

## A review of Sproul Book on Catholicism: Are We Together?

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### Part 1: Scripture

Dr. Robert Charles Sproul (born in 1939) is an American Reformed theologian, author of numerous books, and the founder and chairman of [Ligonier Ministries](#). He is known to be critical to Catholicism; in one of his latest books: *Are We Together*, he examined six major differences between teachings of the Catholic Church and those of Reformed Church. Those six are: authority of Scripture, Justification, Church, Sacraments, Papal Infallibility and Mariology.

Sproul considered authority of Scripture as the *formal* cause of Reformation. The other cause, the so-called *material* cause is *justification*. Those two causes were expressed in the two battle cries of the Reformers: *sola fide* (faith alone) and *sola scriptura* (scripture alone).

Sproul affirmed that in the Catholic Church has high view of Scripture, including its divine authorship and its inerrancy. Citing from fourth Session of Trent Council (held on April 1546)<sup>1</sup> he reiterated that according to Catholic teaching Scriptures have come to us either directly from mouth of Christ or His apostles or from the Apostles under *dictation* of the Holy Spirit (Latin *Spiritu Sancto dictante*) and both Old and New Testaments have God as their author. Sproul questioned the word “dictation” as it implies elimination of any human authors to the biblical text, leaving no room for individual styles, perspective, concerns, and so on. Dictation theory of Scripture has been rejected by Protestants. He admitted that Trent did not elaborate what it meant by “the Holy Spirit dictating”. Trent documents were written in sixteenth century and Latin word for dictation has different meaning as it has today. John Calvin, when in 1536, wrote his major work *Institutes of Christian Religion* in Latin used the same word in “*Deus intus dictante*” in Book IV.8.5<sup>2</sup>. The English translation by Henry Beveridge of that phrase is “inward teaching of God”, which may represent closer meaning of Latin word “dictante” in sixteenth century.

Sproul questioned Vatican II decree on inerrancy of Scripture. To him Vatican II made the Catholic Church depart from previous teachings on inerrancy of the Bible as taught by past popes and councils. The phrase he questions is in Dei Verbum III.11<sup>3</sup> which says “*The books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted to put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation.*” He argues that the phrase “for the sake of salvation” makes inerrancy of Scripture only applicable to salvation, in contrary to previous teachings that did not limit the application of inerrancy - though they did admit the use of figurative language in Scripture. He pointed out that there are two groups within the Catholic Church, the conservative who believe that inerrancy of Scriptures covers *all* that it says and the liberal who believe Vatican II did restrict inerrancy only to scriptural teachings on salvation. An article in Called to Communion web site should clarify the issue<sup>4</sup>.

As for positional differences on Scripture, Sproul enumerated two differences. The first one is Canon of Scripture because Catholic Old Testament has more books than that of Protestant. Citing from Trent Sproul listed books not found in Protestant Bible as 1 and 2 Esdras, Tobias, Judith, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, 1 and 2 Maccabees and other books. Those books are referred as *deuterocanonica* (second canon, a term coined by *Sixtus of Sienna* in 1546) by Catholics and as *apocrypha* by Protestants. Sproul made mistake by including 1 and 2 Esdras, which are Trent designation for Ezra and Nehemiah (Trent did say 2 Esdras or Nehemiah) in the list; those two books are also part of Protestant Bible. There are apocryphal books with the name Esdras but they are not part of Catholic Bible. Nomenclature of books of Esdras (Greek for Ezra) is indeed confusing as the same name is applied to different books or the same book has different names<sup>5</sup>. Sproul simply confused those two canonical books with apocryphal 1 Esdras and 2 Esdras of KJV (until 1885 KJV has apocryphal books sandwiched between Old and New Testaments).

There is no single verse in the Bible that tells us how many and which books belong to the Bible. According to Sproul orthodox Protestants believe that canon of Scripture is *fallible collection of infallible*

books while to the Catholic Church it is *infallible* collection of infallible books. He explained what he meant by fallible collection of infallible books using illustration as follows:

*We can perhaps illustrate the difference between the Protestant and Roman Catholic positions by imagining that God gave us ten books, five of which were infallible and five of which were fallible, containing errors. Then He charged us to separate and identify the infallible books. If we were fallible, we might correctly select four of the five infallible books. However, we also might identify one of those fallible books as infallible. Our decisions, of course, would not change the nature of the books. The one infallible book we did not select would still be infallible, even though we failed to include it in our "canon". Likewise, the fallible book we picked would not therefore be infallible. Our decisions would have no effect in this way because we are fallible.*

Sproul: *Are We Together*, page 22-23

Sproul's illustration of the concept "fallible collection of infallible books" begs a number of questions. It says that God gave us both infallible and fallible erroneous books. Why would God give us the latter? Does the illustration imply that: (1) Protestant Bible might contain fallible book(s) and (2) the existence of infallible books not part of Protestant canon? Using the above illustration the concept should be called "fallible collection of infallible and fallible books", isn't it? Those two kinds of books is the outcome of fallible collection as shown in the illustration. But Sproul insisted that those Protestant selected books are infallible. In other words he simply contradicted the illustration he himself made:

*We [Protestants] hold that the church was called to make decisions in history as to whether certain books belonged in the canon, and while those decisions were made with much study and passed through a historical sifting, it is conceivable that the church could have made mistakes in what it included or excluded. However, the books that were chosen are regarded as individually infallible.*

Sproul: *Are We Together*, page 22 (underlined emphasis added)

When God gave us infallible revelation in the form of books written by men, why wouldn't He give us guidance to recognize them among so many other books? This is what the Catholic Church believes, i.e. Holy Spirit guides the Church to select those infallible books. The Church is not infallible by her own power, which Sproul wrongly accused on page 23, but is infallibly guided by the Holy Spirit to determine which and how many books belong to the Bible.

The second Scripture related difference between Catholic and Protestant is the existence of unwritten Tradition which the Catholic Church considers together with (written) Scripture as revelation from God and therefore are both authoritative. The Reformers, of course, considered only Scripture as revelation from God. *God's special revelation comes only in the Scriptures*, wrote Sproul on page 23. On page 24 Sproul pointed out that the draft of Trent said "the truth of God is found *partly* (Latin *partim*) in Scripture and *partly* in tradition" but the final document said "truth of God is contained in Scripture and (Latin *et*) in tradition". He argued that the use of "and", instead of "partly", make Trent statement ambiguous and implies that tradition is *not* source of revelation. Sproul draw this conclusion because as a Presbyterian he *cannot* say that truth of God is contained in Scripture *and* in the Westminster Confession of Faith.<sup>6</sup> Here he made very poor comparison – for sure Westminster Confession of Faith is not the words of God because it is not inspired by the Holy Spirit, something that Sproul himself or any Reformed Christian would freely admit. In contrast Trent defined tradition as truth coming from Christ and His apostles through the Holy Spirit dictation.

*This truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand.*

Trent: *Decree concerning canonical Scriptures*

The use of Latin "et" meaning "and", not Latin "partim" meaning "partly", even reinforces dual (and equal) source of revelation (Scripture and Tradition) as taught by the Catholic Church. Even Protestants would say that the words of God are to be found in Old Testament *and* in New Testament; they would not say "they are found *partly* in Old Testament and *partly* in New Testament", which in fact sounds ambiguous.

Sproul ended the first chapter with the question who has the right to interpret Scripture. Is that right reserved only to the Catholic Church as Magisterium (Teaching Office) or does every Christian have it? *Every Christian has the right to interpret the Bible for himself or herself*, he wrote on page 28. He explained further about that right:

*However this "right" does not include the freedom to misinterpret Scripture. Before God, we do not have the right to be wrong. With the right of private interpretation comes the responsibility to interpret the Bible correctly, not turning the Bible into a lump of clay that can be twisted, shaped, and distorted to fit our own biases.*

Sproul: *Are We Together*, page 28

The question is how to know who has the right interpretation of the Bible? Everybody claims that he or she is guided by the Holy Spirit to interpret the same passage in the Bible yet they end-up with different and even conflicting interpretations. This leads to establishment of different churches with different theological teachings yet all claims to rely on the Bible alone as rule of faith. This even happens within Reformed churches itself – a good example is the conflict between supralapsarian and infralapsarian Calvinists on the issue whether God's decree of salvation was made before (supra) or after (infra) the Fall.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Latin and English translation can be found at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.v.i.i.html>

<sup>2</sup> Calvin Institutes in Latin and its English translation can be found in [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org). Book IV.8.5 in Latin can be assessed at: [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutio2/Page\\_272.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutio2/Page_272.html).

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.calledtocommunion.com/2010/10/vatican-ii-and-the-inerrancy-of-the-bible/>

<sup>5</sup> Columns 2 to 5 shows the same book with different names according column 1

Tanakh	Ezra - Nehemiah		-	--
Septuagint	2 Esdras		1 Esdras	--
Vulgate	1 Esdras	2 Esdras	3 Esdras	4 Esdras
Trent, Douay Rheims	1 Esdras	2 Esdras (Nehemiah)		--
KJV, RSV	Ezra	Nehemiah	1 Esdras	2 Esdras
OSB	2 Ezra	Nehemiah	1 Ezra	--

Tanakh, the acronym of Torah (the Law), Nevim (the Prophets) and Kethuvim (the Writings) is Jewish scripture.

Septuagint or LXX is Greek translation of Jewish Scripture (and other books) from where most of New Testament quotation of Old Testament made.

Ezra and Nehemiah are combined into one book in Tanakh and in Septuagint (2 Esdras).

Vulgate is Latin translation of Old and New Testament made by Jerome in 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. 3 Esdras and 4 Esdras were part of its appendix.

Douay-Rheims is Catholic English translation of the Bible completed in 1582 (New Testament) and in 1609-1610 (Old Testament).

KJV (King James Version) is English translation completed in 1611.

RSV (Revised Standard Version) is English translation published in 1946 (New Testament) and in 1951 (Old and New Testaments). Following request from General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, translation of apocryphal books were added in 1952.

OSB (Orthodox Study Bible) is Eastern Orthodox English translation of Old Testament based on Septuagint published in 1993; its New Testament is NKJV (New KJV) translation.

<sup>6</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith, which was promulgated in 1646 and is still adopted today by most Reformed churches, is Confession of faith in Reformed/Calvinist theological tradition.

For text refer to [http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/)