CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

Table of Contents

Errata

There is an error on page 79 in the article by Nathan Rinne, "Paradise Regained: Placing Nicholas Hopman's *Lex Aeterna* Back in Luther's Frame," *CTQ* 82 (2018). The last sentence of the second paragraph should read, "Even if they are born of a spontaneous love, the good intentions and works that characterize the 'new man' can be of a very impure love, still tainted by sin, even as that sin is covered by Christ's blood."

The Editors

Is *Sola Scriptura* Obsolete? An Examination and Critique of Christian Smith's *The Bible Made Impossible*

Jack D. Kilcrease

I. Introduction

Over the last few years, the conversion of prominent Evangelical scholars and clergy to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy has become a common event on the American theological scene.[1] Francis Beckwith,[2] Hank Hanegraaff,[3] and Christian Smith[4]—whose book I will examine below—are three significant examples. Such a phenomenon provokes the question: What can account for this attraction to Rome and Constantinople? There are, of course, a number of factors, but converts frequently cite the inadequacy of the scriptural principle of the Reformation.

These converts' disappointment with *sola Scriptura* must be placed in its proper context. Increasingly, Christians have become disenchanted with the radical pluralism and relativism of Western culture. In light of this, many who join Rome, in particular, do so because they believe that scriptural principles of the Reformation gave rise to interpretative pluralism. This, in turn, has supposedly brought about the corrupt relativism of Euro-American society.[5] For those who wish to resist this relativism, the only antidote is seen to be the unifying interpretative authority of Rome. As a universal society with a clear and authoritative notion of the common

---

[1] See several stories of this in Robert Plummer, ed., *Journeys of Faith: Evangelicalism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Anglicanism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). Also see David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996); and Dwight Longenecker, ed., *The Path to Rome: Modern Journeys to the Catholic Church* (Herefordshire, UK: Gracewing, 1999).

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

[3] See Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, " 'Bible Answer Man' Converts to Orthodoxy," *Christianity Today*, April 12, 2017, http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2017/april/bible-answer-man-hank-hanegraaff-orthodoxy-cri-watchman-nee.html.

[4] Christian Smith*, The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), xiii. Also see Christian Smith, *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in Ninety-Five Difficult Steps* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

[5] See example in Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

Jack D. Kilcrease is a Lutheran layperson and Associate Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at the Institute of Lutheran Theology. He may be contacted at jackkilcrease@hotmail.com.

good, the Roman Catholic Church is seen by many as the only realistic counterculture to Western decadence, nihilism, and decay.

In order to engage this argument, I will review below the recent work of Notre Dame sociologist of religion Christian Smith. In examining Smith's criticisms of *sola Scriptura*, I will point out the following. First, Smith's own criticisms often are profoundly lacking in their understanding of actual theology of the Reformation. Second, Smith's theological counterproposals labor under the same problematic theological assumptions as his Evangelical opponents. Third, Smith's arguments against *sola Scriptura* work best when aimed at popular American Evangelicalism. Although Smith acknowledges this fact, he has a tendency to lump all those who hold the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* with the lowest common denominator of American Evangelicalism. Hence his criticisms have little to do with teachings of the Lutheran Reformation.

Ultimately, I will argue that Smith implicitly projects the inadequacies of modern American Evangelicalism onto the Reformation itself. If Smith properly understood the teaching of the Lutheran Reformation on Scripture, then he very well might have been forced to consider the Lutheran Church a more intellectually viable alternative to Rome.

II. Smith's Critique of *Sola Scriptura*

Smith states in the beginning of *The Bible Made Impossible* that it is not his goal to reject the authority of the Bible or its inspiration. He goes on to say that he will not even address the question of the validity of the historical-critical method. Rather, he wants to criticize a particular approach to the Bible and its authority. He contends that the assumptions of American Evangelical Protestants about the Bible are not merely wrong, but are, in actual practice, "impossible" without massive intellectual dishonesty.[6] Smith terms this dishonest approach "Biblicism."[7] He lists ten distinct and highly problematic assumptions of Biblicism:

1. Divine Writing: The Bible, down to the details of its words, consists of and is identical with God's very own words written inerrantly in human language.

2. Total Representation: The Bible represents the totality of God's communication to and will for humanity, both in containing all that God has to say to humans and in being the exclusive mode of God's true communication.

---

[6] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, x.

[7] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 3.

3. Complete Coverage: The divine will about all of the issues relevant to Christian belief and life are contained in the Bible.

4. Democratic Perspicuity: Any reasonably intelligent person can read the Bible in his or her own language and correctly understand the plain meaning of the text.

5. Commonsense Hermeneutics: The best way to understand biblical texts is by reading them in their explicit, plain, most obvious, literal sense, as the author intended them at face value, which may or may not involve taking into account their literary, cultural, and historical contexts.

6. Sola Scriptura: The significance of any given biblical text can be understood without reliance on creeds, confessions, historical church traditions, or other forms of larger theological hermeneutical frameworks, such that theological formulations can be built up directly out of the Bible from scratch.

7. Internal Harmony: All related passages of the Bible on any given subject fit together almost like puzzle pieces into single, unified, internally consistent bodies of instruction about and wrong beliefs and behaviors.

8. Universal Applicability: What the biblical authors taught God's people at any point in history remains universally valid for all Christians at every other time, unless explicitly revoked by subsequent scriptural teaching.

9. Inductive Method: All matters of Christian belief and practice can be learned by sitting down with the Bible and piecing together through careful study the clear "biblical" truths that it teaches.

10. Handbook Model: The Bible teaches doctrine and morals with every affirmation that it makes, so that together those affirmations comprise something like a handbook or textbook for Christian belief and living, a compendium of divine and therefore inerrant teachings on a full array of subjects— including science, economics, health, politics, and romance.[8]

Of course, Lutheran Christians would agree with Smith in rejecting many of these claims. This is particularly true of the denigration of the hermeneutical value of creeds and confessions, as well as the tendency of many Protestants to see Scripture as a grab bag of legalistic advice. Nevertheless, along with other heirs of the Reformation, Lutherans cannot agree with Smith that it is theologically poisonous to believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and verbally inspired. Neither can confessional Lutherans agree with Smith when he denies that Scripture

---

[8] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 4–5.

is clear and self-interpreting, or that it possesses an ultimate authority as a *norma normans non normata*.[9]

Smith argues that this belief in the clarity of Scripture represents a form of epistemologically naive realism. Much like George Marsden and Theodore Dwight Bozeman,[10] Smith claims that the naive realism of the Evangelical Protestants ultimately stems from the Princeton school of the nineteenth century. The major theologians of this school—Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and Benjamin Warfield—appropriated the common-sense realist tradition of philosophy.[11] Smith cites Hodge's famous statement comparing a theologian who gathers facts from Scripture to a scientist who gathers data from the natural world.[12] Whether this is a fair interpretation of Hodge or not, this passage has been widely interpreted as supporting a kind of crass Baconian and Reidian empiricism.[13]

In contrast to this tradition of naive realism, Smith believes it self-evident that Scripture is unclear. Therefore, it cannot serve as the ultimate authority of all theological discourse, because people will inevitably disagree about how to interpret it: "My line of reasoning in this book will run as follows. First, I will argue that most biblicist claims are rendered moot by a more fundamental problem (which few biblicists ever acknowledge) that undermines all the supposed achievements of biblicism: the problem of *pervasive interpretive pluralism*."[14] In other words, if the Bible is really internally consistent and clear, then everyone should be able to agree with one another about what it says. Since that is not the case, then it must be that the Bible is not really clear after all. Furthermore, implicitly, if Scripture is unclear, there must be some higher principle or authority to arbitrate its meaning for readers.

---

[9] "Norming norm, not normed." Classic Lutheran theology views Scripture as the "norming norm," the ultimate authority, and the church's creeds and confessions as "normed norms," authorities subordinate to Scripture.

[10] See Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, "Inductive and Deductive Politics: Science and Society in Antebellum Protestant Thought," *Journal of American History* 64 (December, 1977): 704–722. Also see George Marsden, "Everyone's Own Interpretation? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," eds. Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 79–100.

[11] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 57–58. See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York, London, and Edinburgh: C. Scribner and Co., T. Nelson and Sons, 1872–1873).

[12] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 58.

[13] See Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind: On the Principles of Common Sense* (Edinburgh: Bell and Bradfute, 1810). Also see Francis Bacon, *The Complete Essays* (New York: Dover Books, 2008).

[14] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, x.

Smith does not write explicitly as a Catholic apologist, but those familiar with Catholic apologetics (both popular and more sophisticated versions) know that this is an all too common argument.[15] Ironically, what this line of reasoning reveals about Smith and other Catholic apologists is that they share a common anthropology and understanding of the word of God with some of their Evangelical Protestant opponents. First, they assume that the human will and mind are only minimally bound to sin and spiritual blindness. Even in sin, humans remain rational and autonomous beings who can engage and truthfully expound the Bible like any other book. Second, both traditions implicitly assume that the Bible is simply an inert, dead letter, whose meaning can be controlled by humans.[16]

Seen from this perspective, the Roman Catholic and certain Evangelical understandings of the power of the word and the role of human agency in the process of interpretation are simply two sides of the same coin. From the side of the crude popular Arminianism that characterizes much of American Evangelicalism, the meaning of Scripture may be easily discerned by rational and autonomous human agents without the special illumination of the Holy Spirit or intervening secondary authorities, such as creeds or confessions. For Roman Catholics, the freedom and autonomy of humans in relationship to the word makes all interpretation apart from the infallible institutional church suspect. As free agents, humans can manipulate or falsely interpret the word as easily as they can correctly interpret it. With a multitude of possible interpretations within the marketplace of religion, the only way to gain intellectual certainty regarding the content of revelation is to possess a supernaturally guided teaching authority that is *a priori* guaranteed to not be subject to the capricious winds of free will.

III. Luther's View of Scriptural Clarity

The Evangelical and Roman Catholic anthropology and theology of the word of God is precisely what Luther rejects in his most comprehensive treatment of the doctrine of scriptural clarity at the beginning of *The Bondage of the Will* (1525).[17]

---

[15] See the following: Louis Bouyer, *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers, 1956), 142–211; C. DeVolld, *In Defense of the Faithful: The Scriptural Truth of Catholicism* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2007), 136–137; Stephen K. Ray, *Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historical Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 42–92.

[16] Gerhard writes: "The papists clearly are presenting to us such an idea of Scripture which is, so to speak, a sort of skeleton and dumb and dead statues which must first be brought alive through the Spirit and through that Church, that is, through the pope as he speaks" (Johann Gerhard, *On the Legitimate Interpretation of Holy Scripture*, trans. Richard Dinda [Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2015], 21).

[17] See Luther's comments in vol. 33, pp. 24–28 of *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed.

For Luther, Scripture is clear, but not because humans are rational and autonomous beings. Humans are bounded by sin and grace. For this reason, their ability to comprehend and respond to the word of God depends on whether they labor under the dominion of sin or under the liberating power of God's grace.

Therefore, although Scripture is clear, its clarity functions on two distinct yet interlocking levels. First, there is the internal clarity of Scripture. This is the clarity by which God manifests the truth of the Scriptures to humans through the work of the Holy Spirit operative in the gospel. Second, there is the external clarity of Scripture. This consists in the grammatical-historical meaning of the Bible as it is discernible through the study of its language and historical background.[18]

In contrast to the semi-Pelagianism (or perhaps at the popular level, simply Pelagianism) of contemporary Roman Catholic and popular Evangelical theories of scriptural clarity and human agency, Luther's view of how God makes himself known to us through the Bible stands as a logical corollary of his anthropology. Much like the clarity of Scripture, human agency operates on two levels. First, there is our agency regarding those things that are above us (spiritual things); and second, there is our agency regarding those things below us (temporal things). In regard to spiritual things, Luther teaches that we are bounded creatures. We cannot respond to God by our own reason or strength. Since God manifests himself to us through his word, it follows that we cannot understand Scripture unless the Spirit clarifies it through the proclamation of the gospel. In his description of the inner clarity, Luther says, based on Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians 3:14–18, that those without faith (in this case, non-Christian Jews) read the Scriptures with a veil over their hearts. They are spiritually blind and do not genuinely understand the meaning of Scripture, which is summed up in Christ. When they come to faith, the Spirit removes the veil and believers see the glory of God in Christ's face.[19] Hence, when people have faith in Christ, they understand the central meaning of Scripture; the

---

Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE. For Luther's understanding of scriptural clarity, see the following sources: Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 76–78; Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation*, trans. Thomas Trapp (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 83–90; Friedrich Beisser, *Claritas scripturae bei Martin Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966); Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. Roy Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 268–277.

[18] Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:24–28. See the same notion in the Lutheran symbols in Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1983), 59–64. Also see Gerhard, *On the Legitimate Interpretation of Holy Scripture*, 118–119.

[19] Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:64–70.

content of Scripture, especially the articles of the faith, fall into their proper place. Therefore, in contrast to the Roman Catholic and popular Arminian view of the word of God as being merely a dead and inert letter, the Lutheran view of Scripture is that it is a powerful and living word that creates faithful and receptive creatures out of sinful and blind ones.

In regard to earthly things, such as understanding grammar, linguistic structure, and history, humans are free and rational.[20] Therefore, humans can discern and debate the grammatical-historical meaning of specific passages. As should be clear, many errors in interpretation can arise from a lack of knowledge of the original languages of Scripture. Similarly, as Luther himself notes, not all passages are equally clear, and our ignorance of language pertaining to certain passages of Scripture prevents our full understanding.[21] Nevertheless, no doctrine is unclear, and there are enough grammatically clear passages (i.e., scholastic orthodoxy's *sedes doctrinae*[22]) to provide us with an unassailable core of Christian proclamation.[23]

Hence, contrary to Smith's model, Luther correctly discerns that the existence of disputes regarding the meaning of Scripture in no way militates against its clarity. Being bound to legalism and sin, the postlapsarian human default is to reject the gospel as the burning center of the Bible.[24] This has the predictable effect of distorting the other articles of the faith. For example, Roman Catholicism's belief in the intercession of the saints, the penitential system, and the sacrifice of the Mass is invariably tied up in its legalism and its failure to understand the gospel and read Scripture from its perspective. The Arian, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witness rejection of the divinity of Christ is simply an expression of their legalistic belief that creatures can save themselves by their works.

In the same manner, Luther's model also makes sense of other disagreements that arise from a rejection or misunderstanding of the external clarity. Many disagreements between Catholics and Lutherans on the interpretation of Scripture can be chalked up to the differences between the Vulgate's translations (canonized at Trent) and the original Hebrew and Greek texts.[25] Likewise, the Reformed tradition's rejection of Lutheran teaching on the sacraments is not a result of the

---

[20] Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:70.

[21] Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:25.

[22] Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), 35, 44–49.

[23] Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:27–28.

[24] Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:52.

[25] See the classical example on the issue of justification in Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 75.

ambiguity of the simple grammatical-historical meaning of the text of Scripture, but rather is caused by the Reformed belief that humans ought to ignore the literal meaning of the text in favor of more rational interpretation.[26]

Finally, Luther's model of external and internal clarity implicitly entails greater appreciation for the hermeneutical value of the creeds and confessions. According to the internal clarity, it is God who ultimately clarifies his own word. He is faithful to his church (Matt 16:18); and therefore, he is ever present in it, creating faith and a true confession of the faith through word and sacrament. From this it follows that there is always a valid tradition within the church, albeit as a *norma normata* in relationship to the ultimate authority of the Bible. This tradition as embodied in creeds and confessions is ultimately aimed at faithfully applying the word to situations that the biblical authors did not face.[27]

Conversely, if one accepts the semi-Pelagianism or outright Pelagianism of much of contemporary Evangelicalism, it would theoretically be possible for no one to use his free will and rationality to interpret the Bible correctly between John's penning of Revelation and the founding of one's megachurch or parachurch ministry.[28] Likewise, for Rome, the power of the word itself does not preserve the catholicity of the church's confession of faith. Only the miraculous intervention of an infallible magisterium against the ever-changing winds of human free will can do this.

IV. Smith's View of Scriptural Authority

Beyond his attack on the naive realism of Evangelical exegetical theory, Smith decries what he considers to be the popular belief that Scripture is a universal guidebook. He notes the manifestation of this tendency in the propensity of Christian bookstores to carry books entitled *A Biblical Guide to X*.[29] Beyond implicitly viewing this as a sort of crass legalism, Smith holds that the Bible is not clear, and therefore the application of its values will result in contradiction. Smith

---

[26] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 25–29.

[27] This view of Scripture and tradition is what Heiko Oberman calls "Tradition I." See Heiko Oberman, "*Quo Vadis Petre*? Tradition from Irenaeus to *Humani Generis*," in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 269–298. Also see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation* (London: SCM Press, 1964); Quentin Stewart, *Lutheran Patristic Catholicity: The Vincentian Canon and the Consensus Patrum in Lutheran Orthodoxy* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2015).

[28] In the spirit of Oberman, Alister McGrath calls this view "Tradition 0." See Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 107–108.

[29] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible,* 8–10.

describes this lack of clarity in terms of the ambiguity that it creates in relation to specific Christian practices.

> Consider the following four hypothetical scenarios. Imagine first an official state road map that four people all wanting to drive to the same destination consult for directions; each person decides on a different route as the best one to take to that destination. Picture next a pair of army-certified binoculars that five commanding officers who are meeting in war council use to assess their distant enemy's position, strength, and movements; each officer reports quite different accounts of what they see of their enemy's situation, and each one therefore recommends different battle strategies. Then imagine a manu-facturer-authorized owner's manual for a fancy new camera that all the shutterbug members of a family study carefully; each individual comes away insisting on very different methods for proper use of the camera. Finally, consider a well-known cookbook containing a recipe that all the contestants in a particular cooking-skills competition must prepare; the contestants, though they vow that they cooked up the same recipe from the same cookbook, each produce a dish that is in some way distinct from all the others.[30]

The interesting thing to notice in this passage is that Smith does not actually question the idea that Scripture is a sort of guidebook; rather, he simply asserts that Scripture is an ambiguous and insufficient guidebook. As a former Evangelical, it is not surprising that Smith's Roman Catholic view of the function of Scripture is merely the flipside of his Evangelical view. Hence, as correlative of his hermeneutical semi-Pelagianism, he shares the assumption with his former co-religionists that the Bible must be a legalistic guidebook. Indeed, he writes that the goal of the ministry of the church (and hence, implicitly, the goal of interpreting Scripture) should be to communicate "how best to live in any given sociocultural context."[31] Although Smith decries the guidebook model, his own statements about Scripture seem to suggest that he regards Scripture primarily as a rulebook, albeit a more ambiguous and less useful one than his popular Evangelical brethren suppose.

Since Scripture is unclear, people end up deriving different rules from it. This is unacceptable for Smith, because it makes for denominational and theological disunity. When looking through the kaleidoscope of Scripture, people discover simply whatever rules they wish to find there. Moreover, they ignore or explain away rules that they do not like.[32] Among these, Smith claims that Christians arbitrarily ignore the Levitical injunctions against eating rabbits and having sex during

---

[30] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 16–17.
[31] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 148.
[32] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 44–45.

menstruation.[33] Oddly, Smith adopts a common line of argument used by secularist provocateurs who believe that they, too, have cleverly uncovered the inconsistency of Christian appeals to the authority of Scripture.[34]

In response to this, it should be noted that across denominational boundaries, the historic Christian Church has understood that the Levitical code is no longer applicable to the Christian Church. There is a clear and solid exegetical basis for this in God's revelation to the apostle Peter in Acts 10 and the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Moreover, one might also appropriately cite the books of Colossians and Hebrews, which make a very clear distinction between the moral and the ritual law of the Old Testament (see Col 2:16–23 and Heb 9:1–10:18).[35] It is strange that Smith is unaware of these texts and the nearly universal consensus of Christian interpreters about them.

Beyond this, the supreme authority of the Bible cannot be maintained, according to Smith, because it contains passages that he deems "strange"[36] or simply immoral. No reasonable person could believe that these passages come from God himself; consequently, in Smith's mind, they prove that accepting the full authority of Scripture is simply wrong. The main example that Smith uses is Titus 1:12–13, where St. Paul uses strong language to characterize people on the island of Crete. The apostle quotes an ancient Greek poet in stating, "All Cretans are liars."[37] Smith finds this passage utterly shocking and cannot fathom what a pastor might preach on such a text. Moreover, Smith thinks that the remark is inconsistent with other statements of Paul about kindness and gentleness.

Nevertheless, the simple fact is that the Bible is full of harsh language and hyperbolic statements against God's enemies (one example far harsher than that cited above can be found in Ezek 23:20). Moreover, Smith's argument lacks cogency for at least two reasons. First, he claims that he has some kind of privileged knowledge of what God, who is by definition transcendent, would and would not do. Second, through the history of salvation, God performed many acts of judgment against those who rejected his truth. He judged the world in the flood and tasked Israel with the violent expulsion of the Canaanites from the land of Palestine. In light of these acts of judgment, it is not at all implausible that the same deity would inspire

---

[33] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 72–73.

[34] One of the more childish examples of this popular argument can be found in A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

[35] See comments on this issue in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions: *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1524/1525), AE 40:97–98; AC XXVIII 57–60.

[36] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 72.

[37] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 72.

Paul to say a few harsh things about the inhabitants of Crete who were undermining the faith.

Ultimately, it would appear that Smith's concern is not with the clarity of the word but with its all too clear content. Smith himself claims to know in the seat of his inner heart what God is like above and beyond the external word. He himself can discern what God would say and not say through his prophets and apostles. Consequently, his position is actually predicated on a form of enthusiasm that claims there is another and higher word of God above the historical-grammatical meaning of the Bible.

V. Smith's Theological Alternative

After arguing that the popular (and, to some extent, academic) Evangelical approach to the Bible is impossible, Smith proposes his alternative using a Christomonistic (as opposed to a Christocentric) approach to revelation. As we will see below, this approach embodies the enthusiasm also present in his earlier criticism of the traditional understanding of scriptural authority. According to Smith, Christ is the single Word of God, and Scripture is merely a witness to his revelation:

> Jesus Christ: The True and Final Word. Jesus Christ is the true and final Word of God, in relation to whom scripture is God's secondary, written word of witness and testimony. This line of reasoning carries the prior point one important step further. Biblicists are often so insistent that the Bible is God's only complete, sufficient, and final word that they can easily forget in practice that before and above the Bible as God's written word stands Jesus Christ, who is God's living Word and ultimate and final self-revelation. . . .
>
> The *evangelion*, the gospel, is not simply some cognitive information gleaned from the Bible to which we have to give intellectual assent. Jesus Christ himself *is* the gospel. . . .
>
> The Bible is a secondary, subsidiary, functional, written word of God. . . . The Bible is passing. Jesus Christ is eternal. The Bible points us to the truth, proclaims God's truth; Jesus Christ himself *is* that Truth. Biblicism borders on idolatry when it fails to maintain this perspective.[38]

Hence, the Bible is itself not really a form of revelation, but rather a mere witness to revelation. Jesus is the single revelation of God. Thus, there is a Word of God (Jesus) above the word of God (the written text of the Bible). The theologian may, in a sense, see beyond the text of Scripture to Jesus, who is the measure of the text.

---

[38] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 116–118.

In practical terms, this implicitly means isolating the parts of the text that reflect Jesus and his message from parts that do not. Although Lutheran Christians would certainly agree with Smith that Christ is the center of Scripture, it is important not to play Christ off against the inspiration and authority of the Bible.[39] In many ways, Smith's approach seems quite similar to what John Warwick Montgomery famously termed "Gospel-Reductionism."[40]

Beyond this, Smith appeals to the centrality of the *regula fidei* of trinitarian faith, which he claims was authoritative in the early church before the Scriptures became "Scripture" in the act of canonization in the fourth and fifth centuries.[41] Here, Smith misconstrues the relationship of Scripture to the early church's act of canonization. In response to this mischaracterization, one should observe a couple of things. First, the *regula fidei* is simply a summary of truths contained in the Scriptures and therefore cannot be isolated and exalted above the Scriptures. It is, of course, correct to say that the *regula fidei* summarizes apostolic teaching that initially existed in an unwritten form (2 Thess 2:15). Nevertheless, in the present, the *regula fidei* is only accessible in its pure form as set down by the witness of the apostles in the Scriptures. The confessional Lutheran's claim was never that the word of God was always accessible only through the Bible at every point throughout the history of salvation. Obviously, during the apostolic age, the opposite was the case. Rather, the Lutheran claim is that in the present, the only fully reliable means of access to God's revelation is through the inerrant and inspired written deposit of the word of God in the Bible.[42]

Second, Smith's remark presupposes that there were no Scriptures before the church's act of canonization. This is yet another common Roman Catholic polemic based on a category confusion.[43] Leading scholars of canonical studies rightly point out that canonization cannot be conflated with a community having an authoritative Scripture.[44] Possessing a "Scripture" refers to a community recognizing and using a text based on a belief in its divine authority, whereas "canon" comes about by an official act of a community's leaders affirming that a text is authoritative. The ante-Nicene fathers spoke of and authoritatively quoted the Bible long before the councils

---

[39] David Scaer, "Christ or the Bible?" *Christianity Today* 12 (November 10, 1967): 9–10.

[40] John Warwick Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), 81–123.

[41] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 154.

[42] Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:193.

[43] See an argument of this nature in Peter Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Beliefs Based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 100.

[44] See the classical article by Albert Sundberg, "Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon," *Studia Evangelica* 4, no. 1 (1968): 452–461.

of Carthage and Hippo made decisions about the canon in the fourth and fifth centuries.[45] Moreover, Lutherans affirm that the Scripture's authority is founded on Christ's dominical authorization of the authority of the Old Testament and the infallible teaching of the apostles. It is not based on the institutional church's judgments about the canonical list.[46]

Returning to Smith's Christomonism, such an approach to Scripture was pioneered in the twentieth century by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth. Smith lauds Barth's approach to scriptural authority as being truly evangelical insofar as it centers on "the gospel."[47] Barth centers his understanding of the Bible on the great things God has done in Jesus Christ. Therefore, it is not a manual for mundane tasks like dating or managing one's finances.[48] According to Smith, the reason Evangelicals have typically resisted Barth's approach is largely because his writings were translated in the period immediately after the Modernist/Fundamentalist debate. Evangelicals were too traumatized by Modernists who rejected scriptural authority *in toto* to give ear to someone like Barth who had a more balanced approach.[49]

Smith rejects the notion that Barth's approach has anything to do with theological Liberalism, a common charge among Barth's conservative Protestant detractors. Indeed, Barth did possess a visceral dislike of Schleiermacher and the subsequent German liberal Protestant tradition.[50] Nevertheless, in spite of Barth's antipathy, his own program is reminiscent of Schleiermacher's theological approach in some key ways. Both theologians ultimately reject the final authority of Scripture in favor of the higher authority of historic revelation lying beyond its text. Both ultimately view revelation in Christomonistic terms.[51]

For Schleiermacher, human religion is a byproduct of a generalized "feeling of absolute dependence,"[52] which is itself ultimately an experience of God. In light of his Reformed background, it is not surprising that this notion bears much

---

[45] Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 23–72.

[46] For example, see this approach in J. A. O. Preus, *It Is Written* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971); David Scaer, *The Apostolic Scriptures* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971).

[47] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 124–125.

[48] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 124.

[49] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 122.

[50] See Karl Barth, *The Theology of Schleiermacher* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Brian Cozens and John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

[51] See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: T & T Clark, 1999).

[52] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 12–18.

resemblance to Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*,[53] albeit developed within the categories of Kant's epistemology.[54] According to Schleiermacher, what is unique about Christian religious experience is that it is the experience of absolute dependence on God as mediated through Jesus. The man Jesus possessed perfect "God-consciousness" (i.e., the feeling of absolute dependence), which he in turn transmitted to the church.[55] The believer can progressively increase his God-consciousness through fellowship with the church.[56]

Because Christianity is centered on a God-consciousness present in Jesus as the sole source of Christian revelation, Schleiermacher's theology is Christomonistic in some of the same ways as Smith's. Scripture is not the word of God per se, but only insofar as it represents the revelation of Christ as it has been expressed in many and various ways by the early Christian community. In fact, Schleiermacher's position is so Christomonistic that he went so far as to suggest that since the Old Testament did not contain an experience of God mediated through Jesus, it should be removed from the Christian Bible.[57]

Although Barth's theology superficially attacks Protestant Liberalism in general and Schleiermacher's theology in particular, it nevertheless retains many of its structural priorities. Barth essentially agrees with Schleiermacher's Christomonism as well as his Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God. For Barth, God's revelation is God himself as he has executed his covenant with humanity in Jesus Christ.[58] Similarly, in the same divine-human person, God asserts his sovereignty by choosing humanity while simultaneously rejecting its sin.[59] As true man, Christ is the human person who is perfectly responsive to sovereign divine love and election.[60] As a result, he both bears God's condemnation of sin and nothingness and at the same time serves as a righteous representative of the human race. In this, he becomes the archetype and sole basis of election.[61] The Bible is authoritative

---

[53] See Edward Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 50–56; David Steinmetz, "Calvin and the Natural Knowledge of God," in *Calvin in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 23–39.

[54] See brief comment in Thomas M. Kelly, *Theology at the Void: The Retrieval of Experience* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2002), 15.

[55] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 355–475.

[56] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 560–581.

[57] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 608–611.

[58] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*. 4 vols. trans. G. T. Thomason et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-77), 1.1:295–296.

[59] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 2.2:94–195.

[60] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3.2:203.

[61] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 2.2:94–195.

because it is a witness to this event of divine self-disclosure and redemption.[62] Nevertheless, Scripture is not identical with revelation.

What is essentially different about these approaches is that Barth inverts Schleiermacher's focus on the interior experience of divine sovereignty.[63] Instead, Barth makes the revelation of divine sovereignty a public and objective event outside of the believer. Nevertheless, the Christomonism of revelation remains, as does the Reformed emphasis on the content of divine revelation being the knowledge of divine sovereignty. Ultimately, then, Barth's theology (and that of those who followed his trajectory) is in many regards structurally indistinguishable from the theology of Protestant Liberalism as Schleiermacher classically formulated it. Christ alone is the Word of God, and the Scriptures are merely a witness to that revelation. There is (to use a spatial metaphor) a distance between revelation in Christ and the Scriptures.

Though we can only address a few issues here, from a logical and epistemic perspective, the main difficulty with positing Jesus as the single principle of revelation to which Scripture is merely the witness is that it places the theologian in the position of rather arbitrarily deciding which texts convey Christ and which do not. Since we have no access to Christ apart from the testimony of the prophets and apostles, this is an impossible task. One cannot "see past" the Bible text and find another Christ on the other side.

Moreover, Christ's redemption would not make any sense apart from the perspective of the total history of salvation and mediation through specific, concrete writings inspired by God. Even in regard to secular knowledge, no piece of data makes sense apart from being understood within an overall framework or, perhaps, "paradigm."[64] Therefore, to isolate the revelation of Christ and play it off against the notion that the Scriptures are revelation in themselves makes it possible to drag the Lord out of the original, divinely mandated context of the whole of the Bible and place him into an alternative framework of our own liking. For Schleiermacher, this alternative framework was religious consciousness as understood through the lens of Pietism, Romanticism, and German Idealism.[65] For Barth, Christ became a means

---

[62] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.2:501.

[63] See critique in Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 363. McGrath draws on the interpretation of Balthasar. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth: Darstellung und Deutung seiner Theologie* (Cologne: Jakob Hegner, 1962), 210.

[64] See the parallel to the philosophy of science in Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[65] For Schleiermacher's upbringing and intellectual environment, see the following: C. W. Christian, *Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1979), 19–42; Jack Forstman, *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press,

of reasserting the sovereignty of God in the face of liberal theology and a Europe that had gone into civilizational meltdown after the First World War.[66] Ultimately, Smith's (as well as Barth's and Schleiermacher's) approach allows theologians to create arbitrarily their own Christs through selective use of Scripture. Ironically, this is precisely what Smith accuses his biblicist opponents of doing.

Beyond this, it should be observed that Smith promotes a form of enthusiasm. By distancing God's revelation in Christ from the actual text of the Bible, Smith places himself and his own interior subjective spiritual insight into the breach in order to fill the gap. Ultimately, discerning between the inauthentic and authentic revelation of God in Christ in the text of Scripture is a matter of enthusiastic judgment.

For Lutheran Christians, this is unacceptable. Lutherans have consistently asserted against the Reformed tradition that just as there is no gap between the heavenly Christ and the earthly elements of the Lord's Supper, so, too, there is no gap between the living Word of Christ and the literal word of the Bible. As Gustaf Wingren aptly says, "The Word of the Bible contains within itself the coming of Christ as its general aim to which all tends. . . . It is in the simple words, in what is human in the Bible, that God's power is hidden; divine and human must not be separated." Indeed, Wingren states that "even in the passage and even in preaching, *communicatio idiomatum* holds sway."[67]

VI. Scriptural Ambiguity and Ecclesiastical Consensus

Because Smith considers Scripture largely ambiguous, he is relatively tolerant of what constitutes orthodox Christianity: "Scripture is sometimes confusing, ambiguous, and incomplete—we have to admit and deal with that fact." Indeed, "We do not need to be able to explain everything all the time. It is fine sometimes simply to say, 'I have no idea' and 'We really just don't know.' "[68] Nevertheless, even if the application of the ethical teachings present in Scripture is unclear, or in many cases not addressed, the Christomonistic nature of revelation is apparently clear to Smith: "But the real *matter* of scripture is clear, 'the deepest secret of all,' that God in Christ has come to earth, lived, taught, healed, died, and risen to new life, so that we too

---

1977); Martin Redeker, *Schleiermacher: Life and Thought*, trans. John Wallhausser (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), 6–34.

[66] See the following discussion of Barth's theological epiphanies in light of World War I: Bruce McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 78–184.

[67] Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*, trans. Victor C. Pogue (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 208.

[68] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 131.

can rise to life in him."[69] Although, to many, this may sound very Lutheran, as we saw earlier, Smith seems to see Scripture as primarily a legal authority, and therefore Christ's revelation is implicitly identified with a higher and better law.

Smith believes that because the Bible is clear on the centrality of Christ but not on other issues, Evangelicals should try to minimalize much of what they consider essential to the faith: "Evangelical Christians need to much better distinguish dogma from doctrine and both of those from opinion, in a way that demands much greater humility, discernment, and readiness to extend the fellowship of communion to those who understand scripture differently."[70] Hence, conservative Protestants should discern various levels of authority.[71]

Incidentally, Smith does not mention that the distinction he invokes between "dogma" (statements of magisterium of unchanging truth) and "doctrine" (temporary and mutable applications of dogma) is one derived from Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholic theologians typically divide theological propositions into various degrees of authority by distinguishing between dogma, doctrine, and mere theological opinion (*theologoumenon*).[72] Also, contrary to what Smith implies, aspects of this approach are not totally alien to the tradition of the Magisterial Reformation. Both Lutherans and the Reformed theologians of scholastic orthodoxy did in fact distinguish between fundamental and nonfundamental dogmas.[73] Indeed, as we observed earlier, even Luther did not hold that the clarity of the Bible demanded that every passage of Scripture be absolutely grammatically clear.

Nevertheless, unlike historic Roman Catholicism and the magisterial reformers, Smith holds that differing degrees of doctrinal authority necessitate theological relativism that may in turn bring about ecumenical *détente*. Since only a few points can be agreed on across denominational lines, areas of difference should be treated with extreme tolerance for the sake of unity. Smith states that Pentecostals should be aware that few Christians down through the ages have thought miracles and speaking in tongues were not important. Consequently, they should be tolerant and

---

[69] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 132.

[70] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 134.

[71] See a fairly standard summary of the modern Catholic treatment of this subject in Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 90–106.

[72] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 134.

[73] See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 406–429; Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Hay and Henry Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 96–100. See the early Lutheran treatment of this in Nicolaus Hunnius, *Diaskepsis Theologica: A Theological Examination of the Fundamental Difference between Evangelical Lutheran Doctrine and Calvinist or Reformed Teaching* (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2001).

not consider these things central to the Christian faith. Likewise, Calvinists should recognize that most Christians have not believed in double predestination. From this, they must conclude that their own theological principles embodied in TULIP are peripheral to the Christian faith.[74]

Therefore, the consensus of the visible church plays a significant role for Smith in discerning what is sufficiently clear in Scripture and what is not. Indeed, Smith mentions Vincent of Lérins and his famous maxim "*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*"[75] This truth by consensus is tempered somewhat by Smith's assertion that consensus cannot be an absolute and definitive standard of discerning correct doctrine.[76]

Lutheran Christians will find most of these assertions problematic. First, while not every statement of Scripture is absolutely grammatically clear, no doctrine of the faith is ambiguous.[77] Beyond this, truth by consensus is an extremely shaky principle, as Smith himself acknowledges. Of course, we must agree with Chemnitz that insofar as the Holy Spirit has always been guiding the church through word and sacrament, legitimate interpretations of the Bible must not be totally without precedent in the previous catholic tradition.[78] Nevertheless, turning to examples from the Scriptures themselves, it has often been noted that the majority of ancient Israelites were apostates (1 Kgs 19:18; Rom 11:4). If consensus was the basis of appropriate theological judgment in the Old Testament church, then something like a mixture of Mosaic and Canaanite worship could be regarded as the true religion. If, then, the Old Testament church was mistaken in its consensus, could not the same be said of the visible church in the present age? It is for this reason that Melanchthon in his reflection on church history argued that God preserves a true catholic remnant in every era of history, while most remain under the thrall of unbelief.[79]

Moreover, it is particularly odd for Smith to argue that Calvinists and Pentecostals can remain what they are while relativizing their beliefs. By definition, Calvinists are Calvinists and Pentecostals are Pentecostals insofar as they are committed to the notion that their doctrinal stances are in fact the essential teaching

---

[74] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 138.

[75] See Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitory*, trans. Paul Böer (Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012). Also see Thomas G. Guarino, *Vincent of Lérins and the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

[76] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 138.

[77] Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:27–28.

[78] Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 208–209.

[79] See Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon* (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1961), 69, 100–118.

of Christianity. Indeed, Pentecostals call their understanding of the gospel the "full gospel."[80] Similarly, for Lutherans, what makes Christianity the true religion over against heretical forms of Christianity and other world religions is the fact that it is based on grace alone.[81] Apparently, Smith cannot even make grace the center of Christianity, in that he claims that those who affirm substitutionary atonement (which stands at the very heart of the gospel, 1 Cor 15:3) should tolerate those who reject it.[82]

Ultimately, Smith believes that Evangelicals need to become comfortable with a greater degree of uncertainty regarding the teachings of Scripture.[83] Such a proposal is rather strange in light of Smith's conversion to Catholicism. That is to say, it is odd that Smith derides Evangelicals and conservative Protestants in general for demanding intellectual and ethical certainty, yet he joined a denomination whose main selling point is the intellectual and moral certainty that it supposedly provides through its infallible magisterium.

In point of fact, both the emphasis on Christomonism as well as the belief that Christians need to accept theological ambiguity and be broadly tolerant is more characteristic of the American mainline Protestant denominations than it is of Roman Catholicism.[84] A difficulty with this open-ended approach to doctrine and morals is that it is ultimately impractical. Despite claiming to be supremely tolerant as a result of minimizing the guidance from the Scriptures or confessions and creeds, the mainline Protestant denominations must make theological and ethical decisions for the sake of practical ends. Nevertheless, without the anchor of the infallibility of Scripture, such decisions are largely the arbitrary byproduct of the surrounding culture. This can be seen no more clearly than in the recent decisions of many mainline Protestant denominations to embrace homosexual behavior as morally legitimate.

Since such decisions are transparently arbitrary and based on culturally based preference, they more often than not result in extreme resistance from the more conservative members of these denominations. To solve the problem of legitimacy,

---

[80] See discussion of the origin and a synopsis of this theology in Charles Nienkirchen, *A. B. Simpson and the Pentecostal Movement: A Study in Continuity, Crisis, and Change* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 2–3.

[81] See Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 7–21.

[82] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 135.

[83] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 131–132.

[84] "Christology became the trump card which took every trick. Freedom in doctrine and practice is allowed as long as the doctrine of Christ remains in place, Barth's followers argued (and still argue). This position came to be known as Gospel reductionism, a phrase which originated with the majority position of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, in the 1970s, and is still used for this radical Christomonism" (David Scaer, "All Theology Is Christology," *Modern Reformation* 8, no. 5 [1999]: 3).

many mainline Protestant theologians have claimed that the Holy Spirit is "doing a new thing"[85] through the voting assemblies. The decisions of the voters' assemblies is therefore to be regarded as superseding scriptural revelation. The implicit logic of this line of reason is that whereas the Bible is fallible, denominational voting assemblies are infallible.

Two observations should be made here. First, yet again, the issue is not whether the word of the Bible is clear on a particular subject. Rather, mainline Protestants simply prefer their own enthusiastic concept of the theological authority, rather than the objective external word. Second, Smith's own preference for biblical errancy, ambiguity, and broad tolerance is, in practice, utterly unworkable. Ultimately, the moment one abandons the infallibility and clarity of revelation in one source (the Bible), one must necessarily begin to impute infallibility and clarity to another source of authority so that practical doctrinal and moral decisions can be made authoritatively. This source of authority may take a number of forms: religious experience (Protestant Liberalism), a voting assembly's decisions (mainline Protestantism), or an infallible magisterium (Roman Catholicism).

VII. Overall Evaluation and Conclusion

In evaluating Smith's position, one should observe that what he finds fundamentally problematic about *sola Scriptura* is the institutional disunity that interpretive disagreements within Protestantism that it causes. For Smith, these disagreements and divisions make Christian witness less coherent and therefore less strong and appealing to those outside the community of the faithful:

> The more Christians insist on making long lists of theological "essentials" that real or true Christians ought to believe in order to be recognized as within the

---

[85] "We are not doing any of this in order to catch a wave in popular culture or to get more people to come in. We are doing this because we felt motivated by our understanding of Scripture and of our own confessional tradition that maybe this *was something that God was doing that was new and it would be important for us to allow this kind of inclusion*" ("Rev. Elizabeth Eaton Speaks About Being First Female Lutheran Bishop," interview by Huffpost Live. Accessed October 16, 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/rev-elizabeth-eaton-speaks-about-being-first-female-lutheran-bishop_us_5b5079c5e4b0cf38668f737e, emphasis added). See the following places where mainline Protestants use the phrase in order to justify going against biblical injunctions against homosexuality. Note that Wink even admits that this is in contradiction to Scripture. Marvin Ellison, "Practicing Safer Spirituality: Changing the Subject and Focusing on Justice," in Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *Out of the Shadows Into the Light: Christianity and Homosexuality* (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2009), 12; David N. Glesne, *Understanding Homosexuality: Perspectives for the Local Church* (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 2004), 134; Walter Wink, "Homosexuality and the Bible," in Walter Wink, ed. *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 47.

bounds of the true faith and deserving the fellowship of communion, the more the body of Christ becomes conflicted, divided, and disunified—*and the more the credibility of its witness is compromised.*[86]

As we saw earlier, for Smith, Christian revelation is primarily a higher and better set of values (i.e., the law) revealed almost exclusively through the witness of Christ. Indeed, according to Smith, the goal of Christian witness in the world should be to communicate "how best to live in any given sociocultural context."[87] Hence, the subtext of his concerns about institutional disunity is clear. By definition, commandments that cannot be put into practice are meaningless. Consequently, for Smith, the institutional weakness of the church is a significant problem since it makes the church unable to exercise an appropriate level of moral influence on society. Hence, for the sake of social and political power, Christians should abandon their doctrinal differences and get behind the effort to enforce their unique value system through stronger and more unified institutions. Therefore, in spite of the fact that Smith's theology seems to resemble something more like mainline Protestantism than Roman Catholicism, his attraction to Rome makes a great deal of sense. Rome is, after all, the most institutionally powerful and unified church and, therefore, the one best able to enforce its values.

In response to this line of reasoning, a number of observations may be made. First, the moral influence of the church over society is certainly desirable and has indeed played an extremely important role in the development of Western civilization.[88] Nevertheless, from a confessional Lutheran perspective, Smith has almost entirely misunderstood the central mission of the Christian Church. The central task of the church is to proclaim the gospel (Luke 24:47; 1 Cor 2:2). By relativizing doctrinal differences, one will inevitably lose the gospel in a sea of false doctrine. Likewise, if Smith's ideal of supreme tolerance within the church is taken to its logical conclusion (which, in all fairness, Smith does not do), the ultimate result is supreme moral indifference. Those who take such an attitude will inevitably lose not only the gospel but also the law along with it. They thereby compromise the goal of transformative cultural influence that Smith considers to be most important. When one tolerates all values, he will inevitably have none left to promote. This fact can be seen all too clearly in the fate of the mainline Protestant denominations as well as the Catholic Church under the pontificate of Pope Francis.

Smith's second major concern is the question of humility. He uses the term frequently throughout the sixth and seventh chapters. From Smith's perspective,

---

[86] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 146. Emphasis added.

[87] Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible*, 148.

[88] See Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2006).

to claim that one's denominational tradition has correctly read Scripture arrogantly privileges one's own noetic capacities over all others. Yet again, Smith implies that he believes the Bible is a book read like any other book by rational and autonomous human beings.

Nevertheless, as we have already seen, the Lutheran reformers claimed that the Bible is not a book like other books. Holy Writ is clear to the extent that God himself acts as his own exegete and makes it clear by illuminating the darkened hearts and minds of sinners (1 Cor 2:14–15). Through the power of the Holy Spirit operative in law and gospel, Scripture becomes clear to the believer. Rather than puffing up the conceit of sinners, the clarity and certainty that the Spirit provides humbles sinners by revealing the truth that they are totally dead in their trespasses (i.e., the law, John 16:8–11) and wholly dependent on the work of Christ for their salvation (i.e., the gospel, see 1 Cor 1:18–31). This knowledge of God's word makes believers humble precisely because it is certain. Indeed, if this categorical message of total judgment and total grace were uncertain, the sinner would still be allowed the possibility of self-justification and, therefore, pride.

Overall, though well intentioned and containing many valid criticisms, Smith's response to the contemporary Evangelical misuse of the scriptural principle of the Reformation is not entirely adequate. Much like other conservative Protestant converts to Catholicism, Smith does not take into consideration that the Lutheran Reformation's insistence on the power of the external word provides a better solution to the problems posed by the incoherence of popular American Christianity than do Rome's claims of authority.