words in his mouth.

g) Moreover, the church fathers aren't equally likely to be either right or wrong about everything they say in reference to the past. It isn't a case in which they are either right about everything, or wrong about everything. One has to ask what they were in a position to know in any given instance.

iii) Furthermore, it isn't a forced option between either internal or external evidence. Both lines of evidence are relevant.

iv) What's more, the witness of the Spirit is not irrelevant to this process. You can't establish the canon by this appeal alone, but the reason that Christians believe the Bible is because they are regenerate.

Regeneracy is not a substitute for evidence. Regeneracy opens the mind to the evidence. The evidence must still be presented to the regenerate mind.

So a regenerate state of mind is a necessary, if insufficient, condition, for faith in the Bible.

It's not unreasonable to suppose that God would witness to both the Church and to individuals. What *is* unreasonable is assuming that God witnesses only to individuals but not corporately in a decisively authoritative manner to the Church, which is what you have in the unrefutable data of hundreds of Protestant denominations headed by individuals and groups who claim to be guided by *sola scriptura* and by the Holy Spirit, yet teach radically antithetical doctrines about the most basic things Christ commanded us: "Go . . . baptize," "teach them to observe all that I have commanded you," "do this in remembrance of me," etc. In acts 15 the bishops of the Church identified their decree with the will of the Holy Spirit, and none of us blink an eye. Today hundreds of Protestant teachers claim the guidance of the Holy Spirit while contradicting one another. Folks, we have a problem. The Holy Spirit doesn't contradict Himself.

Multiple errors:

i) I'm not claiming that Protestant teachers are, in fact, guided by the Holy Spirit. Rather, I merely point out that, given Catholic assumption, one could construct a parallel argument for, say, Protestant Pentecostalism.

ii) There is also a basic fallacy in Blosser's argument. The fact that charismatic teachers contradict each other does, indeed, invalidate their charismatic claims, in the sense that they can't all be right.

However, this is not an argument for Roman Catholicism, since the Pope is just one more charismatic teacher who contradicts every other charismatic teacher.

iii) Nearly every Christian denomination does carry out the command to baptize and observe the Lord's Supper. The Salvation Army is a rare exception.

iv) Then you have his slipshod appeal to Acts 15, which blunders on a couple of elementary points:

a) The Council of Jerusalem involved the entire church body: Apostles, elders, and laymen. So it was not a council of "bishops."

b) Moreover, it is grossly anachronistic to equate monarchical bishops with local, NT elders. Luke Timothy Johnson has already made this point (see above), as

have other scholars.⁶⁴

Doesn't Blosser's belief in the indefectibility of the Church boil down to a subset of individuals within the church, viz. the papacy and episcopate?

The indefectibility of the Church does not "boil down to a subset of individuals," understood as Protestants understand autonomous atomistic membership of the laity.

Is this how Protestants understand church membership? Blosser is in serious need of a reality check. Let's look at a couple of historic definitions on this subject:

The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all.

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.

Unto this catholic visible Church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and does, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.

This catholic Church has been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.

The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth to worship God according to His will.⁶⁵

The universal Church, which may be called invisible (in respect of the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) consists of the entire number of the elect, all those who have been, who are, or who shall be gathered into

⁶⁴ Cf. R. Beckwith, *Elders in Every City: The Origin and Role of the Ordained Ministry* (Paternoster 2003).

⁶⁵ WCF 25:1-5.

one under Christ, Who is the Head. This universal Church is the wife, the body, the fullness of Him Who fills all in all.

All people throughout the world who profess the faith of the Gospel and obedience to Christ on its terms, and who do not destroy their profession by any errors which contradict or overthrow Gospel fundamentals, or by unholy behaviour, are visible saints and may be regarded as such. All individual congregations ought to be constituted of such people.

The purest churches under Heaven are subject to mixture and error, and some have degenerated so much that they have ceased to be churches of Christ and have become synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless Christ always has had, and always will (to the end of time) have a kingdom in this world, made up of those who believe in Him, and make profession of His name.

In the exercise of the authority which has been entrusted to Him, the Lord Jesus calls to Himself from out of the world, through the ministry of His Word, by His Spirit, those who are given to Him by His Father, so that they may walk before Him in all the ways of obedience which He prescribes to them in His Word. Those who are thus called, He commands to walk together in particular societies or churches, for their mutual edification, and for the due performance of that public worship, which He requires of them in the world.

The members of these churches are saints because they have been called by Christ, and because they visibly manifest and give evidence of their obedience to that call by their profession and walk. Such saints willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving themselves up to the Lord and to one another, according to God's will, in avowed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel.⁶⁶

In neither definition is church membership understood in atomistic, autonomous terms.

The Pope and bishops (consenting with him) are invested according to Catholic tradition with a charism of indefectibility such as no other individuals possess. This is the equivalent of the Prophetic Office of the OT.

Except that we have no sacerdotal caste under the New Covenant. What we have is the singular, high priesthood of Christ, on the one hand, and the universal priesthood of believers, on the other.

It is the same charism that the Apostles possessed when they were guided

⁶⁶ LBCF 26:1-3,5-6.

infallibly by the Holy Spirit in writing Scripture. No Evangelical has trouble accepting the infallible guidance of a fallible human being when it comes to the process of inscripturation. The problem surfaces in their thinking only when it comes to those who succeed – in apostolic succession -- the last apostle after his death.

And that's because the NT makes no provision for apostolic succession.

They cannot seem to imagine God infallibly guiding the successors of the apostles any more than they can imagine the apostles themselves being thus infallibly guided in their teaching before they set themselves down to writing Scripture.

i) Actually, it's easy to *imagine* God infallibly guiding the successors to the apostles. I can imagine many things. Imagination is a wonderful thing. Think of *Spider-Man 2*. Or *The Martian Chronicles*. Or *Perelandra*. Or *Norstrilia*.

However, I've never regarded imagination as a very reliable rule of faith.

ii) What Evangelical takes the position that the Apostles were only inspired in what they wrote, but not in what they said?

Is Blosser trying to misrepresent the Protestant position? Or is he really that utterly, unconscionably clueless?

The relevant question would be: why? By what canon have they established this division in Church history?

Even where OT history is concerned, back when you really did have a divinely instituted priesthood, there was frequently an open conflict between the sacerdotal office and the extraordinary office of the prophet. For it was the duty of the prophetic office to indict a corrupt and apostate religious establishment. Indeed, the prophetic office was not a true office, but a divine vocation or charismatic calling which operated outside of official channels.

Do you let each individual sort out Church history for himself?

How else would someone judge the claims of Rome?

Fair question; but it confuses two issues. The first issue is: How do you come to assent to the truth of Rome's claims? And, of course, there is no other way but to sift through the data and respective claims prayerfully and as best you can. The second issue is: Who has the authority to interpret Church history properly? And, of course, for the Catholic who has been led to assent to Rome's claims, there is no answer but the Church and her Magisterium (teaching authority). Authority isn't an arbitrary matter, like power. Authority is "author's rights," as Peter Kreeft

somewhere points out. It's about getting back to what the author intended. Who has the right to speak for the Author of the Church (Christ)? He who is lawfully commissioned to do so, of course, His Vicar or Representative (or "Ambassador," if you will). I wouldn't expect you to assent to these Catholic claims where you are now; but I should hope that you would note that the case isn't altogether different from that involved in claiming authority ("Author's rights") for the writings of the Bible.

But the parallel undercuts the Catholic denial of the right of private judgment.

In response to my claim that Luther's early rejection of the canonicity of Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation represents a *prima facie* case against *sola scriptura*, you reply: "No, it only constitutes a *prima facie* case against Luther's criteria."

I'll grant your point. His criteria were certainly defective in assuming that James 2:24 contradicted Romans 3:28, for example (it doesn't, when properly understood). But your answer skirts the larger issue, I think. The larger question is this: If I accept *sola scriptura*, then on what grounds do I dispute Luther's early rejection of four NT books? I can't appeal to Sacred Tradition as Catholics understand it, since that presupposes an ongoing Prophetic Office to interpret what is authoritative in tradition and what is not. I can't appeal to Scripture, because it doesn't tell me that James or Romans is a canonical book. Hence, the question remains. Doubtless you will endeavor to marshal such criteria for authorship as having been an eyewitness to the Resurrection of Christ, etc., etc. But such criteria always run into problems. We don't know who some of the authors were, as in the case of the Book of Hebrews.

Several issues here:

i) We can make a critical use of tradition, as a historical witness.

ii) Blosser's statement that I can't appeal to Scripture, because it doesn't tell me that James or Romans is a canonical book is far from self-explanatory. Does he mean that a book by Paul or by James would have to explicitly claim to be canonical?

No, it wouldn't. It would have to satisfy certain conditions of canonicity. An extant text by Paul or by James would, by definition, be canonical. If we don't know the authorship of a given book, then we may need to turn to other considerations, but authorship can be a sufficient condition depending on the historical position and theological status of the author.

iii) I agree with Blosser that we don't know the author of Hebrews. By this admission, Blosser contradicts the Council of Trent, which explicitly attributes this

book to St. Paul.

iv) Although we don't know the author of Hebrews, this doesn't mean we know nothing about the author of Hebrews. Among other things, we know that he was a friend of Timothy (Heb 5:23). So this would put him in the Pauline circle.

v) We also know, both from internal and comparative data, that he represented the Judeo-Hellenistic wing of the NT church.⁶⁷ So he stands at the fork of at least two headwaters of NT Christianity. Therefore, it's fairly easy to locate him on the map of NT history and theology.

Blosser can't find the answer because he stopped looking. Having discovered Catholicism, he refers all questions to the Magisterium.

vi) Then there's his general statement that [Doubtless you will endeavor to marshal such criteria for authorship as having been an eyewitness to the Resurrection of Christ, etc., etc. But such criteria always run into problems.](#)

Does he mean by this that historical investigation can only yield probabilities rather than certainties? If so, we need to make a couple of basic observations:

a) If one always runs into problems in attempting to verify the canon, one always runs into problems in attempting to verify Roman primacy, or apostolic succession, or sacred tradition.

So Blosser's alternative is no alternative. It doesn't escape any of the difficulties which he attributes to the Protestant position, but simply relocates the same difficulties in Catholicism. Indeed, it multiplies the difficulties.

b) Probability is not a value-free concept. What is probable or improbable is indexed to our worldview. Probability doesn't mean the same thing in a theistic framework that it means in a secular framework.

The evidence we have is the evidence that God has chosen to preserve for posterity. So we weigh the evidence that God has given us.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the evidence is weak. If so, then God would have us form our opinion on the basis of weak evidence. But that's the only evidence we have, and if God wanted us to have more evidence or better evidence, then he was in a position to preserve more or better evidence.

⁶⁷ Cf. F. F. Bruce. *Men & Movements in the Primitive Church: Studies in Eearly Non-Pauline Christianity* (Paternoster 1979), chapter 2; W. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Word 1991), cxliv-cl.

Or suppose, for the sake of argument, that we have a worst-case scenario. The extant evidence betrays me into either including a book in the canon that ought to be excluded, or excluding a book that ought to be included.

Am I responsible for that? No. I can only work with what I've got.

If God didn't want his people to draw that erroneous inference from the inadequate evidence at their disposal, then it was within his power to preserve a more representative sampling of the evidence which would lead them to draw a different conclusion.

God controls what conclusions we can draw by controlling what evidence we have. God could correct a mistaken inference by correcting or augmenting the corroborative evidence. Thus, it's ultimately in his hands what he wants to achieve. In the providence of God, even heresies will subserve a greater good.

So why should I fret over these imponderables? One of the fundamental flaws in Catholicism is the need to feel that I must enjoy godlike control of all the variables. And if I can't be in personal control of all the variables, then I can delegate that to the Magisterium.

But a Christian with a proper sense of his place in God's economy will not be plagued by the nagging and paralyzing fear that he's going to make a fatal mistake.

As a child in God's household, he has his own domestic duties to attend to. But he doesn't usurp the Father's role.

I quoted Peter Kreeft who wrote that *sola scriptura* "violates the principle of causality: that an effect cannot be greater than its cause. [But the] Church (the apostles) wrote Scripture, and the successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church, decided on the canon, the list of books to be declared scriptural and infallible. If Scripture is infallible, then its cause, the Church, must also be infallible.

Notice the patent equivocation of terms: the Church equals the Apostolate. But even as a Roman Catholic, Blosser would scarcely limit the Church to the Apostolate.

True, there's a semantic equivocation here in Kreeft's statement, though it doesn't violate the logic of dynamic equivalence. In other words, in the context of his argument the equivocation is benign, since it represents a distinction without a difference.

Is the distinction between the Church and the Apostolate a distinction without a

difference? That's a question-begging assertion on Blosser's part. That the distinction is inconsequential is hardly self-evident or self-explanatory.

Furthermore, there's an important truth in Kreeft's identification of the Church with the apostles and bishops of the Church. The Apostles were the first bishops of the Church. (When Peter called for a successor to Judas to be chosen and Matthias was selected by the Holy Spirit, the King James Version translates the Greek quotation of Psalm 69:25 (applying it to Matthias' succession of Judas) thus: "Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein; and his bishopric let another take" (Acts 1:20).

No, the apostles weren't bishops. This is a classic word-study fallacy. Indeed, it's fallacious at more than one level:

i) It fallaciously equates words with concepts, as if the same word always denotes the same concept.

ii) It fallaciously equates the semantic domain of one word with the semantic domain of a translation term.

iii) It fallaciously retrojects the later, dogmatic concept of the episcopate back into the NT usage.

While it's true that the sub-apostolic bishops were not apostles, in the sense of the immediate disciples of Jesus who witnessed His Resurrection, they were nevertheless lawfully appointed successors in the "apostolic succession." They were invested, according to Catholic understanding, with the same charism of infallible teaching authority as the apostles were.

Who is Blosser or Kreeft trying to convince? This is an argument by Catholics and for Catholics. It takes Catholic assumptions for granted every step of the way.

I'd add that the logic is pretty slippery. Isn't David greater than Jesse? Isn't Abraham greater than Terah?

This misrepresents the logic of causality, that an effect cannot be greater than its cause. (a) In what sense is "David is greater than Jesse" or "Abraham greater than Terah"? They are both "greater" in terms of the divinely delegated role and authority with which they are invested by God in His redemptive plan. But then the cause of that role and authority is God, not their biological fathers, so the principle remains intact and unassaulted: the effect is not greater than its cause, since their authority is not greater than its cause, which is God. (b) If the claim that "David is greater than Jesse" and "Abraham greater than Terah" is taken as violating the principle of causality in question, it is because it is assumed that the causality in question applies to human biological generation, so that the father

would be naturally the cause (and therefore 'greater') than the begotten son as the effect (which would therefore be seen as 'lesser'). But seen strictly in genetic or biological terms, the principle of causality is not violated either, because the effect is not greater than its cause: the son is not "more human" than his father.

The point is that, in redemptive history, David outranks Jesse and Abraham outranks Terah. Blosser can gloss this distinction as much as he likes, but his qualifications will do nothing to salvage the original argument. If David can outrank Jesse, then Scripture can outrank the church.

And distinguishing between God's primary causality and human secondary causality does nothing to undermine the distinction either, for the argument from analogy remains in tact: God is the primary cause of Scripture, God is the primary cause of David.

I wrote: "Protestants already accept implicitly the principle that God can infallibly guide fallible humans to teach infallibly, both in the oral teachings of the prophets and apostles, and in the writing of Scripture.[56] But there is no more reason why one should deny that God infallibly guided the process by which the Church 'discovered'" the canon than the process by which the Church 'wrote' the books contained in it.

Same equivocation. The Church didn't write the canonical Scriptures. The Church didn't write the Pentateuch, or Job, or Isaiah, or the Psalms, or the Gospels, or Romans. Blosser is playing a shell-game.

Nonsense. What difference does it make whether I say the "Church" canonized Scripture or the bishops of the Church canonized it? True, in either case, individual human beings were involved.

One of Blosser's problems is that he has a sloppy way of expressing himself. He will sometimes bundle two distinct ideas in a single sentence, then act as if his opponent can only affirm both or deny both.

Whether the church wrote the Bible, and whether the church canonized the Bible are two distinct ideas. These are not convertible propositions. As a philosophy prof., Blosser should be capable of drawing elementary distinctions.

Since these are hardly interchangeable ideas, they would require different supporting arguments, and be subject to different answers. One could agree that the church, in some sense, canonized the Bible without having to agree that the church also wrote the Bible—with is blatantly false.

But the relevant point is that both evangelical Protestants and Catholics take the authors of Scriptures to have been granted by God the special charism of infallible

guidance – a charism none of us laity possess. I do not deny you the right to reject the claim that the Catholic bishops who canonized Scripture were invested with the same charism, but I do think it interesting that few evangelical Protestants would question for a moment the utter infallible certainty of the canon that they have been gifted by Catholic Tradition (with the exception of the Deuterocanonical Books). If you wish to call this a “shell game,” be my guest; but be assured that you have the Easter Letter (AD 367) of Athanasius [pictured right] and the Synod of Rome (AD 382) Augustine’s Synods of Hippo (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397) with which to contend.

i) Observe his intellectual confusion. He made two distinct claims: (a) the Church *wrote* the Bible, and (b) the Church *canonized* the Bible.

I denied one of the claims: the Church wrote the Bible.

In response, he transfers my denial to the other claim. Is there some reason why a philosophy prof. is unable to either follow his own argument or his opponent’s targeted reply? *That*, Dr. Blosser, is the “shellgame.” Is it asking too much of you that you keep track of your own arguments?

ii) This is followed up by a duplicitous appeal to the letter of Athanasius, as well as the synods of Rome, Hippo, and Carthage.

But Athanasius is not the Pope, speaking *ex cathedra*. And these are local councils, not ecumenical councils. Hence, none of these sources would infallibly canonize the Bible. The sources he cited cannot warrant “the utter infallible certainty of the canon.” Therefore, to judge him by own yardstick, Blosser is making an appeal which he doesn’t believe in. Is he careless or unscrupulous?

iii) And, at a chronological level, these sources are too late to be of much value as a historical witness to the 1C canon of the NT.

iv) It isn’t necessary for a Christian to be equally certain of everything he believes.

v) In addition, it isn’t necessary (or even possible) for a Christian to have distinct and direct apodictic proof for everything he believes.

Rather, he can be certain of God, God’s providence, and his duty to God. And that, in turn, will indirectly underwrite his level of certainty regarding issues which fall under God’s special providence, as well as what God requires of him.

In response to evangelical apologist James White’s attempt to link the Catholic Church’s infallibility to human fallible choices, trying to undercut the interlocutor’s subjective certainty, I ask: “But one could reply that a person’s decision to follow Christ is also a decision of a fallible human being. Does this

mean one should feel uncertain about following Christ?

Catholicism denies that a Christian can be certain of his salvation. So the parallel undercuts the very thing it's adduced to support.

Catholicism denies *presumption* of salvation, not a sure hope based on the promises of Christ. Much of what goes by the rubric of "assurance" in certain quarters of Protestantism strikes Catholics as sheer presumption, such as the out-of-context quotations of Luther's injunction to "sin boldly" in light of the "Christian liberty," and so forth. But that's another question.

No, it's the assurance itself which is treated as presumptuous. No a presumptuous assurance of salvation, but any assurance of salvation is presumptuous (barring a private revelation to that effect):

No one, moreover, so long as he is in this mortal life, ought so far to presume as regards the secret mystery of divine predestination, as to determine for certain that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate; as if it were true, that he that is justified, either cannot sin any more, or, if he do sin, that he ought to promise himself an assured repentance; for except by special revelation, it cannot be known whom God hath chosen unto Himself [Chapter 12].

So also as regards the gift of perseverance, of which it is written, He that shall persevere to the end, he shall be saved:-which gift cannot be derived from any other but Him, who is able to establish him who standeth that he stand perseveringly, and to restore him who falleth:-let no one herein promise himself any thing as certain with an absolute certainty [Chapter 13].⁶⁸

What Blosser has given the reader is an argument from analogy minus the argument. Why assume that the two cases are analogous?

Because both rest on subjective human (and therefore fallible) judgments. This doesn't imply a counsel of skepticism, but the simple realization that any epistemic claims, if assessed in terms of the algorithmic/apodictic canons of Cartesian methodical skepticism, will land us nowhere. That was my point in response to James White.

Except that White could simply adopt and redeploy your caveats to defend his own position.

You continued: "The issue isn't one of epistemic parity, but epistemic superiority."

⁶⁸ <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct06.html>

Does Catholicism confer an epistemic advantage?"

Not if we're talking about Cartesian subjective certainty in the face of radical skepticism, no. But granting a certain epistemic realism in one's comportment toward the world, I should say it offers monumental advantages in terms of offering a picture of Church history which finally allows the pieces of the puzzle to fit together. How can you adjudicate between, say, the Reformed and Catholic views of authority here? There is no easy way. Alasdair MacIntyre, I think, suggests the most plausible way, even if it remains extremely difficult. The analogy he uses is language. The superiority of one language over another can only be appreciated by the person who is competent in both languages, where one language offers ways of articulating meanings lacking in the other, for instance. The Reformed picture of the world and of Church history offered by Bavinck, Kuyper, Berkouwer, et al., is reasonably coherent, in my view. But the trick would be to see how it stacks up against the Catholic view, having mastered its "language." The only way to do that is with brutal honesty and charity, a herculean task.

This is more of a metaphor than an argument. Let's take a concrete example. What are some of the preconditions of apostolic succession? Valid ordination, for one. And what are the preconditions for valid ordination?

The sanctity and dignity of the Sacrament [of holy orders] demands for its lawful and worthy administration that the minister be in the state of grace, free of ecclesiastical penalties, and observant of the requirements of law regarding the conferral of ordination.

The Council of Trent, in harmony with previous papal statements, made it clear that in effecting and conferring the Sacraments the minister must have an intention at least of doing what the Church does... Besides a defective matter of form, an intention which is defective also invalidates the Sacrament. Thus there must be on the part of the minister a serious will not merely to perform an external application of the matter and form but also to confer a rite that as a matter of fact is considered by the Church as sacred.

Essential to valid reception also is an internal intention or will of receiving this Sacrament, since no adult receives a Sacrament unwillingly... for the reception of Holy Orders the habitual intention must be explicit to receive what de facto the Church and the minister intend to confer and thus to be received, namely, the Sacrament and its effect.

For the lawful reception of Holy Orders, i.e., that the candidate be considered qualified, other conditions are required by the Church and are comprised under the qualities of divine vocation, suitability, and freedom

from canonical impediments.

Besides the intention, which is necessary for the valid reception of the Sacrament, the candidate must have the right intention essential to a clerical vocation.

The lawful reception of Orders demands outstanding and habitual goodness of life, especially perfect chastity, Solid possession of this latter virtue is an indispensable condition of a clerical vocation and its presence must be positively evident, profoundly appreciated, and zealously cherished and not merely assumed by reason of any absence of deviation.

A candidate for Holy Orders must be free of all canonical irregularities and impediments. Both are ecclesiastical disqualifications prohibiting primarily and directly the reception of orders and secondarily and indirectly their exercise. They do not invalidate but rather render unlawful the reception or exercise of orders, and are considered to bind gravely. An irregularity is of its nature perpetual, whether based upon a defect or a delict, and is removable only by dispensation. An impediment is temporary, the basis being considered to be lack of faith or of freedom or of good repute. The impediment may cease by dispensation, the lapse of time, or the removal of the cause.⁶⁹

How would Blosser propose that we verify the satisfaction of these conditions in the case of every Pope?

And assuming, for the sake of argument, that he could pull this off, how would he verify the satisfaction of these preconditions in the case of every papal elector? For if the papal ballot was unlawfully cast, why should we believe that the candidate was lawfully elected?

In addition to these principal considerations we must also take into account certain historical considerations:

From the 4th to the 11C the influence of temporal rulers in papal elections reached its zenith. Not only the Roman emperors but also, in their turn, the Ostrogoth kings of Italy and the Carolingian emperors attempted to control the selection of the Roman pontiff. This civil intervention ranged from the approval of elected candidates to the actual nomination of candidates (with tremendous pressure exerted on the electors to secure their acceptance), and even to the extreme of forcible deposition and imposition.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ New Catholic Encyclopedia (CUA, 2nd ed., 2003), 7:39a-41a.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 11:498b.

How is such coercive interference consistent with Blosser's faith in the integrity of papal elections?

It must be frankly admitted that bias or deficiencies in the sources make it impossible to determine in certain cases whether the claimants were popes or antipopes...Authors variously calculate the number of antipopes: Bäumer counts 33 with three others bracketed with legitimate popes; Amanieu, 34; Frutaz, 36 plus even doubtful and nine improperly designated; Moroni, 39. Since 1947 the Vatican *Anuario Pontificio* has printed Mercanti's list of popes that includes 37 antipopes in the text. All lists are subject to reservations, and the Mercati catalogue has provoked dissent.⁷¹

If you can't tell which claimant was the rightful claimant, then how can Blosser have any confidence in apostolic succession?

On both historical and principial grounds, how is Blosser in any position to verify the chain-of-custody?

Is an infallible church an advantage over a fallible church? How is it advantageous to pile on one interpretive layer atop another? The Bible plus the councils plus the encyclicals plus the ordinary magisterium, &c.

Absolutely. The professors at Westminster Theological Seminary taught me that the only progress in dogmatics and creeds is through progressive analysis, refinement and differentiation, not through further synthesis, summary and generalization. Thus the Nicene Creed [depicted being held, right, by Holy Fathers of the Nicene Council] is a clear advance over the Apostles' Creed, even though they address slightly different concerns – the former responding to a denial of Christ's humanity, the latter to a denial of His divinity. While it's true that the decrees of no ecumenical council may be the last word on a matter, they do decisively conclude speculation on certain points. For example, since Nicea and Chalcedon, there's no more room for speculation about Christ's possible non-divinity. That matter is settled. Other questions may arise, but then the Church is there to authoritatively declare her mind on the matter, bringing further clarification. Read John Henry Cardinal Newman's *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. It's absolutely brilliant.

i) From a Protestant standpoint, the possible non-divinity of Christ is not settled by Nicea or Chalcedon. It's not settled by the Church's authoritative declaration of her mind on the matter.

⁷¹ Ibid. 1:530b.

Rather, it's settled by exegesis. And it's controversies like this which test and refine our exegesis.

ii) And the problem with multiple layers of tradition is sifting the magisterial from the non-magisterial, ordinary from extraordinary magisterial, &c.

The doctrine that Scriptures alone are sufficient to function as the *regula fidei*—the infallible rule for the ongoing faith and life of the Church—is of highly improbable orthodoxy since it had no defender for the first thirteen centuries of the Church. It does not belong to historic Christianity.”

Observe his utterly provincial outlook, as if the covenant community began at Pentecost. The people of God have been around since antediluvian times.

That's a gratuitous cheap shot, my friend. Please. I was referring to “Christianity,” not to the “covenant” transcending Old and New testaments.

No, it's not a gratuitous cheap shot. To the contrary, it draws attention to your orientation, which always invokes a subapostolic context to frame the NT, rather than a 1C or OT context.

But for the sake of the argument, let's entertain your reference to the “covenant people of God,” which, I assure you, we both know “have been around since antediluvian times.” How does this change my argument? Does it weaken it in any way? If anything, would it not strengthen it? For if evidence for the doctrine of *sola scriptura* as the exclusive *regula fidei* of the covenant people of God is sorely meager in Church history preceding the Protestant Reformation, it is hardly more ample in Old Testament times when they subsisted under the spiritual government of prophets and judges.

You miss the point: preexilic Jews didn't have a Catholic style Magisterium. Exilic Jews didn't have a Catholic-style Magisterium. Postexilic Jews didn't have a Catholic-style Magisterium

Second, *sola scriptura* is inconsistent with the practice of the NT Church.”

He continues his anachronistic definition of *sola Scriptura*. Obviously a living Apostle is as good as a written Apostle. But that's beside the point 2000 years down the pike.

First, I'm not sure what you mean by “anachronistic” in this context. Nothing you've written so far clearly defines what you mean, although you use the term repeatedly. I gather that it signifies for you something pejorative, but little more.

I explained exactly what I meant the first time I used it.

Second, it's not at all beside the point that you're willing to concede that a "living Apostle is as good as a written Apostle." This is precisely the point, because what you're conceding is that God's infallible guidance applies not only to the *ipsissima verba* of Scriptures authored by the Apostles but also to their spoken extra-biblical words while they were yet living and teaching.

This is not concession at all, for this was never in dispute. In principle, the spoken word of an apostle has the same authority as his written word.

But keep mind the audience. It has the same authority for the *listener*. For someone who *heard* the spoken word of an apostle.

This is a momentous concession, for it constitutes an admission of a central plank in the Catholic understanding of how Revelation is communicated, which includes not only written Scripture but the living teaching (prophetic) office of the Apostolate, which they see as residing not only historically in the Apostles while they were yet living, but in their lawfully ordained successors.

Notice the little catch at the end. Here is where Blosser introduces a fatal equivocation.

Word-of-mouth does not have the same inherent authority as the spoken word of an apostle to an immediate listener. Word-of-mouth is hearsay.

Hearsay can sometimes be a useful source of information, but it's hardly the same thing as getting your information direct from the source. *Hearing* and *hearsay* are not on an epistemic par. Hearsay raises questions of verification that hearing does not.

If God could infallibly guide the Apostles in their teaching ministry and keep them from falling into doctrinal error (which is different from sins such as hypocrisy, such as Paul confronted in Peter at Antioch), then why should we assume that this divine charism (gift) of infallible guidance should cease with the death of the last Apostle?

i) What God could possibly do furnishes absolutely no warrant for believing that what he would do is what he could do. God can do any number of things which he, in fact, refrains from doing. God could directly and privately inspire every single Christian. But he doesn't.

ii) In addition, Blosser is equivocating. Catholic theology distinguish between public and private revelation. Public revelation comes to an end with the Apostolic era.

So Blosser, if he were being more forthcoming, would have to affirm a

fundamental discontinuity between the way in which God guided the apostles and the way he is guiding their successors.

Blosser doesn't believe in an open canon. So he himself must take a broadly cessationist position.

Peter's leadership in selecting Matthias in the apostolic succession after the death of Judas in Acts 1 suggests continuity, not a rupture.

Another example of his cavalier proof-texting. Peter did not appoint Matthias to take the place of Judas. That was a group decision. It was a group decision to nominate two candidates, and a group decision to pick the winner—by lot (Acts 1:23-26).

Yet someone had to be 'in charge' during these years who had the authority to declare, 'This is orthodox,' and 'That is heterodox.' The authorized successors to the apostles were the ones in charge.[63]

It depends, in part, on what one means by 'authorized' successors. The NT has no episcopate in the Catholic sense of the word—just the pastorate and deaconate.

This is certainly the standard Presbyterian and Reformed line, isn't it; and although one does find the Greek terms *diakonos*, *presbyteros*, and *episkopos* from which we derive 'deacon', 'priest' (a contraction of the Late Latin *presbyter* via Middle English *preist*, Old English *prEost* and colloquial 'prester', from *presbyteros*), and 'bishop' (from the Middle English *bishop*, from Old English *bisceop*, from Late Latin *episcopus*, from Greek *episkopos*), the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition is adamant about conflating the offices of the *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* and calling both "elders" – sometimes distinguishing "teaching elders" (pastors) from "ruling elders" ('presbyters' who sit on the governing consistory or presbytery of denominational body). Their rationale for the conflation is that the terms appear to be used, at times, interchangeably. It is a widespread conceit that the three-fold offices found in Catholic tradition was only a later, perhaps medieval development.

Two problems:

i) He's assuming that I'm a divine-right Presbyterian. I'm not, and nothing I've said justifies such a narrow deduction.

ii) Peter Lamp spends a lot of time documenting, from the primary sources, that Roman Catholic polity is simply a reflection of culture and politics in ancient Rome. To take a few summary statements, which are backed up by his meticulous analysis and magisterial command of the primary and secondary literature:

In the pre-Constantine period, the Christians of the city of Rome assembled in premises that were provided by private persons and that were scattered across the city (fractionation)...The Christian fractionation stands against the background of *a Jewish community in the city of Rome that was broken up into a number of independent synagogue communities* (see in detail, Appendix 4). The parallelism is amazing, whether one wishes to consider the Jewish structure was a direct model for the Christians or not.⁷²

The first and, in my opinion, still the most fitting concept we have to adhere to, although this may sound banal, is that of the οἶκος (Rom 16:5; Hermas. Sim. 8.10.3; 9:27.2). The community life of the Christians formed itself in many respects according to the *oikos* model; 1 Tim 3:4f. formulates this clearly. What does that mean for the house communities that assemble in private homes? In the categories of *oikos*-structure these assemblies are neither social gatherings of *collegiums* nor meetings of a philosophical *thiasos*, but simply the *private invitation of a host* to the fellow Christians in his district of the city.⁷³

The fractionation in Rome favored a collegial presbyterial system of governance and prevented for a long time, until the second half of the 2C, the development of a monarchical episcopacy in the city...Before the second half of the 2C there was in Rome no monarchical episcopacy for the circles mutually bound in fellowship.⁷⁴

I summarize my view of the sources. Individual presbyters preside over the different house communities in the city, leading the worship and, as bishops, directing the care of the poor in their own house congregation. Each individual congregation therefore also has its own treasury, and ministered by the individual “episcopus” (*Apol.* 1.67)...Both examples from the end of the century illustrate what was customary at least until the middle of the century for each group in the city: each individual group was presided over by its own presbyter-bishop.⁷⁵

[This assumption is so widespread today due to the pervasive dominance of Protestant textbook traditions even in Catholic theological teaching that you will even find Catholics who blithely concede the point. But I beg to differ.](#)

Observe his preemptive strike, in which he attempts to discredit Catholic as well as Evangelical scholarship through a preemptory dismissal. This is typical of the

⁷² P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus* (Fortress 2003), 364.

⁷³ *Ibid* 374.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 397.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 400.

convert to Rome. They view themselves as reinforcements, parachuting in behind occupied territory, to liberate the true Church from the renegade, cradle Catholics who have invaded and infiltrated Mother Church.

This assumes that the hierarchy has lost control of the agenda. Such a sceptical presumption is a very odd way of defending the indefectibility of the Rome.

First, all through the writings of the sub-apostolic patristics, one finds a clear articulation of the three-fold distinction between deacon, priest, and bishop found in Catholicism. For example, in the *Letter to the Magnesians* by Ignatius of Antioch [depicted in an icon, right], one reads: “Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with the bishop (*episcopos*) presiding in the place of God and with the presbyters (*presbyteroi*) in the place of the council of the Apostles, and with the deacons (*diakonoi*), who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ . . .” (6, 1). Ignatius’ letters repeatedly reiterates this threefold distinction of offices; and Ignatius was a *contemporary* of the Apostle John.

i) The fact that Ignatius was a contemporary of the Apostle John doesn’t mean he ever had any conversations with John over the finer points of church polity.

Apollos was a contemporary of all the Apostles. Yet his grasp of Christian theology was rather inaccurate until he received a private tutorial (Acts 18:26).

ii) Moreover, even from the standpoint of Catholic theological method, would it not make more sense to examine the *concrete* polity of the *church (es) of Rome* in the *city of Rome* during the 1C and beyond, as your point of reference and point of departure—rather than quoting generic statements about the episcopal office? If Rome is the template, then why not begin with Rome, as Peter Lampe has done?

The problem is that Blosser can’t get what he needs from the indigenous source, so he must cobble together various statements from further afield.

iii) Furthermore, it’s one thing to *quote* Ignatius, quite another to *evaluate* his claims. As one leading scholar notes:

These letters of Ignatius present us with a picture which is completely different from that which we know from other sources. If we compare the two, it appears that the letters of Ignatius must come from a later time...but the solution is a different one: what Ignatius includes in his letters, as often in church history, is not a description of the real situation, but a demand. In fact, matters had taken a completely different course in the churches to which Ignatius addressed in his letters, as their texts show clearly when we examine them more closely. Ignatius is greatly ahead of the actual development; not infrequently it took several generations until the

monarchical episcopate was generally accepted.⁷⁶

Second, according to the Catholic understanding of these three offices, although all priests (*presbyteroi*) are not bishops (*episkopoi*), a bishop (*episkopoi*) is by definition also simultaneously a priest (*presbyteros*), which accounts for the occasional interchangeable use of the two terms. A bishop is simply a priest who has been ordained in the apostolic succession to the office of ‘overseer’ – as we would say in terms of our contemporary rubrics, an overseer of a “diocese.”

i) Blosser is offering the reader an exposition of Catholicism rather than a defense of Catholicism.

ii) He is also accentuating official channels at the expense of nonconformity in Scripture. As Caird observes:

There is in the Bible teaching a strong strain of discontinuity, which seems to me as yet almost wholly unacknowledged in Roman Catholic thought. Saul is anointed king and then deposed... There are prophets who belong to professional guilds, and others, like Elisha, who are anointed by a predecessor. But the great prophets are not among them... And finally the Epistle to the Hebrews points out that Jesus, the great High Priest, could not have been a priest at all if he had had to rely on historic succession, since he came from Judah and a priest must be descended from Levi; on the contrary, Jesus stands in the order of Melchizedek, who is notorious for having no genealogy... To say that God has committed himself to working through a historic succession, but has reserved the right of departing from this method in exceptional circumstances is to say that most of the prophets in the Old Testament, and John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul in the New Testament, are exceptions to a divine rule which finds its full expression in the temple priesthood in the one case and in the Sadducees and Pharisees in the other.⁷⁷

Notice how Blosser treats ecclesiastic authority as a makeweight in the (alleged) absence of Scripture. But the authority to declare one thing orthodox and another heterodox doesn't exist in a vacuum. Apart from a sufficient basis in revelation, a clergyman lacks the authority to render such a value-judgment. Such a pronouncement can't be made out of thin air by appeal to raw authority. Rather, the clergyman must be in a position to render an informed judgment.

This assumes that in the absence of Scripture, ecclesiastic authority has no basis in divine Revelation for judgment. But why assume that? Why assume that

⁷⁶ K. Aland, *A History of Christianity* (Fortress 1985), 1:123.

⁷⁷ *Our Dialogue with Rome*, 64-66.

Revelation is exhausted in Scripture? Those who submitted to the OT prophets or NT apostles surely didn't assume that. The Westminster divines who spoke of extra-biblical revelation in nature surely didn't assume that.

Once again, he's resorting to equivocations. Natural revelation is scarcely the operative category in this discussion. Is Blosser attempting to establish the papacy by natural revelation?

"Clergyman" connotes a Protestant layman functioning in the role of a 'pastor', and I would agree that such an individual would have no authority to render any spiritually binding religious judgments or decrees in a vacuum "by appeal to raw authority."

I simply used "clergyman" as a neutral term, applicable to Catholic and Protestant clergy alike. Blosser is getting a bit paranoid.

If he appealed to "the Bible," this may carry some weight, seeing that the Bible is the inspired Word of God; however, his interpretation of what the Bible means may not necessarily carry any more weight than the opinion of a Jehovah's Witness, who like him, believes ostensibly in *sola scriptura* and holds a "high view of scripture." Catholics receive the instruction of their priests and bishops as authoritative because of their ordination in the apostolic succession, which binds their teaching to the Apostolic Deposit of Faith and the Sacred Tradition of the Church by which the interpretation of that Deposit has been developed and refined and passed down to us.

Is the instruction of a priest authoritative? See below.

It is altogether misleading to construe a doctrine such as "papal infallibility" as conferring *carte blanche* for a pope to arbitrarily invent new doctrines or teach whatever he wishes.

Blosser is confusing the nature of the claim with the truth of the claim. The question at issue is not how papal infallibility is *defined*, but whether the definition is *true*.

Let's remember that Blosser was writing a critique of sola Scriptura. In so doing, he assumes a certain burden of proof. It is not enough for him to regurgitate the claims of Catholicism. He needs to defend them.

What do we do if a priest teaches error? We point it out. We ask: Doesn't that contradict official Church teaching? Church teaching is the public record of defined doctrine (which we call "dogma") that constitutes the binding content of the Christian Faith.

Oh, so the instruction of a priest isn't authoritative after all, for there are occasions when a Catholic layman should challenge it.

Contrary, then, to what he said in the very same paragraph, ordination does not bind their teaching to the deposit of faith. For what they teach may be erroneous.

Or does Blosser take the position that their teaching can be both erroneous and authoritative at one and the same time? Authoritative error?

If there are times when it's up to a Catholic layman to challenge the teaching of his priest, how is that different than an Evangelical layman who challenges the erroneous teaching of his pastor?

In addition, I assume that Blosser wouldn't limit the possibility of error to a priest. A prelate, such as Archbishop Lefebvre, can also go off the reservation, *oui*? Not to mention all of the Arian bishops in the early church.

So the laity must decide for themselves which members of the Magisterium represent the authentic voice of Mother Church.

And even if, for the sake of argument, we conceded his methodology, it directly undercuts Catholicism, for there were undoubtedly many times and places in church history during which the lower clergy and even many members of the upper clergy were abysmally ignorant or even illiterate. So you see, once again, how a Catholic polemicist has no genuine historical consciousness. Rather, he treats church history like an axiomatic system in which you posit certain initial conditions, analogous to self-evident first-truths, to yield the desired results. Blosser does church history the way Leibniz does Monadology.

I'm not entirely sure what your point is here, but let me make a run at trying to understand it.

What's there to be unsure about? I'm responding to his own argument. He said: the apostles died centuries before the NT was fully canonized, and well before each church had copies of all the books that would later make up the NT. Yet someone had to be 'in charge' during these years who had the authority to declare, "This is orthodox," and "That is heterodox."

So he begins with the axiom that someone had to be "in charge" during these years who had the authority to declare, "This is orthodox," and "That is heterodox."

And he then deduces his ecclesiology from that axiom. That's an ahistorical, a priori way of reasoning about church history.

Why today we even have people who buy into The Myth that the medievals believed in a flat earth!

How is that relevant to anything I said? Did I attribute a flat earth geography to medieval Catholicism? No.

Blosser's unresponsive response is littered with these outtakes. What's next? His recipe for kumquat marmalade? The mean temperature of Flagstaff Arizona between 1880 and 1890?

Third, to recognize the authority of the apostles' oral teaching but to assume that this teaching was transmitted without residue into the NT requires jiggery-pokery, as we have seen. One must assume either that everything they ever taught made it into the NT, or cobble together some sort of arbitrary criterion for explaining why those teachings and instructions that did not make it into the NT either (a) lacked authority, (b) ceased to have authority after the apostles died, or (c) may have had some sort of authority but lacked infallibility, divine inspiration, or the like.[64] But then, what sort of criterion could be offered that would avoid the circularity of arguing that only what is inscripturated is inspired because what is not inscripturated is not inspired?

It's simply a question of verification. What is Scriptural is inspired. What is unscriptural may or may not have been inspired. At this stage of the game, it's impossible to verify unscriptural traditions.

Yes, it is a question of verification. That's the problem isn't it. You're saying that unscriptural traditions can't be verified, that it's impossible. Is it possible to verify scriptural traditions, then? If so, how? The question is one of criteria? What I'm banking on is that I don't think you can come up with a set of criteria large enough to include all the canonical books yet small enough to exclude those like the Shepherd of Hermas, Epistle of Barnabas and Didache, which aren't canonical yet are completely orthodox. You can't consistently appeal to Catholic Tradition as having any authority; so you must have some set of alternative criteria.

Been there, done that.

And that's precisely why God inspired Apostles and prophets to commit some of their material to writing. For that supplies the permanent record and reference point for historical revelation. This principle goes all the way back to the Pentateuch, where a documentary covenant is the future reference point for posterity. And the New Covenant follows the same principle.

Well, at least we agree on the necessity and authority of the permanent inscripturated record; but that doesn't mean Catholics agree with you on its

sufficiency. You've probably heard the analogy before, which says that God giving us only a Bible without a Church to interpret it is like the U.S. Constitutional Assembly giving each of us a copy of the U.S. Constitution to govern ourselves without a Supreme Court to interpret it for us. Like all analogies, it falls short of perfection, because the Supreme Court is not invested with a divine charism of infallible divine guidance; but it does make a nice point.

Whether or not this analogy is convincing depends on whether you side with Robert Bork or Laurence Tribe on the authority of the Supreme Court. Blosser evidently takes his jurisprudence from Harry Blackmun. I do not.

Third, [*sola scriptura*] overlooks the extrabiblical influences on its adherents... The important question is whether or not the tradition in question is the one that Christ instituted and committed to his apostles to be passed down through His Church.[65]

Sola Scriptura involves primatial authority. It doesn't mean, and never meant, that Scripture exists in an airtight compartment. Scripture is no substitute for providence, just as providence is no substitute for Scripture.

This sidesteps the issue in question, which was developed in the part of the quoted paragraph you omitted, which has to do with "extrabiblical influences" on the adherents of *sola scriptura*. In other words, no interpreter of Scripture approaches it in a vacuum. You are a Calvinist as opposed to an Arminian, a cessationist as opposed to a charismatic, an amillennialist as opposed to a premillennialist, a sacramental nominalist (Zwinglian) as opposed to a realist, among other things, as you reveal in your profile, and (a) these perspectives can't help but color your particular reading of Scripture, and (b) you can't pretend each of these perspectives was simply derived from Scripture (without having every Arminian, for example, taking vociferous issue with you).

i) Blosser gets credit for checking my profile. It's important to place one's opponent.

ii) For the record, I'm not a cessationist—I'm a semicessationist.

iii) I'm opposed to premillennialism in the sense that I'm opposed to premillennial hermeneutics. But, except for preterism, the timing of Christ's return is a matter of no great theological consequence.

iv) As to Blosser's main point: it's simplistic to say that my theological beliefs condition my reading of Scripture, as if I bring a set of beliefs to Scripture rather than derive a set of beliefs from Scripture.

What we have, instead, is a dialectical relationship:

a) If I never read the Bible before, and had no theological background, then when I began reading the Bible for the first time, starting with Genesis, more than one interpretation might suggest itself for various passages of Scripture, considered in isolation.

b) Likewise, historical theology offers us a number of specific interpretations as well as a number of interpretive strategies.

But as I work my way through the Bible, some of these interpretive options drop away. By process of elimination, some interpretations and interpretive strategies have more explanatory power than others. They are more consistent over the whole of Scripture, and able to integrate more of the data.

v) Arminianism is a poor counterexample. For Arminians will often admit that their interpretive strategy is driven by an axiomatic commitment to libertarian freewill. So they don't even pretend to derive all their theology from Scripture alone. Rather, they treat libertarian freewill as a necessary precondition for moral responsibility, and they explicitly bring this *to* their reading of Scripture, whether or not they can derive it *from* Scripture.

Calvinism, by contrast, does not operate with an extrascriptural a priori.

vi) The appeal to extrabiblical influences cuts both ways. A Protestant is subject to social conditioning, but a Catholic is no less liable to social conditioning.

vii) I never fret over circumstances beyond my control. If I'm blinded by my social conditioning, or subliminal motives, then there's nothing I can do about it, so I won't lie awake at night, traumatized by the fear that I might be wrong if, ex hypothesi, my error is undetectable or incurable.

viii) God is responsible for extrabiblical influences. It's his world. His plan. His providence. Suppose these extrabiblical influences warp my judgment? If so, then I'm the wrong person to judge my own motives. And you're in the same boat.

By definition, a hypothetical like this is out of my hands. So I leave it in God's providential hands. I have no alternative. And I seek no alternative. For, ultimately, it does go back to God. I'm perfectly content with that arrangement. And even if I weren't, it wouldn't make the slightest difference to God's administration of the universe.

You deny my claim that an outlook of sacramental realism pervaded the very identity and self-understanding” of the historical church. You ask: “Which church? The Catholic church? Yes. The NT church? No. The Old Covenant community? No.”

I could identify any number of patristic and sub-apostolic texts from the likes of Augustine, Irenaeus, Ignatius of Antioch [depicted right being martyred in Rome], which articulate a realistic sacramentalism.

Yes, I'm sure you could. But the church fathers are not my rule of faith. They are entitled to a respectful hearing—nothing more and nothing less.

Ignatius, again, warns against those who hold heterodox opinions in his *Letter to the Smyrneans*, “They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they do not confess that the Eucharist is the Flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Flesh which suffered for our sins and which the Father, in His goodness, raised up again” (6, 2). In his *Letter to the Romans*, he writes: “I desire the Bread of God, which is the Flesh of Jesus Christ . . . and for drink I desire His Blood . . .” (7, 3). In his *Letter to the Philadelphians*, he says “. . . for there is one Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup in the union of His Blood . . .” (3, 2). If we remember that Ignatius was a contemporary of the Apostle John, and then read Jesus' words in John's Gospel, it's difficult not to note the parallel sacramental realism of John 6:53-54, where Jesus says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” For that matter, there is no lack of sacramental realism in Paul's warning (I Cor 11:29), “For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” And then, further strengthening the case, he adds (in verse 30): “That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying.” More than mere symbolism at work here, quite evidently.

Two issues:

i) There's no evidence that Ignatius ever sat down and had a talk with the Apostle John over sacramental theology.

ii) Since Blosser is very careless with the rules of evidence, let's draw a few elementary distinctions:

A contemporary of the apostles is three steps removed from Jesus. An *acquaintance* of the apostles is two steps removed from Jesus.

And let's remember that even the disciples were quite capable of misunderstanding Jesus. That's a running theme in the Gospels.

(Of course, this was before Pentecost.)

Likewise, the Corinthians and Thessalonians were quite capable of misunderstanding Paul.

Therefore, the fact that an early church father may be a contemporary of the Apostles or an acquaintance of the church fathers does not create any presumption in favor of their exegesis.

Let us also remember that there are degrees of familiarity. And historical testimony is not an all-or-nothing affair. An early church father is less likely to get some things wrong than others.

iii) I've often discussed the prooftexts for sacramental realism, so I need not repeat myself here. To take just one example (of many):

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2004/04/sign-or-sacrament.html>

On the other hand, I'm banking on the assumption that you will be hard pressed to find any reference in the patristics or the NT that portrays the sacraments as having *exclusively* a symbolical significance. I stress the term *exclusively*, because Catholics, too, recognize sacraments as symbols; and you will not want for Church fathers who will refer to the sacraments as symbols and signs. The difference is this: according to Catholic Tradition, a sacrament *effects* what it symbolizes. It is an "outward sign of an inward grace," as the traditional definition goes. As an outward sign, it is a symbol. The bread in the Mass symbolizes the Body of Christ, the wine symbolizes His Precious Blood. However, it does not end there. That would be Zwinglianism. The bread and wine *become* His Precious Body and Blood. So it will not due to point out, simply, that Augustine uses the word 'symbol' when speaking of the Bread. He certainly does. But he also goes on elsewhere to speak of the Bread as the real Body of Christ upon which the faithful feed in the Eucharist. So my challenge to you is to find a text anywhere among the patristics or NT which claims that the sacraments are *exclusively* symbolic.

i) As I said before, the church fathers are not my rule of faith. Let's remember that Blosser is attacking sola Scriptura. As such, he assumes a certain burden of proof. Treating the reader to an exposition of Catholic theology hardly amounts to an argument for Catholicism or an objection, in this case, to Zwinglianism.

ii) In addition, I reject the way in which he illicitly shifts the burden of proof. The onus is not on me to show that Scripture *excludes* sacramental realism. Rather, I only need to show that every prooftext for sacramental realism is *consistent* with sheer symbolism.

If the sacramental prooftexts are equally consistent with either position, then the sacramentalist will need something above and beyond these passages to establish sacramental realism. He will need a passage that positively *implies* sacramental realism.

I'd add that there are also some positive reasons for rejecting the realistic interpretation of a passage like Jn 6. Has Blosser ever bothered to read the commentaries by Carson, Keener, and Köstenberger? Does he even know the other side of the argument?

The seat of real authority was removed from the Church, as the teacher of Scripture, and placed on the individual interpreter of Scripture alone; where it was never meant to be.[70]

Blosser has a bad habit of personifying the Church. But the church is a collection of individuals. And teaching authority has always been exercised by individuals. It's just a question of which individuals.

What you refer to as my "bad habit" is a longstanding tradition in Church history by which the Church has been called our Mother, referenced by the feminine pronouns "she" and "her," and personified in Scripture itself as the "Bride of Christ." Do you wish to correct Scripture on this point?

This is amusing because it's so transparently sophistical:

i) As is his wont, he bundles two claims into one, then illicitly transfers the properties or implications of one to the other.

The fact that tradition personifies the church as our Mother has no purchase on my Protestant presuppositions.

I have to keep reminding him that if he's going to attack the Protestant rule of faith, then it's insufficient to merely quote tradition against sola Scriptura, for that begs the question in favor of the Catholic rule of faith. A philosophy prof. ought to be capable of discharging a minimal burden of proof. Instead, he constantly assumes what he needs to prove.

ii) I don't have a problem with personifications. What I do have a problem with are opponents like Blosser who forget that a personification is just that, a figure of speech rather than a literal person.

The Bride of Christ is a *collective* personification.

iii) What is even worse is when they come under the spell of an unscriptural personification, like Mother Church.

What you refer to as a "collection of individuals" is also called, traditionally, the mystical "Body of Christ." My hunch as to why you wish to denigrate this view of the Church and replace it with the image of a mere "collection of individuals" is to undermine the authority that tacitly accompanies the notion of the Church as a real

corporate entity. This tendency belies your underlying philosophical nominalism, which sees the only reality as discrete individuals, the “Church” being no more than a convenient fiction, a mere “name” (Latin, *nomen*) which might arbitrarily be applied to this or that loosely arranged collection of individuals.

i) My, doesn't he get carried away! He throws in a bunch of purely pejorative adjectives to mischaracterize my position. I never said a *mere* collection of individuals, or a collection of *discrete* individuals.

ii) Blosser indulges in the fallacy of proof by labeling, as if slapping a label like “nominalism” on the opposing position were any way of disproving it. Even if I were a nominalist, which is not the case, calling me one would not falsify nominalism.

iii) I do not begin by taking sides on the philosophical debate between realism and nominalism, and then use that as my hermeneutical grid. And Blosser couldn't begin to document that charge from anything I've ever written.

iv) And if he chooses to cast this in philosophical terms, then he's the one who is misstating realism, for he's equating a concrete particular (“the Church”) with an abstract universal. But realism would distinguish between general properties and specific property-instances.

That, most certainly, is not the view of the Catholic Church. Rather she refers to the Holy Spirit as the “soul” of the Church. This is nothing new. It is a well-established point of Sacred Tradition: St. Augustine succinctly described the Holy Spirit's role in the Mystical Body of Christ: “What the soul is in our body, that is the Holy Ghost in Christ's body, the Church” (Sermon 267, 4: PL 38, 1231 D). Popes have since used St. Augustine's statement as a starting point of a more elaborate explanation, including Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Divinum Illud Munus*, as well as Pope Pius XII in *Mystici Corporis Christi*, who touches on the Holy Spirit's role as soul of the Church.

Several more problems:

i) As usual, Blosser doesn't bother to make a case for his operating assumptions. He simply quotes Catholic theology to the reader. How is that an *argument* for Catholic theology?

Is Blosser even capable of poking his head out his Catholic shell for long enough to ever make a case for Catholicism?

ii) We also have metaphors masquerading as arguments. A metaphor is, at best, an analogy. An analogy is not an argument. One must mount an actual argument from analogy—which Blosser fails to do.

You want to suggest that since the Church is a mere “collection of individuals,” we shouldn’t be inclined to trust the opinion of an individual who happens to be a Catholic bishop or pope any more than the opinion of, say, a Cumberland Presbyterian who has a reasonable knowledge of his well-worn Bible. But whom was Jesus addressing when He said (in John 16:13) “when the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you into all truth”? Was he addressing the Cumberland Presbyterian gentleman? You? Me? The Arminian? The Premillennial dispensationalist Baptist? The Jehovah’s Witness who reads his Bible? (He accepts *sola scriptura* too, of course.) We would be in a strange pickle if that were the case, because we all disagree substantially at key points. No, Jesus was addressing His Apostles, those upon whom He conferred special charisms of authority to them – e.g., the authority to bind and loose sins (John 20:23) – even as God reserved to His lawfully appointed spokesmen in the OT prerogatives He withheld from others – e.g., the exclusive priesthood of the Aaronic Levites established at Sinai against which Korah led a rebellion (Num 16). Further, Nehemiah 8:7-8 offers a nice example of magisterial authority in action when the Levites -- Jeshua, Bani Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Masseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Peliah -- "helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." No, the Church or OT covenant people of God are not *merely* a “collection of individuals.” Some are lawfully appointed to be priests, to teach, to administer the sacraments, etc.; while others are not, but are duty-bound to receive them with due submission and respect as God’s anointed. This does not mean they are always impeccable in their behavior or infallible in their private judgments. It does mean, according to Catholic teaching, that they speak for God when they teach in their official capacity what the Church infallibly teaches, and we are then no more in a position to stand in judgment upon their teaching than the Ethiopian Eunuch was in a position to correct the instruction of Philip upon being taught by him how to understand the Book of Isaiah (Acts 8:26-40).

i) Blosser’s fictitious imputation notwithstanding, my actual position, as I’ve said on more than one occasion in the past, is that the church is multiply-instantiated in time and place. Many local churches and Christian denominations exemplify the church. But no one denomination is identical with the church. In the words of Hippolytus,

The church is not called a place or house of stone or clay. What is the church? The holy assembly of the righteous.⁷⁸

If you wish to classify my position philosophically, then it would be a brand of realism rather than nominalism.

⁷⁸ *In Dan. 1.17.6f.*

ii) Notice, as usual, that Blosser is *citing* Scripture rather than *exegeting* Scripture. The interpretation of Neh 8:7-8 is rather uncertain.⁷⁹ But let's remember that most of the repatriated exiles did not own private copies of the OT. Moreover, it is unclear how many could even read Classical Hebrew. So this is hardly an example of “magisterial authority”—especially since Ezra himself is apparently absent from the proceedings.

What we have, rather, is the public reading of Scripture. Scripture is read aloud because the members of the audience don't own their own copies.

This may include a translation from Hebrew to Aramaic.

It may also include an exposition. But there's nothing inherently magisterial about expository preaching.

So this is just another instance of Blosser's flagrant, acontextual proof-texting.

iii) Also notice, as usual, his equivocations. Philip was deacon, not a bishop. So Philip was not a member of the Magisterium, even if we retroject the Magisterium back into the NT church.

Likewise, a mere priest is not a member of the Magisterium. Every (validly ordained) bishop is a priest, but every priest is not a bishop. Therefore, the implicit analogy between the Aaronic/Levitical priesthood, the Catholic priesthood, and the Magisterium falls apart at the critical point of comparison. At best, the analogy would only hold for the high priest, and even that is both equivocal and underdetermined by the Scriptural and extrascriptural evidence.

It's important to carefully observe the extent to which Blosser's case for the Catholic rule of faith is erected over the cumulative foundation of serial equivocations and acontextual appeals.

Thus the extrabiblical influence of late medieval nominalism, together with various practical exigencies involved in trying to justify revolt against the Church and the whole ecclesiastical tradition, combined to facilitate the development of *sola scriptura* and to make each Protestant, in principle, his own pope.

Why is medieval nominalism any more of an extrabiblical influence than Patristic Neoplatonism or scholastic Aristotelianism?

It's not. However, where Neoplatonism offers philosophical arguments for why anything that God created cannot be evil (evil as the “privation of being”), or where Aristotelianism facilitates a philosophical articulation of the understanding

⁷⁹ E.g. D. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Eerdmans 1992), 184-85.

of God's purposiveness in nature (immanent natural teleology), they serve as *ancilla theologiae*, as servants of Christian theology. But where medieval nominalism leads Ockham to deny formal and final causality and to deny any sort of immanent teleology implanted by God within nature, and when it leads Luther, as one who called Ockham "my dear master" (B.A. Gerrish, "Luther," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Macmillan, 1967, vol. 5, p. 112), to assert that whereas by human reason $2 + 5 = 7$, yet, if God should declare them 8, one must believe contrary to reason and to feeling (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Mentor, 1950), we have a problem, because the result is a radically fideistic worldview deeply inimical to a biblical (and Catholic) understanding of God as a God of reason. (In this connection, I call to witness Pope Benedict XVI's Regensburg address of last year in which he offered an oblique challenge to Islam to consider whether it's deeply nominalist theology, placing God beyond knowing, allowing only for the revelation of God's arbitrary will, does not make rational discourse about religion impossible. There is a striking parallel between the Islamic rejection of the rational theology of the 8th century Mu'tazilite school and the 16th century Protestant rejection of the Catholic "Natural Law" tradition in favor of its voluntaristic divine command ethic.)

A couple of basic problems here:

i) True to form, he's backpedaling. He does this on a regular basis. Blosser will make sweeping claim. As soon as his indefensible claim is challenged, he changes the subject.

His original objection to nominalism is that it represents an "extrabiblical influence." But when I point out that other philosophies like patristic Neoplatonism and scholastic Aristotelianism are equally extrabiblical, he substitutes a different objection.

ii) Then there's his historically and logically slipshod resort to free association to discredit every evangelical tradition by imputing elements of one evangelical to another evangelical tradition.

iii) And while we're on the subject, there's a strain of apophatic theology in Thomism.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Protestant theology makes every Protestant his own pope, so what? Why shouldn't I be my own pope? What gives you the right to be my pope? The pope is still an individual among individuals. So popery is just another form of individualism. And an autocratic form of individualism at that. An individualism of the one over the many.

Well, this is truly a first, in my experience: not only a frank admission but a ready

embrace of the idea, “Every Protestant his own pope”! But I see you endeavoring to set forth a serious principle here, which is that no individual has any more authority than another.

No, I never made that claim.

There is a rugged American individualism at work here, which evokes John Wayne (a Catholic convert at the end of his life, by the way).

More free association masquerading as serious analysis.

But what about this? Is it true? Are we simply an atomistic collection of individuals here?

A straw man argument.

I’m certain that this is how many congregationalist Christians view the Body of Christ, ironically. So our Lord has left us each to fend for himself as best he can, with his online Bible translations and concordances and word studies and other biblical-grammatical helps?

Where was the Vatican when Abraham was living in tents? Where was the Vatican when Israel was living in Goshen? Where was the Vatican when Ahab, Jezebel, and Athalia drove the faithful underground? Where was the Vatican during the Babylonian Exile? Where was the Vatican during the Intertestamental era?

Like every Catholic apologist, Blosser reasons aprioristically rather than historically. Don’t look out the window to see how God has actually governed his people in the past. Instead, simply deduce your ecclesiology from a set of appealing axioms.

And where do you expect that will lead? To consensus?

I’m not aiming for consensus. I’m aiming for truth.

If the historical record is any predictor of the future, I would wager on further factionalism. At Westminster we used to talk about Presbyterianism in terms of the “Split P’s” because of the multiplication of splinter Presbyterian denominations – there were the Cumberland Ps, UPs, OPCs, PCAs, RPCNAs, ARPs . . . on and on. And there was the title by Gary North of the “**TRULY REFORMED**” Reconstructionist-Theonomist movement founded by Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Failure of American Baptist Culture*. Then there are the Van Tillian presuppositionalists vs. the Norman Geisler and R.C. Sproul evidentialists (though Sproul was also a Kuyperian); not to mention the unresolved debate

between Van Til and Gordon Clark on the question of univocal knowledge and the incomprehensibility of God, or the heresy trial of Norman Shepherd at Westminster Theological Seminary in 1980 because of his instance upon a more nuanced interpretation of "Justification by Faith Alone" than the rest of the Westminster faculty and trustees felt they could permit (which ended with Shepherd switching denominations from the OPC [Orthodox Presbyterian Church] and becoming a CRC [Christian Reformed Church] pastor of the Dutch Reformed tradition). Then there are the Kuyperian Dutch Calvinists, and the Dooyeweerdians and Vollenhovens who don't have much truck at all with other Calvinists. Dooyeweerd and Van Til couldn't agree on the question of transcendental method. Vern Poythress and John Frame had no time for Robert Knudsen or any other Dooyeweerdians, particularly with the notions of "naïve pre-theoretical experience" and "cosmic time," which struck them as too Neo-Kantian.

And there are parallel factions within Catholicism. Running feuds between Thomistic Dominicans and Molinist Jesuits. Or Catholic critics of transcendental Thomism (e.g. Jaki v. Rahner). Of competing schools of casuistry, viz. probabilism, probabiliorism, and equiprobabilism. You have heresy trials in Catholicism.

Incidentally, what was wrong with the heresy trial of Norman Shepherd? It's a *good* thing when a seminary or denomination maintains doctrinal fidelity.

All of these individuals have remarkable insights and wonderful resources to share. But my problem – the Catholic problem – is with the notion that the Lord would have left us with nothing more to guide us in the ongoing governance of our faith and life within the Church than a Bible and this cacophony of competing interpretations.

But that's exactly the situation you had in 2nd temple Judaism.

The historical record of the Church surely shows otherwise. Among the four marks of the church in the Nicene Creed are the marks "Catholic" and "Apostolic." If one goes deep into history, one sees that these concepts have a stable and well-established meaning and aren't susceptible of arbitrary interpretations such as one finds in modern times among Protestants.

Catholicism is chock-full of arbitrary interpretations. To take one conspicuous example, just consider the "exegetical" argument offered by Pius IX for the Immaculate Conception:

This sublime and singular privilege of the Blessed Virgin, together with her most excellent innocence, purity, holiness and freedom from every stain of sin, as well as the unspeakable abundance and greatness of all heavenly

graces, virtues and privileges -- these the Fathers beheld in that ark of Noah, which was built by divine command and escaped entirely safe and sound from the common shipwreck of the whole world; [Gn 6:9] in the ladder which Jacob saw reaching from the earth to heaven, by whose rungs the angels of God ascended and descended, and on whose top the Lord himself leaned'[Gn 28:12] in that bush which Moses saw in the holy place burning on all sides, which was not consumed or injured in any way but grew green and blossomed beautifully;[Ex 3:2] in that impregnable tower before the enemy, from which hung a thousand bucklers and all the armor of the strong;[SG 4:4] in that garden enclosed on all sides, which cannot be violated or corrupted by any deceitful plots;[SG 4:12] as in that resplendent city of God, which has its foundations on the holy mountains;[Ps 87:1] in that most august temple of God, which, radiant with divine splendors, is full of the glory of God;[Is 6:1-4] and in very many other biblical types of this kind. In such allusions the Fathers taught that the exalted dignity of the Mother of God, her spotless innocence and her sanctity unstained by any fault, had been prophesied in a wonderful manner.⁸⁰

However, the comparison is cute rather than acute. The position of evangelical theology is not that every Christian is his own pope, but that no Christian is the pope. Evangelical theology doesn't claim that every Christian can speak *ex cathedra*, but that no Christian can speak *ex cathedra*—since the death of the Apostles.

It's certainly cuter than accurate. I don't doubt that your statement of the "position of evangelical theology" is accurate, though I do doubt its defensibility. How, for example, would you defend the proposition that none can speak *ex cathedra* "since the death of the Apostles"? Where do you get that? One needs more than wishful thinking to establish a claim, as you know. Furthermore, how do you defend the claim that "no Christian is the pope," since, if "pope" means nothing other than "father," Paul several times describes himself in a paternal relationship with those he "fathers" in Christ?

Once again, he's confusing words with concepts, as if you can extract the *concept* of the papacy from the *etymology* of "Pope" as "father." This is a twofold fallacy:

- i) Usage, not etymology, is the way to define words.
- ii) The meaning of a word is not the same thing as the meaning of a concept denoted by a word.

It's been 46 years since James Barr published his landmark work on The Semitics

⁸⁰ <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ineff.htm>

of Biblical Language (Oxford 1961), and that, in turn, goes back to Frege's theory of meaning—in his 1891-92 series: "Funktion und Begriff," "Über Sinn und Bedeutung," and "Über Begriff und Gegenstand."

I think often the problem when Evangelicals hear the word "pope," they think of a fat Italian wearing a tiara wearing crimson robes with fine ermine trim being carried in a litter shouldered by a crowd of men. But these are only accidental properties of the pope. Peter is clearly established in the NT as the head of the Apostles, the "prince of the apostles," and, in that sense, the first 'pope.' He's given the keys of the kingdom (Mt 16:19), based on the symbolic "keys" given to the prime minister (or "chief steward" or "chamberlain") of a King (cf. Is 22:22). He's renamed "Cephus" (Lat. from Aramaic "Kepha," meaning 'rock') and declared the foundation stone of the Church (Mt. 16:18). Furthermore, in every listing of the Apostles in the NT, Peter is named first, and Judas last, where the list is complete. If the list is partial, Peter is still named first, and then there follows a predictable order in an accepted hierarchy of Andrew, James the Greater, and John, and so on. Moreover, here's an interesting circumstantial detail: the second-most frequently named Apostle in the NT is John, who is cited a total of 30 times. The most frequently named Apostle is Peter, who is cited a grand total of – could you have guessed it? – 179 times. A mere circumstantial detail, to be sure, but significant. Are you sure it's fair to describe these as a mere "collection of individuals"?

I've been over all this ground in the past. To quote myself:

Even with respect to the primary Petrine text, Protestants have often pointed out that the prerogatives ascribed to Peter in 16:19 ("binding and loosing") are likewise conferred on the Apostles generally in 18:18. The image of the "keys" (v19a) is used for Peter only, but this is a figure of speech—while the power signified by the keys was already unpacked by the "binding and loosing" language, so that no distinctively Petrine prerogative remains in the original promise. In other words, the "keys" do not refer to a separate prerogative that is distinctive to Peter. That confuses the metaphor with its literal referent.

For that matter, 18:18 doesn't even limit the disciplinary jurisdiction to the Apostolate or the eldership, for the context has a larger and less structured body in view (vv15-20). As John Meier, a leading Catholic scholar, has observed,

We should notice that, in this whole process of discipline, there is no intervention by a single authoritative leader. When the church acts authoritatively, it acts as a whole, though Matthew certainly knows the existence of church leaders (Cf. 23:34; 13:52; and of course 16:17-19). For Matthew, church leadership does not swallow up the authority of the assembly of believers acting as one body. That is why Matthew can assign

to the local church in 18:18 the power to bind and loose that is given to Peter in 16:19. Whenever the church leader acts, he activates and concretizes the authority which resides in the church as a whole.⁸¹

The collective reference is also an embarrassment when the power to bind and loose is taken as a proof-text for papal infallibility. For if, in 18:17-18, this power extends to the local congregation, then that entirely undercuts papal primacy.

That disciplinary authority extends to the laity is further confirmed by the practice of the Pauline churches (cf. 1 Cor 5:4-5; 6:4).

By way of reply, it is sometimes said that 16:18 has reference to the universal church whereas 18:17 has reference to the local church, so that we can't equate the Apostolic prerogative with the Petrine prerogative. However, 18:17 also applies to the universal church. The passage (18:15ff.) is dealing with church discipline, which is necessarily a local affair since it addresses individual infractions. But Christ is laying down general norms that are valid in any case of church discipline. There is, therefore, a functional equivalence between the collective identity of the church in 16:18 and the distributive identity of the church in 18:17, for 18:17 presents a paradigm-case.

Catholicism glosses 18:18 by saying that the collective apostolic prerogative in 18:18 must be exercised in consultation with the Petrine prerogative in 16:19. But there is no textual warrant for drawing this connection. It assumes the very point at issue.

Mt 16 actually presents a dilemma for the Catholic apologist, for if we identify the Petrine office with the papacy on the basis of v18, then—by parity of argument—we ought to identify the Antichrist with the papacy, based on the malediction of v23. Catholic theology has penned entire libraries on v16 while remaining strangely silent on v23.

Appeal is sometimes made to the Isaian background of Mt 16:19 (cf. Isa 22:22) as a precedent for apostolic succession. But as E.J. Young has noted,

This office is not made hereditary. God promises the key to Eliakim but not to his descendants. The office continues, but soon loses its exalted character. It was Eliakim the son of Hilkiah who was exalted, and not the office itself. Eliakim had all the power of a "Rabshakeh," [the chief of drinking], and in him the Assyrian might recognize a man who could act for the theocracy...Whether Eliakim actually was guilty of nepotism or not, we are expressly told that at the time ("in that day") when they hang all the

⁸¹ J. Meier, *The Vision of Matthew* (Crossroad 1991), 132.

glory of his father's house upon him he will be removed. Apparently the usefulness of the office itself will have been exhausted...The usefulness of Eliakim's exalted position was at an end: were it to continue as it was under Eliakim it would not be for the welfare of the kingdom; its end therefore must come.⁸²

Mt 16:18 is the primary Petrine text. But a direct appeal to Mt 16:18 greatly obscures the number of steps that have to be interpolated in order to get us from Peter to the papacy. Let's jot down just a few of these intervening steps:

- a) The promise of Mt 16:18 has reference to *Peter*.
- b) The promise of Mt 16:18 has *exclusive* reference to Peter.
- c) The promise of Mt 16:18 has reference to a Petrine *office*.
- d) This office is *perpetual*.
- e) Peter resided in *Rome*.
- f) Peter was the *bishop* of Rome
- g) Peter was the *first* bishop of Rome
- h) There was only *one* bishop at a time
- i) Peter was not a bishop *anywhere else*.
- j) Peter *ordained* a successor
- k) This ceremony *transferred* his official prerogatives to a successor.
- l) The succession has remained *unbroken* up to the present day.

Lets go back and review each of these twelve separate steps:

- a) V18 may not even refer to Peter:

We can see that Πετρας is not the πετρα on which Jesus will build his church...In accord with 7:24, which Matthew quotes here, the πετρα consists of Jesus' teaching, i.e., the law of Christ. "This rock" no longer poses the problem that "this" is ill suits an address to Peter in which he is the rock. For that meaning the text would have read more naturally "on you." Instead, the demonstrative echoes 7:24; i.e., "*this* rock" echoes

⁸² The Book of Isaiah (Eerdmans 1982), 1:116-18.

“*these* my words.” Only Matthew put the demonstrative with Jesus words, which the rock stood for in the following parable (7:24-27). His reusing it in 16:18 points away from Peter to those same words as the foundation of the church...Matthew's Jesus will build only on the firm bedrock of his law (cf. 5:19-20; 28:19), not on the loose stone Peter. Also, we no longer need to explain away the association of the church's foundation with Christ rather than Peter in Mt 21:42.⁸³

- (b) Is falsified by the power-sharing arrangement in Mt 18:17-18 & Jn 20:23.
- (c) The conception of a Petrine office is borrowed from Roman bureaucratic categories (*officium*) and read back into this verse. The original promise is indexed to the person of Peter. There is no textual assertion or implication whatsoever to the effect that the promise is separable from the person of Peter.
- (d) In 16:18, perpetuity is attributed to the Church, and not to a church office.
- (e) There is some evidence that Peter paid a visit to Rome (cf. 1 Pet 5:13). There is some evidence that Peter also paid a visit to Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 1:12; 9:5).
- (f) This commits a category mistake. An Apostle is not a bishop. Apostleship is a vocation, not an office, analogous to the prophetic calling. Or, if you prefer, it's an extraordinary rather than ordinary office.
- (g) The original Church of Rome was probably organized by Messianic Jews like Priscilla and Aquilla (cf. Acts 18:2; Rom 16:3). It wasn't founded by Peter. Rather, it consisted of a number of house-churches (e.g. Rom 16; Hebrews) of Jewish or Gentile membership—or mixed company.
- (h) NT polity was plural rather than monarchical. The Catholic claim is predicated on a strategic shift from a plurality of bishops (pastors/elders) presiding over a single (local) church—which was the NT model—to a single bishop presiding over a plurality of churches. And even after you go from (i) oligarchic to (ii) monarchical prelacy, you must then continue from monarchical prelacy to (iii) Roman primacy, from Roman primacy to (iv) papal primacy, and from papal primacy to (v) papal infallibility. So step (h) really breaks down into separate steps—none of which enjoys the slightest exegetical support.
- (j) Peter also presided over the Diocese of Pontus-Bithynia (1 Pet 1:1). And according to tradition, Antioch was also a Petrine See (Apostolic Constitutions 7:46.).
- (j)-(k) This suffers from at least three objections:

⁸³ R. Gundry, *Matthew* (Eerdmans 1994), 334.

i) These assumptions are devoid of exegetical support. There is no internal warrant for the proposition that Peter ordained any successors.

ii) Even if he had, there is no exegetical evidence that the imposition of hands is identical with Holy Orders.

iii) Even if we went along with that identification, Popes are elected to papal office, they are not ordained to papal office. There is no separate or special sacrament of papal orders as over against priestly orders. If Peter ordained a candidate, that would just make him a pastor (or priest, if you prefer), not a Pope.

(l) This cannot be verified. What is more, events like the Great Schism falsify it in practice, if not in principle. No less a figure than Cardinal Ratzinger, now the Pope, admits that:

For nearly half a century the Church was split into two or three obediences that excommunicated one another, so that every Catholic lived under excommunication by one pope or another, and, in the last analysis, no one could say with certainty which of the contenders had right on his side.⁸⁴
Principles of Catholic Theology (Ignatius, 1987), 196.

Furthermore, if there was ever an Apostle who should have outranked Peter, the common poorly-educated fisherman, it should have been Paul, the protégé of Gamaliel, the head of one of Jerusalem's two chief rabbinical schools. Paul was not only a highly literate Jew, educated in Aramaic and Hebrew; he was a Roman citizen. He knew Latin. He knew Greek. He was a highly refined and sophisticated young man being groomed by Gamaliel as a future leader of Judea – a great loss when he defected to the new sect of Christians in the region. But here's the kicker: after Paul's conversion, after his time of retreat in the Arabian desert, where does he go? In Gal. 1:18, he tells us: "Then . . . I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas [the 'rock'], and remained with him fifteen days." I would have given anything to listen in to the conversations between them – a common fisherman and a highly refined and educated sophisticate who came up in submission to let the head of the Apostolic team – the "prince of the apostles," the 'rock,' the 'head,' the 'papa' or 'pope' of the group – that he was making his services available to play for the Varsity Team. Then in Gal. 2:1-2, Paul describes an incident some 14 years later after years of struggle on his mission journeys, when, he says, "I went up again to Jerusalem . . . and laid before them the gospel which I preached among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain." What is interesting here is the humanity of Paul in humbly submitting the content of the gospel he had been preaching to have it vetted by Peter, James, and John "lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain."

⁸⁴ Principles of Catholic Theology (Ignatius 1987), 196.

No Christian can be *pope*? That would be news to Paul and the other Apostles.

What would be news to Paul and the other Apostles is the way in which Blosser reads against the grain of text and context alike. As F. F. Bruce explains:

[Paul] was concerned to argue that at no point between his conversion and the writing of the letter [of Galatians] had the Jerusalem leaders conferred on him any authority which he did not possess already by direct commission of the risen Christ. What Paul was concerned about was not the validity of his gospel but its practicability. His commission was not derived from Jerusalem, but it could not be effectively discharged except in fellowship with Jerusalem. A cleavage between his Gentle mission and the mother-church in Jerusalem would be disastrous for the progress of the gospel: the cause of Christ would be divided, and all the devotion with which Paul has thus far prosecuted his apostolate to the Gentiles, and hoped to go on persecuting it, would be frustrated.⁸⁵

The order in which Paul names them suggests that James had now attained a position of primacy, in Jerusalem at least, in which he was beginning to overshadow the Twelve themselves. No longer is he mentioned almost incidentally alongside Peter, as in Paul's account of his earlier visit to Jerusalem.⁸⁶

Paul does not commit himself to acceptance of their status as "pillars". He affirms, however, that they "added nothing" to him—neither to the subject-matter of his gospel nor to his authority to preach it.⁸⁷

Not Peter in particular, but the triumvirate as a whole, undertook the responsibility for directing and executing the mission to Jews, with James becoming more and more *primus inter pares* and issuing directives which even Peter felt bound to obey.⁸⁸

Fifth, *sola scriptura* assumes that the Bible can be understood apart from tradition. It assumes no ultimate need for the larger context of the Church's tradition and teaching. However, not only is the canon of Scripture incapable of being identified apart from tradition, as we have seen, but the meaning of Scripture cannot be fully grasped. Protestants argue that Scripture is clear, but they disagree even among themselves as to what it means. If they admit that parts of Scripture are unclear, they argue that the essentials are clear and that the unclear parts can be interpreted

⁸⁵ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans 1984), 151-52.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 153.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 153.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 154. Cf. 175ff.

in light of the clear.

Actually, the case for sola Scriptura doesn't depend on the perspicuity of Scripture, per se. That's an apologetic move, and it has some merit. But the question of sola Scriptura is simply a factual question: is this the rule of faith that God has imposed on the church? The answer doesn't turn on the exact degree of clarity—which varies in time and place, and from one reader to the next.

Presumably, though, would you not agree that Scripture must be perspicuous and clear as to its teaching on *sola scriptura*, if indeed you think it teaches this? Otherwise, from what extra-biblical source would you garner the warrant for the tenet? And if you believe Scripture does teach this, then where is it perspicuously established?

The answer depends on how we frame the question and what we think will count as evidence:

i) Suppose Scripture were silent on the issue. How would we interpret its silence?

Blosser assumes that if Scripture doesn't answer various questions about church and sacrament, then Scripture must be supplemented by extrascriptural tradition and/or a divine teaching office (the Magisterium).

But if Scripture doesn't answer various questions, that is not an argument in favor of an authoritative supplement to Scripture.

For that may just as well be an argument in favor of the proposition that this is a point of liberty. Where Scripture is silent, there is more than one morally acceptable choice.

If it were that important to have an answer, God would reveal the answer (public revelation recorded in Scripture). If God has not revealed the answer, then there is no one right answer. And we are free to make a reasonable choice.

So even if we had no positive evidence for sola Scriptura, the argument from silence would not be an argument for the Catholic rule of faith. At most, the question would be undecidable.

ii) As far as positive evidence is concerned, sola Scriptura would be a theological construct, like many other doctrines. It wouldn't turn on one or two isolated prooftexts.

iii) One practical line of evidence would be: what does God hold his people to? For what are they answerable? We can learn *to* what they are responsible by learning *for* what they are responsible. As John Frame has put it:

Scripture tells us to go to Scripture! Or, rather, the God of Scripture tells us in Scripture to go to Scripture!

Of course we must note at the outset that the Bible is not the only word that God has spoken. God has spoken words to and by his apostles and prophets that are not recorded in the Bible. He has also spoken, in a sense, to the earth, to the storms, to the winds and waves.[21] And in a mysterious sense, the word of God may also be identified with God Himself[22] and particularly with Jesus Christ.[23] But God does not always tell us what he says to the winds and waves, and he has not always provided us with prophets at a handy distance! Rather, he has directed us to a book! That is where we are to go for daily, regular guidance. That is where we may always find the demands of the Lord and the promise of the Savior.

Writing goes back a long way in the history of redemption. The book of Genesis appears to be derived largely from “books of generations.”[24] We don't know much about the origin of these books, but it is significant that (1) they include inspired prophecies[25] and (2) they were eventually included among Israel's authoritative writings. From a very early time, God's people began to *record* the history of redemption for their posterity. It was important from the beginning that God's covenants, his demands and his promises be written down lest they be forgotten. The first explicit reference, however, to a divinely authorized book occurs in connection with the war between Israel and Amalek shortly after the Exodus:

And Joshua discomfited Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. And the Lord said unto Moses, “Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua: that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” And Moses built an altar, and called the name of it Jehovah-nissi; and he said, “The Lord hath sworn: the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”[26]

Not only does the Lord authorize the writing of the book; the content of it is God's own oath, his pledge. It is the word of God, a word of absolute authority and sure promise. Because God has spoken it, it will surely happen.

But an even more important example of divine writing occurs a few chapters later. In Exodus twenty, God speaks the Ten Commandments to

the people of Israel. The people are terrified, and they ask Moses to act as mediator between themselves and God. From Ex. 20:22 to 23:33, God presents to Moses further commandments in addition to the ten, which Moses is to convey to the people. In Ex. 24:4, we learn that Moses wrote down all these words and in verse seven read them to the people. The people received these words as the word of God himself – “All that the Lord hath spoken will we do, and be obedient.”[27] They accepted these *written* words as words of absolute demand! But something even more remarkable occurs a few verses later. The Lord calls Moses alone to ascend the mountain, “and I will give thee the tables of stone, and the law and the commandment which I have written, that thou mayest teach them.”[28] Note the pronouns in the first person singular! God did the writing! In fact, the implication of the tenses is that God had completed the writing before Moses ascended the mountain. Moses was to go up the mountain to receive a completed, divinely written manuscript! Nor is this the only passage that stresses divine authorship of the law. Elsewhere, too, we learn that the tables were “written with the finger of God”[29]; they were “the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables.”[30]

What was going on here? Why the sustained emphasis upon divine writing? Meredith G. Kline[31] suggests that this emphasis on divine writing arises out of the nature of covenant-making in the ancient near East. When a great king entered a “suzerainty covenant relation” with a lesser king, the great king would produce *a document* setting forth the terms of the covenant. The great king was the author, because he was the lord, the sovereign. He set the terms. The lesser king was to read and obey, for he was the servant, the vassal. The covenant document was the Law; it set forth the commands of the great king, and the servant was bound to obey. To disobey the document was to disobey the great king; to obey it was to obey him. Now in Exodus twenty and succeeding chapters, God is making a kind of “suzerainty treaty” with Israel. As part of the treaty relation, he authors a document which is to serve as the official record of his absolute demand. Without the document there would be no covenant.

Later, more words were added to the document; and we read in Deuteronomy that Moses put all these words in the ark of the covenant, the dwelling place of God, the holiest place in Israel, “that it may be there for a witness against thee.”[32] The covenant document is not man's witness concerning God; it is God's witness against man. Man may not add to or subtract anything from the document;[33] for the document is God's word,

and must not be confused with any mere human authority.

This divine authority takes many forms. In the extra-biblical suzerainty covenants, certain distinct elements have been discovered[34]: the self-identification of the lord (the giving of his name), the “historical prologue” (proclaiming the benevolent acts of the lord to the vassal), the basic demand for exclusive loyalty (called “love”), the detailed demands of the lord, the curses upon the disobedient, the blessings upon the obedient, and finally the details of covenant administration, use of the document, etc. In the law of God, all of these elements are present. God tells who he is,[35] he proclaims his grace through his acts in history,[36] he demands love,[37] he sets forth his detailed demands,[38] he declares the curses and blessings contingent on covenant obedience,[39] and he sets up the machinery for continuing covenant administration, laying particular emphasis on the use of the covenant book.[40] All of these elements of the covenant are authoritative; all are words of God.

Theologians generally oversimplify the concept of biblical authority. To some theologians, it is God's personal self-manifestation (as in the giving of the divine name) which is authoritative. To others, it is the account of historical events. To others, the demand for love is the central thing. To others it is the divine self-commitment to bless. But the covenantal structure of revelation has room for all of these elements, and what's more, places them in proper relation to one another. There is both love and law, both grace and demand, both kerygma and didache, both personal disclosure (stated in “I-thou” form) and objective declarations of facts, both a concept of history and a concept of inspired words. The covenant document contains authoritative *propositions* about history (the servant has no right to contradict the lord's account of the history of the covenant), authoritative commands to be obeyed, authoritative questions (demanding the vassal's pledge to covenant allegiance), authoritative *performatives* (God's self-commitment to bless and curse).[41] The propositions are infallible; but infallibility is only part of biblical authority. This authority also includes the authority of non-propositional language as well.

We have seen that the idea of a “canon,” an authoritative written word of God, goes back to the very beginning of Israel's history, back to its very creation as a nation. The Scripture is the constitution of Israel, the basis for its existence. The idea of a written word of God did not arise in twentieth-century fundamentalism, nor in seventeenth-century orthodoxy, nor in the post-apostolic church, nor in II Timothy, nor in post-exilic Judaism. The

idea of a written word of God is at the very foundation of biblical faith. Throughout the history of redemption, therefore, God continually calls his people back to the written word. Over and over again he calls them to keep “the commandments of the Lord your God, and his testimonies, and his statutes which he hath commanded thee.”^[42] These are the words of absolute demand and sure promise, the words of the Lord. These were the words that made the difference between life and death. These were the words which could not be questioned, which transcended all other demands, which governed all areas of life. When Israel sinned and returned to the Lord, she returned also to the law of God.^[43]

From time to time there were new words of God. Joshua added to the words which Moses had placed in the ark.^[44] How could a mere man add to the words of God in view of the command of Deut. 4:2? The only answer can be that Joshua's words were also recognized as God's words. The prophets also came speaking God's words,^[45] and some of them were written down.^[46]

Thus the “Old Testament” grew. By the time of Jesus there was a well-defined body of writings which was generally recognized as God's word, and which was quoted as supreme authority, as Holy Scripture. Jesus and the apostles did not challenge, but rather accepted this view. Not only did they accept it, but they actively testified to it by word and deed. The role of Scripture in the life of Jesus is really remarkable: although Jesus was and is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, during his earthly ministry he subjected himself completely to the Old Testament Scripture. Over and over again, he performed various actions “so that the Scripture might be fulfilled.”^[47] The whole point of his life – his sacrificial death and resurrection was determined beforehand by Scripture.^[48] Jesus' testimony to Scripture, then, is not occasional, but pervasive. His whole life was a witness to biblical authority! But listen particularly to what Christ and the apostles say concerning the Old Testament! Listen to the way in which they cite Scripture, even in the face of Satan, to “clinch” an argument, to silence objections.^[49] Listen to the titles by which they describe the Old Testament: “Scripture,” “holy Scripture,” “law,” “prophets,” “royal law of liberty..... the oracles of God.”^[50] Listen to the formulae by which they cite Scripture: “It is written”; “it says”; “the Holy Spirit says”; “Scripture says.”^[51] All of these phrases and titles denoted to the people of Jesus' day something far more than a mere human document. These terms denoted nothing less than inspired, authoritative words of God. As Warfield pointed out, “Scripture says” and “God says”

are interchangeable!⁵¹

And consider further the explicit *teaching* of Jesus and the apostles concerning biblical authority:

1. Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, 'till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law; until all things are accomplished. Whosoever therefore shall break one of the least of these commandments, and shall teach men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.[52]

Jots and tittles were among the smallest marks used in the written Hebrew language. Jesus is saying that *everything in* the law and the prophets (equals the Old Testament) carries divine authority. And obedience to that law is the criterion of greatness in the kingdom of heaven.

2. Think not that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuses you, even Moses, whom you trust. For if ye believed Moses, ye would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?[53]

The Jews claimed to believe Moses' writings, but they rejected Christ. Jesus replies that they do not really believe Moses; and he urges them to a *greater* trust in the Old Testament. He urges them to believe all of the law, and thus come to accept his messiahship. We see here that Jesus did not merely quote Scripture because it was customary among the Jews. Rather, he *criticized* the prevailing custom because it was insufficiently loyal to Scripture. Jesus' view of Scripture was *stronger* than that of the Pharisees and Scribes. Jesus sees Moses justly accusing the Jews because of their unbelief in Scripture. Believing Moses is the prerequisite to believing Christ.

3. The Jews answered him, "For a good work we stone thee not, but for blasphemy; even because thou, being a man, makest thyself God." Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, I said, 'Ye are gods'? If he called them gods unto whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), say ye of him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'Thou blasphemest'; because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?"[54]

A difficult passage, this; but note the parenthesis. Concerning a fairly obscure Psalm, Jesus says that “scripture cannot be broken.” It cannot be wrong; it cannot fail; it cannot be rejected as we reject human words.

4. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope.[55]

Here, the apostle Paul tells us that the Old Testament is relevant, not only for the people of the Old Testament period, but for us as well. It teaches us, gives us patience, comfort, hope. And most remarkably, the *whole* Old Testament is relevant! None of it is dated; none of it is invalidated by more recent thought. Of what human documents may that be said?

5. And we have the word of prophecy made more sure; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of private interpretation. For no prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spake from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit.[56]

Note the context of this passage: Peter expects to die soon, and he wishes to assure his readers of the truth of the gospel.[57] He knows that false teachers will attack the church, deceiving the flock.[58] He insists that the gospel is not myth or legend, but the account of events which he himself had witnessed.[59] Yet even when the eyewitnesses have left the scene, the believers will still have a source of sure truth. They have the “word of prophecy” – the Old Testament Scriptures – a word which is “more sure.”[60] They are to “take heed” to that word, and forsake all conflicting teaching; for the word is light, and all the rest is darkness. Moreover, it did not originate through the human interpretative process; it is not a set of human opinions about God; nor did it originate in any human volition. Rather the Holy Spirit carried the biblical writers along, as they spoke for him! The Holy Spirit determined their course and their destination. The Bible consists of human writings, but its authority is no mere human authority!

6. All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.[61]

Note again the context, for it is similar to that of the last passage. Paul in this chapter paints a gloomy picture of deceivers leading people astray. How shall we know the truth in all this confusion? Paul tells Timothy to hang on to the truth as he learned it from Paul,[62] but also to the “holy scriptures”[63] (which, we note, are available even to us who have not been taught personally by Paul). This Scripture is “inspired of God” as the KJV says, or more literally “Godbreathed” – breathed *out by God*. In less picturesque language, we might say simply “spoken by God”; but the more picturesque language also suggests the activity of the Holy Spirit in the process, the words for “spirit” and “breath” being closely related in the original Greek. Scripture is *spoken* by God; it is *his Word*; and as such it is all profitable, and it is all that we need to be equipped for good works.

Both Old and New Testaments then pervasively claim authority for the Old Testament scriptures. But what about the New Testament scriptures? Can we say that they, also, are the word of God?

We have seen the importance of verbal revelation in both Old and New Testaments. Both Testaments insist over and over again that such words are a necessity of God's plan of salvation. As we have seen, the concepts of lordship and salvation presuppose the existence of revealed words. And in the New Testament, Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. It would be surprising indeed if Jehovah, the Lord of the Old Testament people of God, gave a written record of his demand and promise, while Jesus, the Lord incarnate of whom the New Testament speaks, left no such record. Jesus told his disciples over and over again that obedience to *his words* was an absolute necessity for kingdom service and a criterion for true discipleship.[64] We need the words of Jesus! But where are they!? If there is no written record, no New Testament “covenant document,” then has Jesus simply left us to grope in the dark?

Praise God that He has not! Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead his disciples into all truth.[65] After the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, the disciples began to preach with great power and conviction.[66] The pattern remains remarkably consistent throughout the Book of Acts: the disciples are filled with the Spirit, and then they speak of Jesus.[67] They do not speak in their own strength. Further, they constantly insist that the source of their message is God, not man.[68] Their words have absolute, not merely relative, authority.[69] And this authority attaches not only to their spoken words, but also to their written words.[70] Peter classes the letters of Paul together with the “other

Scriptures”![71] Paul’s letters are “Scripture”; and we recall that “Scripture” is “God-breathed”![72]

We conclude, then, that the witness of Scripture to its own authority is *pervasive*: (1) The whole biblical message of salvation presupposes and necessitates the existence of revealed words – words of absolute demand and sure promise; without such words, we have no Lord, no Savior, no hope. (2) Throughout the history of redemption, God directs his people to find these words in written form, in those books which we know as the Old and New Testaments.⁸⁹

I’d add that impugning the clarity of Scripture is often quite misleading. It suggests that while Scripture speaks to an issue, what it says is unclear. But that’s rarely the case: (a) To begin with, we need to distinguish between what was clear to the original audience, and what is clear to us. (b) In addition, when a Catholic says that Scripture is unclear, what he ordinarily means is not that Scripture speaks to an issue, yet without sufficient clarity, but rather, that Scripture doesn’t, in fact, speak to an issue—at least, that it doesn’t say enough to answer the question of the Catholic. In other words, there’s a big difference between the claim that Scripture has a lot to say on a particular topic, but it’s unclear what it means by what it says—and claim that Scripture doesn’t have very much to say on a particular topic, which is why the reader is unclear on what do think or do.

Okay. Fair enough. So let’s see you make your case.

The real problem is that Catholic priorities are out of sync with divine priorities. Catholics are terribly concerned with questions which Scripture isn’t terribly unconcerned with answering.

Isn’t this what logicians call begging the question? It would help your case if you offered an argument, would it not? Statements of these kind are what my Westminster classmates used to dismiss as “papist pontifications,” even though, in this case, the pontifications happen to be Protestant.

One of the problems with this section is that I presented a continuous argument. Blosser responded by chopping it up into disconnected snippets, then exclaiming: “Where’s the argument!”

He needs to pay attention to the whole flow of the argument.

This doesn’t mean that Scripture is unclear or insufficient. To the contrary, a Catholic is asking the wrong questions. If he’s interested in answers to questions

⁸⁹ http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/1974Scripture.html

which Scripture isn't interested in answering, then the problem is not with the lack of answers, but the superfluity of misguided questions. If you can't find the answers you're looking for in Scripture, try posing questions which Scripture was designed to answer. The right answers select for the right questions.

More of the same here, wouldn't you agree? If not an argument, how about – at the very least – an example? That might spice things up, at least. I don't know what you mean when you're saying that Catholics are asking questions of the Bible it was never intended to answer. I hope you'll forgive me if I say it looks for all the world like some sort of bait-and-switch tactic. Catholics follow Jerome in seeing ignorance of Scripture as ignorance of Christ. We love Scripture, as you do.

It's odd that he doesn't know what I mean when I say that Catholics are asking questions of Scripture which it was never intended to answer, and then say that the onus is on me to give him an example or two.

I am simply arguing with him on his *own* grounds. *He* is the one who makes a case for sacred tradition and the Magisterium by pointing out that Scripture doesn't preserve detailed liturgical instructions regarding the administration of the sacraments. That it doesn't spell out a chain-of-command, &c.

So he is the one who is posing a set of questions which he thinks need to be answered, a set of question which Scripture doesn't answer, and which, on that account, justify the existence of the Magisterium.

Why is Blosser unable to follow his own argument?

And that's a pretty good indicator of God's will. Scripture answers the questions it was meant to answer, which is another way of saying that Scripture answers the questions we were meant to ask.

This sounds like it would fall under that classification which is the weakest of all arguments: an argument from authority, suggesting that the questions Catholics ask (by which I take you to mean the ways in which Catholics approach to Scripture) do not accord with God's will. Well, um . . . that's all fine, but – at the risk of sounding a bit tedious – how about an argument, please?

Other issues aside, the argument from authority is a fundamental feature of religious authority. For our theology is, or ought to be, derived from revelation. The question is how and where we identify the locus of authority.

Catholics are obsessed with questions they were never meant to ask, not in the sense that there's anything wrong with asking their questions, but if you think that Scripture is unclear or insufficient because it doesn't answer your pet questions, then your spiritual priorities are seriously out of whack. You can come to Scripture

with any questions you like, but if you come away from Scripture dissatisfied, then you're the one with the problem.

Hold it right there. Stop. Let's be clear about something here: the question being raised here is not one of Catholicism's creation but of Protestantism. The question concerns the Protestant teaching of *sola scriptura*. If Catholics raise the question as to how this question can be justified from Scripture, and you reply that Scripture was never designed by God to answer this question – that the question itself is illegitimate – aren't you, in effect, shooting yourself in the foot? Aren't you admitting that *sola scriptura* is alien to the entire ethos of biblical discourse? I would certainly agree that it is. It's surprising that you would. But then, if that's not what you intended to suggest (since it would pretty much end this debate in your conceding the argument), then what in the world were you trying to say?

Of course, I never said that Scripture was unclear on *sola scriptura*. In fact, as I went to some pains to explain—which went right over Blosser's head—I never said that Scripture was unclear on anything.

What I pointed out, rather, is that the denial of perspicuity is confused. For it equates the silence of scripture with a lack of clarity. But that's a very misleading equation.

To reiterate what I said before—since Blosser missed the point the first time around—a writer could give a very detailed explanation which is, at the same time, very unclear because he's a poor communicator. It isn't that he didn't attempt to answer the question. But he lacks the ability to clearly express himself.

That's quite different than saying that someone is unclear because he makes no attempt to answer the question. If he's silent on the question, then you can't properly say that he's either clear or unclear.

When a Catholic denies the perspicuity of Scripture, what he really means most of the time is that Scripture leaves many things unstated. That it hasn't spoken to some of the issues that a Catholic thinks are important.

But this doesn't mean that *Scripture* is unclear in what it *says*. To the contrary, it means that *we* are unclear as to a particular course of action because Scripture has little or *nothing* to say on that particular question. Why does Blosser find this rather elementary distinction so difficult to grasp?

Not finding the answers you sought is just as instructive as finding what you sought. If it isn't there, you were never meant to find it there.

I would agree that nobody was ever meant to find *sola scriptura* in Scripture. But I don't think you intend to go there. The question is where are you intending to go?

It's a winnowing process. One way of learning how to ask the right questions is to find what questions are answered in Scripture. To sift the truly important questions from all the unimportant questions. By process of elimination, you learn what really matters to God. If it wasn't all that important to God to answer your question, it shouldn't be all that important to you to know the answer. Knowing what you don't need to know is a basic element in the walk of faith.

I couldn't have put the matter better myself. So why buy into all this *sola scriptura* nonsense? Jesus never taught it. Peter or Paul never taught it. Paul taught his readers to "Stand firm and hold fast to the *traditions* you were taught, whether by an *oral statement* or by a letter from us" (2 Thess 2:15, emphasis added).

Blosser has a remarkable knack for failing to see what is staring him square in the face. After explaining that if you can't find the answers you're looking for in Scripture, then this should tell you that you're asking the wrong question, Blosser exclaims: I couldn't have put the matter better myself. So why buy into all this *sola scriptura* nonsense?

Shouldn't a philosophy prof. be a little quicker on the uptake?

A Catholic is like a senior citizen who thinks the steak is too chewy because he forgot to put his dentures in. No, the steak is just fine. The source of the problem lies at the toothy end of the transaction.

Is that the reason for the Evangelical "de-catholicizing" translations of key biblical passages having to do with the Lord's Supper and tradition in the New International Versions (NIV)? For example, there are thirteen instances of the term *paradosis* (usually in its plural form, *paradoseis*) in the NT, of which ten are critical of human traditions that have departed from God's Word. In the other three cases, Paul *commends* traditions to the churches to whom he writes (1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thes 2:15; 3:6). Significantly all ten of the negative references are translated by the NIV as "traditions," while all three of the positive references are deliberately mistranslated as "teachings"—the translation for *didaskalia* or *didachê*, not *paradosis*. Where's the beef in the NIV?

This is irrelevant to my argument. Who is Blosser talking to? Is like street people who swear at unseen adversaries and swat invisible flies.

But [Protestant] disagreements are not merely over unclear passages, but over the clear ones—about the very meaning of precisely those things that Jesus commanded us to do in His name: "Take, eat; this is my body ... do this in remembrance of me.... Go ... baptize ... teach them to observe all that I have commanded you."

So what? We don't have to understand or agree on the theological significance of a dominical command to carry it out. We can baptize people and administer communion without having any sacramental theology whatsoever. The ritual performance is one thing, and the ritual significance is another. Throughout Scripture, God tells people to do things even though they don't fully grasp the rationale. They don't need to. It's enough that God knows.

What you offer here is precisely just one more controvertible interpretation of the significance of Christ's "dominical command" in his Great Commission. According to your view, the "ritual performance is one thing, and the ritual significance is another"; so it really doesn't matter whether you understand what you're doing as long as you do it.

No, I was actually responding to Blosser's examples. A subordinate can carry out an order without knowing the purpose or significance of the order.

Well, you're entitled to your interpretation, I suppose; but you shouldn't kid yourself for a moment about all of Christendom agreeing with you.

Another irrelevancy since I never predicated my argument on the consensus of Christendom. And Christendom is not united on the significance of the sacraments, so there's no consensus to invoke.

In fact, I doubt there are many Calvinists who would agree with your bald assertion that it doesn't matter whether you understand the significance of what you're doing.

Blosser is equivocating. "Matter" in what sense? To perform a command? Not necessarily. For example, a child can do what his father or mother tells him without having to understand the significance of the prescription or proscription.

Moreover, the "dominical command" in question is not merely about practical "ritual acts," but about "teaching." It pertains not merely to acts, but expressly to beliefs, where it decidedly matters whether one understands the significance of what he's affirming or denying. Unless we're speaking of infants or the mentally retarded, a rational human being is accountable for what he believes. It's not "enough that God knows."

True, and I never denied that distinction. The problem is not with what I affirm, but with what Blosser denies. He acts as if you can't follow an order unless your commanding officer explains to you what it all means. The fact is that in the military, soldiers are often given an order to execute while they are kept in the dark regarding the ultimate purpose or strategic significance of their mission.

The fact is that Scripture is only a part of what has been handed down to us in

sacred tradition. By itself it was never intended to communicate the whole of God's instruction for the ongoing life of the Church and is ill-suited to that purpose. It contains many things that were not at first understood, but took time to become clear through decades and centuries of reflection and definition, often in contradistinction to emergent heresies.[72]

While heresy is a catalyst to Biblical understanding, because it forces us to ask questions of Scripture we might not have thought to pose before, we must still be able to find those answers in Scripture itself.

Try reading Mark Shea's book, *By What Authority?: An Evangelical Discovers Catholic Tradition*, which shows, among other things, how commonly embraced Evangelical beliefs (like the Trinity, monogamous marriage, and opposition to abortion) cannot be conclusively grounded in Scripture alone apart from an authoritative apostolic tradition of interpretation.

Several issues:

i) Notice, how often, after making a big deal about the absolute necessity of the Magisterium, Blosser immediately refers the reader to a Catholic layman or priest. To someone who is not a member of the Magisterium.

ii) In addition, I don't need to read a Catholic to tell me the basis for evangelical beliefs on abortion, marriage, the Trinity, &c. I can get that information directly by reading an Evangelical ethicist or systematic theologian.

iii) Sola Scriptura doesn't mean that everything we believe has to be exclusively and conclusively grounded in Scripture. There are degrees of certainty, as well as various sources of information.

Our religious and ethical beliefs can be partly informed by reason and experience. But Scripture will remain the supreme source and standard of what we believe.

[The Bible] contains many references which cannot be understood apart from the larger context of sacred tradition.[73]

No, it contains many references which cannot be understood apart from the historical context of the past or contemporaneous events—in relation to the author—and not the future framework of church history.

I'm sympathetic to the view you recommend here. Cardinal Newman compared it to the view according to which "a stream is clearest near the spring." However, as he also noted, whatever use may be made of this image, it doesn't apply to the history of belief, which on the contrary "is more equable, and purer, and stronger, when its bed has become deep, and broad, and full" (*Essay on the Development of*

Christian Doctrine, p. 40). For example, if we were to ask what the author of Isaiah 7:14 had in mind when he wrote “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel,” it’s difficult to say. I know Jewish commentators for whom the farthest thing from their imagination would be any reference to Mary and the birth of Jesus. But when we see Matthew quoting this passage in Mt 1:23, he uses the Septuagint’s translation, which renders the Hebrew term *almah* (which has a semantic range inclusive of both “young woman” and “virgin”) explicitly as “virgin,” and, further, applies this text explicitly to the birth of Jesus, we see that the meaning that was not altogether clear in the original historical context is clarified by later development.

This is misleading. Clarified by what development? We’re dealing with a prophecy. In the nature of the case, we will be clearer on the identity of the future referent once the future becomes present. So what clarifies the referent for us is an *event*—the fulfillment of the prophecy.

This is not the same thing as principle of *doctrinal* development. So Blosser is equivocating—as usual.

There is nothing unclear in what Isaiah *said*. What would be unclear, to OT Jews, is what he left *unsaid*: the historical process of fulfillment. The precise, concrete circumstances by which this oracle would be realized.⁹⁰

Many other examples could be given of this. While we may wish to argue that the concept of the “Trinity” is somehow *implicit* in the writings of the NT, the fact remains that the doctrine of the triune nature of God was not very fully developed in the first couple of centuries after Christ. There were consequently various Adoptionist and Ebionite Christologies that held sway in some circles until the Arian controversy brought the matter to a head and the Church was compelled to define its stand over against error, the yield of which was the Nicene Creed. Etc., etc.

i) This is hardly analogous to prophecy, which is, by definition, future-oriented.

ii) Does he or does he not think that the Trinity is implicit in the NT? If not, then what did the Church Fathers *develop*?

If so, then we need no recourse to tradition to supplement Scripture. For we could reproduce traditional interpretations every time we exegete Scripture, even if we had no knowledge of tradition.

Not only is [the Bible] multifarious and complex; it does not often clearly specify

⁹⁰ Cf.

http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/TH.Pratt.Historical_Contingencies.pdf

what is didactic or historical, fact or vision, allegorical or literal, idiomatic or grammatical, enunciated formally or occurring obiter, temporary or of lasting obligation, as Newman notes.[74]

Notice how Blosser uses sacred tradition as a magic wand or exegetical shortcut or stopgap. But certain things in Scripture are bound to be obscure to a modern reader due precisely to the cultural difference in time and place between the modern reader and the original reader.

I don't see much with which to take issue here, although I have yet to locate the "magic wand" to which you refer.

Keep in mind that the Vatican has never issued an official commentary which systematically and clearly specifies what is didactic or historical, fact or vision, allegorical or literal, idiomatic or grammatical, enunciated formally or occurring obiter, temporary or of lasting obligation. So Blosser's Catholic alternative is not a genuine alternative—even on its own grounds.

Perhaps there's a bit of a misunderstanding here. Catholicism distinguishes *dogma* (bodies of defined doctrine which are irreformable, understood to be infallibly revealed truth, such as the divinity of Christ, the triune nature of God, the immortality of the soul, the existence of heaven and hell, salvation as a gift of divine grace, etc.) from *doctrine* (teaching, which may be defined or undefined). There are large areas of Catholic doctrine where the Church has not dogmatically defined her doctrine and theologians are free to develop their ideas within the boundaries of orthodoxy established by the Church's dogmatic tradition. For example, the Catholic Church has few defined eschatological dogmas beyond the existence of the "four last things" (death, judgment, heaven, and hell). We should also include as relevant doctrines, the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and purgatory; but there is very little in the way of details (e.g., in the Book of Revelation) about the "Antichrist" or "the woman who rides the beast," or the final "great apostasy," or the role of the state of Israel, or Gog and Megog, etc. concerning which the Church has yet defined any doctrines in any definitive way. Usually in Church history, dogmatic definitions are the product of controversies where the Church is compelled to define the position of orthodoxy over against the threat of a contemporary heresy. In his book, *Will Catholics Be Left Behind: A Critique of the Rapture and Today's Prophecy Preachers*, Carl Olson has gone some way toward addressing the challenge of dispensational premillennialist speculations about the pre-tribulational "rapture" of believers. But the Church has no dogmas on these matters yet. Hence theologians are free (within limits) to speculate.

In my view this reluctance to dogmatically define doctrines is not a liability but a credit to the judiciousness of the Church in the face of the relatively slow

historical development and progressive unfolding our limited human understanding of divine Revelation. You seem to imply that it is a defect of Catholic teaching that the “Vatican has never issued an official commentary which systematically and clearly specifies what is didactic or historical, fact or vision, allegorical or literal, idiomatic or grammatical, enunciated formally or occurring obiter, temporary or of lasting obligation.” In my view such an official definitive commentary would be a ridiculous pretension that would precipitously slam the door on legitimate theological development. The Church in her wisdom leaves plenty of room (within limits of established orthodoxy) for theologians to ponder, puzzle, consider and contemplate the meaning of God’s Word. To my way of thinking, that is a credit to her prudence, not a liability.

No, the problem with all this is that Blosser quotes something from Newman as an argument for the Catholic rule of faith as over against the Protestant rule of faith, but as soon as I apply the particulars of Newman’s statement to the Catholic rule of faith, Blosser immediately backs a way and says that Catholicism doesn’t have to “clearly specify what is didactic or historical, fact or vision, allegorical or literal, idiomatic or grammatical, enunciated formally or occurring obiter, temporary or of lasting obligation.”

So Blosser is being duplicitous in his appeal. He doesn’t apply the same standard to Catholicism and evangelicalism alike. What is a defect in Evangelicalism is not a defect in Catholicism, even if both are deficient in the exact same respect.

In this sense, [Scripture] is not ‘self-interpreting.’ As Newman writes: ‘We are told that God has spoken. Where? In a book? We have tried it and it disappoints; it disappoints us, that most holy and blessed gift, not from fault of its own, but because it is used for a purpose for which it was not given. The Ethiopian’s reply, when St. Philip asked him if he understood what he was reading, is the voice of nature: ‘How can I, unless some man shall guide me?’ The Church undertakes that office.’[75] The question has nothing to do with whether one is a Christian or Jew, any more than it has to do with whether the text is from the OT or NT. What one needs is a teacher (magister) who can instruct him in what God intends him to understand; that is what the eunuch received in Philip, and that is what we have in the magisterium of the Church.

Evangelical theology doesn’t deny the role of theologians and Bible scholars in the life of the church. There is, however, a fundamental difference between a commentator who exegetes the text according to a transparent argument or publicly available evidence, and a prelate who dictates the interpretation by a purely authoritarian fiat.

This misrepresents what Catholics understand by authoritative interpretation. “Authority,” once more, means “author’s rights,” not raw power.

Blosser's likes to bandy this definition of authority, but he never cites any Catholic authority to authorize his definition of authority. Instead, he uses a catchy pun from a lay apologist. But this is just a play on words: author=authority.

It is not an official definition.

Hence, it has no meaning within Catholic Tradition apart from the rights of the Divine Author of Scripture and the Church to which He entrusted its care and interpretation. Please recall my earlier discussion of how notion of "papal infallibility" must never be interpreted as some sort of arbitrary *carte blanche* allowing the pope to invent new doctrines, but as a restriction, binding the pope and his successors to the Apostolic Deposit of Faith and to the Sacred Tradition by which it is transmitted via apostolic succession to our own day.

As usual, Blosser can't tell the difference between a claim and an argument. We all understand the claim. The question is: what reason is there to credit the claim?

Take *Humanae Vitae*. The Catholic position on birth control is basically a natural law argument. As such, a natural law argument ought to be open to rational scrutiny.

But when, on rational grounds, *Humanae Vitae* was greeted with widespread and sustained dissent, the Vatican reverted to the argument from authority. This was the *traditional* teaching. The Pope had spoken. John-Paul II reaffirmed the position of Paul VI.

So, at the end of the day, it came down to "Do what you're told! Submit to your elders and betters!"

Paul VI went through the motions of mounting an argument. But when the argument failed, he and his successors played the authority card.⁹¹

Catholic interpretation of Scripture is open to investigation by anyone, and when examined with an open mind, can be seen to be quite reasonable. I invite our readers to read any of Scott Hahn's books, among which I recommend:

Reasons to Believe: How to Understand, Explain, and Defend the Catholic Faith

The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth

Scripture Matters: Essays on Reading the Bible from the Heart of the Church

⁹¹ For more on the traditional position, cf. J. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Harvard 1986).

Letter and Spirit: From Written Text to Living Word in the Liturgy

Yes, well...if the Mass is heaven on earth, then heaven is seriously overrated.
Where can I go for a refund?

Furthermore, even while claiming that Scripture is their only standard, Protestants typically presuppose Church tradition in ways of which they are often unaware. Mark Shea, for instance, offers a detailed analysis of certain fundamental commitments of evangelicals and argues compellingly that some of them—such as their commitment to the sanctity of human life in the pro-life movement, their rejection of polygamy, and their adherence to the doctrine the Trinity—are actually based more on tradition than on explicit Scripture. In fact, in some cases, such non-negotiable commitments are only weakly attested in the Bible, he notes, yet treated as revealed doctrines in much the same manner as Catholics accept sacred tradition as a channel of revelation.[76]

I deny that the Trinity is weakly attested in Scripture.

Then why was there a Christological controversy in the first several centuries involving (a) denials of Christ's humanity (leading to the Apostle's Creed's affirmations that He was "conceived . . . born . . . suffered . . . died . . . was buried") and (b) denials of His divinity (leading to the Nicene Creed's affirmations that He is "God of God, light of light, true God of true God . . . begotten not made, consubstantial to the Father")? Why are there still Jehovah's Witnesses, who accept *sola scriptura* but not Christ's divinity? The fact is that the NT contains both subordinationist passages (in which Christ clearly subordinates Himself to the Father, and these passages can mistakenly be read as distinguishing God from Jesus) – and equality passages (in which Christ claims equality with the Father, which could be mistakenly read as suggesting that Jesus was not really human). You and I, with the benefit of over 2000 years of Church history and the ecumenical councils behind us, can easily say that the NT attests to the fullness of the triune Godhead; but the fact is that this understanding took some time to be articulated by the Church. Concepts such as the 'hypostatic union' of the divine and human natures in Christ are not spelled out in the Bible. Theologians had to do that work reflecting on the Apostolic Deposit of Faith. A distinction had to be developed to understand the subordinationist and equality passages and how they could be reconciled: what was subordinated to the Father was not Christ's nature but His will; what was equal with the Father was not His will but His nature. This is not explicit in Scripture. It's only implicit and had to be teased out over time.

There are several issues here:

i) Some people are rationalistic. They refuse to believe anything that isn't entirely

transparent to reason.

ii) Some people bring philosophical precommitments to Scripture. They can only accept what they can filter through their philosophical screen. For example, variations on Platonism, with primacy of the one over the many, as well as its disdain for matter impede an acceptance of the Trinity or the Incarnation.

iii) Some people begin with unity, and then try to work in complexity.

iv) People have preconceptions of how to model a one-over-many relation. A flawed model will impede a proper formulation of the Trinity.

v) Some people failed to distinguish between numbers and numbered objects. For them, if you say three of x is one of y, they take this to mean the number three is the number one, and then reject that identification.

vi) Likewise, some people reduce all relations to absolute identity (sameness) or absolute alterity (difference), instead of operating with a more nuanced conception: x and y are the same with respect to z.

vii) Some people misconstrue the OT monotheistic passages as if these are describing the unity or simplicity of God rather than the unicity or singularity of God. They treat the oneness of God as a divine attribute rather than a relation between the true God and false gods. Thus, they take the OT passages in a unitarian sense whereas, rightly understood, these verses are neutral on the internal structure of the Godhead.

viii) Cult-members derive their sense of identity by what differentiates them from Christians generally. They take pride in being on the fringe.

ix) No, it's not just the church councils. There are exegetical monographs on Christology and the Trinity that analyze and synthesize the witness of Scripture.

x) We need to distinguish between doctrinal sophistication and saving faith. Most lay Catholics could not articulate an orthodox formulation of the hypostatic union.

But assuming, for the sake of argument, that some of what Evangelicals believe is actually more dependent on tradition than on Scripture, then we should make a comparable adjustment in the degree of our commitment.

Nonsense. Are you saying that staunch Calvinists ought to compromise their 100% commitment to the pro-life cause, just because abortion isn't explicitly condemned in Scripture? Abortion is explicitly condemned in *Didache* (ca. AD 50-160), one of the earliest extra-biblical Christian documents. If you're such a literalist that

you would be willing to accept abortion on the grounds that it's not explicitly condemned in Scripture, you would be severing yourself from the mainstream of what Francis Schaeffer called "historic Christianity" which translates pretty closely into what Catholics understand by Sacred Tradition.

Several issues:

i) It's not as if a prolife argument from Scripture has never been made. It's been made repeatedly.⁹²

ii) Once again, sola Scriptura does not mean that everything we believe derives from Scripture. Scripture is our *rule* of faith and life, but it is not the only source of knowledge.

So even if, for the sake of argument, we couldn't make an airtight case against abortion from Scripture alone, that would not overthrow the Protestant rule of faith.

iii) Apropos (ii), Blosser assumes that the only alternative to sola Scriptura is living tradition.

But even if there's a sense in which we need to supplement Scripture—without having to deny the primacy of Scripture—this doesn't mean that the supplement must take the form of tradition or the Magisterium.

Reason and experience supplement Biblical knowledge. And a Protestant can make use of tradition. But he will make *critical* use of tradition. It will not be an argument from authority.

iv) Absolute certitude is not a precondition for belief or behavior. Even if we couldn't make an airtight case against abortion, that wouldn't make abortion acceptable. The question, rather, is which side has the *best* of the argument? Are our prolife arguments *better* than the arguments for abortion? That's the deciding factor.

I may not be able to prove the existence of the external world, but this doesn't mean it's reasonable, much less equally reasonable, to deny the existence of the external world.

And this doesn't mean that denial of an external world should be made a matter of public policy—in the absence of apodictic proof to the contrary.

Other examples [of extra-biblical Church traditions presupposed by Protestants],

⁹² E.g. <http://www.opc.org/GA/abortion.html>

cited at random, would include the traditional commitment of Presbyterians to infant baptism, Methodists to the episcopacy, Lutherans to baptismal regeneration and the Real Presence in the Eucharist, and so forth.

This may well be true. Various denominations and theological traditions are historical accidents that carry over and bundle together a package of beliefs which are fairly conventional rather than tightly logical. And Roman Catholicism is no exception. But that's a reason to reexamine tradition rather than rubberstamp it.

“Reexamine” the tradition in light of what? The traditional Scriptures? How would a Calvinist re-evaluate the tradition it inherited from Catholicism of infant baptism? By reference to the Bible? Have you ever seen a Calvinist try to argue with a highly biblically-literate Baptist about the (lack of) biblically deducible grounds for infant baptism? My point would be that, despite the nominal appeal to *sola scriptura*, the ground you would ultimately be making your case from would consist of the Catholic traditions you're saying need to be “reexamined.” How will you escape that *circulus in probando*, that *petitio principii*?

i) This is a losing move on Blosser's part. He continues to cast me in the role of a doctrinaire Presbyterian. I'm not.

The credo/paedobaptist debate is very much an open question in Evangelical theology. And if a Presbyterian is outargued by a Baptist, then so much the worse for infant baptism.

ii) I also add, as I've said before, that some debates may be undecidable. Our priorities aren't always the same as God's priorities. We may assume that something is all-important while God is indifferent to the issue because there is no one right answer.

It's like the ceremonial law. For the most part, the ceremonial law did not coincide or even intersect with the moral law. That was not its function. So it was rarely a question of right or wrong in the sense of intrinsic good or evil. Cultic categories of ritual purity and impurity were a divine convention. Ritual defilement was not the same thing as sin. This is why Jesus is rather free with the ceremonial law.

And the sacraments also move in the realm of cultic conventions. They are divine institutions, to be sure, but in the same sense as the Mosaic cultus. Who or how we baptize or eucharistize is not a moral absolute.

But the high-church (e.g. Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism) tradition doesn't draw that distinction. This is why you have life-and-death battles over the right way (there's only one, you know!) to make the sign of the cross, or pronounce the name of Jesus, and other taradiddles.

iii) There are always people who obsess over the externals, because the externals are something they can master and manipulate. Once they have God in a wafer, they can pop their God-pill once a day to keep the devil away.

iv) Yet this gives them no real security, for it only pushes them into interminable debates over what validates a sacrament—which, in turn, sends them on a never-ending quest for the “true” church on earth. (Hint: the true church is a dark, cramped, church in Ethiopia, hallowed out of solid rock, in the face of a cliff. You have to climb a long winding staircase to get there. Bring a flashlight—and a parachute)

Moreover, what do you mean by “Roman Catholicism is no exception”? That Catholicism involves a package of beliefs and practices that are “fairly conventional”? But who would dispute that? Catholicism is *essentially traditional!* It doesn’t try to derive its traditions from Scripture, since Scripture itself is understood to be the most important part of Sacred Tradition, and the Church is the authoritative custodian of Sacred Tradition (what has been handed down by the Church) in direct succession from the Apostles.

What I meant, as I explained at the time, is that Catholic tradition is a historical accident. It’s a package deal, but a culture-bound package of various elements, some of which are logically interrelated, but others that are there as a matter of ethnic, socioeconomic, and political convention. The evolution of the papacy is as good an example as any.

And there’s nothing inherently wrong with a historical accident unless you forget that it’s just a historical accident, and treat it as a divine revelation.

I wrote [offering as another example of unhistoric Protestant understandings]: “. . . that liturgy is a medieval invention and nothing but empty ritual.

Often true in varying degrees.

As to the claim that Catholic liturgy was a medieval invention, this is easily refuted by an examination of the facts.

This is another example of Blosser’s sloppy way of expressing himself. He bundled two questions into one, as if I can’t answer one question without answering both. Actually, I have no opinion about the antiquity of the Catholic liturgy, and I couldn’t care less.

Remember, this was an issue which Blosser raised, not me. I didn’t introduce that question, he did. He floated an objection I never raised, in order to dispose of an objection I never raised.

The same is true with respect to the charge of empty ritualism, although my answer was directed at that objection.

As to the claim of “empty ritual,” I am not insensitive or unsympathetic to your view of the matter, which I myself used to share. There was a time before I was twenty years old when I would have considered liturgical worship the most boring thing imaginable. Let me assure you, this perception is due to an inadvertent nominalist-empiricist perspective that animates Evangelical understandings of the relationship of flesh and spirit. The spirit is really all that matters in Evangelical worship – that one worships God “in spirit and in truth.”

i) This is a gross overgeneralization. To the extent that it’s true, it’s mainly true of Puritan worship, which has hardly carried the day in our own time and place—not even within Reformed circles.

ii) Moreover, it’s oxymoronic to claim that an empiricist perspective would have no place for the sensory dimension of worship.

Nothing is more sensuous than St. Peter’s in Rome, or a Russian Orthodox basilica.

Blosser is so fond of his push-button labels, which he uses as a substitute for genuine analysis, that he doesn’t even think through what he is saying.

What’s missing from this? Think of marriage. Imagine never embracing or kissing your wife, and when she asks why, you tell her: “Dear, you know that I love you, my heart is one with you, and that’s what really matters, after all.” Now it’s true that a kiss or an embrace could be ‘faked’. This is the danger of hypocrisy that exists anywhere (“empty ritual,” if you will). But that danger is hardly reason to avoid embracing and kissing your spouse.

Why does Blosser feel the need to rebut an objection that his opponent never leveled in the first place? Who does he think he’s talking to, anyway? Is he hearing voices?

He reminds me of Jim Profit, the TV character who grew up in a cardboard moving box with the television blaring at all hours of the night and day.

I wrote [offering as another example of unhistorical Protestant understandings]: “. . . that the ‘extra’ books in the Catholic Bible were not part of the Scriptures used by the NT writers.

Blosser is simply assuming the Catholic viewpoint rather than presenting an argument for his assumption.

In this context, you're right, I offer no argument. But I have plenty of arguments, beginning with my page on [The Bible and the "Apocrypha" \(Deuterocanonical books of the Bible\)](#).

Okay, let's look at some of his "plentiful arguments." Here are some arguments by James Akin:

Some Protestant apologists are fond of pointing out that the Muratorian fragment, an early canon list dating from the A.D. 170s, includes most of the New Testament. But they fail to point out that the Muratorian fragment also omitted certain works from its canon. It did not include Hebrews, 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. Furthermore, it included works that the Protestant apologists would not regard as canonical: the Apocalypse of Peter and the Wisdom of Solomon. So there was obvious disagreement on the extent of the canon.

Several problems:

- i) It isn't simply Protestant scholars who point to the Muratorian fragment. Catholic scholars do so as well.⁹³
- ii) The Muratorian fragment is just that—fragmentary. Also, it's been poorly copied and recopied. So some omissions may be due to mistranscription.
- iii) According to F. F. Bruce, "The document is best regarded as a list of New Testament books recognized as authoritative in the Roman Church at that time."⁹⁴

If Blosser and Akin think that the addition or omission of certain books is a problem for Protestant scholars, then it's far more of a problem for Catholic scholars. For if the Muratorian fragment represents a primitive historical witness to the Roman Catholic canon, and it includes books later excluded by Catholicism, while excluding books later included by Catholicism, then the later church of Rome is at odds with the early church of Rome.

[The Church is the living Bride of Christ, and she recognizes the voice of her husband.](#)

This is a fine, if rather sad, example of what passes for reasoned argument in Catholic apologetics. Proof by personification.

Did the Bride of Christ also ask her husband to mow the lawn, fix the roof, paint

⁹³ R. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday 1997), 4,267,436,576,600,640,642,665,700,722,759; L. R. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Fortess 1999), 600-601.

⁹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (IVP 1988), 159.

the house, and take out the garbage? Does the Bride of Christ prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner for her husband? As well as doing his laundry? Who does the dishes?

During the first century, the Jews disagreed as to what constituted the canon of Scripture. In fact, there were a large number of different canons in use, including the growing canon used by Christians. In order to combat the spreading Christian cult, rabbis met at the city of Jamnia or Javneh in A.D. 90 to determine which books were truly the Word of God.

This is out of touch with standard scholarship on the OT canon:

So far as the scriptures are concerned, the rabbis at Jamnia introduced no innovations; they reviewed the tradition they had received and left it more or less as it was. It is probably unwise to talk as if there was a Council or Synod of Jamnia which laid down the limits of the Old Testament Canon.⁹⁵

The theory that an open canon was closed at the Synod of Jamnia about AD 90 goes back to Heirich Graetz in 1871...Its complete refutation has been the work of J. P. Lewis and S. Z. Leiman...The decision reached was not regarded as authoritative, since contrary opinions continued to be expressed throughout the second century.⁹⁶

But the apostles did not merely place the deuterocanonicals in the hands of their converts as part of the Septuagint. They regularly referred to the deuterocanonicals in their writings. For example, Hebrews 11 encourages us to emulate the heroes of the Old Testament and in the Old Testament "Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life" (Heb. 11:35)... The story is found in 2 Maccabees 7.

I've discussed this issue elsewhere:

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2006/09/hebrews-11-and-old-testament-canon.html>

i) Akin's problem is that he doesn't know how to read the text in context. And that's because he's not reading the text on its own terms, according to the author's rhetorical strategy and the flow of argument, but with a view to validating the Catholic canon—a concern extraneous to the author of Hebrews.

The reason that our author alludes to intertestamental literature at this juncture is because he charting a fairly linear chronology, and when he reaches the

⁹⁵ Ibid. 34.

⁹⁶ R. T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Eerdmans 1986), 276.

Intertestamental era, the only available literature would be Intertestamental literature. It's simply a case in which the narrative progression matches the date of the period literature.

It isn't an attempt to treat this extracanonical literature as Scripture, but to document every basic stage of the historical sequence with some memorable event. As one commentator explains:

The thought of the writer at this point moves entirely on the historical plane. He brings before his audience a long series of exemplary witnesses to an enduring faith and demonstrates that faith is essentially determined by hope. The catalogue shows that throughout redemptive history attestation from God has been based upon the evidence of a living faith that acts in terms of God's promise, even when the realization of the promise is not in sight...the series of events and personages drawn from Scripture and presented in chronological sequence in vv3-31 is developed in terms of the characterization of faith in v1 and its corollary in v6. Cf. Grässer, *Glaube*, 45-57). These first paragraphs move selectively and quickly through Gen 1 to Josh 6. The writer then alters his format.⁹⁷

ii. At the same time, there is a striking parallel between the historical order and the canonical order. So Heb 11 does afford partial, intertextual witness to the OT canon.

Second, the marginal references in the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, edited by E. Nestle, 22nd ed. (Stuttgart, 1948; the linked edition is the 27th edition, published by the American Bible Society in 1993, which I have not examined), one finds numerous references to texts from the Deuterocanonical books. By my own count, I find 148, divided as follows – 38 in Matthew, 3 in Mark, 15 in Luke, 20 in John, 15 in Acts, 14 in Romans, 2 in I Corinthians, 3 in II Corinthians, 1 in Galatians, 3 in I Thessalonians, 2 in I Timothy, 1 in II Timothy, 7 in Hebrews, 6 in James, 3 in I Peter, 2 in II Peter, 1 in Jude, and 12 in Revelation.

i) As far as the Catholic canon is concerned, this appeal either proves too much or too little. For the literature alluded to goes well beyond the scope of the Catholic canon, viz. Ascension of Isaiah, Assumption of Moses, 3-4 Maccabees, Psalms of Solomon, Susanna.⁹⁸

ii) A literary allusion is not a sufficient criterion of canonicity. It depends on how the allusion functions in the argument of the speaker or writer.

⁹⁷ W. Lane, Hebrews 9-13 (Word 1991), 315.

⁹⁸ B. Aland et al eds. The Greek New Testament (UBS 1994), 900-901.

iii) Let's also keep in mind that the attempt to identify the background material is often an exegetical judgment call, so one would need to go beyond a bare list of marginal references and consult the major commentaries on the respective books of the Bible alluding to this literature.

Third, the NT was written in Greek (ca. AD 50-120), so it should come as no surprise that the NT writers would have made use of the Septuagint (ca. 300-200 BC), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (containing the additional Deuterocanonical books) when writing the NT. Thus it's no surprise that when Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14 (as noted earlier), he specifies *parthenos* ("virgin," following the LXX, or Septuagint's rendering) when translating the Hebrew term *almah*, which could just as easily have been rendered "young woman" in Greek.

It's obvious that Blosser has never attempted to acquaint himself with standard Septuagintal scholarship, not to mention the role of the Vulgate in the codification of the Catholic canon:

Books were included in the Roman Catholic Bible not on the basis of the Hebrew canon, but according to the contents and sequence of the Latin Vulgate.⁹⁹

A fifth persistent factor that has clouded this discussion is the concept of an "Alexandrian Jewish canon" of Scripture that was broader than the Palestinian Jewish canon. This is based on a lack of clarity about the meaning of the term "Septuagint".¹⁰⁰

The author of this quotation has assumed that the "Septuagint" in the sense of that collection of texts known from Codices Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, and Vaticanus (or in the sense of the critical editions available today) was the "Septuagint" of the Jewish community of the third century B.C.E. This is, however, a grave misstep, because the work undertaken in the third century B.C.E. in Alexandria involved only the Greek translation of the Pentateuch (clearly the scope envisioned by *Letter of Aristeas*). Moreover, the quotation involves its author in a paradox: it would be impossible for the third-century-B.C.E. version of the Septuagint to contain the Apocrypha books, since they were all written between 185 B.C.E. and 10 C.E. (with the possible exception of Tobit, which may predate the second century B.C.E.)! Also, telling in the argument against the Alexandrian Jewish canon is that Philo, the Jewish commentator in Alexandria par excellence, never

⁹⁹ K. Jobes & M. Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Baker 2005), 81.

¹⁰⁰ D. DeSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha* (Baker 2004), 29.

quotes from the Apocrypha (Beckwith 1985: 384).¹⁰¹

The “Septuagint” codices mentioned above cannot be used as evidence for an Alexandrian Jewish canon that included the Apocrypha. These manuscripts are fourth- and fifth-century Christian works, fail to agree on the extent of the extra books, and seem to have been compiled more with convenience of reference in mind than as the standards of canonical versus noncanonical books (the fact that one even contained, at one point, *Psalms of Solomon* strongly suggests this).¹⁰²

We can see that Hellenistic Judaism had a relatively well-defined canon of “Holy Scripture” already in the second century BC, which thus preceded the witnesses of the New Testament writings; in the definition of what was to be regarded as “canonical” the foundation is being laid for the later differentiation between “canonical” and “apocryphal.” I see evidence for this position in the prologue of Jesus ben Sirach from the second half of the second pre-Christian century.¹⁰³

It can therefore be assumed that a differentiation within, “Holy Scripture” as a whole was already existing in Judaism. I believe that the primitive Christian witnesses attest this differentiation as a “given”: the Palestinian canon in the form preserved in the Massoretic tradition was seen as authentic canon, the other writings transmitted in the Alexandrian canon—both those translated from Hebrew or Aramaic and those originally written in Greek—as “apocryphal.”¹⁰⁴

The content of the Alexandrian LXX canon, which does not meet the canonical standard transmitted in Josephus (*c. Ap I 36-42*) according to which the succession of prophets, determinative of canonicity, ended in the time of Artaxerxes I or Ezra and Nehemiah—the description of the Seleucid religious persecution in 1 and 2 Maccabees, Jesus ben Sirach’s mention of the high priest Simon—would have been, from the outset, not only appended to, but considered inferior in terms of authority to the Scriptures of the Palestinian canon. The only question that remains open is whether this distinction was a phenomenon common to Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism or a point of contention between the two communities.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 29.

¹⁰² Ibid. 29-30.

¹⁰³ R. Hanhart, Introduction, M. Hengel, *The Septuagint as Christian Scripture* (Baker 2004), 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 3.

Beside quotations in writings belonging only to the Alexandrian canon, I believe that the reference to prophetic word as Scripture in the *Damascus Scroll* (to mention only one example) supplies the best evidence *in the realm of pre-Christian Judaism* of the Hellenistic period that all the writings of the “Palestinian canon” transmitted in the Massoretic tradition already possessed the canonical significance of “Holy Scripture.”...The fact that this document reflects the awareness of a particular trend within Hellenistic Judaism is, with reference to the question of the canonicity of the Palestinian canon, much more likely an argument for an early fixation of acknowledged Scripture than an argument for isolated recognition.¹⁰⁶

As a translation of already canonized writings, the LXX translation itself has canonical significance both for Judaism and for the Christian church. It derives this significance, however, only from the strength of the canonical authority of its Hebrew original. It was for this reason that the Greek translation was from the moment of its origin onward continuously subjected to verification against the Hebrew text and to recensional correction according to this criterion, as demonstrated by recently discovered translations of Jewish origin from pre-Christian and early Christian times. What we already knew, through Origen, concerning the Christian church of the late second and third centuries, and through the translations or new editions of Aquila, Theodotion and Symmachus in the second century, in regard to Judaism of Christian time, has now been demonstrated to be equally true for the Judaism of the pre-Christian and pre-Aquilan period.¹⁰⁷

Fourth, the earliest listing of all the 27 books contained in the canon of the NT is the Easter Letter of St. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Egypt (AD 367). This is typically recognized by Evangelicals, such as the Evangelical authors, Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, in their textbook, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*, 2nd edition, p. 27, where they quote the twenty-seven books of the NT canon from Athanasius’ letter. What they don’t tell you, however, is that, along with the 27 books of the NT, Athanasius also listed the books of the OT and that this OT list includes all of the Deuterocanonical books contained in the Septuagint. Remember, what Athanasius is doing in his Easter Letter is listing the books of Holy Scripture recognized as canonical. The Catholic canon is commonly supposed by Evangelicals to have been a creation of the Council of Trent (AD 1545-63). This is so far from the empirical record as to be appalling. Trent merely confirmed Athanasius’ Easter Letter, as did the patristic decrees of the Council of Rome (AD 382), Council of

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 5.

Carthage (AD 397), and St. Innocent (AD 405). (For further details see [“The earliest lists of the Old Testament canon.”](#))

i) And what Blosser fails to tell the reader is the discrepancy between the Catholic OT canon and the Orthodox OT canon.

ii) In addition, Blosser acts as if this appeal is a double-bladed sword for the Evangelical. But, if so, it equally double-edged for the Catholic.

Blosser keeps saying that an Evangelical has no right to invoke patristic testimony for the canon unless he’s prepared to acknowledge the authority of the church fathers.

Yes, that would only make sense assuming the consensus of the fathers. But as any student of the NT canon can see, the church fathers did not speak with one voice on the boundaries of the NT canon.¹⁰⁸ There were differences between earlier and later church fathers; between Greek and Latin church fathers; between one Greek father and another; between one Latin father and another.

There are considerable areas of agreement, but it falls well short of unanimity. Therefore, Blosser cannot, at one and the same time affirm the authority of patristic testimony when the fathers don’t see eye to eye with one another.

I wrote [offering as another example of unhistorical Protestant understandings]: “. . . [the assumption] that Catholic devotions such as the Rosary and Stations of the Cross have no basis Scripture.”

Notice the weasel word: a “basis” in Scripture. If I commit suicide, that has a “basis” in Scripture. After all, Judas killed himself.

Please, my friend. There’s nothing normative or praiseworthy about committing a mortal sin such as suicide.

Now he’s backing away from his original argument. He originally attempted to justify Catholic devotions by claim that that these have a “basis” in Scripture.

But this is extremely vague. So I used a simple counterexample. He still doesn’t seem to grasp the problem with his appeal.

On the other hand, one has only to look at the lives of those who practice such devotions to see their salutary effects in humility and sanctity.

This is a circular argument. The sort of piety which Catholic devotional exercises

¹⁰⁸ E.g. B. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford 1987).

cultivate is Catholic piety. That, of itself, is hardly an argument for the piety thus cultivated. The sort of piety which Aztec religion selects for is Aztec piety. Is that an argument for Aztec piety?

Furthermore, the meditations of the Rosary are virtually all taken *directly* from Scripture (*Joyful Mysteries* – Annunciation, Visitation of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth, Nativity, Presentation of Jesus in the temple, where He was recognized as Messiah by Simeon and Anna; *Sorrowful Mysteries* -- Agony in the Garden, Scourging at the Pillar, Crowning with Thorns, Carrying of the cross, Crucifixion, and so forth – on to the *Glorious Mysteries* -- Resurrection, Ascension, etc.). The Hail Mary itself, is a prayer compounded of parts of Luke 1:28 and Luke 1:48. The Stations of the Cross, in turn, offer meditations on the events of the *via dolorosa* (“way of the cross”) described primarily by the relevant Evangelists in their Gospels. “Weasel word”?

There are several issues here:

i) Blosser continues his odd habit of responding to objections I never raised. I didn't introduce the Rosary or the Stations of the Cross as an objection to Catholicism. So who is Blosser talking to? An invisible six-foot rabbit by the name of Harvey, perchance?

Or is he's doing his Jim Profit impersonation? Blosser in his cardboard box, talking back to the TV screen.

One of Blosser's problems is intellectual sloth. He has a set of stock answers to stock objections. So, instead of responding to what his opponent actually says, which might require a bit of original research or thinking on his part, he reaches for his flash cards and substitutes a different objection to which he has a prepared answer.

ii) For the record, I have no objection to something like the Stations of the Cross, although, as presently constituted, they do contain some legendary elements.

iii) But the Rosary is quite different. Mind you, I never mentioned the Rosary. But since he choose to broach the subject, the Rosary is objectionable on several grounds:

To begin with, in what does the Rosary consist? The Marian devotions include the Ave Maria:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of death. Amen.

And the Rosary is customarily concluded by the Salve Regina:

Hail, holy Queen, mother of mercy, our life, our sweetness, and our hope. To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve. To thee do we send up our sighs mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. Turn then, most gracious advocate, thine eyes of mercy toward us, and after this our exile show us the blessed fruit of thy womb, Jesus. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary.

Blosser says [The Hail Mary itself, is a prayer compounded of parts of Luke 1:28 and Luke 1:48.](#)

This is true, but deceptive. The Ave Maria does, indeed, draw on some elements from the Annunciation. But it distorts the borrowed elements.

a) Gabriel's salutation is not a prayer. The Angel Gabriel isn't offering a prayer to Mary. Likewise, the Magnificat is not a prayer to Mary.

To the contrary, the Magnificat is Mary's prayer to God. Catholicism has taken Mary's prayer to God, and turned it into a prayer to Mary. That's a profoundly subversive and idolatrous misuse of Scripture.

b) It is also a prayer to the dead. As such, it is a form of necromancy, which is forbidden in Scripture.

c) The appeal to Lk 1:28 is based on a fundamental misrendering of 1:28. In the original Greek, Mary is not full of grace. She is not the source of grace. Rather, she is the object of divine favor. This is admitted by honest Catholic exegesis:

Here it rather designates Mary as the recipient of divine favor; it means "favored by God," another instance of the so-called theological passive.¹⁰⁹

By contrast, the Ave Maria is based on the Vulgate, which misconstrues the Greek participle. And that, in turn, laid a false foundation for later Marian theology.

Now, this mistranslation may have begun as an innocent mistake. But that's the problem with sacred tradition. It builds on precedent. And even if the precedent is later shown to be erroneous, the precedent and subsequent elaborations thereof attain dogmatic status. Catholicism is officially committed to certain primitive errors:

This word [kecharitomene] is the perfect passive participle of charitoun, a denominative verb related to charis ("favor, grace") which means "to

¹⁰⁹ J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (Doubleday 1981), 345.

bestow favor on, highly favor, bless”—see Eph 1:6). It concerns Mary as one who has been “graciously favored (by God)” and is explained by Luke in v30: “You have found favor with God”...the Latin Vulgate rendition “(Ave) gratia plena,” which appears in the famous “Hail Mary prayer. This translation, “*full* of grace,” which is not literal and is gradually being replaced among Roman Catholic translators...later mariology took the plenitude literally in terms of Mary’s personal possession of graces and privileges...Objection has also been raised when the “grace” has been interpreted to mean not only a grace or divine favor bestowed on Mary, but also grace which she has to bestow on others. Debates on these points are not within the scope of our study, although we agree that such interpretations clearly go beyond the meaning of Luke’s text.¹¹⁰

d) Both the Ave Maria and Salve Regina are prayers to Mary for salvation. There is no Scriptural authorization for this. Just the opposite.

e) There is also the implication, which is amplified in Marian theology, that we should pray to Mary according to her *meritorious* intercession.

I wrote [offering as another example of unhistorical Protestant understandings]: “. . . that doctrinal ‘development’ in Catholicism means doctrinal “creation.”

Maybe because it does.

Give me an example and an argument, my friend.

The imposing edifice of Mariolatry is as fine an example as any.¹¹¹

I wrote [offering as another example of unhistorical Protestant understandings]: “. . . that certain Catholic doctrines—such as purgatory, baptismal regeneration, prayers for the dead, the sinlessness of Mary, and the transformation of bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood—are medieval inventions.”

Whether or not they’re Medieval inventions, they’re ecclesiastical inventions.

This isn’t the place to delve into a detailed apologetic concerning each of these, seeing the ease with which you dismiss each Catholic claim in a matter of one or two sentences, while it would take some time and space to elaborate each of these. (Why should I do all the work?) But I would have hoped for an argument from you, at least. These are all ancient doctrines -- some of them (Purgatory, for instance) better attested in early Christian writings (in Tertullian, Perpetua, Cyril,

¹¹⁰ R. Brown et al. eds. *Mary in the New Testament*, 127-28.

¹¹¹ Cf. J. Armstrong, ed. *Roman Catholicism* (Moody 1998), chapter 5; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Conflict with Rome* (Baker 1958), chapter 6.

Hilary, Jerome, Gregory Nyssen, etc.) than doctrines widely accepted also among Protestants, such as the doctrine of Original Sin (see Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, p. 21). Prayers for the dead can be found among the Jews of the intertestamental period (II Maccabees 12:43-45), and II Timothy 1:16-18 attests obliquely to the practice, even though it must be admitted that Paul does not explicitly state in the text that Onesiphorus was dead at the time of his writing. Augustine clearly argues for the sinlessness of Mary, and so forth.

i) Whether or not original sin is well attested in early Christian tradition, it is well attested in Scripture.

ii) I don't care whether Augustine believed in Mary's sinlessness. Augustine is in no position to know that.

iii) Appealing to an apocryphal book (2 Macabees) which, as far as we can tell, was never in the Jewish canon, is an act of desperation.

iv) Even on its own grounds, George B. Caird (an official observer at Vatican II) made some astute observations:

Judas Maccabaeus considered it a holy and pious thing to pray for the dead. Even if I were prepared to adopt these very words of Judas, it is plain that I should not be meaning by them what he meant, or what the author of 2 Maccabees meant. For this is not all that Judas is said to have done for that group of Jewish renegades for whom he was praying. He also collected a large sum of money to provide a sin offering, in the persuasion that the offering and the prayers together would atone for the idolatry which he believed had brought them to their untimely death. His reliance on the merits and atoning efficacy of human acts of piety was precisely that form of Judaism which Paul was later to repudiate as incompatible with the gospel of God's all-sufficient grace. It seems therefore a pity to appeal to the example of Judas at a time when merit and the bookkeeping type of religion associated with it are rapidly dropping out of the religious vocabulary and practice of Rome.¹¹²

v) Idolatry would be a mortal sin, not a venial sin. Those who die in a state of mortal sin are damned. They don't pass on to Purgatory. So I don't see that Blosser's appeal is consistent with his own theological commitments.

vi) There is also a difference between prayers *for* the dead and prayers *to* the dead.

¹¹² G. Caird, *Our Dialogue with Rome* (Oxford 1967), 40.

vii) It is far from clear that Onesiphorus was dead.¹¹³

viii) Even if he was dead, this is hardly a proof-text for Purgatory:

If Onesiphorus had died, we should not read into Paul's wish a prayer for his friend's postmortem salvation, as if his spiritual condition at death were uncertain and sufficient prayer might sway the Lord toward mercy; the text is hardly an allusion to anything like the advice given in 2 Macc 12:43-45. Paul seems to be quite clear on the man's standing in the faith. However, two factors should be kept in mind as we consider the import of Paul's wish for his friend. On the one hand, the judgment on "that day" is one in which believers will face the Lord's assessment (1 Co 3:13). If this is in mind, invoking the Lord's mercy is not at all out of place, for the one thing Paul warns severely against is presumption. On the other hand, certain aspects of Onesiphorus's faith and life recall the Jesus tradition preserved in Mt 25:34-40.¹¹⁴

On the basis of this teaching, and, indeed, the whole drift of Paul's thought in this passage, Onesiphorus's acceptance by the Lord is already a settled matter. From this sort of perspective, whether he is alive or dead, what Paul wishes for is that the blessing promised to God's faithful servants be fulfilled in the case of his friend. This same concern for the status of believers at the Eschaton can also be seen in passages such as 4:16, where he "wishes" that the wrongs of those who deserted him will not be counted against them, presumably by the Lord. Equally, 1 Thes 3:11-13 is a typical Pauline wish that his readers might be found blameless at the time of Christ's parousia—the sentiment is not different in substance from Paul's wish for Onesiphorus. What is accented in this wish/prayer by couching it in terms of "mercy" is the divine initiative and compassion involved in salvation.¹¹⁵

ix) We also need to draw some further distinctions. Prayers for the dead can rest on very different assumptions.

a) For example, one kind of supplicant may pray for the departed on the assumption that he can pray his loved one out of hell. On this view, one's eternal fate is not sealed at death. And prayer can change one's postmortem status. It can effect a shift in one's postmortem status—either in the sense that one's immediate postmortem status is indeterminate (neither saved nor damned), or else the departed may be transferred from hell to heaven.

¹¹³ Cf. W. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (T. Nelson 2000), 495.

¹¹⁴ P. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Eerdmans 2006), 485.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 485-86.

Now is not the time and place to debate postmortem salvation or its theological underpinnings.¹¹⁶ Traditionally, this is repudiated by Catholic and Evangelical theology alike. In debating a conservative Catholic like Blosser, I don't, presumably, need to disprove a theory to which neither of us subscribes.

From a Reformed perspective, a person's eternal fate is sealed, not at the time of death, but from all eternity.

b) A supplicant may also pray on the assumption that human merit has a role in leveraging the eternal outcome. This would also be false from a Reformed perspective.

c) However, a supplicant may pray for the departed simply because he doesn't know if his loved one died in a state of grace. He is praying *that* his loved one died in a state of grace. He is praying for his loved one's condition at the time of death, and not for a change in his postmortem condition.

d) Apropos (b), we also need to distinguish between different timeframes. There's the timeframe of the prayer, and the timeframe of the event which is the object of our prayer. The efficacy of prayer is not necessarily contingent on the timing of prayer in relation to the timing of the event.

We ordinarily pray for future outcomes rather than past outcomes since the past is irreversible.

However, God is not bound by our timeframe. I can pray for a past event in case I don't know the outcome. And God's knowledge of my prayer (indeed, his foreordination of my prayer) is independent of when I pray. The fact that the event lies in my past doesn't mean it lies in his past, for he has no past or future.

Thus, God can answer a prayer even if the prayer is after the fact. And the prayer can, in that sense, affect the outcome. As one philosopher explains:

We have to make a distinction between changing the past so it becomes different from what it was and influencing the past so it becomes what it was.¹¹⁷

Metaphysically speaking, the past is over and done with. But from the epistemic situation of the supplicant, the outcome may be unknown. And since his prayer is indexed, not to the historical event itself, but to the God of history, there are situations in which an ex post facto prayer could, in principle, affect the

¹¹⁶ For some useful reading, cf. R. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Zondervan 1994); R. Phillips, ed. *Only One Way?* (CB 2007).

¹¹⁷ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/causation-backwards/>

outcome—not by directly altering the past, but by preventing what would otherwise have happened (an alternative past) had he not prayed for a certain outcome.

The efficacy of prayer lies, not in power the supplicant, but in the power of God. It indirectly affects the past inasmuch as God, in answer to prayer, effects a past result which is different than if the prayer had never been offered or answered.

God does not do this at the time the prayer is offered. Indeed, God does not do this at any time, since God is timeless. Both the prayer and its answer were foreordained. But the effect is temporal.

e) And there's nothing meritorious about our prayers. Rather, they derive whatever efficacy they enjoy from the singular merit of Christ.

One argument I would want to make is that if these were all “ecclesiastical inventions,” as you claim, where is the outcry against these innovations in Church history when they emerged? This is a weak argument, to be sure, since it is an argument from silence; but it is surely a silence that speaks volumes. Let me offer an example, the first mention of the perpetual virginity of Mary we have on record in Church history -- any documented history at all that we know of -- is the writing of the outraged Jerome against Helvedius, who is the first person we know of in Church history to have questioned it. But this would speak in *favor* of the Catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, not against it. But where are the similar cries of outrage *against* these sorts of Catholic doctrines -- purgatory, baptismal regeneration, prayers for the dead, the sinlessness of Mary, and the transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, etc. -- that we should expect to find if your Protestant claim that these were “ecclesiastical inventions” were true?

i) Let's keep in mind that however we answer this question, the answer is irrelevant to whether purgatory, baptismal regeneration, prayers for the dead, the sinlessness of Mary, and the transformation of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, etc. can be justified from Scripture.

ii) There would only be outcry against ecclesiastic inventions if these were viewed as ecclesiastical inventions. Many Christians have an insatiable appetite for pious fiction.

In addition, high churchmen believe in ecclesiastical authority.

People can believe in falsehoods without believing them to be falsehoods. This happens all the time.

The prudential discipline imposed (in the case of celibacy) for the sake of

fostering single-minded devotion to God and service in the ministry.[83]

Not to mention the single-minded seduction of underage boys.

My friend, it is true that we Catholics are still chaffing from a clerical sex scandal of unimaginable proportions. But I don't see how it can be either charitable nor edifying to offer a 'dig' such as this.

I reserve my charity for the victims.

The sin of these priests deeply grieves us.

It doesn't grieve you enough to separate yourself from the corrupt institution responsible for this scandal.

Sin is neither an invention nor a monopoly of Catholics. There's plenty to go around. I know plenty of sex scandals in our own vicinity involving Protestant and Evangelical clergymen, though their ability to garner the cooperation of law enforcement and media officials in keeping the lid on these affairs is impressive. I know good and holy Evangelicals, as I can assure you that I know many good and holy Catholic priests; and there is nothing about sin – including the sin of pedophilia – that makes it an ineluctable habit of Catholics or unique to Catholicism.

This is a complete jumble:

- i) The question at issue is not about Catholics in general, but about the clergy.
- ii) No doubt many priests are honorable men.
- iii) The argument from moral equivalence will do him no good when he must argue for the superiority of Catholicism over Evangelicalism.
- iv) He is also sidestepping the issue of a *pattern* of abuse.

The notion that celibacy *fosters* pedophilia or any kind of sexual self-indulgence is a popular argument in the anti-Catholic media and of Catholic dissidents opposed to celibacy, but it is a misconception based on broad ignorance of the psychological facts.

This is ambiguous. The claim is not that celibacy turns heterosexuals into homosexuals. Rather, one aspect of the claim is that it inadvertently recruits for homosexuals.

Also, straight men sometimes turn to sodomy when that is the only readily available sexual outlet, viz. prisons.

First of all, sexual concupiscence and lust are the result of lifestyles that indulge sexual activity, whether autoerotic or interpersonal. Those who practice a disciplined life of celibacy, avoiding pornography, and other near occasions of sin, generally find that sexual temptations eventually begin to diminish, if not virtually disappear. A sexually active, married man is more apt to be tempted by sexual thoughts than a sexually inactive celibate.

Does he have any hard evidence for this claim?

Second, notwithstanding a media conspiracy to the contrary, what has pervasively been presented to the public as a pedophilia scandal is actually a scandal of homosexuality stemming from an all-too-permissive policy of several decades toward admitting men with homosexual dispositions into the priesthood, on the assumption that they could remain faithful to their vows of chastity. The study commissioned by the Catholic-sponsored National Review Board and provided by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York (the John Jay Report) reported that 81% – that's eighty-one percent! – of the reported victims were boys or young men molested by clergy! Michael Rose's book, *Goodbye, Good Men: How Liberals Brought Corruption Into the Catholic Church*, (2002) provides a detailed exposé of this scandal. The problem clearly stemmed from those in charge failing to mind the store – a major negligence of discipline. Many men with actively homosexual histories slipped into the priesthood. However virtuous their intentions may have been (it's hard to judge), an actively homosexual history presents a host of habituations that are extremely difficult to alter: the tendency to repeat homosexual activity, once habituated, is notorious.

As usual, he isn't paying attention to what I actually wrote. I specifically cited Rose's book. I'm well aware of the fact that the clerical sex scandal is a homosexual scandal. Blosser is shadowboxing with some adversary other than me.

Once more, is there some compelling reason why a philosopher prof. is so deficient at following his opponent's argument?

On the other hand, has having married clergy spared Protestant denominations from sexual problems – ranging from clerical infidelity and divorce to homosexuality? Hardly. The latest Garrison Keillor joke about why Anglicans can't play chess is that they can't tell the difference between a bishop and a queen.

This is a smoke screen:

i) There a major moral difference between sexual sins wherein a natural virtue is turned into a natural vice by misusing or abusing a natural good, and sexual sins which are intrinsically vicious, unnatural evils to begin with.

ii) There's also a difference between liberal and conservative Protestant denominations.

Furthermore, despite the existence of married apostles, it is not without biblical warrant (1 Cor 7:32, 35; Mt 19:11-12).

Observe the bait-and-switch. The question at issue is not whether marriage is mandatory, but whether celibacy is mandatory.

“Bait-and-switch”? You make me sound like a used car salesman! Come to dinner sometime, and I'll endeavor to show you the meaning of courtesy, my friend.

Did I mention anything about marriage being “mandatory”? Even celibacy is not mandatory, in Catholic teaching; not even for all Catholic priests. It depends on the Rite to which you belong. Eastern Rite Catholic priests are married in some cases. Western Rite priests are permitted to have wives in certain cases, as in the case of Fr. Ray Ryland, whose article “A Married Priest Looks at Celibacy” I cited above, who was permitted to become a Catholic priest under an Indult for former Anglican clergy who convert with their wives. So you can see it's a matter of discipline, and not of doctrine.

You are discussing departures from the Catholic ideal. These highly selective accommodations are irrelevant to the main issue.

But even where the Catholic Church mandates celibacy for priests of its Western Rite, it's silly to see it as something oppressive. Nobody is required to become a Catholic priest of this Rite. It's a free choice. If celibacy is a requirement for becoming such a priest, one should consider the choice much in the way he should consider Jesus' invitation to become a “Eunuch for the sake of the Kingdom” – i.e., “He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Mt 19:10-12).

I never said it was “oppressive.” You're trying to change the subject. No, the problem is that it's a magnet for sexual misconduct.

And it's always been a problem. If it wasn't sodomy, then it was concubinage.

Furthermore, celibacy has remarkable advantages for evangelism and mission work. The earliest missionaries to Japan, where I grew up, were Francis Xavier and his Jesuits, and later the Franciscans. Members of religious orders generally take three vows – (1) poverty, (2) chastity, and (3) obedience (others, confined to a monastery or convent, may also take vows of stability and silence). What are the three things most inhabitants of a country fear from foreigners? They fear theft, molestation of their women, and tyranny.

These three vows automatically remove these threats. The Jesuits and Franciscans

came in poverty, with no interest in acquiring wealth. They came vowed to celibacy, with no interested in sex or prostitution. They came vowed to obedience to their superiors and their God, with no interest in seeking political power over their converts. Furthermore, celibacy allows priests and monks to go where any family man would dread to go, such as St. Damien (1840-1889) [pictured right], who embraced the apostolate of working in the leper colony of the Hawaiian islands before there was a cure for leprosy.

My he's naïve! Does Blosser seriously believe a vow of chastity "automatically removes the threat" of prostitution or molestation? A vow of chastity will not prevent a man from breaking his vow.

Such misunderstandings can also stem from a failure to understand the nature of doctrinal development. John Henry Newman offered the classic study of this idea in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845).

Typically, Blosser assumes that if you disagree with Newman, this means that you just don't understand him."

Can you show me an instance of where I assume this, and I will try to correct it.

See below.

I'd add that Newman's classic essay received classic rebuttals from reviewers like J. B. Mozley and William Cunningham.

Fair enough. Can you point out specific rebuttals?

Keep in mind that it's difficult to excerpt 19C authors, for they have an expansive, leisurely, run-on style of writing, but here are some samples:

Having noticed the substantial argument, we shall not follow the detail and division through which Mr. Newman subsequently takes it. The Christian "Tests of true development" which he gives, only profess to be, and only are, an expansion of the one and leading argument. They all successively go on the supposition that there is no kind of corruption but that of the departure from, and destruction of an idea.¹¹⁸

But this proof [of chronic continuance] rests entirely on the one prevailing assumption, viz., that there is no other kind of corruption or deterioration but that of failure. The idea of exaggeration does not enter. We see no reason for our part why failure may not be a long as well a short process.

¹¹⁸ J. Mozley, *The Theory of Development: A Criticism of Dr. Newman's Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York 1879), 39.

But to say that doctrinal exaggerations may not get strong hold of large portions of the world, and gain a chronic continuance, would certainly be, in our opinion, as purely arbitrary an assumption as any reasoner could make.¹¹⁹

We have then, on the one hand, a great presumptive ground asserting that if a revelation is given it must go on; that human nature wants a present infallible guide; that “Christianity must, humanly speaking, have an infallible expounder.” Upon this original notion of what is necessary arises immediately the assertion of what is, and with that assertion a whole corresponding view of the existing matter-of-fact Church, and its established body of ideas, however and wherever derived.¹²⁰

A whole, to use the word, perfectionist view of the historical progress of thought and growth of truth in the Church earthly, and the Christian world is ultimately imposed by an original basis of presumption like the present. The hypothesis of a standing revelation cannot afford to make any large established ideas in the earthly Church erroneous, it would interfere with such a standing revelation to do so; a pledge for the absolute correctness of all that growth of opinion which the infallible guide sanctions is contained in the notion of that infallible guide. Thus inevitably arises the great general view that whatever is is right. The fact of certain ideas getting established becomes itself the proof of their truth.¹²¹

We can see this view immediately in the tone of the arguer. The arguer reposes in fact; he carries the sensation about with him of largeness, extent, numbers; a doctrine that spreads over a large surface, that is held de facto by a large mass, is its own evidence....It is almost a condescension for him to argue at all; he has the fact, that is his argument.¹²²

That his use of the fact is an assumption is lost sight of in the largeness of the fact itself; the authority of the fact becomes itself a fact. And is ever seen in the background as the supreme authority, beyond which no appeal lies. The arguer is thus less occupied in proving than in simply unfolding his assumption. He explains how it was that such opinions arose, the need that was felt for them, their convenience in filling up certain chasms in the original revelation.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 40.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 117.

¹²¹ Ibid. 117-18.

¹²² Ibid. 118.

¹²³ Ibid. 118.

Here, then is what may be called a perfectionist view of the progress of truth in the Christian world. The ideas which establish themselves time after time in the Church are ipso facto true. What exists is right; each successive stage of thought improves on the following one.¹²⁴

It is asked, for example, how we can suppose that God would allow great saints and holy men to have joined in and promoted this cultus [of the Virgin] if it was wrong? But surely it is not necessary to suppose that, a general tendency to error being granted in the Christian body, good men should not, in particular cases, go along with it, even actively...subtle evil is an awful mysterious fact, which must be expected to have its results... You may ask how God will allow this; but if he allows the element of evil to exist in these good members at all, it is no great additional wonder if he allows that element to do something, and make a real difference in what comes from them, and affect the actual external issues from their minds. Why should not they be subject to their own class of partialities and obliquities, be liable to take up ideas, and then be over fond of them... Let no persons think we are doing injustice here to the minds of really holy men; the degree to which serious evil can coexist with very high dispositions in the soul is one of the mysteries of our present state.¹²⁵

It is evident that in multitudes of cases of theological opinion in the Church public, not to mention the innumerable daily cases in the private life of all Christians in the world, who have been, are, or will be, there is, as a matter of fact, no continuous revelation which decides for us. And wherever it stops, all the objections which apply to the original revelation's continuance, apply in principle to its cessation too.¹²⁶

With respect, then, to the direct proof of the existence of an absolute monarchical authority somewhere in the Church, drawn from the fact of the Church being intended to be one external society—of the proof of the existence of a local centre of unity, drawn from the idea itself of unity—we do not see the force of it. The idea of unity does not imply a particular local centre of unity... Indeed Christians *did* keep together for many centuries in fact, without any local head.¹²⁷

In a word, the ground of the Roman church hitherto has been, that all the Roman doctrines were actually revealed to the Apostles, and really in the Church from the first, though some were not taught publicly. This

¹²⁴ Ibid. 119.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 122-23.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 127.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 129.

hypothesis Mr. Newman denies. He says of the “hypothesis put forward by divines of the Church of Rome, called the *Disciplina Arcani*, ...” This is no key to the whole difficulty,” that is to say, it is not a true hypothesis; and he puts forward the hypothesis of development expressly to supply its place. So then here are two directly conflicting hypotheses put forward in the Roman Church’s the account of her faith.¹²⁸

Now, on this state of the case, one reflection, which necessarily arises, is that with regard to general antecedent claim upon attention and respect, both hypotheses are considerably weakened by this opposition. So long as one account of her creed is put forward by a whole church, that account comes with a certain imposing introduction to us; but if another account is put forward which directly conflicts with the old one, it is natural for a person to say, “You come to persuade me, and yet you are fighting among yourself as to the very foundation upon which your own sole belief rests. The early Church had one account, but you have two contrary ones. You must really make up your own mind before you come to persuade me. Choose which of the two you please, but if they oppose each other, do let me have one of them, and not both together. Otherwise you simply puzzle me.”¹²⁹

For, be it remembered, this is not an affair of simple phenomena, the truth of which is visible to the eye, and does not depend at all on the hypothesis which explains them, such as the fact that matter falls to the ground, the truth of which does not at all depend on the hypothesis of gravitation; but it is a case where the hypothesis is applied to for the truth of the fact itself. We want to know why we are to believe a doctrine, say Purgatory or any other. Bellarmine gives one reason, and Mr. Newman a totally contrary one. Nor would the remark that it was the Church’s teaching all the same in either case be to the purpose, for the reason of the Church’s teaching is the argumentative ground on which we believe the Church’s teaching; and this reason is a contrary one as Bellarmine and as Mr. Newman give it.¹³⁰

In his introduction he [Newman] explains at some length to what extent, and upon what grounds, he has now modified, or rather abandoned, his former views of the fundamental principles of the Tractarians, or Anglo-Catholics, as they call themselves, about Catholic consent, and of the truth and practical utility of the famous rule of Vincentius of Lerins, *quod*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* 213.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 214.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* 214.

*semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus.*¹³¹

The Tractarians in general, and Mr Newman himself while belonging to that party...had defended “Catholic consent” as an legitimate and authentic means of supplying the deficiencies of Scripture...They then, somewhat arbitrarily selected the leading authors of the latter part of the fourth, and of the early part of the fifth centuries, as exhibiting or embodying this catholic consent, and insisted that the church in all subsequent ages was to take as her standard of doctrine and practice the system which generally prevailed during the century that succeeded the First Council of Nice. This notion, of course, was founded upon the assumption that the apostles had inculcated many things for the guidance of the church which were not contained in the Scriptures, which were handed down correctly by oral tradition.¹³²

Agreeing with the Church of Rome in the general doctrine of the insufficiency of the Scriptures, and of the authority of oral tradition, and finding in the fourth and fifth centuries about as much of corruption and impurity in doctrine, government, and worship, as suited their taste at the time, they have selected that era as the period when the apostolic teaching was fully brought out.¹³³

Mr Newman of course can no longer concur in this position, and a considerable part of his introduction is occupied with an attempt to remove it out of the way. He takes up the famous maxim of Vincentius, *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*, of which he himself and his Tractarian brethren used to boast so much, and shows conclusively, as many sound Protestants have done before him, that from its vagueness and ambiguity, and the difficulty of applying it, it is of little or no real practical utility. The truth is, that Romanists, though they have laboured to mislead men by talking much about catholic consent and the unanimous testimony of the fathers, have been always aware, and have been sometimes led to confess, that there is much about the system of modern Popery which cannot be traced by anything like a chain of testimonies to apostolic times, or even to the third century.¹³⁴

Is not Mr Newman’s whole theory of development based upon a virtual

¹³¹ W. Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Prebyterian* (Still Waters Revival Books 1991), 39.

¹³² *Ibid.* 40.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 41.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 41-42. Keep in mind that Cunningham’s review was originally published in 1863, before either Vatican I or Vatican II. So the historical hiatus he here comments on is far worse now than it even was at the time of writing.

admission, that the old Romish pretence of tracing historically their doctrines and practices to primitive times can no longer be sustained?...He takes care to give no precise and definite statement of what the difficulties are, because this would expose the weaknesses of Romanism.¹³⁵

Romanists, however, have commonly been so reasonable as to admit, that it is only doctrines taught or practices enjoined by the apostles which the church is obliged to receive and observe; and they have, in consequence, been constrained to admit, further, the reasonableness of the demand for evidence of the apostolic origin of those parts of their system which are not found in the New Testament...They have, accordingly attempted to produce something of this sort, using, as far as they could with anything like plausibility, the doctrine of oral tradition, Catholic consent, the testimony of the fathers, the rule of Vincentius, and, when these failed them, taking refuge in the infallibility of the church.¹³⁶

They have never, indeed, attempted to adjust authoritatively the logical relations of tradition and infallibility; but they make tradition to establish infallibility, or infallibility to guarantee tradition, according to the exigencies of the occasion.¹³⁷

This demand was not easily met; and now, at last, the Romanists, if we are to take Mr Newman as their representative, deny the legitimacy of the demand altogether, and maintain that they are not called upon to produce any evidence of the apostolic origin of their tenets, for that these might be all true and legitimate developments of apostolic doctrine, though never taught by the apostles, and never heard of till centuries after their death. This is Mr Newman's theory of development. It cuts the knot, but most certainly does not untie it.¹³⁸

The Romish answer to this very obvious and very strong antecedent presumption used to be, that the apostles delivered much for the instruction and guidance of the church, which is not contained in the New Testament, but which may be learned from other sources. This, however, has been found unsatisfactory and inconvenient; and now, at last, the theory of development has been invented, which supersedes the necessity of adducing any proof of an apostolic origin—a process that was often very

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* 48.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 48-49.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.* 49.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 51.

difficult and troublesome.¹³⁹

The theory of development, if established and conceded, merely removes a general preliminary objection against Romanism. It gives no positive weight or validity to any Romish arguments, but only clears the field for a fair discussion. It is but a substitute for the doctrine which the Romanists used to maintain—namely, that the apostles taught many things which were not contained in, or deducible from, the New Testament, but which might be learned from other sources...so the new theory of development, even when proved or conceded, requires to be followed up by specific proof, that every Romish addition to the New Testament system is a true and legitimate development, and not a corruption.¹⁴⁰

It is in the highest degree improbable, that a theory which was really sound in itself, and legitimately available for the defence of Romanism, should have been invented in the nineteenth century.¹⁴¹

But the analogy fails in one essential particular—namely, that God made all these developments of previous revelations through inspired men, who were commissioned, not merely to develop previous revelations, but also to communicate new ones.¹⁴²

Were we satisfied of the existence of a living infallible guide, whom we were bound to obey, we would not trouble ourselves about the theory of tradition, or the theory of development; we would, of course, believe whatever doctrine he propounded to us, whether he pretended to have had it handed down from the apostles, or to have developed it himself.¹⁴³

It has been conclusively proved that, in the fourth century, the idea of its being necessary to be in communion with the See of Rome, in order to be in the communion of the catholic church, was unknown. But, even if Mr Newman's view of the case were admitted to be correct, it would not afford even the slightest presumption that the Romish additions to the Christianity of the New Testament preserved the type, or idea, of the original.¹⁴⁴

It would be no difficult thing to turn Mr Newman's tests against himself, and to collect under each of the seven heads a good deal of matter from the history of the church which would afford strong presumptions that the

¹³⁹ Ibid. 51.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 52.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 53.

¹⁴² Ibid. 64.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 66.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 72.

tenets held by the Romanists, in opposition to Protestants, were not legitimate developments, but corruptions of the doctrine of the apostles.¹⁴⁵

The allegation of Mozley and Cunningham that Newman's theory of development represents a dramatic break with the traditional definition of tradition receives ironic confirmation from no less an authority than the present pope:

Before Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was defined, all theological faculties in the world were consulted for their opinion. Our teachers' answer was emphatically negative. What here became evidenced was the one-sidedness, not only of the historical, but also of the historicist method in theology. "Tradition" was identified with what could be proved on the basis of texts. Altaner, the patrologist from Wurzburg...had proven in a scientifically persuasive manner that the doctrine of Mary's bodily Assumption into heaven was unknown before the 5C; this doctrine, therefore, he argued, could not belong to the "apostolic tradition. And this was his conclusion, which my teachers at Munich shared. This argument is compelling if you understand "tradition" strictly as the handing down of fixed formulas and texts. This was the position that our teachers represented.¹⁴⁶

Not only are these doctrines well-attested in the early Church (for example, Newman shows that there is stronger evidence for belief in purgatory in the early Church than for belief in original sin); they are also implicitly grounded in Scripture (e.g., purgatory in 1 Cor 3:12-15; transubstantiation in Jn 6:54-59; papal supremacy in Mt 16:18).[84]

Assuming that a doctrine is well-attested in the early church, that doesn't make it true or even probable. Much of the NT is devoted to repelling various heresies which sprang up in the Apostolic church.

I think it's quite clear when the NT writers are approving or disapproving of what beliefs or practices are being attested. When the Apostle John in his First Epistle calls the Gnostics who went out from among the Christians in Ephesus "Antichrists," I think there's little doubt he's not approving of their denials that Jesus came in the flesh. On the other hand when he speaks of those who took offense at Jesus' literalism in the "Bread of Life" passage in John 6, where they "murmured at him because He said, 'I am the bread which came down from heaven'" (v. 41), I think it is no less clear that he is NOT disapproving of Jesus' literalism, even though many of his hearers eventually leave Him. Jesus had every opportunity to tell his offended audience: "Wait! I didn't mean you to take my

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 75.

¹⁴⁶ J. Ratzinger, Milestones (Ignatius 1997), 58-59.

words LITERALLY!” But He didn’t. Instead, he ratchets up his literalism, by declaring: “. . . unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (v. 53).

Several issues here:

i) Notice the extent to which, throughout the course of his reply, Blosser’s Biblical case for Catholicism comes down to a single verse here, a single verse there, or—if we’re lucky—a two or even three-verse proof-text. For someone who decries nominalism, his isolated proof-texting and atomistic appeal to Scripture is nothing if not nominalistic to the nth degree.

ii) Compare this with Reformed theological method, where large blocks of Scripture are used. Complete chapters. Consecutive chapters. Where the whole flow of argument is analyzed. Indeed, where you have an overarching hermeneutic in the form of covenant theology—a precursor to narrative theology. Tracing out a theological motif across many books of the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation.

iii) Purgatory is implicitly ground in 1 Cor 3:12-15? As one commentator points out:

This cannot be a reference to purgatory since Paul is referring to what happens on the judgment day...He is not referring to what happens to a person after death and before the final judgment.¹⁴⁷

iv) Blosser has a problem with reading comprehension. Did I deny that NT writers approve or disapprove of the belief or practice under review? No, that is what I affirmed.

My point remains: a belief or practice could date to the apostolic era, and still be condemnable. If that is true, then a belief or practice which dates to the subapostolic era could also be condemnable. Therefore, antiquity is no evidence of orthodoxy. Ironically, Blosser’s response merely serves to reinforce my original point.

v) Then there’s Blosser’s sophisticated denial that John was rejecting the teaching of Jesus in Jn 6. Did I ever suggest otherwise?

vi) Blosser also assumes, without benefit of argument, that the audience in Jn 6 were offended by Jesus’ literalism. No, they were offended by Jesus himself!

vii) For Blosser, Jn 6 refers to the Eucharist. But his audience would have to be pretty precocious to be offended by the sacramental understanding of this

¹⁴⁷ B. Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Eerdmans 1995), 134.

discourse seeing as it was delivered prior to the institution of the Lord's Supper.

viii) Blosser also ignores other obvious objections to the sacramental reading. Does he believe that every single communicant is heaven-bound (v51,54)?

ix) If Jn 6 is referring to the Eucharist, then why do we have the bread and flesh pairing, instead of the Eucharistic pairing of bread and wine or body and blood?

x) If Jn 6 is referring to the Eucharist, then why do we have a function equivalence between salvation by faith (v35,40,47) and salvation by communion (51,54)?

Isn't the logical relationship between the two that vv35,40,47 literally state what vv51,54 figuratively state?

xi) Is he equally literalistic about other Johannine metaphors, like the true vine, the door, the good shepherd, and the light of the world?

Does he believe that Jesus is literally a piece of bread?

What kind of bread is Jesus made of? Cornbread? Beer bread? Banana bread? Garlic bread? Sourdough? Pumpernickel rye? Cinnamon raisin cranberry bread?

Please don't tell me that Jesus is made of French bread!

Remember, we must be absolutely literal. None of that Zwinglian rationalism allowed!

xii) Finally, is the wafer a literal body? Is the chalice a literal body?

What's a literal body? You know—as in skin, arms, legs, fingers, toes, eyes, ears, hair, bones, internal organs, &c.

Whether purgatory, transubstantiation, and papal supremacy are, in fact, grounded in Scripture is, of course, a primary point of contention. Citing Scripture and exegeting it are two different things.

Point granted, so long as you remember this point when a Calvinist tries to defend his Calvinist doctrine of infant baptism against the Baptist.

Paedobaptism is not a Reformed distinctive. The fact that many theological traditions which are opposed to Calvinism share a common belief in infant baptism should suffice to show that the affirmation or denial of infant baptism is irrelevant to Reformed identity.

First, it results in hermeneutical anarchy. The fact that hundreds of denominations, each professing to derive its teaching by means of the Holy Spirit's guidance from

“Scripture alone,” cannot agree even on the fundamentals of the faith, such as the meaning of baptism or the Lord’s Supper or even the means of salvation, constitutes a powerful prima facie case against it. The principle itself becomes impracticable and self-undermining—a recipe for anarchy.

Is it a fact that “hundreds of denominations, each professing to derive its teaching by means of the Holy Spirit’s guidance from ‘Scripture alone,’ cannot agree even on the fundamentals of the faith?”

First of all, let's be clear about the numbers of different denominations. According to the *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990): "As of 1980 David B. Barrett identified 20,800 Christian denominations worldwide . . ." ("Denominationalism," page 351). Barrett "classified them into seven major blocs and 156 ecclesiastical traditions" (Oxford *World Christian Encyclopedia* [1982], ed., David B. Barrett). The 1999 *Encyclopedia of Christianity* (edited by E. Fahlbusch, et al., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999, vol. 1, p. 800, s.v. "Denomination") raises the number: "In 1985 David Barrett could count 22,150 distinct denominations worldwide." The Wikipedia article on "Protestantism" now states that "According to the World Christian Encyclopedia (2001) by David B. Barrett, et al, there are "over 33,000 denominations in 238 countries."

For someone who attacks nominalism, Blosser has an utterly nominalistic way of looking at denominations. He simply tabulates them, one by one, like counting marbles, rather than making any attempt to discuss what they share in common, or the extent to which they are variations on a handful of basal themes. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, the diversity of denominations boils down to the way in which you answer four basic questions: (1) Is the Bible the only rule of faith? (2) Does man have freewill? (3) Is the New Covenant continuous with the Old? (4) Are the sacraments a means of grace?

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2004/06/4-door-labyrinth-1.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2004/06/4-door-labyrinth-2.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2004/06/4-door-labyrinth-3.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2004/06/4-door-labyrinth-4.html>

<http://triablogue.blogspot.com/2004/06/4-door-labyrinth-5.html>

Second, look up what their basic tenets are and whether you can reconcile them. The differences, including many "irreconcilable" differences and in some cases ineluctable opposition to ecumenism, are enough to make one's head spin; and, as mentioned earlier (in #34), many of these differences are over the most

fundamental commands the Lord imposed upon his disciples in His Great Commission.

I would generally regard ineluctable opposition to ecumenism as a plus, not a minus.

On the one hand, you have charismatic denominations which profess to derive their teaching by means of the Holy Spirit's guidance. But, by that same token, they reject *sola Scriptura*, for they subscribe to continuous revelation in the form of contemporary prophecy. On the other hand, you have cessationist denominations which, by that same token, do not profess to derive their teaching by means of the Holy Spirit's guidance. So which denominations is Blosser talking about?

Name one, and we can talk about it. We could start with the Gooch Gap Turkey Covian Baptists, but that might make it difficult to generalize. The only way we can generalize and have an intelligible conversation here would be to go back to those sects that are closer to the mainline branches that initially broke ways from the sixteenth century Reformation groups -- much as the Methodists were a reform movement within the Anglican branch of the Reformation, from which all sorts of splinter "free church" groups subsequently emerged, and so forth. But these aren't typically charismatic. But even in the case of 'charismatic' groups we have a problem, because you attempt to generalize about "charismatic denominations" by stating that they reject *sola scriptura* and derive their teaching by means of the Holy Spirit's guidance. That may certainly be the case with some of these charismatic megachurch groups we have today, but do these represent *all* charismatic groups? There is no central clearing house, no equivalent of the "Vatican," for charismatic denominations. So what makes you sure that among the twenty-two thousand some Protestant denominational sects identified by Barrett, there isn't one which embraces *sola scriptura*?

Blosser is the one who made sweeping assertions about Protestant denominations that both lay claim to pneumatic guidance and *sola Scriptura*. It's up to him to come up with concrete examples, and explain how representative they are. I'm merely pointing out an apparent point of tension in his claim.

There's nothing innately incompatible with a person's believing both *sola scriptura* and that the Holy Spirit can offer a person revelations, is there?

That would depend on the content of the revelation. If it's of the Ellen G. White variety, then, yes, that would be incompatible with the Protestant rule of faith.

If, on the other hand, it's something like a premonition of death, then, no, that would not be incompatible with the Protestant rule of faith.

Then we could talk about ‘cessationism’ (the view that the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit – such as tongues, prophecy, and healing -- have ceased) and how you defend or attempt to derive that view from the Bible. I remember at Westminster Theological Seminary they taught a generally cessationist view. But what struck me was the lack of any cogent *biblical* argument -- not to mention historical argument – produced for the position, though I could have missed something.

There are several issues, here:

i) In debating with a Catholic, I don’t have to present an all-purpose argument for cessationism. I can argue on Catholic grounds. For Catholicism itself distinguishes between public and private revelation:

The Apostles hold a unique status in salvation history by reason of their immediate contact with the Incarnate Word (1 Jn 1:1) and their Pentecostal experience... Whatever God has communicated since apostolic times to privileged souls can add nothing to the deposit of the Christian faith.¹⁴⁸

Besides the public revelation that was completed at the death of the last Apostle and that gave to the Church the deposit of faith, there were in the course of Christianity private revelations... Private revelations have no bearing on the deposit of faith. They do not, theologians are agreed, contain new doctrine for belief by divine and Catholic faith.¹⁴⁹

The teaching of the Church distinguishes between “public Revelation” and “private revelations”. The two realities differ not only in degree but also in essence... In this respect, let us listen once again to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “Throughout the ages, there have been so-called ‘private’ revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the Church... It is not their role to complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history” (No. 67).¹⁵⁰

ii) There are Reformed cessationist arguments and/or Reformed arguments for the finality of the canon.¹⁵¹ You may find these unsatisfactory in one respect or

¹⁴⁸ New Catholic Encyclopedia 12:197b-198a.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 12:200b-201b.

¹⁵⁰

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000626_message-fatima_en.html

¹⁵¹ E.g. R. Gaffin, *Perspectives on Pentecost* (P&R 1986); “The New Testament as Canon,” H. Conn, ed. *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic* (Baker 1998), 165-83; M. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eerdmans 1972); H. Ridderbos, *Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures* (P&R 1988); J. Roberts & A. du Toit, *Guide to the New Testament* (NGKB 1989), Volume 1; P. Robertson,

another, but since you don't raise any specific objections, I can't offer any specific replies.

iii) One doesn't have to subscribe to full-stop cessationism to draw a distinction between public and private revelation. As David Aune has documented in some detail, second temple Judaism classified and differentiated between various revelatory, viz. classical/canonical prophecy, eschatological prophecy, isolated eschatological prophecy, and divination.¹⁵²

iv) The distinction between canonical prophecy and divination goes all the way back to the Pentateuch:

Prophecy and dreams are common vehicles of divine revelation in the Bible (see 1 Sam 28:6). God truly speaks through these means in the Hebrew Bible. In addition, signs and wonders sometimes accompany the revelation as a means of confirmation. These are normally to be interrelated as confirming the word of the true prophet of Yahweh (18:22).¹⁵³

Here Moses provides an exception: even if the prophet or dreamer produces signs and wonders, if he is promoting apostasy, he is not to be listened to...The people are to maintain exclusive allegiance to Yahweh. Thus the Israelites' first response is to be rejection of the message given by the false prophet.¹⁵⁴

I don't think it's coincidental that this distinction is drawn in Deuteronomy, which is a specimen of covenant renewal, and prepares the Israelites for the future as they embark on the Conquest, with the Mosaic Covenant as their charter document.

In my view, the seminal distinction between canonical prophecy and divination remains valid. This is analogous to the distinction between public and private revelation.

For example, in the OT there were both authorized and unauthorized forms of divination. Necromancy is an example of forbidden divination.

The Final Word (Banner of Truth 2004); B. B. Warfield, Counterfeit Miracles (Banner of Truth 1983).

¹⁵² D. Aune, Prophecy in Early Christianity And the Ancient Mediterranean World (Eerdmans 1991), chapter 5. Aune also has a category of clerical prophecy. But this is not well-attested, and also rests on some disputatious exegesis.

¹⁵³ J. Currid, Deuteronomy (Evangelical Press 2006), 260.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 260.

On the other hand, dreams could be a genuine source of divine guidance. It's also significant that, in the case of dreams, the dreamer does nothing to seek or compel a knowledge of the future. Rather, God retains the sovereign initiative.¹⁵⁵

God may occasionally reveal himself to individuals, but this does not enjoy the same standing as canonical revelation. Public (i.e. canonical) revelation remains the yardstick for measuring private revelation, and apparent private revelation may also be delusive (i.e. occultic rather than divine).

I suppose this follows hand-in-glove in the skeptical tradition of the Scottish Presbyterian editors of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, 14 vols., who, in their discussion of the miracles witnessed first-hand according to the testimony of St. Augustine in his *City of God* (Bk XXI, ch. 8), have appended a note (vol. 2 of the series, p. 485, n. 2), quoting Isaac Taylor's *Ancient Christianity* (Vol II, p. 242) who takes the account offered by Augustine and his bishop Ambrose of a certain miracle, according to the editors, as "a specimen of the so-called miracles of that age . . ." In Taylor's own words: "In the Nicene Church, so lax were the notions of common morality, and in so feeble a manner did the fear of God influence the conduct of leading men, that, on occasions when the Church was to be served, and her assailants to be confounded, they did not scruple to take upon themselves the contrivance and execution of the most degrading impostures" (p. 270). The editors add, "It is to be observed, however, that Augustin was, at least in this instance, one of the deceived." Such a view betrays not only the extreme skepticism of the naturalism of the Enlightenment tradition that permeated much of 19th century Scottish thinking, but poor judgment of the integrity of these two prominent saints of the Church. Taylor's remarks, in particular, reveal virtually no acquaintance with the writing of St. Augustine at all. But the most remarkable fact about these details is the sheer absence of any argument: the statements are nothing more than the expression of manifest prejudice. Compare John Henry Newman's *Essay on Miracles* (1826) -- which the editors have the decency to reference in their bibliography -- which, even though written well before his Catholic conversion, reaches a vastly different assessment of both patristic and medieval miracles, and that based on careful argument.

Several issues:

- i) This may have less to do with scepticism than a Protestant, preemptive strike against the appeal to Catholic miracles to validate Catholic doctrine. I myself am less restrictive.
- ii) Newman's essay is better at theory than application. On the one hand, he is useful in redefining miracles away from the Humean paradigm. And he does a fine

¹⁵⁵ "Divination," ZPEB 2:146-49.

job of situating miracles in a more embracing conceptual scheme. In that respect, I think that Newman's essay breaks fresh ground, and thereby breaks away from a stultified paradigm.

iii) He also draws a number of basic distinctions between Biblical and ecclesiastical miracles:

The Scripture miracles are for the most part evidence of a Divine Revelation, and that for the sake of those who have not yet been instructed in it, and in order to the instruction of multitudes: but the {116} miracles which follow have sometimes no discoverable or direct object, or but a slight object; they happen for the sake of individuals, and of those who are already Christians, or for purposes already effected, as far as we can judge, by the miracles of Scripture. The Scripture miracles are wrought by persons consciously exercising under Divine guidance a power committed to them for definite ends, professing to be immediate messengers from heaven, and to be evidencing their mission by their miracles: whereas Ecclesiastical miracles are not so much wrought as displayed, being effected by Divine Power without any visible media of operation at all, or by inanimate or material media, as relics and shrines, or by instruments who did not know at the time what they were effecting, or, if they were hoping and praying for such supernatural blessing, at least did not know when they were to be used as instruments, when not. The miracles of Scripture are, as a whole, grave, simple, and majestic: those of Ecclesiastical History often partake of what may not unfitly be called a romantic character, and of that wildness and inequality which enters into the notion of romance. The miracles of Scripture are undeniably beyond nature: those of Ecclesiastical History are often scarcely more than extraordinary accidents or coincidences, or events which seem to betray exaggerations or errors in the statement. The miracles of Scripture are definite and {117} whole transactions, drawn out and carried through from first to last, with beginning and ending, clear, complete, and compact in the narrative, separated from extraneous matter, and consigned to authentic statements: whereas the Ecclesiastical, for the most part, are not contained in any authoritative form or original document; at best they need to be extracted from merely historical works, and often are only floating rumours, popular traditions, vague, various, inconsistent in detail, tales which only happen to have survived, or which in the course of years obtained a permanent place in local usages or in particular rites or on certain spots, recorded at a distance from the time and country when and where they profess to have occurred, and brought into shape only by the juxtaposition and comparison of distinct informations. Moreover, in Ecclesiastical History true and false miracles are mixed: whereas in

Scripture inspiration has selected the true to the exclusion of all others.¹⁵⁶

iv) On the other hand, his critical faculties fail him when he makes the transition from theory to application. There is a blind credulity to his treatment of any sort of ecclesiastic miracle. And that is not merely my own judgment. In the opinion of Cardinal Dulles:

In the last chapter of his book Newman examines some particular cases, such as the “thundering legion” that brought rain to the troops of Marcus Aurelius, the appearance of the Cross to Constantine and his army, and the discovery of the true Cross by St. Helena. Some scholars have faulted Newman for being over-credulous in his evaluations.¹⁵⁷

Newman’s assessment of individual miracle stories in early church history stands in need of revision. His enthusiastic embrace of modern ecclesiastical miracles in his Lectures of 1851 can best be understood in the context of the triumphalist tone of his anti-Protestant polemic.¹⁵⁸

Perhaps, though, Blosser would dismiss this evaluation on the grounds that Cardinal Dulles is also bewitched by the Enlightenment spell!

From a Protestant perspective, Roman Catholicism is just one more denomination.

I know . . . which always strikes me as something on the order of saying: “From a New Yorker’s perspective, Planet Earth is just one more American state.” I must admit I had to chuckle when Alvin Plantinga of the tiny (Dutch Reformed) Christian Reformed Church gave a speech at a Philadelphia gathering of the American Catholic Philosophical Association at which he, at the end of his speech, invited any dissatisfied Catholics to consider returning to “the Mother Church.”

And what makes him think that truth lies in numbers? Were the faithful in the majority in OT times? Were the faithful in the majority in NT times?

What about the Exodus generation—when, out of some two million refugees (cf. Exod 12:37), the faithful remnant came down to a total of about two individuals, Joshua and Caleb?

There were parallel divisions in second temple Judaism. If God didn’t see fit to install an OT magisterium to prevent doctrinal diversity in second temple Judaism, why is doctrinal diversity an argument for the necessity of a Magisterium under the New Covenant?

¹⁵⁶ <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/miracles/essay2/chapter3.html>

¹⁵⁷ A. Dulles, John Henry Newman (Continuum 2002), 54-55.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 60.

The fact that there were divisions of practice and belief does not mean that every difference is divinely approved. Take the difference between the Sadducees and Pharisees. Although Jesus regularly lashed out at the Pharisees, it was their hypocrisy that he generally condemned, not their beliefs. In fact, in Mt 23:2-3, Jesus says: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach, but do not practice.” Pharisee doctrine was the orthodoxy of the period and is unfortunately eclipsed by the hypocrisy of the Pharisees which gives them a bad reputation. However Pharisee doctrine was essentially what Jesus embraced, except for the additional deepening of the law (spirit of the law) that He offers in Mt. 5. By contrast, the Sadducees were the theological Liberals of the day, rejecting belief in the resurrection, angels and spirits, the last judgment, life after death, divine providence, and a coming Messiah. I don’t think Jesus was all about celebrating theological “diversity.”

Three problems:

i) This is not question of “celebrating” theological diversity. And this is not a question of whether God approves of every difference.

The question, rather, is God’s administration of the covenant community.

ii) It’s overly facile to say the Sadducees were the theological liberals of their day. They were liberal in some respects, and conservative in others. Their rejection of the oral Torah (a la the Pharisees) was conservative, not liberal. And Jesus rejects the oral Torah (pace the Pharisees).

iii) Like every other Catholic apologist, Blosser cites Mt 23:2-3 out of context. In so doing, he is unable to integrate his interpretation into the chapter as a whole, or the running indictment of the Pharisees in Matthew generally. As one commentator explains:

Matthew alone has preserved the material of vv2-3...It is normally taken to mean to have authority to interpret for the people the demands of the Mosaic Law. But this is difficult, given that the same people to whom the sitting is applied are identified soon after in v16 (cf. 15:14) as “blind guides.” Powell identifies ten different approaches to dealing with this tension, but as he clearly shows, none is satisfactory.¹⁵⁹

So what is the force intended by “sit/sat in the seat of Moses?” According to Powell,

Jesus may be simply acknowledging the powerful social and

¹⁵⁹ J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans 2005), 922.

religious position that [the scribes and Pharisees] occupy in a world where most people are illiterate and copies of the Torah are not plentiful. Since Jesus' disciples do not themselves have copies of the Torah, they will be dependent on the scribe and the Pharisees to know what Moses said.

We might say that the scribes and Pharisees were walking copies of the Law. What they did with it might be suspect, but not their knowledge of it. They could be relied on to report the Law of Moses with care and accuracy.¹⁶⁰

To say the meaning of baptism or the Lord's Supper represents "fundamentals of the faith" merely begs the question in favor of Catholic sacramentalism.

I'm flattered you would say so, but why? Isn't baptism included in our Lord's Great Commission itself? What could be more basic? And before the most important event in His earthly ministry, Jesus commanded His Apostles: "This do in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19), giving a radical new meaning to the Passover He was celebrating with them, and binding the Old Covenant to a New. What could be more basic?

i) You're equivocated. As I already explained, there's a difference between executing a ritual command, and understanding the significance of the ritual. A person can do one without the other. I'm simply answering you on your own grounds.

ii) Speaking for myself, I don't deny that the NT attaches a certain significance to communion and baptism. But not the meaning which you ascribe to these covenant signs.

Both Catholicism and Protestantism have their share of horror stories. But the problem with an authoritarian, top-down denomination is that, once the hierarchy is corrupted, the disease is incurable since it's the accountability mechanism which is infected with terminal illness.

I think you may want to be careful here. I don't know of a human organization that doesn't have a corruptible authority structure. Plato could tell us about the corruptibility of democracy as well as our own experience of democratic politics in our own country. Grass roots "bottom-up" authority is no guarantee, as much as we may prefer it as Americans to having a Queen, like England.

i) Actually, I agree with this, which is why debates over polity are largely a waste of time. Every form of church government is a failure if you define success by incorruptibility. The polity is no better than the people it empowers—be it

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 923.

congregational, presbyterial, or prelatical.

ii) The problem is that Catholicism identifies itself as the true church, and dogmatizes a particular polity. This renders the institution irreformable.

By contrast, if a Protestant denomination becomes incurably decadent, the faithful can separate themselves from the terminally ill institution.

Furthermore, although I'd like to be more sanguine about your declaration of "terminal illness" with respect to a "top-down" structure like the Catholic Church, I find myself hesitating over a story of Abraham, the medieval Jewish merchant in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. As Kreeft relates the story ([How can the Creed call the Church "Holy"?](#)), Abraham is contemplating becoming a Catholic. He tells his friend, the bishop of Paris, who has been trying unsuccessfully to convert him, that he has to go to Rome on business. The bishop is horrified: "Don't go! When you see the stupidity and corruption there, you'll never join the Church." (This was the time of the Medici popes, who were notoriously worldly and corrupt.) But Abraham is a practical man. Business calls. Upon his return to France, he tells the bishop he is now ready to be baptized. The bishop is astounded, but Abraham explains: "I'm a practical businessman. No earthly business that stupid and corrupt could last fourteen weeks. Your Church has lasted fourteen centuries. It must have God behind it." There's an implicit serious argument in the story: How could anything so corrupt as the Catholic Church survive for so long?

Do you apply that same reasoning to Islam? It's been around since the 7C. What about Hinduism or Buddhism?

Furthermore, one could add, how could it produce such holy saints as it has – men and women who forsook all to follow Christ, like St. Augustine, St. Dominic, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Lucy, St. Therese of Lisieux?

A couple of issues:

i) Once again, Blosser is speaking for the dead. He doesn't know what Augustine or Dominic would think of the contemporary Catholic church—unless he's held a séance.

ii) Sanctity is a generic Christian trait, not a sectarian trait. You can find saintly Christians in any orthodox Christian tradition.

Church history, like the history of Old Testament Israel, shows that the People of God have progressed through cycles of obedience and rebellion. The Church has frequently gone through cycles of reform – the Gregorian reforms, the Cluny reforms, the reforms of Pius V and Pius X, etc. This is nothing new.

And Catholicism had a chance to reform itself during the Reformation. It stood at a fork in the road. And it took the wrong turn.

The resulting fragmentation of teaching authority in Protestantism has produced a proliferation of Protestant positions disagreeing over baptism, Communion, worship, divorce, remarriage, women's ordination, altars, pictures, statues, kneelers, alcohol, cigarettes, cards, Zionism, contraception, pre-millennialism, the use of musical instruments in worship, and the like.

I see. And what, in Catholicism, is the *de fide* position on alcohol, cigarettes, cards, Zionism, and premillennialism? What ecumenical council or *ex cathedra* pronouncement has defined the orthodox position on these issues?

I believe I've answered that already, when I described the large area of undefined Church teaching in connection with eschatology. As to the things you mention, the Church only has general teachings that would apply, no dogmatic definitions. For example, one's use of alcohol and cigarettes, would fall under the category of one's duty to protect one's own health. There are no hard and fast rules here. One may drink beer, if one likes, though drunkenness is regarded as a sin. There are no official proscriptions forbidding smoking, although the dangers of smoking to one's health ought to make any good Catholic take notice of what he's doing in that area. Cards? No problems, not even with gambling (bingo, anyone?), as long as it doesn't compromise one's family's finances, etc. Zionism? No official teaching, again, though Catholics don't share dispensational fundamentalists gleeful clamoring for front row seats at the Battle of Armageddon or the view that Israel can do no wrong politically. At the same time, they do have a special regard for people of the Jewish faith, as any Christians probably should. Premillennialism? I've already spoken to that. Bottom line: no dogmatic definitions exist here yet.

Once again, he backs away from his own argument. He blames Evangelicalism for not having a uniform position on all these issues, but then he exempts his own communion from the same blame. Either both are blameworthy, or neither.

Blosser keeps harping on women's ordination, but in Catholicism there is one woman in particular whose institutional standing has been elevated far above any pastor or priest or bishop, apostle, angel, archangel, prophet, or Pope. She goes by such titles as the Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, Mediatrix, and co-Redemptrix. Why choke on the gnat of women's ordination if you're going to swallow the camel of Mariolatry?

A fair question, which deserves a decent (if here, brief) answer. First, women's ordination: Outside Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, ordained ministry is understood chiefly in *functional* terms. Hence, if a woman can perform the

functions of a minister by preaching and offering pastoral counseling, etc., nothing is seen as properly excluding her from ordination – that is, unless you belong to one of these more conservative evangelical or fundamentalist denominations that retains the Church’s tradition of an all-male ministry but tries to justify it on biblical grounds (e.g., such as Paul’s remarks about women keeping silent and subordinate in the assembly (I Cor. 14:34). On the other hand, in the common Sacred Tradition of Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, ordained ministry is understood in *ontological* terms.

I’m not debating the pros and cons of female ordination. Rather, I’m discussing the consistency of Catholicism on this part: it bans women from the priesthood, but elevates Mary to a station far above any priest. And Mary, as Mediatrix and co-Redemptrix, has priestly role.

That is, when a man is ordained, he receives a charism that ontologically changes his being, imprinting him indelibly with the character of a priest who serves *in persona Christi* as a spiritual ‘father’ to his flock. Nancy Doe can no more become “Fr. Nancy” than a man can biologically be re-engineered to become a mother. Priests are “fathers” because they spiritually “father” children; and women simply cannot be fathers, even spiritually. Read Edith Stein’s *Essays on Woman* on the subject of the spiritual vocation of women. Stein was a Jewish philosopher under Husserl in Germany before becoming a Carmelite nun and being martyred at Auschwitz. She has remarkable insights.

Once more, the question at issue is not the Catholic rationale for restricting the priesthood to men. Rather, the question at issue is how that restriction is consistent with the position of Mary in the chain-of-command.

Second, Protestants often equate the Catholic view of Mary with the sinful idolatry of “Mariolatry,” as you seem to here. First of all, the worship of Mary is an explicitly condemned heresy in Catholicism. It’s called *Collyridianism* and first appeared between 350 and 450 A.D., when Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis and a close colleague of St. Jerome, rose up to condemn it and combat it in his apologetic work, *Panarion*. An interesting point about his refutation is that in the same work he addressed not only the heresy of Collyridianism (the super-exaltation of Mary to a par with divinity), but the other extreme of Marian heresies -- Antidicomarianitism (an Arabian movement which demoted and debased Mary's importance).

This is a paper theory with no practical or psychological relevance in a real world situation. As Caird observes:

Anyone who has lived in a Catholic country and seen the cult of Mary at first hand as it is conducted among unsophisticated folk cannot help but

wonder what all this has to do with the day-to-day piety of the parish churches of Sicily and Quebec, of Lima, Bangalore, Jakarta, and Manila. Does it not look a little bit like a rationalization, the attempt to give respectable reasons for practices that originated from less exalted sources.¹⁶¹

Other Protestants – usually Evangelicals and Fundamentalists – recoil at Marian titles such as “Mother of God,” because they think this elevates Mary above God. The recoil, however, stems from ignorance, for anyone acquainted with the Third Ecumenical Council (held at Ephesus in AD 431) will know that the title “Mother of God” derives from the Council’s term *theotokos* (from Greek *theos*, ‘God’, and *tokos*, ‘bearer’), which was applied to Mary to indicate that her Son was divine, over against the heretical view of Nestorius that Mary should be called *Christotokos* (‘Christ-bearer’), restricting her role to the mother of Christ’s humanity only and not His divine nature. Hence, calling Mary “Mother of God” doesn’t mean that she was the mother of, say, God the Father, or the source of the Godhead, but simply that the God-man Jesus is (and was) not only the Son of God but the Son of Mary. In other words, Mary could point to her baby and say, “He’s God.” Evangelicals such as Michael Card have even composed songs about this beautiful mystery of a Son who creates His own mother, and so forth. Where’s the idolatry in this, my friend?

I’m well aware of this escape clause. However, it isn’t just a Christological statement. To the contrary, the way this cashes out, both in principle and practice, is that Mary, as the Mother of God, is held to have a lot of pull with her Son: hence, if you want to get something from God, go through his mother.

Indeed, you make that very point just below when you discuss the relation between a royal son and the queen mother. So, if a royal subject needs something from the king, the best way to approach the kind is to go to and through his mother. He will do it as a favor to Mom. All very anthropomorphic.

I could go on about the titles, “Queen of Heaven,” “Mediatrice,” and “co-Redemptrix” at length too, but let me try to truncate my response here a bit so that this doesn’t become too lengthy. In Hebrew understanding the Queen of a King was never his wife, but his mother. (I won’t elaborate on this now, but you can research it for yourself. The data is there.) An example would be I Kings 2:18 – “Bathsheba therefore went to King Solomon. . . . And the king rose up to meet her and bowed down to her, and sat down on his throne and had a throne set for the king’s mother; so she sat at his right hand.” Thus the tradition of calling Mary “Queen of Heaven” comes originally from a Hebrew convention, which would lead to mother of King Jesus naturally being viewed as his Queen. Furthermore,

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 46.

there's the imagery of Rev. 12 (“ . . . a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars . . .”) which is identified with Mary the Mother of Church (note v. 17, where the dragon, angry with the woman, goes off “to make war on the rest of her offspring . . . who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus). I know Protestants exclude the Marian interpretation of this passage by restricting its meaning to the mystical Church, but it's well to be aware of the larger tradition of Marian interpretation in Sacred Tradition (the Mexican image of “Our Lady of Guadalupe,” another name for Mary, comes right out of this text).

A couple of basic problems:

i) Criticism of the Marian interpretation isn't limited to Evangelical scholarship. This also crops up in ecumenical scholarship involving top-tier Catholic scholars:

What does the author mean by the symbol of the woman? Since very few interpreters today would see a primary or exclusive reference to Mary, let us postpone that question for a moment to investigate what most authors regard as the primary reference, namely, to the people of God (whether Israel or the church or both).¹⁶²

Granted that the woman described in Revelation 12 refers primarily to the people of God, Israel and the Church, is there a possibility of a secondary reference to Mary?...Let us mention some of the difficulties that the suggestion of a reference to Mary face. A primary objection is that early Church writers do not interpret Revelation 12 in a mariological sense; indeed our first known mariological interpretation dates to the fourth century...the fact that the mariological emphasis on Revelation 12 is relatively recent raises the question of whether it represents an exegesis of the text itself or simply an imaginative theological application as part of a search for biblical support for Marian doctrines.¹⁶³

With many modern commentators on Revelation, we agreed that the primary reference of the woman is to the people of God—both *Israel*, which brings for the Messiah, and *the Church*, which relives the experiences of Israel and brings forth other children in the image of Christ.¹⁶⁴

Moreover, Blosser also needs to actually engage some of exegetical arguments offered by Evangelical scholars in opposition to the Marian interpretation, such as:

¹⁶² Mary in the New Testament, 231-32.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* 235-36.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 292.

In view of the corporate nature of her person, to which attention has already been drawn, it is highly unlikely that this figure should be understood as Mary, the mother of Jesus; although this equation, which has been a part of Marian theology since the medieval period, is still being made... We are on more secure ground if we take proper account of the Old Testament representation of the ideal Zion as the *mother* of God's people, as in Isa 54:1-3; 66:7-9; 4 Ezra 10.7; cf. Gal 4:26-27 (Jerusalem is the mother of the Church; (Eph 5:31-32 (the Church as the bride of Christ); 2 Jn 1,5 (the Christian community as an "elect lady")... This explains the female imagery in this passage, as well as the collective character of the woman herself; and both are reinforced by the personification of Babylon and the new Jerusalem, later in the drama (Rev 17:-18; 21:2), as women. The woman of 21:1 is therefore best seen as the heavenly counterpart of the true Israel, the community from which the Messiah descends (see also vv2-5); and for John (as in Rev 7:1-17; 11:19; 15:5; 21:12-14) this body embraces both the Jewish and Christian Church.¹⁶⁵

The primary focus here is not on an individual but on the community of faith within which the messianic line ultimately yielded a kingly offspring. This is evident not only from what we have said about v1, but from what happens in the remainder of the chapter: the woman is persecuted, flees into the desert, and has other children, who are described as faithful Christians. Furthermore, her time in the wilderness is the time of Israel's tribulation prophesied by Daniel (see on v6). All this goes beyond anything that could have been said about Mary and her children.¹⁶⁶

"Mediatrix" and "co-Redemptrix" are misunderstood only because they are transposed from a human to a divine context by those who misunderstand them. Jesus is the only mediator we have, if by that we mean the One who could atone for our sins and purchase our redemption. But in order to understand what the Catholic thinks, it helps to think of these notions in mundane terms. How did you first learn about the love of Jesus? Your parents? Your Sunday School teacher? An individual who shared the Gospel with you or gave you a Bible to read? In any case, the Gospel is "mediated" to us in countless ways. When we evangelize others, we serve as "mediators" – not in the sense that we presume to take Christ's role, but in the sense that we become the means by which others hear the Gospel. Furthermore, when we pray for others, we become their "intercessors" before God, and in that sense, too, we become "mediators." In each of these ways we also serve to facilitate God's plan of redemption in the lives of those to whom we minister; and in *this limited sense*, one could also say, because we are cooperating

¹⁶⁵ S. Smalley, *The Revelation of John* (IVP 2005), 314-15.

¹⁶⁶ G. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans 1999), 628-29.

with God's plan to redeem the world, that we are Christ's "co-redeemers." The danger, of course, is that this can be misunderstood as implying that we are taking over the role of Christ's inimitable redemptive work; but a moment's thought should clear up any misunderstanding of this point. No Catholic for a moment assumes anything of that sort. Now if any of us can be "mediators" and "co-redeemers" in these sense, it shouldn't be surprising that these titles are applied especially to Mary.

The problem with recasting this in "mundane terms" is that it's equivocal, for the mundane sense is not the sense in which Mary is the Mediatrix and co-Redemptrix in Catholic theology. For example:

This motherhood of Mary in the order of grace continues uninterruptedly from the consent which she loyally gave at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the Church under the titles of Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix.¹⁶⁷

This cannot be said of parents, pastors, and Sunday school teachers.

Why "especially"? Because God allowed His *entire plan of redemption* to hinge upon the response of a young peasant girl when He sent his archangel, Gabriel, to announce His plan to her, and she replied: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word." She was free to say "No," although we assume God had a pretty good idea of how she would reply.

She was free to say "No"? So God's "entire plan of redemption" was at the mercy of one human being's veto?

Other issues aside, how, exactly, would Mary be in a position to say "No."

How would she say "no" to the action of the Holy Spirit? Unlike ordinary conception between consenting adults, a virginal conception doesn't depend on the consent of the female party to the transaction. There is nothing that Mary could do to prevent a virginal conception, even if she wanted to. For this is the unilateral effect of God's miraculous agency. No form of contraception will preempt a virginal conception. Short of attempting a self-induced abortion in the course of gestation, there is nothing that Mary could have done to thwart God's plan—even if you assume a libertarian theory of the will.

¹⁶⁷ <http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p123a9p6.htm#l>

The honest Protestant Bible student has little ground for easily presuming that his private interpretation of the issues that divide the Protestant denominations is necessarily the right one, or that the 2000 year-old consensus of millions of Catholics on every inhabited continent is necessarily wrong. It would be untoward ignorance to assume that he is the first person in history to have carefully examined Scripture; and presumptuous arrogance to assume that he is the first to have understood it.

If you read any major commentary on the Bible by a Protestant Bible scholar, you will see that he interacts with the history of interpretation.

This may be true, but it's often of a very selective and limited scope, restricted to a "Protestant textbook tradition" of exegesis and blindsighted to large traditions outside of its own circles. There are some exceptions to this, or at least scholars who have read some of the Catholic Tradition, such as Jaroslav Pelikan, Alasdair McGrath, and N.T. Wright, but those are a Lutheran convert to Eastern Orthodoxy and two Anglicans, not your bread-and-butter Evangelicals.

There's really no need for me to respond to this since the onus is on Blosser to back up his charge. To judge by his Catholic proof texting, he doesn't bother to consult standard Evangelical commentaries, so what does he actually know about their "Protestant textbook tradition"?

Either a Roman Catholic must exercise his own discernment regarding the evidence for or against the identity of the Catholic church as the true church, or else he is exercising blind faith in Catholicism, like flipping a coin or going with whatever faith he happened to be born into. If the former, then he's in the same boat as the benighted Protestant. If the latter, then he's an accidental Catholic. In another time and place, he'd be an accidental Protestant, Hindu, or Marxist.

Point well-taken. Of the latter kind, there are all-too-many of both unthinking cradle Catholics and cradle Protestants who simply have their religious identity by virtue of happenstance. For an Evangelical to convert and become a Catholic (as for a Catholic to convert and become an Evangelical) requires deliberation and careful investigation.

However, my original statement was directed at something else: the presumption of contemporaries assuming that with a Bible and a few commentaries published in the last ten years, they can "know it all," meanwhile overlooking two thousand years of careful biblical scholarship. Correct me if I'm wrong, but my distinct impression is that most Fundamentalists and many Evangelicals don't really give much mental space to medieval or patristic biblical commentary. I don't think they even know it exists, for one thing; and I don't think they would imagine it worth their while to investigate it, for another. But I think this is arrogance. If one delves

into the patristics and medievals, one finds a wealth of careful reflection upon the Bible; and to think that we cannot benefit from this, in my view, is a denial of the work of the Holy Spirit over the last two millennia in leading the Church progressively “into all truth.” This isn’t to say I don’t find much of value in Evangelical scholarship. I do. But hopefully you see my point.

Several issues here:

i) We need to distinguish between Protestant scholars and the rank-and-file. No, the average layman doesn’t give much mental space to medieval or patristic biblical commentary. But the same could be said for the generality of the Catholic laity.

ii) There is also a difference between Medieval and patristic biblical commentary. A handful of the church fathers have some useful things to say because they are, to some degree, in touch with the Jewish and Greco-Roman sources.

The same cannot be said for Scholastic theologians. Aquinas may be ever so brilliant, but he knows nothing of Greek, Hebrew, cuneiform, Egyptology, Assyriology, second temple Judaism, &c.

iii) Evangelicals can also get the Catholic side of the argument by reading Catholic commentators, viz. Brown, Fitzmyer, Quinn, Johnson, &c.

However, Blosser seems to be in the habit of dismissing Catholic commentators as captive to German Bible criticism.

The difference between Blosser and me is that I read Catholic and Protestant commentators alike, whereas Blosser reads neither. Or if he does, it never shows.

To speak of “the 2000 year-old consensus of millions of Catholics on every inhabited continent,” begs several questions in a row: (a) It assumes that Roman Catholicism is self-identical over 2000 years.

There are two ways of remaining “self-identical”: (i) by remaining changeless, or (ii) by undergoing change while preserving a continuous identity. When the Venerable Newman was confronted by the question why the medieval church looked so different from the NT church if it was supposedly the “same” (viz., Catholic) Church, he responded by pointing to the difference between an acorn and an oak. An oak looks vastly different from an acorn; but everything that would be realized in the oak was implicitly present already in the acorn.

That’s an argument from analogy minus the argument.

The Catholic Church remains “self-identical” through continuous change in the

same way. It's doctrine "develops" in the same way. There's nothing in the NT about the "hypostatic union" of Christ's two natures, but that's simply a later refinement of what is implicit in the biblical data of the NT. The doctrine of "transubstantiation" wasn't officially defined until AD 1215 (Fourth Lateran Council), but the idea that the elements symbolizing the Body and Blood of Christ are somehow mysteriously "transformed" into them was present from the beginning. Thus Ambrose of Milan (d. AD 397) countered objections to this idea by writing "You may perhaps say: 'My bread is ordinary.' But that bread is bread before the words of the Sacraments; where the consecration has entered in, the bread becomes the Flesh of Christ" (*The Sacraments*, v.2,1339,1340). Q.E.D.

This is only as good as the underlying interpretation of Jn 6 or Lk 22:19.

You continue: (b) "It assumes a consensus among millions of Catholics. (c) Is there any polling data on what the laity believed in the year 800 or 1200? Did a survey team from Rome fan out over Medieval Europe and go door-to-door to ask every illiterate peasant what he believed about transubstantiation, condign merit, or the hypostatic union? Once again, Blosser has absolutely no historical sense."

I'll let the reader be the judge of whether I have "absolutely no historical sense." When I referred to a "2000 year-old consensus of millions of Catholics," I was assuming (i) that there were no orthodox Christian options other than Catholicism before the Great Schism of 1054;

Okay, let's play along with that contention. He's admitting that the consensus was a default consensus. The consensus existent in the absence of any practical alternative or fallback position.

Well, that's a pretty weak appeal. You might as well talk about a Marxist consensus or Muslim consensus or Hindu or Buddhist consensus where that's the only thing the populace is exposed to. They believe it because they've been given nothing else to believe.

If, as soon the Protestant Reformers put another option on the table, you had a mass defection, then the preexisting consensus was a purely nominal consensus.

Obviously there is no polling data from the medieval or patristic periods, as you suggest. But it's a good guess that insofar as parishioners were reflective upon the Faith, they pretty much accepted what they were taught by the Church -- at least up until Vatican II.

That's probably true. And yet, once more, the internal consensus only survived for as long as the Magisterium was the gatekeeper—controlling the flow of information.

But once the laity and even members of the clergy were exposed to opposing viewpoints, the consensus began to unravel. How does Blosser think this admission helps him make a case for Catholicism? Doesn't it turn the church of Rome into a house of cards?

Where was the Holy Spirit for these two thousand years?

Renewing and preserving the remnant.

An answer worthy of John Nelson Darby or Ellen White. Good heavens! Some of these 'remnant' traditions don't believe there were any "real believers" between the time of Constantine and Martin Luther! Or else, like the Anabaptist book, *Martyr's Mirror*, they includes as the 'forerunners' of today's "believer's church" heretics who were persecuted and martyred by the Catholic Church for sedition, such as the Cathars (Albigensians), who held quasi-gnostic, docetic views of Christ (as a manifestation of spirit unbounded by matter), believed in reincarnation, rejected the God of the OT as the devil, rejected the Trinity, etc., etc. These were representatives of the 'remnant' persecuted by the "Whore of Babylon," the Roman Catholic Church, according to such traditions – and we haven't even addressed their civil crimes of political sedition for which they were often persecuted and executed.

Once again, Blosser goes off on a tangent. This is irrelevant to what I actually said. Did I ever say there were no true believers between Constantine and Luther?

To the contrary, my answer implies the continuous existence of a godly remnant for two thousand years.

Every time, which is much of the time, he redirects his fire at some shadowy opponent rather than my actual argument, he leaves my original objection intact.

I much prefer the image of the tormented young Luther, not knowing where to turn for help, going to his confessor for absolution. Luther's confessor, Johan von Staupitz, was Vicar-General of the Augustinian Order in Germany. He understood Luther's problem. Luther was afflicted by feelings of guilt – a psychological condition called 'scrupulosity' – which no amount of confession would alleviate. Although his problem was symptomatically psychological, it was rooted in a nominalistic conception of God as an unpredictable tyrant. Staupitz understood that what Luther needed was an understanding of God as a gracious and loving God, and required him to study the Book of Romans, wherein Luther discovered the ancient Pauline and properly Augustinian theology of grace. In short Luther rediscovered the Catholic Gospel of God's grace through the prudent direction of his Catholic confessor. Where was the "Holy Spirit" for two thousand years? In the Church, as Christ promised, of course.

His conclusion doesn't follow from his supporting argument. It was found within the Augustinian tradition, and not the church at large. It was found in Staupitz, and not in Tetzel.

What about the centuries upon centuries through which the Christian faith was preserved, passed down from generation to generation, and carried by missionary monks to our barbarian ancestors in Europe? What about the millennia of godly champions of the faith, such as St. Augustine, St. Jerome, Pope Leo, Pope Gregory, St. Benedict, St. Anselm, St. Bonaventure, St. Bernard, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis Xavier (the first missionary to Japan), and John Henry Newman, for starters?

Other issues aside, this is simply a Catholic version of church history, which anachronistically classifies every pre-Reformation believer as if he were a Tridentine or post-Vatican II Catholic. Blosser is ventriloquizing for the dead. We have no idea what any of these individuals would think of Roman Catholicism in the 21C. If, moreover, we're going to indulge in ritual postmortem baptism, then assuming that Augustine or Anselm or Aquinas would have shared the same outlook as Rahner or Raymond Brown or Urs von Balthasar, the former would be just as heterodox as the latter.

How do I assume that Augustine, for example, was a Tridentine or post-Vatican II Catholic? On the one hand, I do think that Augustine would recognize in the Catholic Church of either the Tridentine or post Vatican II period a Church that affirmed the same creed as himself, affirming all the marks of the Church as "One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic," understanding the Mass as an *anamnesis* of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ through which the faithful participate in His oblation, embracing the ancient Marian and other traditions, etc. On the other hand, how do I fail to recognize that Augustine (or any of these other saints) are products of their time, representing the unique stages of the Church's development in which they lived? For example, Augustine would not have been acquainted with the term "transubstantiation," which was a later development borrowing Aristotelian terminology, which became available in the West only after the writings of Aristotle – preserved by the Muslims – became available in the 13th century around the time of Aquinas, even though he would have been familiar with the Church teaching that the consecrated bread "becomes the Flesh of Christ," as Ambrose, the bishop who received him into the Catholic Church taught. Hence, I do not see how my view is anachronistic, as you suggest.

What, exactly, does it mean to say that if Ignatius (to take one example) were alive today, he'd be a Roman Catholic? What is underpinning this hypothetical? I assume that Blosser is working with either of two unspoken scenarios:

i) If Ignatius were born today, he would be Roman Catholic.

But Blosser is in no position to say that, since Ignatius' social conditioning would be entirely different were he born today. His education and opportunities would be quite different.

ii) If we put Ignatius in a time-machine and brought him forward from the 2C to the 21C, he would recognize the church of Rome as the true church.

Under this scenario, unlike (i), Ignatius remains the same person with the same formative influences. We've frozen his identity in place, and then inserted him, as a discrete, self-contained individual, into a very different social milieu.

But even under this scenario, how does Blosser know how Ignatius would react?

a) For one thing, Blosser is hostile to nominalism, but this is a very nominalistic way of framing the issue. Where you isolate Ignatius from his surroundings. Put him in an airtight time capsule, and move him around in time and place.

b) Ignatius would suffer from future shock. And even after the future shock wore off, there's no telling what mental adjustments he'd make in his religious outlook given such drastic dislocations in time, space, and culture.

What about the early bishops who personally knew the apostles, like Ignatius of Antioch."

What about Judas, who personally knew Jesus? Judas, who was "ordained" to the Apostolate by Christ himself. What about Simon Magus, who personally knew Peter? What about Hymenaeus, Philetus, Demas, and Alexander the Coppersmith—who personally knew Paul? What about Diotrephes and Jezebel, who personally knew John? What about an apostate high priest like Uriaah, who collaborated with Ahab in introducing pagan idolatry into the official worship of Israel (2 Kg 16)?

True, their mere acquaintance with the Apostles or Christ, does not of itself authenticate their doctrine. However, my point would be this: Here you have a tradition of apostolic succession initiated by Peter in Acts 1.

This is equivocal, for he is using "apostolic succession" in a far more specialized sense than he can extract from Acts 1.

You may contest this understanding, but it's confirmed by the first Church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Ecclesiastical History*, where he lists the succession of bishops of the first metropolitan sees, such as Antioch, Alexandria, etc., from the time of the Apostles down to his own day. The interesting thing is that some of these, like Ignatius, one of the early bishops of Antioch, were contemporaries of the Apostles, and this entire development of "apostolic

succession” (bishop-to- bishop) occurred as a matter of course without even a raised eyebrow.

This claim is beset by numerous problems:

i) The Book of Acts was probably written around 62-64 AD (before the sack of Jerusalem), whereas the work of Eusebius was probably published around 323 AD. His Ecclesiastical History is full of helpful information, but to use a work written some 260 years later to gloss Acts 1 is extremely precarious. The sociopolitical conditions were worlds apart.

ii) The Ecclesiastical History is a largely secondary source document, quoting and paraphrasing other sources. Nothing wrong with that. But we need to sift the historical quality of this material. For example, Peter Lampe offers the following comparative analysis:

What is the significance of Irenaeus’s (in the 180s) and Hegesippus’s (c. 160 C.E.) so-called “lists of Roman bishops”?...Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.3.3, provides for the first time a long catalogue of twelve names from the apostles to Eleutherus. The interest of this list is to anchor the present doctrine with a successive chain of authorities back to the apostles.¹⁶⁸

In my opinion we can reliably estimate the age of the list. Irenaeus did not himself put the catalogue together but in *Haer.* 3.3.3. uses a previously prepared list. This does not mean that the list is old:

a) Eleutherus constitutes its last, twelfth member. The list explicitly emphasizes δωδεκατω τοπω. The “apostolic” number twelve lends beauty to the list: the apostles are followed by twelve guardians of tradition from Linus to Eleutherus, inclusively. The number twelve is not accidental but deliberate. One could have begun with Peter instead of Linus and then would have had thirteen members. Also, that with Sextus the “halfway mark as noted (“as sixth, Sextus is appointed”) show the framework of twelve members to be intentional, already in the composition of the list before Irenaeus. This means that the twelfth, Eleutherus, is absolutely essential for the catalogue. Thus, the provenance of the catalogue cannot be proved to be earlier than Eleutherus (c. 175-89).¹⁶⁹

b) About 180, when Hegesippus records his memoirs, he mentions by name only three members of the Roman διαδοχη: Anicetus, Soter, Eleutherus. All three belong to the second half of the second century...The catalogue

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 404.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 405.

preserved in Irenaeus, *Haer.*3.3.3, which identifies nine persons by name for the time before 150, in contrast to Hegesippus's list, gives a more elaborate and therefore younger impression.

In those days there did not as yet exist a chain of monarchical bearers of tradition. Before the middle of the second century in Rome, at no time did one single prominent person pass on tradition; this was done by a plurality of presbyters.¹⁷⁰

What is the result? At the time that Rome experiences the development of a monarchical episcopacy, a twelve-member list of names going back to the apostles is constructed...The presence of a monarchical bearer of tradition is projected back into the past.¹⁷¹

Result: The list of Irenaeus (*Haer.*3.3.3) is with highest probability a historical construction from the 180s, when the monarchical episcopacy developed in Rome. Above all, the framework of "apostolic" twelve members (from Linus to Eleutherus) points in the direction of a fictive construction. The names that were woven into the construction were certainly not freely invented but were borrowed from the tradition of the city of Rome (for example, "Clement" or the brother of Hermas, "Pius"). They had belonged to presbyters of Roman church history. These persons, however, would never have understood themselves as monarchical leaders—especially Pius at the time of Hermas.¹⁷²

And why assume that Ignatius would approve of Trent, Vatican I, or Vatican II?

Good question. It's one thing for me to say that a Church Father like Ignatius might have easily recognized the Catholic Church of today as a product of the progressive development and elaboration of the Church in his own time. I think he would have, given the fact that he himself was an ordained bishop with a diocese in Antioch and stressed in his writings the importance of being in communion with the local bishop in any province who is a lawful successor of the Apostles and of Christ, and his eucharistic theology, etc. But it's quite another to speculate whether he would have understood or approved, from his own vantage point at the tail end of NT times, developments he had no way of anticipating, such as the Tridentine condemnation of the Protestant notion of "justification by faith alone" (as it was then understood, as opposed to how it is understood in the Joint Catholic-Lutheran Declaration on Justification, which reached a compromise), or Vatican I's definition of papal infallibility, or Vatican II's more nuanced

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 405.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 405-06.

¹⁷² Ibid. 406

interpretation of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“Outside the Church there is no salvation”). Even Cardinal Newman opposed the definition of papal infallibility in Vatican I, not because he regarded it as heretical, but because he judged it untimely. So you may have a point here.

Agreed.

Yet I think it’s important to see that this point does not undercut in any way the seamless unity of Sacred Tradition or Catholic teaching.

That’s the claim. Making good on the claim is something else entirely.

What about the popes and bishops who settled the Trinitarian and Christological controversies of the early Ecumenical Councils, who declared ‘This is orthodox’ and ‘That is heterodox,’ ‘This is canonical’ and ‘That is not,’ and preserved and passed down the Bible and the meaning of its message to us?

What about the popes promoting heresy, like Liberius, Zosimus, Vigilius, Julius I, Honorius I, Celestine I, and Eugenius IV?

Well, why don’t you get specific? What about them? You say that these popes promoted heresy? Which heresies? If you’re relying on Loraine Boettner (famous for his anti-Catholic “Bible,” *Roman Catholicism*, 1962) and his stepchildren here (most of these arguments seem traceable through footnotes back to Boettner), you’re barking up the wrong tree.

I corresponded with Boettner when he was still living, and residing in Missouri. I know his writings well. The shortest and most accessible reply to these charges you will find is Karl Keating’s book, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on "Romanism" by "Bible Christians"*, the 18th chapter of which is devoted to the subject of “Infallibility of the Pope,” where he explores these challenges regarding the popes you mention. Each of them can be answered clearly and honestly (p. 226 answers the case of Zosimus, p. 227 answers the cases of Liberius and Vigilius, and pp. 228-229 answers the case of Honorius.) There is nothing resembling even a *prima facie* case against Julius I, Celestine I, or Eugenius IV that I know of. Correct me if I’m wrong. (If you desire, we can go into much more detail here.)

i) Back to his cardboard box—a la Jim Profit. Instead of responding to me, he picks a fight with the long gone Lorraine Boettner. Did I cite Boettner? No.

ii) For the record, I happen to agree with Keating’s assessment of Boettner’s shoddy scholarship. Boettner was a popularizer. His book is dated and poorly sourced. It would be best if this work were withdrawn from publication.

iii) At the same time, one can't honestly attack Boettner by citing Karl Keating, who is just another popularizer. Does Keating know his way around the primary sources? Keating may be a lawyer, but he's not a canon lawyer, is he?

iv) As for my own source material, I get my information on this subject from such sources as E. Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes* (Yale 1997)); J.N.D. Kelly, *The Oxford Dictionary of Popes* (Oxford, 1986); B.J. Kidd, *The Roman Primacy to AD 461* (London: SPCK, 1936); R. McBrien, *Lives of the Popes* (HarperCollins, 1997), I. von Döllinger, *The Pope and the Council* (Boston, 1870), and the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (CUA 2003).

v) I've read Keating as well. Yes, he can salvage papal infallibility by drawing a number of face-saving distinctions. But he pays a price for that move. He salvages papal infallibility at the expense of verification. Infallibility becomes a moving target.

What about the Sistine Vulgate?

What about it? Are you implicitly criticizing the fact that it was the first standard edition (1590), produced under Pope Sixtus V out of the numerous editions produced during the Renaissance and manuscripts produced during the Middle Ages, and was hurried into print, yielding an infelicitous number of printing errors? Granted, popes do stupid things, just like you or me (and think of St. Peter, denying our Lord and hypocritically trying to save face with the Judaizers who visited Antioch). But these were quickly remedied in the Clementine edition (1592) under Pope Clement VIII.

i) To begin with, let's remember what I was responding to. Blosser originally said: [What about the popes and bishops who...preserved and passed down the Bible and the meaning of its message to us?](#)

So I took him up on his challenge by citing the example of the Sistine Vulgate. Does he think this is a good example of how the popes and bishops preserved and passed down the Bible?

ii) The errors weren't "printing errors." These were errors introduced into the text by Sixtus himself. "Printing errors" was the cover story, concocted by Bellarmine. Can't Blosser read for himself? I documented my claims by a verbatim quotation from a standard Catholic reference work.

iii) And it wasn't just that popes do stupid things. It was more official than that. The Sistine Vulgate was not only edited by Sixtus, but promoted by Sixtus in a papal bull.

[However the common caricature of the Church as keeping the Bible from the laity](#)

is nonsense.

Since that was no part of my argument, Blosser is firing into the bushes.

Translations – whether the Latin Vulgate or the King James Version – are always imperfect and require correction against the original manuscripts. Catholics recognize that as much as Protestants.

If so, then it would seem that Sixtus didn't get the memo.

Catholicism has a heads-we-win, tails-you-lose approach to the papacy. When the papacy happens to get it right, this validates the claims of the papacy—but when the papacy gets it wrong, that doesn't invalidate the claims of the papacy.

This isn't quite fair. You have to distinguish matters of doctrine from matters of discipline. It's only in matters of doctrine – and then only under certain specified conditions, such as that the pope or bishops have to be formally defining a doctrine for the universal Church – that infallibility or indefectibility is claimed for popes. In matters of discipline, they have generally been much better than most people imagine, but have sometimes made some pretty stupid decisions. They're *infallible*, not *impeccable*.

All he's done here is to paraphrase my objection rather than rebut it. Yes, you can draw this distinction. That's a way of saving face for the papacy. But that move comes at a cost. You lose the evidential appeal to those occasions when the papacy got it right. For, whenever the papacy got it wrong, you're going to invoke this distinction. But, in that event, the papacy itself proves nothing since you're having to invoke some external criterion to distinguish between fallible and infallible statements. Whenever the papacy says is rendered compatible with infallibility. When it gets it right, that's compatible with infallible—but when it gets it wrong, that's also compatible with infallibility since the Pope wasn't speaking infallibly. A perfect vicious circle.

It has spawned thousands of denominations, and sects and cults and conventicles. According to the *Oxford Encyclopedia of World Christianity*, published in 1982, there are more than 28,000 recognizable denominations of Christianity.

Other issues aside, I prefer an arrangement in which people are free to either be right or wrong over an arrangement in which no one is free to right a wrong.

Besides dodging the issue, you're introducing a distinction without a difference. Compare: anyone is free to accept or reject the Bible as God's inspired Revelation, but once you assent to the conviction that it is God's Word, you're no longer free to reject that commitment – not because of any external coercion, but because you can't help believing what you believe. I can't pay you a thousand dollars to

believe that the Catholic Church is the infallible interpreter of God's Revelation, because you can't help believing what you believe to be true, and you don't believe that to be true. But once a person voluntarily assents to this conviction, seeing it as true, then he's no longer free to reject it. It's not a matter of external coercion. Of course, if you later conclude you were wrong about your belief in the Bible, you can freely reject it. The same with Catholicism. As Thomas Aquinas says, if a person disbelieved the claims of the Catholic Church, it would be incumbent upon him in good conscience to depart from it. So who's unfree? It all depends what you mean. I would rather talk about the freedom to know the truth (which freely leads to the compulsion of true conviction) than the freedom of choice to go to hell (which begins as unconstrained license and ends in tyrannical slavery to self and Satan).

This all turns on whether the Catholic church is what it claims to be. If not, then it's irreformable. No one can fix it, because it claims to be indefectible.

Nothing is worse than a defective institution which claims to be indefectible. That's utterly hopeless.

Is a plethora of denominations an ideal situation? No. But at least it allows some people to get it right. And to break free from heretical churches.

I'd add that a fallen world is not an ideal situation. But that's what we're stuck with until the Eschaton.

"Spirit-led" Protestant leaders have split congregations and founded new denominations over disagreements sometimes serious and sometimes piffling.

The pope is just one more religious leader who presumes to have the ear of the Holy Spirit. Benny Hinn in vestments.

You're certainly entitled to your comical opinions, although I can imagine many of your fellow Protestants and Evangelicals finding this a rather tawdry comparison. Pope John Paul II had two doctorates, one in philosophy with a dissertation on Max Scheler, another in theology with a dissertation on St. John of the Cross. He suffered under the Nazis in Poland, was a playwright and poet, fluent in multiple languages, a gentleman and a good and pious and holy man who spent many hours each day in prayer. I met him once while he was still with us. His successor, Benedict XVI, is a refined German with a love of Mozart, whose music he himself plays on the piano, a love for good liturgical music (Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony), a love of the Gospel, and gift for theological writing, which has yielded an impressive count of outstanding volumes. Many Evangelicals have found his book, *Introduction To Christianity*, one of the best all-around introductions to the Christian Faith in print. Benny Hinn??? Please.

A couple of basic issues:

i) As usual, Blosser can't keep track of your own argument. Anyone can be well educated. Many Protestant scholars and Evangelical theologians are very erudite.

What sets the pope apart is that he supposedly enjoys the charism of infallibility, on those occasions when he chooses to exercise his full authority.

So, I'm comparing one charismatic claimant with another.

The fact that a pope may have a doctorate or two, or like Mozart and Palestrina, is irrelevant to the point of comparison.

ii) There's good piety and bad piety. From an evangelical standpoint, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Mary is bad piety, not good piety. Indeed, idolatry—or, rather, cardiolatry.

All . . . Blosser is doing here is to assume that Catholicism represents the true church, and then set that over against all those mischievous “sects and cults and denominations. But this identification simply begs the question in favor of Catholicism. So Blosser is substituting a tendentious assumption for a reasoned argument.

A false inference. It's true that I assume the truth of Catholicism. (Who can help but assume the truth of what he believes?) When Augustine declared, "*Credo ut intelligam*" ("I believe in order that I may understand"), he wasn't encouraging blind believism (gross *fideism*); rather, he was noting a profound point of epistemology -- that one can't prove anything without assuming something (e.g., not even science can prove its own presuppositions scientifically). But this does not entail begging the question (a *petitio principii*), as long as I offer arguments based on a common record of empirically testable claims from history and experience and a common fund of metaphysical and logical first principles from which we all must argue.

So when are you going to offer your arguments based on a common record of empirically testable claims from history and experience, &c.?

Or is this, in fact, the best you can do?

One must ask what has gone wrong here. Something about this picture is not quite commensurable with our Lord's call for unity (Jn 17:21) and the repeated warnings throughout the NT about dissent against divinely ordained authority, factionalism, division, and the literal 'denominationalism' of those who claimed, 'I belong to Paul,' 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas.' [96] No great leap in logic is required to see how these warnings extend to those who claim to

belong to Luther, Calvin, Knox, Cranmer, Wesley, Menno, and so forth.

It wouldn't hurt if Blosser bothered to exegete Jn 17:21 in context. It falls on the heels of v20, which has reference to Christian mission, involving the evangelization of the Gentile world, which will bring it into the fold of Messianic Judaism (cf. 10:16). To cite this verse as a proof-text for ecumenism is quite anachronistic.

So you think that Paul (or Jesus) would be happy with Christian missionaries from the U.S. going to Mongolia to convert Mongolians into Mongolian Cumberland Presbyterians, Mongolian Southern Baptists, Mongolian Missouri-Synod Lutherans, Mongolian Dutch Calvinists, Mongolian Free Will Methodists, and Mongolian Foursquare Gospel groupies? You find nothing ironic about that? A Japanese convert to the Christian Faith, Uchimura Kanzo [pictured left], rebelled against all of this and said he would stand for nothing more than “two J's” – “Jesus” and “Japan.” He founded the *Mukyokai* (non-church) movement in Japan. A better answer would have been to find nothing new at all, but to quit trying to re-invent the wheel and come back to the universal Church. ‘Catholic’ (from the Greek καθολικός), of course, means “universal.”

i) As usual, Blosser is unable to follow his own argument. He was the one who cited Jn 17:21 in support of his position. I then pointed out that he failed to exegete the verse in context.

His retort is to ask if Paul (or Jesus) would be happy with the status quo.

He still doesn't feel the duty to do exegesis. Instead, he simply complains about what he thinks are the unacceptable consequences of sola Scriptura.

Whether or not Paul (or Jesus) would be happy with the status quo is not an exegetical question. And it's not a way of answering an exegetical question. Indeed, it begs the question entirely.

ii) But beyond the exegetical question, this goes to another divide between Catholic and Calvinist. Since Jesus is divine, Jesus, along with the Father and the Spirit, is ultimately responsible for the state of the world as we find it today.

Why would Jesus be unhappy with the status quo? He decreed the status quo. He brought it into being.

This is God's world, not ours. God was free to foreordain a different world had he found the prospect of this world unsatisfactory. So, yes, Jesus is happy with his own handiwork.

This world is exactly what God intends it to be every step of the way. Everything

happens according to plan. Everything occurs right on schedule.

I'm not offended by God's world. I'm not at war with God's design.

At the same time, a fallen world is simply one stage in the history of the world, as a means to a higher end. So when we ask if Jesus would be happy with the status quo, it depends on what you mean. Is Jesus happy with every individual event, considered in isolation?

I suppose not. But, then, Jesus doesn't judge every event in isolation, but as a phase of world history in relation to the end-stage of the world history.

iii) Finally, you have another example of Blosser's proof by etymology: "Catholic" means "universal." But, once again, this begs the question in more than one way:

a) Universal in what sense? How is the universality of the church to be exemplified?

b) Why should I define the church by a creed rather than Scripture?

However, I'm all for Christian unity. Here's my own proposal for the reunion of Christendom: (a) Creeds: Westminster Confession or London Baptist Confession; (b) Preaching: Black or Southern Baptist; (c) Music: German or Italian Baroque; hymns by Wesley, Watts, & Pantycelyn; (d) Architecture: Gothic, Romanesque, or Byzantine; (e) Liturgy: Cranmer; (f) Polity: Episcopal (Mondays and Wednesdays); Congregational (Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday); Presbyterian (Saturday and Sunday). Something along the lines of Tony Evans or Charles Stanley preaching a sermon by Spurgeon or John Piper or Martyn Lloyd-Jones in a Gothic cathedral with a choir singing Bach or Vivaldi.

How *Baskin-Robins* of you, and how very American! Only, it looks a bit like you're mixing Mint Chocolate Chip with Butter Pecan and Orange Pineapple, which might not ultimately appeal to too many people.

i) Making allowance for the fact that I was being a bit tongue-in-cheek, let's keep in mind that the Catholic church is very Baskin-Robins as well. It is a multicultural institution with many varied ethnic ingredients going into the recipe.

ii) But on a wholly serious note, why shouldn't we be discriminating? Why shouldn't we select the very best from every Christian tradition?

Another point: your scenario assumes that the Church is man-made. But she is not. She was founded by Christ.

My scenario assumes no such thing.

That is why Peter Kreeft could declare:

“The Catholic Church claims less authority than any other Christian church in the world; that is why she is so conservative. Protestant churches feel free to change “the deposit of faith” (e.g. by denying Mary’s assumption, which was believed from the beginning) or of morals (e.g. by allowing divorce, though Christ forbade it), or worship (e.g. by denying the Real Presence and the centrality of the Eucharist, which was constant throughout the Church’s first 1,500 years).” (Peter Kreeft, “Gender and the Will of God: The Issue of Priestesses is Ultimately an Issue of God,” *Crisis* magazine, Vol. 11, No. 8 [September 1993], pp. 20-28.)

The Assumption of Mary was “believed from the beginning”? Show me the documentation.

One could add: That’s why Protestants feel that they can hive off and re-invent the church in their own image in every generation, while the Catholics submits to the Church passed town to them in unbroken tradition from the Apostles.

We should, indeed, take to heart the NT admonitions about divinely constituted authority. That’s why no great leap in logic is required to see how these warnings extend to institutions that usurp authority, viz. the papacy. Remember the False Decretals?

What’s your point? Pseudo-Isidore’s Decretals have been universally recognized to be forgeries by both Catholic and Protestant scholars for well over a century. Does this rather impressive forgery somehow undermine the credibility of the Catholic Church? If so, how? It wasn’t commissioned by the Church. It ended up fooling a lot of people for a while; but it had the opposite effect of that intended by the forger and ultimately corroded the authority of the curial hierarchy in the years that followed its appearance.

Here’s a bit of background info:

The official edition of the "Corpus Juris", in 1580, upheld the genuineness of the false decretals, many fragments of which are to be found in the "Decretum" of Gratian.¹⁷³

The sacerdotal system. Pseudo-Isidor advocates the papal theocracy. The clergy is a divinely instituted, consecrated, and inviolable caste, mediating between God and the people, as in the Jewish dispensation. The priests are the “familiares Dei,” the “spirituales,” the laity the “caruales.” He who sins

¹⁷³ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05773a.htm>

against them sins against God. They are subject to no earthly tribunal, and responsible to God alone, who appointed them judges of men. The privileges of the priesthood culminate in the episcopal dignity, and the episcopal dignity culminates in the papacy. The cathedra Petri is the fountain of all power. Without the consent of the pope no bishop can be deposed, no council be convened. He is the ultimate umpire of all controversy, and from him there is no appeal. He is often called “episcopus universalis” notwithstanding the protest of Gregory I.

Significance of Pseudo-Isidor. It consists not so much in the novelty of the views and claims of the mediaeval priesthood, but in tracing them back from the ninth to the third and second centuries and stamping them with the authority of antiquity. Some of the leading principles had indeed been already asserted in the letters of Leo I. and other documents of the fifth century, yea the papal animus may be traced to Victor in the second century and to the Judaizing opponents of St. Paul. But in this collection the entire hierarchical and sacerdotal system, which was the growth of several centuries, appears as something complete and unchangeable from the very beginning...

Pseudo-Isidorus was no doubt a sincere believer in the hierarchical system; nevertheless his Collection is to a large extent a conscious high-church fraud.¹⁷⁴

In the legalistic-scholastic ideology of the church which I have known all too well since my time at the Gregorian, this model is deduced theoretically right from the top: from the pope as the source of power...But what all too few people know is that this hierarchical mode of the church isn't the traditionally Catholic model! Though of course it was already prepared for in Rome in the first millennium, it was implemented in the 11C by that Pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand) and the men of the 'Gregorian Reform' by means of excommunication, the interdict and the Inquisition (directed above all against German emperors and theologians, against the episcopate and the clergy). And this was done on the basis of the claims made by crude forgeries (above all that of pseudo-Isidore), which presented the Roman innovations of the second millennium as Catholic traditions of the first millennium.¹⁷⁵

I also agree with Blosser that we should avoid the literal 'denominationalism' of those who claim Peter for their own, viz. the papacy.

¹⁷⁴ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc4.i.iv.xiii.html>

¹⁷⁵ H. Kung, *My Struggle for Freedom* (Eerdmans 2003), 348.

You're imputing to me a view that I do not hold – a view, furthermore, which makes no sense.

I'm merely satirizing your statement.

But the upshot, I take it, is that you think of Catholicism as another factional 'denomination' of the sort that Paul condemned in I Corinthians, ch. 1. I would ask you, then, where's a more plausible place to hang your hat on Sunday? Your *Baskin-Robbins* congregational-episcopal Anglican Black Baptist Calvinist mega-church? You're grasping at straws! "Non-denominationalists" (who are invariably baptistic and/or charismatic) are trying the same thing. They're trying to get beyond the denominational divisions by re-inventing the wheel. The wheel was already invented 2000 years ago. People just need to recognize this.

This assumes that there's only one place I ought to hang my hat on Sunday.

The Apostle Paul says that the "pillar and foundation of truth" is the Church (1 Tim 3:15).

Blosser's confident appeal to the words of Jesus or the words of Paul is out of step with contemporary Catholic scholarship, which does not assume that Paul wrote the Pastorals or that Jesus spoke all the words attributed to him in the Gospels. The problem is that traditional Catholic proof-texting is based on precritical views of Scripture. But since Catholicism is no longer committed to the proposition that the Gospels preserve the *ipsissima verba* of Christ or to the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals, then its traditional proof-texting is seriously out of date with its modernistic embrace of the historical-critical method.

You're making an important point here that must be recognized; however, you're doing so without making a necessary distinction – the distinction between Catholic official teaching and contemporary opinions of various Catholic theologians. They're not the same thing. This is why faithful Catholics cringe every time there's some sort of public question about the Catholic Church and the news media go to someone like the Notre Dame's tenured dissident professor, Richard P. McBrien, for what they take to be an authoritative voice on "the Catholic position." McBrien is known to be a liberal dissenter from Vatican teaching on a number of issues. Opinions like his a dime-a-dozen.

Now it's true that among Catholic biblical scholars these days (especially *Bible* scholars), there has been a broad acceptance of the historical-critical traditions stemming from the Enlightenment's rejection of supernaturalism, a tradition that has come down to us mainly and heavily through Protestant Liberalism (from Lessing to Bultmann). Add to that the postmodern rejection of evidentialist and foundationalist premises, and you end up with some pretty flaky Catholic Bible

scholars, such as Dominic Crossan, a founding co-chair of the notoriously flakey Jesus Seminar. These sorts of theologians have managed to catch the ear of the media with their sound bytes and statements and have had a considerable (unfortunate) impact on many Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

This does not mean, however, that the Church herself has abandoned her traditional high view of Scripture. This view can be traced back through Pius XII's encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943) and Leo XIII's encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), and beyond. But it is also articulated in the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965) and in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993). Even though the Church has slowly accepted some of the tools of historical-criticism as having a legitimate use in textual analysis, she has never withdrawn her high view of Scripture as the inspired Word of God, inerrant in all that it proposes for our salvation. (See Fr. William Most, *Free from All Error: Authorship, Inerrancy, Historicity of Scripture, Church Teaching, and Modern Scripture Scholars*, 1985.)

i) Her traditionally high view of Scripture was abandoned at Vatican II, as I already documented.

ii) And, as I've also argued, one must also judge a denomination by what it *does*, and not merely what it *says*. Many liberal denominations have perfectly orthodox creeds. But their creeds are never enforced. It's special pleading for Blosser to constantly drive a wedge between what his church affirms on paper, and what it allows in practice—as if that is somehow exculpatory. To the contrary, it is responsible for what it actually permits, no less that what it officially prescribes or proscribes.

iii) Again, I never cited Dominic Crossan. To my knowledge, he was automatically excommunicated when he left the priesthood for a woman.

Throughout his reply, Blosser acts as if I will cite *some*, Catholic, *any* Catholic, to make my point. But I'm not citing rogues or renegades like Crossan as spokesmen for Catholicism.

iv) I'd also add that some lapsed Catholics or outright unbelievers have a higher view of Scripture than Catholic scholars with institutional standing:

I do not share the extreme scepticism of many scholars, including Christian scholars, about the historical value of the Gospels...With regard to the Acts of the Apostles, I have long been amused to note that Catholic biblical scholars often appear less ready to accept them as broadly historical than

are atheist colleagues in ancient history departments.¹⁷⁶

I wrote, criticizing a Protestant tendency, against: “. . . ‘Spirit-led’ individuals hiving off to start their own independent thing.

You mean, like popes who lay exclusive claim to the charism of infallibility whenever they speak *ex cathedra*?

How have popes “hived off to start their own independent thing”? Even in Mt 23:2-3, Jesus says of the *scribes and Pharisees* -- of all things! -- that they “sin on Moses’ seat”; and then He adds: “*so* practice and observe whatever they tell you . . .” (emphasis added). You may not like the popes any more than you like the Pharisees. But that’s not the point. The question is: Is what they tell you true? Do they sin on “Moses’ seat”? Do they have the authority delegated by them to teach – the authority of Moses, of the Apostles, of Christ? Then listen to them and do what they tell you. You may question their authority all you want; but there’s no hiving off to start something new here.

i) I’ve already discussed Blosser’s misinterpretation of Mt 23:2-3.

ii) Beyond that, look closely the wild leaps of logic. His unspoken argument goes something like this:

Pharisees>Peter>papacy.

Notice that he doesn’t even make a gesture towards filling in the gaps with anything resembling a reasoned argument.

The relation between the modern philosophical turn to subjectivism (Descartes) and the anti-Catholic turn to private interpretation (Luther) is itself an interesting question.[97]

Given that Descartes was a French Catholic who studied under the Jesuits, the relation is, indeed, elusive.

Michael Gillespie, in *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, traces the roots of philosophical nihilism back through Descartes to the late medieval nominalist tradition.

Descartes was steeped in this tradition through the influence of the Jesuits, among others (the contemporary Jesuit, Suarez, for instance, was a moderate nominalist). As I have described earlier, above, Luther was also steeped in this nominalist tradition through Ockham’s influence in his own Augustinian order. Wheaton College’s Arthur Holmes has a great chapter on this subject in his book, *Fact*,

¹⁷⁶ A. Kenny, *What I Believe* (Continuum 2006), 58.

Value, and God, and Louis Dupre's *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* also has excellent sections on the influence of nominalism on Luther and the modern turn to subjectivism and skepticism. The philosophical speculations of the nominalist Catholic, Descartes, no more represent official Church teaching than diatribes of the nominalist Augustinian monk, Martin Luther.

i) You keep introducing Luther into this discussion. News flash: I'm not a Lutheran!

Save that for a debate between you and J. W. Montgomery.

ii) But if it came down to a choice between Catholicism and Lutheranism, I would certainly opt for the latter.

But also endorsing abortion and euthanasia as acts of Christian stewardship, and flirting with the ordination of gays and lesbians, and with the acceptance of 'same sex marriages'.

Not to mention the ordination of homosexual popes as well as a homosexual subculture among the priesthood [Here you quote a list of renegade popes including the notorious Borgia popes citing their scandalous sexual and homosexual exploits.]

Here you miss an important point I was making in my statements to which you were responding. Perhaps you simply took me to be listing the sins of Protestants. This is not so. I know there is plenty of sin to go around. I trust we can agree on that. But that was not my point. My point was (and is) this: none of the worst of the Borgia popes ever went on record as declaring that their scandalous behavior was not sinful. They may have been notorious hypocrites and sinners; but they never taught that black was white, that vice was virtue, that sin was pure, that evil was righteousness. Likewise, the abuse of the annulment tribunals in the Catholic Church may be a serious problem (I think it is), but the Church has never said that it's permissible (or even possible) to simply dissolve a sacramentally valid marriage. The difference is that Protestant denominations have. Many of them have accepted divorce as an "acceptable" thing, even producing liturgical services for divorce; and, with that, remarriage. Many of them have endorsed abortion and euthanasia (the ELCA now allows its institutional pension investments to fund abortions for members). Some mainline Presbyterians, Methodists and Anglican groups have given their blessing to actively sexual "same-sex partnerships," and the Episcopal Church (ECUSA) now has an ordained homosexual bishop who regularly offers pious theological rationales in defense of his lifestyle. But as the prophet says: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, and put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!"

(Isaiah 5:20)

Other issues aside, I don't get that worked up over liberal denominations. Why should I? They don't speak for *me*. They don't represent *my* views. So why should I feel like a father who's ashamed of his dissolute son?

Unless you make it illegal to misrepresent the Christian faith, there will always be liberal denominations. Worldings will infiltrate, invade, occupy, and erode various denominations from within. That's inevitable. What else would you expect?

As long as there are unbelievers, there will be unbelievers in the church as well as the world. Unbelievers who profane the holy. Did you think they would stop at the church door?

Now, there was a time when heresy was a crime. But when you make heresy a crime, the heretics simply infiltrate the judiciary.

The fact is that I'd rather have a clear-cut division between liberal churches and conservative churches than wishy-washy churches in the middle. Moderates simply confuse the unsuspecting.

So there's a sense in which it's a good thing when evil comes out from behind the mask and show its true colors.

As long as I'm free to worship, catechize, evangelize, and polemize for the true faith, the existence of liberal denominations doesn't keep me awake at night.

The popes were the original prosperity preachers, with a lifestyle to match.

This is a generalization that is either ignorant or unfair. There have been self-indulgent popes, as well as over forty "antipopes" who weren't even legitimate popes. But the vast majority of popes have been only good and holy men, as anyone who takes the time to investigate their lives will learn. Nobody ever seems interested in the good popes. Read the lives of the popes who are canonized saints. Not all of them are, for obvious reasons. Dante placed several popes in the lower cantos of hell in his *Divine Comedy*, for reasons with which few would quarrel. But the canonized popes were wonderful, saintly men. Read about the lives of Pope St. Leo I (reigned 440–61), Pope St. Gregory I (590–604), and Pope St. Nicholas I (858–67), Pope St. Pius X (1903–14), or even the many un-canonized popes, like Pope Paul III (1534–49), who went through the streets of Rome in sackcloth and ashes for the sins of his predecessors, or popes of our own time, like John Paul II (1978–1005). If you think these were self-indulgent "prosperity preachers," you simply don't know them.

i) Just look at their address. Vatican City makes the Vanderbilts look like poor

white trash. If a monk lives at Versailles, I'll judge his asceticism by his accommodations.

ii) But, to pick up on Blosser's counterexample, what about the good popes? One of the problems with Catholicism is the corrupting influence which its doctrine of the papacy has on good men. To take a few examples, Pius IX, Leo XIII, and Pius XII were, from what I can tell, men of genuine piety and principle, yet their office turns them into megalomaniacs:

The temporal power of the Pope over the Papal States was central to Pio Nono's [Pius IX] religious vision. The Patrimony of Peter was "the seamless robe of Jesus Christ," committed to each pope as a sacred trust, as the guarantee and defence of the Pope's universal spiritual ministry...As "Vicar of a Crucified God" he was prepared to suffer, but never to surrender. If necessary he would take to the catacombs: God would vindicate him.¹⁷⁷

[Cardinal] Guidi insisted: "The *Pope* was not infallible, though his teaching might be. Infallible teaching is irreformable, the teacher is not...but Pio Nono was enraged. He summoned Guidi and berated him, as a cardinal and a bishop of the Patrimony, for treachery. Guidi replied that he had said only that bishops are witnesses to the tradition. "Witnesses of tradition?" the Pope relied. "*I am the tradition.*" *La tradizione son' io*. Pius' magnificently arrogant aphorism laid bare both the attraction and the historical poverty of the infallibilist case.¹⁷⁸

He himself [Leo XIII] could not bear contradiction. When his Secretary of State once questioned his decision on some minor administrative matter he tapped the table and snapped at him, "Ego sum Petrus"—("I am Peter"). That authoritarianism is in evidence in everything he did...He surrounded himself with the trappings of monarchy, insisted that Catholics received in audience kneel before him throughout the interview, never allowed his entourage to sit in his presence, never in twenty-five years exchanged a single word with his coachman.¹⁷⁹

Surrounded now by ultra-conservative advisers, his privacy jealously guarded by his German nun-housekeeper, Sister Pascalina, Pius XII retreated into a suffocating atmosphere of exalted piety, exacerbated by hypochondria...Rumours circulated of visions of the Virgin and participations in the sufferings of Christ granted him. He cultivated his role

¹⁷⁷ E. Duffy, *Saints & Sinner*, 224.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 243-44.

as Vatican oracle...since the Pope was the Church's hotline to God, everything he had to say must be of interest. Pius himself came to believe that he had something valuable to contribute on every subject, no matter how specialized. He lived surrounded by encyclopaedias and monographs, swotting up for the next utterance. Midwives would get an update on the latest gynaecological techniques, astronomers were lectured on sunspots. One of his staff recalled finding him surrounded by a new mountain of books in the summer of 1958. "All those books are about gas," Pius told him—he was due to address a congress of the gas industry in September.¹⁸⁰

How does one know whether his religious leaders agree with God? The Protestant's answer of sola scriptura is insufficient at this point, because the interpretive autonomy and individualism it permits, as well as the profusion of conflicting interpretations it has fostered historically, run into unavoidable conflict with one of the fundamental functions of Church authority, which is to settle matters of doctrinal dispute (e.g., Acts 15).

Appeal to the Council of Jerusalem either proves too much or too little, for it is both more as well as less than an ecumenical council. On the one hand, it's more than an ecumenical council because Apostles (as well as James, a half-brother of Christ) rather than bishops oversaw the proceedings. On the other hand, it's less than an ecumenical council because the laity were also involved (Acts 15:22). So it's too hierarchical and too laical to model an ecumenical council. By turns apostolic, presbyterial, and congregational, whereas an ecumenical council is strictly episcopal—outranked by the Apostolate while outranking the laity.

Because it was an Apostolic council, Acts is not listed as the first Ecumenical Council of the Church. You are right that it was more than an ecumenical council in the sense you specify. You may even be right that it was less in the very interesting way you relate the Apostolate and the laity. However why should you assume that the Apostles were not bishops? The NT doesn't hesitate to identify the office of an Apostle with that of a bishop (e.g., Acts. 1:20, where *episkopos* is used). Furthermore, if we assume the Catholic understanding of hierarchical authority, there's nothing disordered about the proceedings of the Council in Acts 15. We read that after there has been "much debate, the first to stand and make a statement is Peter (v. 7), summing up the position of salvation by grace over against the Judaizers' position. Then all listen to the reports by Paul and Barnabas about the progress of the work in Antioch (v. 12). After they finish, James offers his assessment of the situation. Evangelicals are often eager to suppose that James' role in the Council trumps any Catholic assumption about "Pope Peter" here, but this is hardly the case. James was bishop of Jerusalem, not Peter. This was effectively James' "diocese." Thus, while it is natural that the other Apostles and

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 268.

presbyteroi ('presbyters' or 'priests' – though Protestants favor 'elders' [not to be confused with *episkopoi*) in the assembly deferred first to Peter, as the one whom Christ made head of the whole Church, it is not at all surprising that James should have authority of jurisdiction within his own metropolitan diocese.

You continue to indulge in word-study fallacies of the sort James Barr debunked decades ago. And you continue your anachronistic reconstruction of the NT church—contrary to standard Catholic scholarship.¹⁸¹ For example, in summarizing his conclusions after lengthy analysis of usage in the Pastoral Epistles, a leading Catholic scholar says:

The specialized *episkopoi* of 1 Tim are still a long way off from the monarchical bishops of Ignatius or even Polycarp...And one cannot protest that the monarchical episcopate is represented by Timothy and Titus, since they are not stable leaders of local churches and they do not bear the title *episkopos*. It would be strange indeed to want Timothy and Titus to represent the later monarchical *episkopos*, and yet to apply the title only to a number of officials below Timothy and Titus, while never applying the title to the "apostolic delegates."¹⁸²

Karl Rahner saw that as a lost cause long ago:

This community has its origins in Jesus and in this sense was founded by Jesus even if in the course of its development and through historical decisions this community adopts structures that are selected from a broad range of genuine possibilities which are possible in themselves and in the abstract, but structures which are nevertheless irreversible and binding on future epochs...These structures can be understood this way even if they cannot be traced back to a specific, unambiguous and historically identifiable saying of Jesus which founds them.¹⁸³

It is not basically and absolutely necessary that we would have to trace back to an explicit saying of Jesus the more concrete structures of the constitution of the (Catholic) church which the church now declares are always obligatory.¹⁸⁴

It is ultimately unimportant whether this or that element of the church as it is being formed in apostolic times can be traced more or less directly back

¹⁸¹ I've already quoted from Quinn and Johnson on the Pastoral Epistles. Another standard work is Raymond Brown's *Priest and Bishop* (Wipf & Stock 1999).

¹⁸² J. Meier, "Presbyterios in the Pastoral Epistles, CBQ 35 (1973), 345.

¹⁸³ *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 331.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 332.

to the historical Jesus, or whether it is to be understood as a historical but still irreversible decision of the church which lies within the genuine possibilities of the original church...we grant her merely the possibility of free and accidental changes depending on the concrete situation in which she finds herself, and no one denies this.¹⁸⁵

Incidentally, James was not a “half-brother” of Jesus, but a *cousin*. This common Protestant confusion is based on (1) a widespread Protestant animus against the knowledge that the claim of Mary’s perpetual virginity is a Catholic claim, (2) ignorance of the historical record, and (3) a linguistic confusion.

There are only three – and possibly only two – NT saints by the name of ‘James’:

James the Greater, son of Zebedee, brother of John, called as an Apostle.

James the son of Alphaeus/Clopas/Cleophas, known as James, the Lesser, called as an Apostle.

James the Just, ‘brother’ of the Lord.

James the Greater was not the writer of the Epistle of James, but the brother of John and Son of Zebedee. James the Lesser was a brother of Matthew, also known as Levi (Mt 2:14). Hegesippus, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, records that Alphaeus/Clopas was the brother of Joseph (Eusebius, Hist. eccl., III, 11), so that James the Lesser and Matthew (Levi) were, like James the Greater and John, cousins of Jesus. Eusebius reports the tradition that James the Just was the son of Joseph’s brother Clopas (the Greek form of the Aramaic transliteration Alphaeus), and therefore was of the “brethren” (which he interprets as “cousin”) of Jesus described in the New Testament. The Greek word *adelphos* (‘brother’) was not restricted to the literal meaning of a full brother in the Bible, a use still common today in Greece and other Balkan cultures. Jerome (d. AD 410) argued vehemently (*De Viris Illustribus*, “On Illustrious Men”) that James was merely a cousin to Jesus, the son of *another* Mary, the wife of Clopas and “sister” of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in the following manner:

“James, who is called the brother of the Lord, surnamed the Just, the son of Joseph by another wife, as some think, but, as appears to me, the son of Mary sister of the mother of our Lord of whom John makes mention in his book.” Jerome’s reference is to the scene of the Crucifixion in *John* 19:25.

The writer of the Epistle of James and the first bishop of Jerusalem, called “James the Just,” was therefore most likely one and the same individual as “James the Less.”

Protestants who hold out for the unlikely possibility that James the Just might have been a distinct individual from James the Less, and the even less plausible possibility that this James was literally a ‘brother’ of Jesus Christ (at least in the

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 332.

sense of a “half-brother”) generally bank on the fact that the NT explicitly refers to Jesus’ “brothers.” James, as well as Joseph (or Joses), Simon, and Jude or (Judas) are unequivocally mentioned in Mt. 13:55 and Mark 6:3 as Jesus’ “brethren,” and Paul refers to James as “the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19). However, as briefly mentioned above, this linguistic appeal rests on a flawed semantic assumption. First of all, these were Hebrew men, and the Hebrew term *ach* (conventionally translated ‘brother’) has a wide range of meaning. It is not restricted to a brother german (full blood brother) or half brother. The same is true for the term for ‘sister’ and the plural ‘brethren.’ Accordingly, Abraham’s *nephew*, Lot, is described as Abraham’s ‘brother’ (*achi* from *ach*) in Genesis 14:14. This pattern is ubiquitous throughout the OT. The Jews who translated the Hebrew OT into Greek in the *Septuagint* (LXX) had available two terms in Greek that would have specified a difference between ‘brother’ (*adelphos*) and ‘cousin’ (*anepsios*), but they simply took the term *adelphos* and used it as though it had the same range of semantic reference as the Hebrew *ach*, using it here for a brother german and there for a nephew or cousin, etc. Thus in translating Gen. 14:14, the Jewish writers of the *Septuagint* translated the Hebrew term for ‘brother’ by the Greek term *adelphos*, referring to Abraham’s nephew, Lot, as his ‘brother’ (*Septuaginta*, ed. Alfred Rahlfs, 5th ed., Stuttgart: Bibelanstalt, 1955, p. 19). The NT writers simply follow this convention. Thus when James is called Jesus’ *adelphos*, this does not necessarily mean brother german or half-brother.

But the actual positive evidence that Jesus in fact had no brothers german or half-brothers is laid out quite clearly in Karl Keating’s aforementioned book, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, pp. 282ff., on “Mary’s Perpetual Virginity,” a doctrine both Calvin and Luther accepted.) The evidence is circumstantial, at best, but probable. For one thing, Jesus was Mary’s “first born,” and when Jesus was taken to the temple in Jerusalem at age twelve, he is mentioned as evidently the only Son of Mary (Lk 2:41-51); there is no hint of other children in the family. He is never referred to as “a son of Mary,” but only as “the son of Mary” (e.g., Mk 6:3). Moreover, it would have defied Jewish custom for Jesus to entrust his mother’s care to the Apostle John as He did (Jn 19:26-27 – “. . . And from that hour the disciple took her into his own keeping [or home]”), if He had elder siblings, who would have naturally shouldered the conventional Jewish responsibility of care for their mother. There’s some more complicated exegetical detail Keating goes into that is quite interesting, but goes beyond the scope of what I am willing to take on for my purposes here. (See “[St. James the Greater](#)” and “[St. James the Less](#)” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*; and “[Saint James the Great](#),” “[Saint James the Less](#),” and “[Saint James the Less](#)” in the *Wikipedia*.)

This analysis goes awry on many counts:

1. There is an asymmetric relation between Catholic and Protestant theology on

this issue. On the one hand, the perpetual virginity of Mary is Catholic dogma. So, if this doctrine is false, it falsifies the Catholic faith.

On the other hand, Protestant theology has no intrinsic stake in the perpetual virginity of Mary. Blosser himself admits that Calvin believed in Mary's perpetual virginity.

Hence, if Mary and Joseph never consummated their marriage, that would require no adjustment whatsoever in Protestant theology. So it's misleading to say that Protestant opposition is driven by Protestant animus against Catholicism. As far as Mary's perpetual virginity is concerned, a Protestant can, in principle, take it or leave it.

ii) Moreover, before Blosser is going to impute ignorance to his opponents, it would be more convincing if, every once in a while, he exhibited some nodding acquaintance with what was going on under his own roof. As we shall see, challenges to the exegetical argument for Mary's perpetual virginity are by no means limited to Protestant scholarship. Blosser needs to acknowledge and interact with this literature.

Either Blosser is ignorant of standard Catholic Bible scholarship on this issue (and others), or else he knows about it, but acts as if it doesn't exist.

So which is it? Is he ignorant? Or does he know better, but prefers to deceive his Catholic readers by implying that this is a purely Catholic/Protestant debate?

iii) Furthermore, if he's going to impute ignorance to his opponents, one would also like to see him reference official Catholic sources instead of referring us to Wikipedia articles or fluffy laymen like Karl Keating.

This is a recurrent different in the level at which he and I operate. I cite cream-of-the-crop Catholic scholars and theologians while he responds by citing lightweight laymen and popularizers.

iv) To my knowledge, either nonconsummation or tying the knot with no intention to have children would ordinarily be impediments to valid marriage in Catholic canon law.

Does this mean the marriage between Joseph and Mary was invalid? Or did they apply for a retroactive papal dispensation from St. Peter?

v) Ben Witherington makes the additional point that:

In the context of Jewish culture during that time, it was considered a duty,

not merely an option, for a married couple to fulfill the commandment to be fruitful and multiply, so long as one was not somehow blemished or physically impaired. If Joseph and Mary were devout Jews, and the evidence suggests they were, it is highly likely they would have obeyed the Law in such a matter, especially when marriage was viewed as a vehicle to sustain a family line and maintain an inheritance within that family line.¹⁸⁶

vi) Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the NT data is simply inconclusive on the perpetual virginity of Mary.

Would that give me the right to believe in her perpetual virginity? No. In that case I should reserve judgment, for I don't have enough evidence to warrant a belief one way or the other. But far from suspending judgment, Catholicism turns this into dogma.

Incidentally, there's a good online debate over this issue.¹⁸⁷ In my opinion, Svendsen wins hands down.

vii) There is, of course, far more to Marian dogma than the claim that Mary and Joseph never consummated their marriage:

The deepening of faith in the virginal motherhood led the Church to confess Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made man.¹⁸⁸

Not only does this lack anything resembling Scriptural support, but there are positive reasons for its denial:

The line between the assertion of a virginity in *partu* and a Docetic Christology is hard to draw. Some of the sayings just quoted sound very much like the Gnostic and Docetic denials of a real birth of Jesus... Thus, at the end of the second century, we are confronted with a somewhat paradoxical situation. While the church had tried to refute Docetism for Christological reasons, affirming the reality of the virgin birth as a *birth*, it fostered at the same time the glorification of the Virgin Mary for ascetic reasons, allowing an interpretation of the birth in terms of her inviolate virginity and thus introduced a new danger of docetic trends.¹⁸⁹

viii) Finally, what about [ignorance of the historical record](#), and (3) a linguistic

¹⁸⁶ H. Shanks & B. Witherington, *The Brother of Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco 2003), 95.

¹⁸⁷ <http://ntrminblog.blogspot.com/2007/02/perpetual-virginity-of-mary-redux.html>

¹⁸⁸ <http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p122a3p2.htm>

¹⁸⁹ *Mary in the New Testament*, 278.

confusion?

This is some of what John Meier,¹⁹⁰ editor of the Catholic Biblical Quarterly and President of the Catholic Biblical Association has to say:

What is often considered the common teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, namely, that the brothers and sisters were really cousins, and that not only Mary but also Joseph was a perpetual virgin, was first championed by Jerome in his tract *Against Helvidius*, in the late fourth century (ca. 383). This became the predominant position of Christianity in the West during the Middle Ages, while the view that the brothers and sisters were children of Joseph by a previous marriage remained dominant in the East.¹⁹¹

This text [Mt 1:25], like the rest of the NT, never takes up the later theological concept of *virginitas in partu*...Although the idea is never explicitly treated in the NT, the fact that Lk 2:23 cites Exod 13:2,13,15 in reference to Jesus birth (“every male that *opens the womb* shall be called holy to the Lord”) seems to indicate that such a concern was not on Luke’s theological horizon.¹⁹²

Whether we are oriented more to redaction criticism or to modern narrative criticism, we realize that we cannot take Mt 1:25a in splendid isolation. It is a very small part of a large literary and theological work with a surprising amount of coherence and “cross-referencing.” Matthew often points forward and backward in his text to foreshadow and recapitulate. Such is the case here. The author who tells us in 1:25a that Joseph did not have relations with Mary until she bore a son is the same author who tells us in 13:55 that Jesus’ mother is called Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Jude. Putting aside for the moment the special question of the meaning(s) of “brother” (*adelphos*) in NT Greek, we must admit that, at first glance, the combination of the “until” statement in Mt 1:25a with the naming of Jesus’ mother and brothers all in the same verse (13:55) creates the natural impression that Matthew understood 1:25a to mean that Joseph and Mary did have children after the birth of Jesus.¹⁹³

It is difficult to maintain that the brothers are thought of only as stepbrothers or cousins of Jesus, when Matthew [13:55] is at pains to separate the legal-but-not-biological father of Jesus from Jesus’ real, biological mother. Faced with this great divided that he himself creates,

¹⁹⁰ <http://theology.nd.edu/people/all/meier-john/index.shtml>

¹⁹¹ J. Meier, “The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus,” *CBQ* 54 (1992), 6.

¹⁹² *Ibid.* 9n18.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.* 11.

Matthew chooses to place Jesus' brothers with his biological mother, not his legal father.¹⁹⁴

Moreover, in both Mark's and Matthew's versions of the story, the final "punch line" of Jesus carries full weight only if the mother, brothers, and sisters all have a close, natural relationship to Jesus: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt 13:50). The whole thrust of the metaphor is weakened if we must interpret the natural point of comparison to mean: "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my male cousin, my female cousin, and my mother." The full force of the aphorism is retained only if the natural relationships mentioned are all equally close and blood-related.¹⁹⁵

Jerome's most important claim is that there are a number of passages in the OT where the Hebrew word for brother (*'ah*) plainly means not blood-brother but cousin or nephew, as can be seen from the wider context (e.g., LXX Gen 29:12; 24:48)... While all this is perfectly correct, the number of OT passages where in fact *'ah* indisputably means cousin is very small—perhaps only one! It is simply not true that *adelphos* is used regularly in the Greek OT to mean cousin, and the equivalence cannot be taken for granted.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, one should remember that the very reason why we know that *'ah* or *adelphos* can mean cousin, nephew, or some other relative is that the immediate context regularly makes the exact relation clear by some sort of periphrasis... Given the ambiguity of *'ah* in Hebrew, such further clarification would be necessary to avoid confusion in the narrative. No such clarification is given in the NT texts concerning the brothers of Jesus. Rather, the regularity with which they are yoked with Jesus' mother gives the exact opposite impression.¹⁹⁷

Actually, the whole analogy between the Greek OT and the NT documents with regard to the use of *adelphos* for cousin is questionable because these two collections of writings are so different in origin. In the case of the Greek OT, we are dealing with "translation Greek." A Greek that sometimes woodenly or mechanically renders a traditional sacred Hebrew text word for word. Hence it is not surprising that at times *adelphos* would be used to render *'ah* when the Hebrew word meant not "brother" but some

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 13.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 13-14.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 16-17.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 17.

other type of relative. But in the case of the NT writers, whatever written Aramaic sources—if any—lay before them, the authors certainly did not feel that they were dealing with a fixed sacred text that had to be translated woodenly word for word. The improvements Matthew and Luke both make on Mark’s relatively poor Greek make that clear.¹⁹⁸

A more glaring case is that of Paul who, in writing the cannon-blast of Galatians (ca. AD 54) and the pastoral “question-and-answer” tract of 1 Corinthians (around the same time), is speaking very much in his own person, in his own style, and on his own authority. In Gal 1:19 he speaks of “James the brother of the Lord,” and in 1 Cor 9:5 he speaks globally of “the brothers of the Lord”—hardly because he is woodenly translating some document previously composed in Hebrew or Aramaic! Unlike the evangelists, he is not passing on and reshaping revered stories of past events in the life of Jesus. In Gal 1:19 and 1 Cor 9:5 he is referring to people who are personally known to him and who are living and active in the church even as he writes. Writing on his own, without the pressure of a set tradition or formula, Paul refers to these people as brothers, not cousins. Now, there was a perfectly good word for cousin in NT Greek, *anepsios*, and presumably it was known to the Pauline churches, since it occurs in Col 4:10. If Paul had meant cousin and not brother, most likely he would have written *anepsios* in Galatians and 1 Corinthians, and not *adelphos*.¹⁹⁹

Josephus speaks independently of the NT when he calls James the brother of Jesus.²⁰⁰ Now Josephus knew full well the distinction between “brother” and “cousin” in Greek. In fact, he even corrects the Hebrew usage in the Bible [Gen 29:12] in favor of Greek precision on this point...The avoidance of a literal translation of ‘ah as *adelphos* and the introduction of *anepsioi* to clarify the relationship is striking.²⁰¹ When Josephus calls James “the brother of Jesus,” there is no reason to think that he means anything but brother. The import of the NT usage thus receives independent confirmation from a Greek-speaking Jew who knows full well when and how to avoid “brother” and write “cousin” when that is the precise relationship under discussion—something he does not do when defining James’ relation to Jesus.²⁰²

All this brings us to what is perhaps the most pivotal point in our whole

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 17-18.

²⁰⁰ *Ant.* 20.9.1 §200.

²⁰¹ *Ant.* 1.19.4 §290.

²⁰² *Ibid.* 19.

survey: the different meanings of *adelphos* (“brother”) attested in the NT. Even within the NT, if we prescind from the disputed case of “the brothers of the Lord,” there is no clear use of the Greek word *adelphos* (“brother”) to mean precisely “cousin.” The various meanings of *adelphos* in the NT can be boiled down to two basic senses, literal and metaphorical.²⁰³

(1) First and foremost, *adelphos* is used literally to mean a blood-brother, either a full brother or a half-brother (i.e., with one common biological parent)...With “full brother” and “half-brother” we exhaust the literal meaning of *adelphos* found in the NT—all the more surprising when we realize that the “literal” sense of “brother” could be fairly broad in the extended families of the ancient world.²⁰⁴

What is the constant usage of the NT in this matter? The answer is clear: in the NT *adelphos*, when used not merely figuratively or metaphorically but rather to designate some sort of physical or legal relationship, means only full or half-brother, and nothing else. Outside of our disputed case, it never means step-brother (the solution of Epiphanius), cousin (the solution of Jerome), or nephew. When one considers that *adelphos* in either the literal or the metaphorical sense) is used a total of 343 times in the NT, the consistency of this “literal” usage is amazing. To ignore the strikingly constant usage of the NT in this regard, as well as the natural redactional sense of the Gospel passages we have already examined, and to appeal instead to the usage of koine Greek in various Jewish and pagan texts cannot help but look like special pleading.²⁰⁵

As Oberlinner and many other exegetes have pointed out, no amount of parallels from outside the NT can tell us a priori what the NT texts means; only a detail exegesis of the NT texts *in their own context* can tell us that.²⁰⁶

(2) Every other use of *adelphos* in the NT falls under the general rubric of a figurative or metaphorical sense...It is significant that, when contemporary exegetes such Josef Blinzler and John McHugh have tried to defend something similar to Jerome’s position, but in updated versions, they have been constrained to adopt convoluted theories of relationships within the families of Joseph and Mary that simply cannot be verified. As with the Epiphanian solution, so with the cousin theory: what is gratuitously

²⁰³ Ibid. 19.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 20.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 21.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 21n36.

asserted may be gratuitously denied.²⁰⁷

Here the Protestant finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. What does he do if his beliefs conflict with those of his denomination?

Change denominations.

Indeed . . . Or start a new one, no doubt. You make it all too easy, don't you!

True to form, Blosser can't stick to his own argument. He said the Protestant finds himself on the horns of a dilemma.

When I answered his challenge on his own grounds, he then said that I make it "all too easy."

How is that the least bit responsive to the way in which he chose to cast his question? If it's that easy to get off the horns of the dilemma, then his horny dilemma has a pair of rubber horns.

Why should anyone take Blosser's arguments seriously when he dumps them at the drop of a hat?

True, it's subject to abuse. Equally subject to abuse is a fallible denomination with delusions of infallibility.

That would certainly be true, I agree; and there may be quite a number of such denominations around. However, in the case of the Catholic Church, it's not a matter beyond empirical testing. Setting aside the question of 'peccability' (sinfulness) – since I trust we can agree that 'infallibility' pertains to the indefectable truth of doctrine, not to the unimpeachable sanctity of behavior – all one has to do is find a single Catholic doctrine that contradicts (1) Scripture or (2) extra-biblical Sacred Tradition. Then you've felled your "Whore of Babylon" for good! Give it a try. Go ahead, make my day. ;)

i) He keeps speaking of empirically testable claims. How does he himself empirically test the claims of Rome?

ii) There's an extensive body of literature documenting the way in which Catholic dogma contradicts Scripture. I don't need to reinvent the wheel here.

What does it mean for him to 'submit' to his spiritual leaders?

Good question. Is this blind submission to a self-appointed authority? Or is this

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 21-22.

rational submission to someone who can make a reasonable case for his interpretation? Notice how often Jesus and Paul reason with their audience. And this is despite the fact that Jesus, for one, is divine authority Incarnate.

First, unlike some Fundamentalist preachers who perceive a God's 'call' and go out and found their own church, no Catholic clergy are "self-appointed." You can't just make yourself a priest, or decide to become a bishop. You have to go through a discerning process, a novitiate -- years of preparation, training and study, during which you might be judged unsuitable for the priesthood at any time, and then the bishop may be willing to ordain you a priest. All bishops are appointed by Rome. Popes are elected by a college of cardinals. None of these are "self-appointed."

It is the authoritarian claims of the command-structure itself which is self-appointed. Bishops claiming episcopal authority. Popes claiming papal authority.

Second, even after you've become convinced of the truth of the claims of the Catholic Faith and assented to the authority of the Church, the Magisterium (pope and bishops) are constantly appealing to your reason. Have you ever read a papal encyclical? Try John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio* (On the Relationship between Faith and Reason), or his *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone), or the Vatican's *Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"* (a brilliant critique of the New Age movement). Your portrayal of Catholicism is a caricature reminiscent of Mel Brooks's cinematic historiography, or, worse, Jack Chic's tracts.

And, at the end of the day, they resort to the argument from authority when their reasons are unsound and unconvincing. *Humanae Vitae* is a case in point.

His pastor might tell him: "You have to trust that God leads through the elders." What should the Protestant do? If his denomination represents a valid ecclesiastical authority, he should submit.

We trust God, but we listen to men. A Christian should never take an interpretation on "trust." Appeal to divine leadership to validate a particular interpretation is just so much bluff and bluster.

That caricature, again . . . Catholic apologists (from Augustine to Chesterton) have repeatedly testified that Catholicism is the most intellectual satisfying of any conceivable religious worldview and way of life. Converts have repeatedly attested to the same. Men such as John Henry Newman, Ronald Knox, G.K. Chesterton, Evelyn Waugh, Thomas Merton, etc., etc., etc. would have been utterly *repulsed* by a religion that made blind appeals to authority with no credible warrant.

Biographical vignettes do not an argument make.

I will concede one possible exception here – the Dutch Calvinists have a philosophical tradition worthy of note, perhaps the only alternative in the running besides the Catholic – at least according to Wheaton College’s Mark Noll in his book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (and see my [Review](#)).

Actually, Noll’s work was, itself, a piece of shoddy scholarship. Noll has an ax to grind. He’s a Presbyterian who’s at war with the Westminster standards on the age of the earth. He therefore attacks anything he can associate with young earth creationism.

Whom does it take more faith to trust – (1) a devout Christian who has founded his own denomination and believes God has graced him with a special illumination to understand how Jesus intended the Church to be run and Christianity to be understood, even though most other denominations haven’t got it quite right.

Is that what I said? Is that how I stated the alternatives? This is what I actually said. And this is what Blosser is supposedly responding to: *We trust God, but we listen to men. A Christian should never take an interpretation on “trust.” Appeal to divine leadership to validate a particular interpretation is just so much bluff and bluster.*

When I answered his question, how does he reply? Is his reply responsive to my answer? No.

Instead, he simply reverts to his original formulation. He swaps out what I said, swaps in what he said, and then responds to himself.

It’s very revealing to debate a Catholic philosophy prof. who is chronically unable to follow his own arguments, even when his opponent is responding to him on his own grounds. I keep track of what he says, and I respond in kind.

He seems to lack the attention span to follow his own trail of breadcrumbs. I suppose his lack of mental concentration goes a long ways in explaining how he was able to reason himself into Rome—if reason is the right word to use.

So let’s repeat myself, and see if he can focus for long enough to register the original point: the Protestant position isn’t predicated on the idea of *trusting* a man who lays claim to *special illumination*. Rather, we judge his case by the quality of the *argumentation*. Got it?

Or (2) a Christian who claims no original insights but has Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Anthony of the Desert, Augustine, St. Benedict, Leo the Great, Methodius, Gregory the Great, Anselm, Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Dominic,

Francis of Assisi, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Bellarmine, Ignatius of Loyola, Francis Xavier, Teresa of Avila, Frances a Kempis, John Henry Newman, G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Edith Stein, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Mother Teresa, Malcolm Muggeridge, Alasdair MacIntyre, Mortimer Adler, Thomas Howard, Scott Hahn, Steve Wood, Marcus Grodi, William Farmer, and Peter Kreeft on his side? (see my list of [Notable Catholic Converts](#))

Other issues aside, Protestant theology has its own roster of luminaries, viz. Calvin, Turretin, Edwards, Owen, Cunningham, Bavinck, Lightfoot, Zahn, Schlatter, Warfield, Vos, Murray, F. F. Bruce, Bruce Metzger, Archer, Guthrie, D. J. Wiseman, E. J. Young, Helm, Hengel, Frame, Plantinga, Poythress, Beale, Bauckham, Bock, Block, Barnett, Schreiner, Cranfield, France, Ellis, Keener, Kitchen, Carson, Currid, Hoehner, Porter, Dembski, Yamauchi, Montgomery, Ridderbos, Roger Beckwith, O. P. Robertson, C. A. Evans, N. T. Wright, &c. All-in-all, I'd say we're scraping by.

In the final analysis, there would seem to be no more than a couple of alternatives: either we are left with nothing but personal opinion, illumined as it may or may not be by private interpretations of others—which means it comes down to this: every man for himself, interpreting Scripture as best he can and joining whatever group or denomination agrees most closely with his personal understandings.

Notice his deistic way of describing the Protestant alternative, as if God's providence were in abeyance."

I don't think either of us wants do deny divine Providence. The question is, How does it operate? Neither of us would assume, I think, that the Lord would be happy with anyone who trust Providence to protect him if he blindfolded himself before crossing an Interstate highway. Should we expect Providence to lead every Protestant "into all truth" by simply relying on the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and whatever insights he can muster from Church history? The proof is in the pudding, is it not? Ever since 1517, Protestantism has seen nothing but a proliferation of factions. (But we've been through that before . . . Well over 20,000 distinct Protestant denominations, and counting . . .)

i) Blosser keeps citing Protestant sectarianism as if that were the worst-case scenario. From his own standpoint, this is the worst-case scenario. But that simply assumes that his priorities are right.

ii) From my standpoint, diversity is not the worst-case scenario. What is worse is unity in error. Agreement in error is worse than disagreement, which allows some parties to be right, and others to be wrong.

Unity in truth is better than disunity, but disunity is better than unity in error.

iii) Did I every claim that divine providence will lead every Protestant “into all truth.”

Blosser is constitutionally incapable of addressing himself to what his opponent actual says.

What divine providence will do is to lead all the elect into a saving knowledge of the truth.

iv) Even the existence of error has an overarching purpose in the plan of God; otherwise, God would not include the occurrence of erroneous beliefs in his plan for the world.

v) Does Blosser believe that the Catholic rule of faith leads every single Catholic “into all truth”?

vi) Finally, one of the standing oddities and, indeed, ironies of Blosser’s own position is that, on the one hand, he is violently opposed to the right of private judgment while, on the other hand, he often refers the reader to Cardinal Newman. Yet Newman himself placed great stock in the spiritual discernment of the laity, or individual Christian, as over against, or even in direct opposition to the hierarchy:

It is individuals, and not the Holy See, that have taken the initiative, and given the lead to the Catholic mind, in theological inquiry. Indeed, it is one of the reproaches urged against the Roman Church, that it has originated nothing, and has only served as a sort of *remora* or break in the development of doctrine. And it is an objection which I really embrace as a truth; for such I conceive to be the main purpose of its extraordinary gift. It is said, and truly, that the Church of Rome possessed no great mind in the whole period of persecution. Afterwards for a long while, it has not a single doctor to show; St. Leo, its first, is the teacher of one point of doctrine; St. Gregory, who stands at the very extremity of the first age of the Church, has no place in dogma or philosophy. The great luminary of the western world is, as we know, St. Augustine; he, no infallible teacher, has formed the intellect of Christian Europe; indeed to the African Church generally we must look for the best early exposition of Latin ideas. Moreover, of the African divines, the first in order of time, and not the least influential, is the strong-minded and heterodox Tertullian. Nor is the Eastern intellect, as such, without its share in the formation of the Latin teaching. The free thought of Origen is visible in the writings of the Western Doctors, Hilary and Ambrose; and the independent mind of Jerome has enriched his own vigorous commentaries on Scripture, from the stores of the scarcely orthodox Eusebius. Heretical questionings have been transmuted by the living power of the Church into salutary truths. The case is the same as

regards the Ecumenical Councils. Authority in its most imposing exhibition, grave Bishops, laden with the traditions and rivalries of particular nations or places, have been guided in their decisions by the commanding genius of individuals, sometimes young and of inferior rank. Not that uninspired {266} intellect overruled the super-human gift which was committed to the Council, which would be a self-contradictory assertion, but that in that process of inquiry and deliberation, which ended in an infallible enunciation, individual reason was paramount. Thus Malchion, a mere presbyter, was the instrument of the great Council of Antioch in the third century in meeting and refuting, for the assembled Fathers, the heretical Patriarch of that see. Parallel to this instance is the influence, so well known, of a young deacon, St. Athanasius, with the 318 Fathers at Nicæa. In mediæval times we read of St. Anselm at Bari, as the champion of the Council there held, against the Greeks. At Trent, the writings of St. Bonaventura, and, what is more to the point, the address of a Priest and theologian, Salmeron, had a critical effect on some of the definitions of dogma. In some of these cases the influence might be partly moral, but in others it was that of a discursive knowledge of ecclesiastical writers, a scientific acquaintance with theology, and a force of thought in the treatment of doctrine.²⁰⁸

It is not a little remarkable, that, though, historically speaking, the fourth century is the age of doctors, illustrated, as it was, by the saints Athanasius, Hilary, the two Gregories, Basil, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, and all of these saints bishops also, except one, nevertheless in that very day the divine tradition committed to the infallible Church was proclaimed and maintained far more by the faithful than by the Episcopate.

Here, of course, I must explain:—in saying this, then, undoubtedly I am not denying that the great body of the Bishops were in their internal belief orthodox; nor that there were numbers of clergy who stood by the laity, and acted as their centres and guides; nor that the laity actually received their faith, in the first instance, from the Bishops and clergy; nor that some portions of the laity were ignorant, and other portions at length corrupted, by the Arian teachers, who got possession of the sees and ordained an heretical clergy;—but I mean still, that in that time of immense confusion the divine dogma of our Lord's divinity was proclaimed, enforced, maintained, and (humanly speaking) preserved, far more by the "Ecclesia docta" than by the "Ecclesia docens;" that the body of the episcopate was unfaithful to its commission, while the body of the laity was faithful to its baptism; that at one time the Pope, at other times the patriarchal,

²⁰⁸ <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/apologia65/chapter5.html>

metropolitan, and other great sees, at other times general councils, said what they should not have said, or did what obscured and compromised revealed truth; while, on the other hand, it was the Christian people who, under Providence, were the ecclesiastical strength of Athanasius, Hilary, Eusebius of Vercellæ, and other great solitary confessors, who would have failed without them.

On the one hand, then, I say, that there was a temporary suspense of the functions of the "Ecclesia docens." The body of Bishops failed in the confession of the faith. They spoke variously, one against another; there was nothing, after Nicæa, of firm, unvarying, consistent testimony, for nearly sixty years. There were untrustworthy Councils, unfaithful Bishops; there was weakness, fear of consequences, misguidance, delusion, hallucination, endless, hopeless, extending itself into nearly every corner of the Catholic Church. The comparatively few who remained faithful were discredited and driven into exile; the rest were either deceivers or were deceived.

A.D. 360. St. Gregory Nazianzen says, about this date: "Surely the pastors have done foolishly; for, excepting a very few, who, either on account of their insignificance were passed over, or who by reason of their virtue resisted, and who were to be left as a seed and root for the springing up again and revival of Israel by the influences of the Spirit, all temporised, only differing from each other in this, that some succumbed earlier, and others later; some were foremost champions and leaders in the impiety, and others joined {218} the second rank of the battle, being overcome by fear, or by interest, or by flattery, or, what was the most excusable, by their own ignorance." *Orat.* xxi. 24.

A.D. 363. About this time, St. Jerome says: "Nearly all the churches in the whole world, under the pretence of peace and the emperor, are polluted with the communion of the Arians." *Chron.* Of the same date, that is, upon the Council of Ariminum, are his famous words, "Ingemuit totus orbis et se esse Arianum miratus est." *In Lucif.* That is, the Catholics of Christendom were surprised indeed to find that their rulers had made Arians of them.

A.D. 382. St. Gregory writes: "If I must speak the truth, I feel disposed to shun every conference of Bishops; for never saw I synod brought to a happy issue, and remedying, and not rather aggravating, existing evils. For rivalry and ambition are stronger than reason,—do not think me extravagant for saying so,—and a mediator is more likely to incur some imputation himself than to clear up the imputations which others lie under."

*Ep. 129.*²⁰⁹

Or God has established some kind of identifiable authority, with a promise of protection against error, to guide the Church.

And how does he identify this identifiable authority? How does he identify the true church?

The best advice I could suggest would be to read some of the conversion stories of those who have previously made their way into the Catholic Church and analyze their reasoning.

I've read a lot of these conversion stories and analyzed their poor reasoning.

Beyond that, of course, you have the ancient (Nicene) Creed, which offers the Four Marks of the Church: (1) One, (2) Holy, (3) Catholic, and (4) Apostolic. That will get you in the ballpark, at least. (1) *One* -- This means that Christ founded one Church: He has only one Bride. He's not a polygamist. This doesn't mean non-Catholics Christians are not in some way related to the Church; but they are not incorporated into the fullness of unity that our Lord desires. (2) *Holy* -- This means 'set apart', different, consecrated to God. Catholics believe we're made holy by being incorporated into Christ's holy Body. Holiness is the Church's final end or goal, her *telos*. As such, many of her members fall sadly short that holiness in this life. Yet the Church's holiness is also in a sense her number one selling point. More people have been brought into the Church by the authentic holiness of individuals like Francis Assisi, Mother Teresa and John Paul II than any argument. (3) *Catholic* -- This means that the Church is not only a particular, local church with a specific center of authority at a specific place, Rome, comprised of those particular individuals, but also a universal Church, for all people. Furthermore, the Church embraces earth, purgatory, and heaven – the 'Church militant', 'Church suffering', and 'Church triumphant'. (4) *Apostolic* -- This means the Church subsists in direct continuity through lawful ordination (in the laying on of hands) in "apostolic succession" from the first Apostles commissioned by Christ.

i) How would the Nicene marks of the church identify the true church? The Nicene creed is, itself, a conciliar document.

You would need to know that the Nicene creed was the produce of the true church to use Nicene marks of the church to identify the true church.

ii) As a matter of fact, Catholics do not use the Nicene marks of the church to identify the true church. Rather, they begin with the Roman Catholic church as

²⁰⁹ <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/consulting.html>

their touchstone, and then proceed define or redefine the Nicene marks of the church in conformity with the history and theology of Catholicism.

Indeed, you'll notice that this is exactly the procedure which Blosser unconsciously follows in his explication of the four marks (see above). So the four marks do not function as working criteria to authenticate the true church.

iii) Are there just four marks? According to Bellarmine, there are fifteen marks!²¹⁰

iv) From a Protestant perspective, we would begin with Biblical criteria, not conciliar criteria.

After that, I would explore what some of the early Popes and other patristic fathers had to say about Rome, such as:

Pope St. Boniface (d. 422): "... it is clear that this Roman Church is to all churches throughout the world as the head is to the members, and that whoever separates himself from it becomes an exile from the Christian religion, since he ceases to belong to it's fellowship." (*Ep.* 14, 1)□

Pope St. Leo The Great (d. 461): "Though priests have a like dignity, yet they have not an equal jurisdiction, since even among the most blessed apostles, as there was a likeness of honor, so was there a certain distinction of power, and the election of all being equal, pre-eminence over the rest was given to one, from which type the distinction between the bishops also has risen, and it was provided by an important arrangement, that all should not claim to themselves power over all, but that in every province there should be one, whose sentence should be considered the first among his brethren; and others again, seated in the greater cities, should undertake a larger care, through whom the direction of the Universal Church should converge to the one See of Peter, and nothing anywhere disagree with its head." (*Ep.* 14)□

Pope St. Agatho (d. 681): "... Peter's true confession was revealed from heaven by the Father, and for it Peter was pronounced blessed by the Lord of all; and he received also, from the Redeemer of us all, by a threefold commendation, the spiritual sheep of the Church that he might feed them. Resting on his protection, the Apostolic Church (of Rome) has never turned aside from the way of truth to any part of error and her authority has always been faithfully followed and embraced as that of the Prince of the Apostles, by the whole Catholic Church, and by all the venerable Fathers who embraced her doctrine, by which they have shone as most approved lights of the Church of Christ, and has been venerated and

²¹⁰ <http://www.ancient-future.net/markschurch.html>

followed by all the orthodox doctors..." (*Mansi XI*, p. 233)□

Wow! Now that's impressive. He can actually find some popes who believe in papal authority. What a surprise!

I can also quote judges who believe in judicial authority, presidents who believe in executive power, and kings who believe in the divine right of kings.

Why is it important for the advocate of sola scriptura to also affirm ecclesiastical authority? Because if the Church has no authority, there is no discipline.

Church discipline is nearly nonexistent in Catholicism. So, if church discipline is Blosser's rationale for the Catholic rule of faith, then the rationale undercuts the Catholic rule of faith in actual practice.

The dissident periodical, the National Catholic Reporter, printed an article in 2005 in which it presented as evidence of Vatican "repressiveness" the example of 24 prominent theologians and clerics who had been censured, silenced, or otherwise disciplined by the Vatican since 1979. That's only 24 cases in 26 years! (See my article, "[The Vatican too 'repressive'?? Gimme a break!](#)")

Back to his cardboard box. Did I say the Vatican was repressive? That it was overly censorious? No, I said just the opposite—the Vatican is way too lax.

But the fact that I leveled the opposite objection doesn't keep Blosser from responding to an objection I never raised—an objection which is the polar opposite of what I said.

We've already seen that your earlier caricatured portrayal of the Catholic Church as an authoritarian institution demanding blind, unreasoning submission contradicts the existence of well-reasoned catechisms, encyclicals, and other magisterial documents inviting open examination.

No, what we've already seen is a failed attempt to affix that charge.

Here, too, we see that the Catholic Church has been lenient to a fault in allowing her theologians "elbow room" to speculate and explore, and that she is reluctant to silence or discipline them unless there is no alternative – and even then only after painstaking and protracted investigations. Sometimes some of us wish she were quicker to move against those we judge to be renegades.

In other words, Vatican would rather protect the wolf at the expense of the sheep.

You continued: (2) "Underlying his attack on sola Scriptura is Blosser's unspoken and unsupported assumption that the rule of faith is supposed to function a

problem-solving device, and if it fails to solve the problem, then it's a faulty rule of faith. But the rationale for sola Scriptura is principial rather than pragmatic."

This is not so. I make no such claim. What justifies a rule of faith (*regula fidei*) is its truth, not it's ability to solve problems. However, if the rule is true, one expects it to solve problems.

Why would one expect it to be a problem-solving device if it was never designed to be a problem-solving device? Or if it was never designed to solve the problems you pose?

As I recently said: Sola scripture derives from the identity of the Christian faith as a revealed religion. We believe in sola Scriptura because we believe in the primacy of revelation. Revealed theology is the basis of doctrine. And Scripture is the only record of revealed theology.

I think what you may mean to say is that "Scripture is the only divinely inspired record we have of revealed theology." Surely there are many extra-biblical records attesting to revealed theology – *Didache*, records of Church councils, Eusebius, statements by Julian the Apostate, etc.

A record *of* revealed theology, and a record *attesting* revealed theology, are two different things—unless one happens to be a Barthian.

Fourth, while I agree with your last sentence as I've restated it (above), I think you actually intend to say more than this. I think you intend to imply that *everything God intends for us to know for purposes of our salvation and the on-going governance of His Church is exhaustively contained in Scripture*. I doubt I'm wrong in this supposition. Furthermore, I don't see how anything you've written here demonstrates this.

I've demonstrated my claims, both in my original critique of your article, and in my present reply.

Fifth, I don't see how *sola scriptura* "derives" from "the identity of the Christian faith as a revealed religion." You referred earlier to the Covenant People of God going back to the OT. Abraham is reckoned as the father of our Judeo-Christian faith, yet there were no Scriptures in his day.

He continues to bandy your anachronistic definition of sola Scriptura. The Christian canon of Scripture includes the OT. That's why I take Christianity as the point of reference.

Hence, the principle of the Prophetic Office comes into play here, which is something other than *sola scriptura*. Neither do I see how one can believe in *sola*

scriptura “because” he believes in the “primacy of revelation.” This faces the same objections as the former claim. I may agree with you that “revealed theology is the basis of doctrine,” but why must I add to that the supposition that this revealed theology must be inscripturated? Where’s the warrant for that?

Since I’ve argued that point repeatedly, Blosser will need to be more specific.

I know that a noble fear of Evangelicals is that Catholics, by raising questions such as these, may be threatening to undermine the authority of Scripture, or to substitute some other authority for Scripture that would be inimical to it. Let me assure you that this is not the case. Here is how we view the matter: There is only one divine Revelation, which has one source: Christ. But this Revelation is conveyed to us in various different ways (setting aside ‘natural revelation’ [e.g. Rom. 1:19ff.], for our purposes): Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Prophetic Office. God saw to it that He never left Himself without a witness. “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets,” . . . “but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . .” (Heb. 1:1-2). God’s people weren’t left in the dark before His Revelation began to be inscripturated under Moses; and the Prophetic Office continued concurrently with the development of Scripture in the OT. Nor did it cease in NT times, which is a common Protestant conceit. One may recall John 18:14, which identifies Caiaphas as he who “gave counsel to the Jews, that it was expedient that one man should die for the people.” This passage alludes to an earlier text (John 11:49-52) in which John offers greater detail: “And one of [the Pharisees], named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, ‘Ye know nothing at all; nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not.’ And then John adds: “And this *spake he not of himself* -- but *being high priest* that year, he *prophesied* that Jesus should die for that nation; and not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.”

We have already seen Jesus’ imperatives to “practice and observe” whatever the Pharisees (who “sin on Moses’ seat”) told them to do; and now we see the additional links drawn between the office of high priest and the Prophetic Office. It is common knowledge that Peter alludes to Paul’s writing as “Scripture” (II Pet. 3:15-16); and we all know, also, how Paul equates what he has spoken with what he has written, commanding his followers to stand firm and hold to the traditions which they’ve been taught by him, whether those traditions were conveyed in writing or by word of mouth (II Thes. 2:15). Even before he became a Catholic, Newman wrestled extensively with these questions in his Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church (*Via Media*, Vol. 1). The Catholic position is simply that the Prophetic Office of the Covenant People of God continues in the Church today in the living authority of the Magisterium.

This is a fascinating specimen of fallacious reasoning:

i) Blosser appeals to the Prophetic Office. What he means by this is clerical prophecy: the notion that the High Priest was a prophet by virtue of his sacerdotal office.

ii) Blosser identifies this claim with “the Catholic position.”

iii) Thus, we would expect him to cite some conciliar decree or papal encyclical to support his identification.

So what does he cite? Something written by a 19C Anglican theologian. How does this represent the official position of the Catholic church?

Shouldn't Blosser be able to quote some authoritative statement from a Catholic source? From the Magisterium? An ecumenical council? And ex cathedra pronouncement by one of the early popes?

Compare Newman's position with Rahner's:

Before the church of Christ this absolute authority of a teaching office did not exist. The OT knew of no absolute and formal teaching authority which was recognized as such. Its “official” representatives themselves could fall away from God, his revelation and his grace.²¹¹

There was no infallible teaching authority—not even before the death of Christ—in the OT, in the sense of a permanent institution, which had this inerrant character. There were prophets every now and again. But there was no infallible Church.²¹²

iv) Also notice the enormous weight which Blosser lays on a single proof-text: Jn 11:51-52.

v) And is this the only interpretation, or even by best interpretation, of Jn 11:51-52?

And with the next words he is not tracing this “prophecy” back to a charisma inherent in the high priestly office that manifests itself independently of the person of the priest. For although one can cite a few

²¹¹ Foundations of Christian Faith (Seabury 1990), 378.

²¹² Inspiration in the Bible (Herder & Herder 1961), 52.

examples of priests being credited with prophetic gifts, prophetic inspiration was not regarded as a privilege automatically belonging to the office of high priest. It is much rather the intent of the Evangelist to say that Caiaphas, as the highest officeholder of that (historic) year, had to give prophetic expression not to his own purpose but to God's purpose in the death of Jesus in the words he chose. That this fell to Caiaphas is of course deeply meaningful. One can call it a "tragic irony" that Caiaphas here, "against his knowledge and intention," appears as a prophet. What concerns the Evangelist, above all, however, is that Israel's highest official, with all the authority associated with his office, spoke of Jesus' death as the only way in which the people could be saved. Israel had to hear this from the lips of its own high priest.²¹³

vi) Let us also remember that the role of the prophet was often to stand against the corrupt religious establishment, as the prosecuting attorney for the covenant lawsuit.²¹⁴ Opposition between priest and prophet. So one can hardly equate the prophetic office with the priestly office.

²¹³ H. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John* (Eerdmans 1997), 409-10.

²¹⁴ Cf. M. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eerdmans 1975), 58ff.