

The Five Solas of the Reformation: Then and Now¹

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Abstract

After a description of the five *solas* of the Protestant Reformation and their biblical basis, the rejection of the *solas* by the Roman Catholic Church at Trent and Vatican I is traced, focusing on revelation, justification, and worship. The account of Roman Catholic theology is brought up to date by an examination of changes that occurred at Vatican II. A different stance toward Protestants and the wider world is explained by a shift in the Church's view of the nature-grace relationship. Despite this change, the core commitments of the Catholic Church on revelation, justification, and worship remain unaltered. They are held within a less adversarial but still expansionist Rome-centered theology that Protestants must continue to resist.

I. Introducing the Five Solas

The five great *solas*—*sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *solī Deo gloria*—represent a summary of some of the key theological commitments of the Protestant Reformation.² They were expressed first in the specific historical context of a multinational attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church.

¹ This article is a revised and shortened version of Garry J. Williams, *Why Protestant Truth Still Matters: A Biblical Perspective* (London: Protestant Truth Society, 2014).

² “*Solas*” is widely used as an anglicized plural of the feminine of the Latin word *solus*, meaning “alone.”

That attempt met with immediate resistance and it was apparent quite early—certainly following the failure of the Colloquy of Ratisbon in 1541—that Rome would accept no doctrinal reform. When it came, Rome’s own “Catholic Reformation” was willing to embrace the need for a moral reform of the Church, but it would not accept Reformation theology. At the Council of Trent (1545–63) Rome’s response to doctrinal criticism was one of reactionary entrenchment.

Nonetheless, the substance of the *solas* was born not from controversy but from Scripture, as *sola Scriptura* requires. The Reformation is rightly understood as a return *ad fontes* (back to the sources), to the inspired, binding, and sufficient text of the Christian faith. None of the Reformers believed that they were innovating. As the Elizabethan bishop John Jewel puts it in his apology for the Church of England, “God’s holy Gospel, the ancient bishops, and the primitive church do make on our side.”³ Understood historically, Protestant theology was always reactive to Rome; understood theologically, it is the fruit of obedient submission to the tutelage of Scripture. I will therefore examine first the biblical foundation for the *solas*, and then their role in defining Protestantism against Roman Catholicism. As soon as we broach this second aspect, it becomes vital to consider the ways in which Rome has changed since the sixteenth century: is the Rome of Vatican II (1962–65) still the Rome of Trent?

II. The Solas Stated

1. Sola Scriptura

Measured theologically, two of the five *solas* stand out: *sola Scriptura* and *solus Christus*. In the order of knowing, *sola Scriptura* comes first because Scripture is the means by which we come to know Christ. We encounter Christ through encountering at least the truths, if not the very words, of Scripture (John 5:39), and it is in knowing Christ that we know the Father (John 14:9).

As well as being the instrument by which we know Christ, Scripture also has a determinative effect on the rest of our theology. *Sola Scriptura* describes the way in which we know God, and our view of how we know God will determine what we think on all other theological questions. *Sola Scriptura* expresses the understanding of authority and method that shapes the rest of Protestant theology.

³ John Jewel, *An Apology, or Answer, in Defence of the Church of England*, in *The Works of John Jewel*, ed. John Ayre for the Parker Society (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), 56.

Why should Christians submit to the authority of Scripture? Because Jesus Christ himself modeled that submission in his prophetic office as revealer of God the Father. The authority of Scripture and the authority of Christ come together. In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly rebukes a variety of opponents by asking them, “Have you not read?” or “Is it not written?” He corrects the Sadducees: “You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matt 22:29). He affirms that “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). And he resists the temptations of Satan by taking a stand on biblical texts (Matt 4:4, 7, 10). Jesus understood the words of Scripture to be the very words of God. In the Gospels he ascribes words to God himself that in the Old Testament are not presented as words of God (for example in Matt 19:4–5). He bases arguments not only on the words but even on the smallest letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In Matthew 22:43–45 he uses Psalm 110:1 to prove that he is “Lord” by noting that David says “*my* Lord,” a meaning conveyed by the tiny consonant that is the Hebrew pronominal suffix. John Murray rightly concludes that in debating the authority of the Bible it is not the Bible so much as the authority of Jesus that is at stake: “The integrity of our Lord’s witness is the crucial issue in this battle of the faith.”⁴

In one sense this point was not part of the debate with Rome at the Reformation. Rome professed belief in the inspiration and authority of Scripture; it is more a characteristic of liberal theology to deny the authority and inspiration of the Bible. The point at which *sola Scriptura* expresses a distinctive of Protestantism is more in its affirmation of the *sole* final authority of Scripture than in the affirmation of its inspiration. Why do Protestants insist on the unique authority of Scripture? Again, because Jesus did, most notably in his debates with the Pharisees. Like Rome, the Pharisees did not deny the authority of the Scriptures but added to them. Jesus insisted on the unique authority of the written Scriptures over against any additional oral tradition. The only expansion of the Hebrew Scriptures that he authorized was his own teaching and that of his apostles (e.g., John 14:25–26; 15:26–27; 16:12–15). He said nothing at all about extending their authority beyond them to their successors in later generations, nor indeed about who their successors would be. The New Testament itself contains the beginnings of its own recognition as God’s word when Peter describes the letters of Paul as “Scripture” (2 Pet 3:16, *graphē*) and when Paul uses the same term to refer to a text from Luke (1 Tim 5:18, citing Luke 10:7). There are subordinate

⁴ John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (1967; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 42.

authorities in the life of the church such as confessions and catechisms, but they always depend on conformity to Scripture for their weight.

When we speak of the inspiration of the Bible we do not mean that it is a dry, static book, a dull encyclopedia of the divine. Nor do we separate it from God himself, as if it had a life of its own and we might fashion an idol out of it. Rather, as the God-breathed word, the Bible is the living voice of God himself, his love letter to a dying world. The Bible itself speaks of the life-giving power of the word of God, for example in Psalm 33:6:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.

Here God's word and his breath are paralleled, as they are in 2 Timothy 3:16, when Paul says that "all Scripture" is "God-breathed." God's breath has creative power: it gives life to Adam (Gen 2:7) and to spiritually dead Israel (Ezek 37:9–10). This is why the Bible needs no authority beyond itself: it comes with all of God's power. As the voice of God it self-authenticates. Who would dare claim to authenticate it, as if God's authority needed to be propped up by another? The apostles and prophets founded the church, not the church Scripture (Eph 2:19–22). As Luther asks, "who begets his own parent?"⁵

The idea of the self-authenticating authority of Scripture is not a circular argument, contrary to what many, even Protestants, say. Circular arguments are bad arguments, since they have no resting point, no firm foundation. By contrast, the appeal to the self-authenticating authority of Scripture is an argument from a final first principle: God in his word. All systems of thought either have no first principle (being circular), or they have some such first principle; there is no shame in it. For the Protestant, the first principle is God in his word.

Is there not, however, a problem with knowing what Scripture means and how we are to understand it? Do we need an authoritative interpreter? To think so is to imply that Scripture lacks sufficient power and clarity. But the Bible teaches its own active authority. It is the voice of God. Who would dare to tell God that he has not spoken clearly? Nor does the multiplication of voices actually help to narrow the range of interpretations. We only need to observe heated debates among Roman Catholic theologians concerning the role of tradition or non-Christian religions to realize that the plurality

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 238.

of texts in Denzinger has not made Rome's total theology any clearer.⁶

Note, however, that the Bible teaches *sola* but not *nuda Scriptura*. The unique final authority of Scripture does not mean that I could achieve my best theology if I could just get away from everyone else, leaving behind two thousand years of reflection on the text. It is obvious that the catholic (i.e., universal) church has deepened its grasp of biblical teaching on such doctrines as the Trinity, the incarnation, and justification. Only a madman would want to leave all that behind.

2. Solus Christus

In the order of our knowing, the message of Scripture comes first. In the order of being (the *ordo essendi*) the first place is unassailably occupied by the Lord Jesus who is first and last (Rev 1:17). He is the one through whom and for whom all things were created, and in whom they exist (Col 1:16–17). He alone is the “image of the invisible God,” the one in whom the fullness of the Father dwells (Col 1:15, 19). Benjamin Warfield, great advocate of Scripture that he was, describes how the revelation in Christ “stands outside all the diverse portions and diverse manners in which otherwise revelation has been given” because Christ “does not so much make a revelation of God as Himself is the revelation of God.”⁷ In this sense, any account of the *solas* could rightly reflect the order of reality by beginning with *solus Christus*.

The uniqueness of Christ is clear when we view his person and work in terms of the three offices of prophet, priest, and king. In the first chapter of Hebrews the Son is described as “so much better than the angels” because he possesses a unique sonship (vv. 4–5), is uniquely worthy of worship (vv. 6–7), and sits enthroned as the king who will endure forever (vv. 8–12). As the book continues, it becomes clear that the uniqueness of Christ is also focused in his priestly work. He alone took on flesh so that he might rescue his brothers. He alone was able to offer a final and sufficient sacrifice and to live forever to make intercession for his people (Heb 7). As Paul writes to Timothy, “there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5). Jesus himself explains his work as prophet. He alone can make the Father known: “Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to

⁶ “Denzinger” is a common label for the *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Heinrich Denzinger et al., 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), which extends to around 1,400 pages.

⁷ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. Ethelbert D. Warfield, William Park Armstrong, and Caspar Wistar Hodge, 10 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1927; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 1:28.

whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Matt 11:27). Only the Son can reveal the Father because they uniquely indwell one another (John 14:9–10).

3. *Sola Gratia and Sola Fide*

To understand the Protestant’s delight in being saved by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*) we have first to grasp his despair of himself. Without a grasp of the doctrine of sin it is not possible to understand the doctrine of salvation: soteriology responds to hamartiology. The Reformers knew this. They realized that when they were dealing with a false understanding of salvation its root lay in the overestimation of human capacity. When Luther writes against Desiderius Erasmus on the condition of the human will, he commends him for homing in on this as “the real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute,” “the question on which everything hinges,” “the vital spot.”⁸ When John Calvin maintains against Rome that a man must find righteousness outside himself because he is dead in sin, he notes that “a controversy immediately arises with reference to the freedom and powers of the will.”⁹ On this point the Reformers are the true heirs of Augustine, who frequently argued from the bondage of the human will to the sole-sufficiency of divine grace.

This entire tradition echoes the teaching of Paul, who connects the doctrines of sin and salvation, perhaps most notably when he explains to the Christians at Ephesus that they were “dead in trespasses and sins” until God made them alive together with Christ (Eph 2:1, 5). A resurrection is not something to which the one raised contributes; he languishes helpless until God sovereignly breathes new life into him. Paul goes on to state that we are saved by grace as a gift of God and that salvation is not of ourselves but of God (2:8). Indeed, he depicts salvation as an act of creation in Christ (2:10). As the world was created *ex nihilo* by the breath of God without a self-determining choice, so we are re-created solely by the gracious work of the Spirit of God: *sola gratia*.

Sola fide is the proper outworking of *sola gratia*. It was by no means unique to Luther, and while there are some differences between the Lutheran and Reformed doctrines of justification, there is much common ground. Calvin too held that the doctrine of justification is vital for the life of the church: “The safety of the Church depends as much on this doctrine as human life

⁸ Martin Luther, *On the Bondage of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. and trans. Philip S. Watson and B. Drewery (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 333.

⁹ John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, in *Selected Works of John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols. (1851; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 1:159.

does on the soul.”¹⁰ And the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England teach that justification by faith alone is “a most wholesome doctrine.”¹¹

The exclusion of works from any causal role in justification is a repeated theme in Paul. He teaches in Romans 4 that Abraham could not have been justified by works, since that would have given him something to boast about before God. Righteousness was imputed to David “apart from works” (Rom 4:6), hence by faith alone. The works excluded are not just works done before conversion: Paul quotes Genesis 15, from the time after the patriarch responded to God’s call in chapter 12, and the words of David (from Ps 32), who had known God from the womb (Ps 22:9–10). Scripture excludes as the causal ground of justification even works done after conversion.

A word is needed to guard against two misunderstandings. First, our faith itself is not the moral basis of our justification. Our believing does not justify us by reference to itself, but by uniting us to Christ, whose merit alone justifies us. Second, *sola fide* is a statement circumscribed in its doctrinal scope. It is not to be applied more widely than the discussion of the meritorious ground of justification. When we deny a role to works, we are denying specifically a role in providing the moral basis of our justification; we are not denying any place for works. Roman Catholics fear that the denial of the merit of works results in moral license, but the place of works is affirmed by Protestant theology. They are the result of our saving union with Christ. As Calvin put it, in Christ we receive the double grace of his justifying righteousness *and* his sanctifying Spirit,¹² and as the popular epithet accurately summarizes it, faith justifies alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone.

4. Soli Deo Gloria

What is the creation for? Does it have a purpose? If it does have a purpose, does it all have the same purpose? The Protestant answer is that the whole creation is for the glory of God. The world is not about us; it is about the glory of God in Christ. God delights in saving his people for their good, but he does so for his own praise and glory. It is right for God to seek his own praise because he is supremely praiseworthy. Indeed, he must be praised. The perfection of his being so demands that he be glorified that he would be wrong not to glorify himself. Isaiah writes, “My glory I will not give to

¹⁰ Calvin, *Necessity*, 1:137.

¹¹ Article 11, in *Documents of the English Reformation*, ed. Gerald Bray (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1994), 291.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., LCC 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1 (1:725).

another” (Isa 42:8). God is jealous of his glory. It is for him alone and no other. That the Father’s purpose is to glorify the Son is a sure sign that the Son himself is God: God does not share his glory with another. The self-glorification of God in Christ is the final purpose of the entire creation.

We must align our own purposes with the overruling purpose of God for his creation: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor 10:31). The instinct of Protestant theology is therefore to attribute nothing to the creation and everything to the Creator. The first four *solas* are bound together because they have the fifth as their goal: *sola Scriptura* emphasizes the glory of the sufficient word of God, *solus Christus* the unique glory of Christ, *sola gratia* the glory of God as alone our Savior, and *sola fide* the glory of the works of Christ rather than our work.

III. Roman Catholicism before Vatican II

In response to the Protestant expression of the *solas*, the Council of Trent clarified and defined Rome’s view on these and other issues. From a Protestant perspective, three great problems stand out with Trent: its views of revelation, justification, and worship. The situation was if anything worsened by Vatican I (1869–70). I will outline this historic position before turning to consider developments in the twentieth century.

1. Revelation

The brief but dense statement produced by Trent on Scripture and tradition affirms that the revelation of saving truth is contained in two equal sources, the “written books and unwritten traditions.”¹³ While some modern Roman Catholic theologians have tried to reinterpret the Council of Trent, the text is clear: the word of God is found in two different forms, written and unwritten. The Council “receives and venerates with the same sense of loyalty and reverence” both the written form and the unwritten form of the word of God.¹⁴ The Old Testament canon maintained by Trent is not the list of thirty-nine books that would have been used by Jesus himself and was accepted by Josephus and Philo, but includes the writings represented in the Greek Old Testament that were rejected by church fathers such as Origen and Jerome. The unwritten traditions were supposedly dictated orally by Christ or else by the Spirit, and the Council claims that they have been preserved in “continuous succession” since then through the bishops of the

¹³ “Decree on the Reception of the Sacred Books and Traditions,” in *Compendium*, §1501.

¹⁴ *Compendium*, §1501.

Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵ In other words there is a line of oral tradition from Christ down to this present day that contains no doctrinal innovations but faithfully hands on what Jesus and the apostles taught. When it comes to interpreting the twofold form of the word of God, the Roman Church alone has authority.

To this position Vatican I added the doctrine of papal infallibility, locating the supreme authority for interpreting the word of God in the pope himself. The decree on papal infallibility was defined on July 18, 1870. It declares that the pope is infallible when teaching *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and practice, that he can teach thus even without the consent of the Church, and that such teachings are “irreformable of themselves, not because of the consent of the Church.”¹⁶ Even the pope did not claim the right to innovate: when speaking *ex cathedra* he declares the correct interpretation of the already-given word of God.

2. Justification

The Council of Trent does not teach that we can save ourselves by our own effort. It clearly states that divine grace is necessary for salvation. Nevertheless, it does teach that we can cooperate with God in the work of our justification by using the free will that remains after the fall, a free will that has been weakened but not destroyed by sin. In that sense, the Council is semi-Pelagian. According to Trent, faith is only the beginning of justification. Works done in cooperation with the power of the Spirit grow justification so that the justified should be regarded as “having truly merited eternal life.”¹⁷

3. Worship

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer argued that the doctrine of transubstantiation explained why in the Roman Catholic Mass the people would rush from altar to altar to worship the elevated host: “They worshipped that visible thing which they saw with their eyes and took it for very God.”¹⁸ The doctrine of transubstantiation was defined at the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and repeated at the Council of Trent:

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *Pastor Aeternus*, ch. 4, in *Compendium*, §3074.

¹⁷ “Decree on Justification,” ch. 16, in *Compendium*, §1546.

¹⁸ Cited in Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 98.

By the consecration of the bread and wine, there takes place a change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of wine into the substance of his blood.¹⁹

This belief forms the basis for Roman Catholic worship of the bread and wine in the Mass, which Trent takes to be the worship of God himself, “the worship of *latria* that is due to the true God.”²⁰

IV. Contemporary Roman Catholicism

1. *In with the New*

Rome today is not the same as she was in the sixteenth or nineteenth century. Prior to Vatican II the pronouncements of the papacy were increasingly vehement against Protestants, the secular world, and modernizers within the Church (see for example Pius IX’s *Syllabus* of 1864 and Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani generis* of 1950). At Vatican II, however, the Church changed. While Rome is committed to her own form of consistency, and while some Protestant polemics rely on believing that Rome cannot change, the facts of change are clear. A few examples will suffice to introduce the change that has occurred in the last fifty years.

The opening *Message to Humanity* from Vatican II and Pope John XXIII is unique in the history of church councils for its open greeting to “all men and nations.”²¹ The tone is immediately different from the anathematizing voice of Trent: the Church “was not born to dominate but to serve.”²² The desire of the Council is to foster all that is good, wherever it may be found.²³ The Church should seek peace more than anyone else, given that she is “the Mother of all.”²⁴ *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* makes the same point about addressing “the whole of humanity.”²⁵

Traditionally, Rome has insisted that there is no salvation beyond her own bounds: “There is indeed one universal Church of the faithful, outside of which no one at all is saved.”²⁶ Formally, at least, Vatican II agrees with this sentiment: “The Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is

¹⁹ “Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist,” ch. 4, in *Compendium*, §1642; for Lateran IV, see §802.

²⁰ “Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist,” ch. 5, in *Compendium*, §1643.

²¹ *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966), 3.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, 2, in *Compendium*, §4302.

²⁶ “The Fourth Lateran Council (1215),” ch. 1, in *Compendium*, §802.

necessary for salvation.”²⁷ But in practice, the bounds of salvation are extended beyond the Roman communion. The opening *Message* calls “not only upon our brothers whom we serve as shepherds” but also to “all our brother Christians.”²⁸ Here is an acknowledgement of brother Christians beyond the Roman fold. The Council later speaks of how the Church is in many ways “linked with those who, being baptized, are honored with the name of Christian” though they are not in communion with the pope.²⁹ This link is specified as the shared work of the Holy Spirit: “In some real way they are joined with us in the Holy Spirit, for to them, too, he gives his gifts and graces whereby he is operative among them with his sanctifying power.”³⁰ This kind of stance toward non-Catholics explains the booming industry in ecumenical dialogues with other churches that followed Vatican II.

The positive stance extends not only to other Christians, but even to adherents of non-Christian religions:

The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the Last Day will judge mankind.³¹

We might think that this means only that Muslims are not beyond conversion, but the idea is evidently that they can be saved *while remaining Muslims*, because the text continues to say of the next group of those who acknowledge the Creator,

those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.³²

A second change at Vatican II is a greater emphasis on the role of the college of bishops and the laity in the life and work of the Church, producing a much more “democratic” tone than Vatican I.³³ In particular, the “secular” work of lay people is endorsed as part of their spiritual work for God: “the laity consecrate the world itself to God.”³⁴

²⁷ *Lumen gentium*, 14, in *Compendium*, §4136.

²⁸ *Documents*, 6.

²⁹ *Lumen gentium*, 15, in *Compendium*, §4139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Lumen gentium*, 16, in *Compendium*, §4140.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ The term is that of Avery Dulles, in *Documents*, 12.

³⁴ *Lumen gentium*, 34, in *Compendium*, §4160.

A third change in contemporary Roman Catholicism at both Vatican II and in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the more exegetically sensitive use of some biblical texts. Trent quotes the Bible constantly, but it does so in ways that make it say what it does not say. Much of the use of the Bible at Vatican II is more accurate, and the *Catechism* contains sustained pages of exegesis that could pass under the radar of the sharpest Protestant if they were presented without their context. In a related change, Vatican II encourages the laity to read Scripture, requiring that “easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful.”³⁵

2. Out with the Old?

It will not do to say that Rome is *semper eadem* (always the same). Any Protestant who insists that there is nothing new in Rome runs the risk of being taken for an ignoramus. Given the undeniable reality of the changes, we must ask how they can be understood. Most importantly, do these new elements mean that the traditional doctrines that offend against the biblical *solas* have been removed?

Most of the content of pre-Vatican II theology remains entirely intact at the points where it departs most clearly from biblical teaching. The old errors are differently framed and differently voiced, but they remain as they were. There is no movement on the unbiblical elements of the teaching regarding revelation, justification, or worship. This analysis may be sustained by considering the evidence of Vatican II and the 1994 *Catechism* that was written to disseminate the teaching of the Council.³⁶

i. Revelation

Vatican II presents its own innovations not as changes to the traditional position, but as organic developments of it. This is evident in the teaching on revelation. *The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* echoes Trent: “Both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.”³⁷ Referring to Vatican I, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* states unequivocally, “All this teaching about the institution, the perpetuity, the meaning, and reason for the sacred primacy of the Roman pontiff and of his infallible Magisterium, this

³⁵ *Dei verbum*, 22, in *Compendium*, §4229.

³⁶ Pope John Paul II explains that the *Catechism* was commissioned in order to bring the work of the Council to the people; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 3.

³⁷ *Dei verbum*, 9, in *Compendium*, §4212.

sacred council again proposes to be firmly believed by all the faithful.”³⁸ And even as Vatican II emphasizes the collegial role of the bishops, it makes them entirely dependent on the pope: “The pope’s power of primacy over all, both pastors and faithful, remains whole and intact.”³⁹

ii. Justification

Despite numerous ecumenical agreements, there has been no magisterial revision of Trent on justification. Indeed, the 1994 *Catechism* simply reiterates the substance of Trent in a gentler tone, frequently by direct quotation. Justification is defined as “not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.”⁴⁰ Justification itself entails the sanctification of the whole being.⁴¹ This sanctification can be sufficient to merit salvation: “*We can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.”⁴²

iii. Worship

The Mass remains at the center of Roman Catholic worship. The *Catechism* quotes Vatican II, saying that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life.”⁴³ It explains that all the other sacraments are “oriented towards” this sacrament, that it is “the Sacrament of sacraments,” and that in it is contained “the whole spiritual good of the church.”⁴⁴ It is “the sum and summary of our faith,” “the centre of the Church’s life.”⁴⁵ The Mass is identified even as the “cause” of the Church’s communion with the divine life; in other words, it is the action of the Mass which keeps the Church “in being.”⁴⁶ The *Catechism* holds that the bread and wine “become Christ’s Body and Blood.”⁴⁷ It uses the words of Trent to say that the change is “fittingly and properly called *transubstantiation*.”⁴⁸ It explains that the transubstantiated elements are worshiped with the “adoration” due to God, as opposed to just the “devotion” due to Mary.⁴⁹ The host is therefore to be

³⁸ *Lumen gentium*, 18, in *Compendium*, §4142.

³⁹ *Lumen gentium*, 22, in *Compendium*, §4146.

⁴⁰ *Catechism*, §1989, quoting the “Decree on Justification,” ch. 7.

⁴¹ *Catechism*, §1995.

⁴² *Ibid.*, §2010.

⁴³ *Catechism*, §1324, quoting *Lumen gentium*, 11.

⁴⁴ *Catechism*, §§1324, 1330.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, §§1327, 1343.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, §1325.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, §1333.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, §1376, quoting Trent, “Decree on the Sacrament of the Eucharist,” ch. 4.

⁴⁹ *Catechism*, §1378; cf. §971 for the distinction from Mary.

reserved for veneration and carried in procession.⁵⁰ The words of John Paul II are cited in the *Catechism*: “Let our adoration never cease.”⁵¹

iv. More of Mary

Vatican II also affirms the devotion to Mary that had grown since the Reformation. The *Message to Humanity* states the credentials of the Council in terms of Mary and Peter: “We successors of the apostles have gathered here, joined in singlehearted prayer with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and forming one apostolic body headed by the successor of Peter.”⁵² *Lumen gentium*, arguably the most significant reforming text at Vatican II, ends with a section on Mary. Among other things, it affirms that she is “Queen of the universe,” “the beloved daughter of the Father and the temple of the Holy Spirit,” who “far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth,” “a preeminent and singular member of the Church,” “Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix.”⁵³ Mary cooperates with God in the work of salvation. She was “united with him by compassion as he died on the Cross” and “in this singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the work of the Savior in giving back supernatural life to souls.”⁵⁴ For all these reasons, the cult of Mary is to be “generously fostered.”⁵⁵

3. Understanding Contemporary Roman Catholicism

Rome thus still teaches her traditional convictions on revelation, justification, and worship, and she has taken further her exaltation of Mary. And yet alongside all this she has adopted an open and embracing stance. Is the traditional dogma set alongside the contemporary stance in a competition that only one side can win?⁵⁶ Or is there a theological rationale that can identify some kind of coherence to the developments?

In his excellent, persuasive account of the changes in Roman Catholic theology, Leonardo De Chirico argues that the new stance is explained by developments in Roman Catholic treatments of the relationship between nature and grace.⁵⁷ The traditional position, derived from the medieval

⁵⁰ Ibid., §1378, quoting Paul VI in *Mysterium fidei*, 56.

⁵¹ *Catechism*, §1380, citing *Dominicae cenae*, 3.

⁵² *Documents*, 3.

⁵³ *Lumen gentium*, 59, 53, 62, in *Compendium*, §§4175, 4173, 4177.

⁵⁴ *Lumen gentium*, 61, in *Compendium*, §4176.

⁵⁵ *Lumen gentium*, 67, in *Documents*, 94.

⁵⁶ This is the reading favored by David Wells in *Revolution in Rome* (London: Tyndale Press, 1973).

⁵⁷ See Leonardo De Chirico, *Evangelical Theological Perspectives on Post-Vatican II Roman*

scholastics, was that the realms of nature and grace are strongly to be distinguished. The distinction was traced back even to the created state of Adam. Thomas Aquinas believed that man was created with a natural human goodness as part of the image of God, to which was added another kind of goodness, a supernatural gift of grace (which came to be known as the *donum superadditum*). Though it was given at the time of creation, the *donum* was not part of created nature.⁵⁸ Thus Thomas distinguished sharply Adam as a natural man from Adam as a man graced by God.

For Thomas, fallen man therefore retains many natural created capacities still intact. The natural inclination to virtue was “diminished by sin” but not destroyed.⁵⁹ Only the *donum* was entirely destroyed. This is why reason can play such a significant role for Thomistic Catholicism: fallen man retains a considerable natural capacity for reasoning correctly. God, Aquinas believes, can be known by natural men and even *loved* by them. Indeed, in one sense, he is loved by all: “God, in so far as He is the universal good, from Whom every natural good depends, is loved by everything with a natural love.”⁶⁰ Natural law can be a viable guide for fallen creatures, since they retain “a natural inclination to know the truth about God, and to live in society.”⁶¹ Man thus has a twofold happiness, one “proportionate to human nature” attained through natural virtue, and one “surpassing man’s nature” attained by God’s grace through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.⁶² Later Thomists took this position even further. Some of them, especially Thomas Cajetan, argued that there is a realm of pure nature (*natura pura*) that does not need the supernatural to find its goal, but has its own proper end in the natural realm itself. This development of Thomas’s position, which goes beyond his own view that nature could never find its proper end in itself, produced a very strong nature-grace contrast. Grace was firmly contained within the supernatural realm alone, and nature was sufficient to itself. Given such views, we can see why Trent was so insistent on the unique place of the Church as the repository of supernatural grace. Rome’s aggressive anti-Protestant and anti-Enlightenment stance stemmed from the conviction that only she was the realm of grace.

Catholicism, Religions and Discourse 19 (Bern: Lang, 2003), passim. I am greatly indebted to this work for my understanding of the theology of Vatican II.

⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (1948; repr., Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia IIae 112.1 (hereafter, *ST*).

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, Ia IIae 85.1, 2:966.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *ST*, Ia 60.5, 1:301.

⁶¹ Aquinas, *ST*, Ia IIae 94.2, 2:1009.

⁶² Aquinas, *ST*, Ia IIae 62.1, 2:851.

Even though Thomas's *Summa* was enjoined as the basis of theological training by Leo XIII in 1879, twentieth-century Roman Catholicism increasingly challenged the later Thomistic views of the nature-grace antithesis. G. C. Berkouwer and others have drawn attention to the impact of the *nouvelle théologie* (new theology) of French Catholic theologians in the 1940s and 1950s. Their teaching explains the improved use of the Bible compared to Trent because they emphasized *ressourcement*, a return to the Bible and the church fathers. But they also stand behind the changed stance of Vatican II toward non-Catholic churches and the non-Christian world.

Theologians like Henri de Lubac led the transformation of Rome's attitude. His most controversial work focused on the nature-grace issue. He argued against the later Thomists that nature itself always seeks its fulfillment in grace. He made the case most notably in his 1946 work *Surnaturel*, and with more circumspection in *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (1965). While he is clear that fallen nature itself is not penetrated by supernatural grace, he has a much more spiritual account of created nature than the later Thomists, and in some respects than Thomas himself. Where later Thomists denied that in pure nature there is a natural desire for God, de Lubac argues for a strong *desiderium naturale* in man.

The influence of this new theology of nature yields a whole new picture of the Church and its relationship to nature. Nature, even fallen nature, is viewed as always looking for God. If nature is like that, then the Church may take an embrace view of human religious phenomena, drawing men from other religions gently and gradually into her own body. Rather than standing against everyone else as the only repository of grace, Rome can warmly invite a searching world to herself since she is the center of a gracious work of God that nonetheless extends beyond herself. As David Wells describes it, for the new Catholicism "the reality of God has become identified with the reality of the earthly city, the sacred is found *in* the secular, Christ is *in* the world."⁶³

Initially this tendency was strongly resisted. De Lubac was removed from his teaching role, and his books were taken out of circulation in 1950. In the same year Pius XII issued *Humani generis*, essentially an attack on his position. But de Lubac's fortunes changed dramatically when Pope John XXIII appointed him as a consultant to the theological commission that was preparing for Vatican II. He was later made one the Council's theological experts, and Paul VI made him a member of the theological commission. In 1983 John Paul II made him a cardinal.

⁶³ Wells, *Revolution*, 54.

Other elements of the new theology are also important if we are to understand the changes at Vatican II. Yves Congar, another French theologian, is notable for his influence on the Council's stance toward other Christian churches. In *Chrétiens désunis* (1937) he argued for real elements of grace among non-Catholic churches.⁶⁴ His theology of tradition was also crucial for enabling the Church to embrace contradictory elements. Rather than viewing tradition as a fixed code of sharp-edged dogmatic statements provided by the Magisterium, Congar redefined it as a living, organic reality embracing the spiritual life itself. Writing in 1964, he explains how the tradition has been passed down "not by discursive means" but by "the concrete experience of life." Its transmission is more like an entire upbringing than discrete moments of instruction.⁶⁵

Such a concept of tradition means that there is room to adapt the interpretation of past definitions of doctrine. A fascinating example of this is Congar's own reading of Trent on Scripture and tradition. He distinguishes the belief of the authors of Trent and their immediate successors from the later theological interpretation of their text. They believed that certain truths were contained in tradition and not in Scripture, but this is not enough to invalidate a different reading which finds the full presence of the truth in both Scripture and tradition.⁶⁶ In short, the text meant one thing then but can be taken differently now: "The historical analysis of the question with its array of quotations must not be allowed to dominate and conceal its real significance."⁶⁷

Like de Lubac, Congar was suspended from his teaching role in the 1950s. But in 1959 the pope appointed him as a theological consultant on the commission preparing for Vatican II. Avery Dulles comments that his influence at the Council "was equal to, and perhaps greater than, that of any other Catholic theologian."⁶⁸ Pope John Paul II made Congar a cardinal in 1994.

On the basis of developments like Congar's concept of tradition, Vatican II sets out a historical, developmental, and provisional conception of the Church: "While she slowly grows, the Church strains toward the completed kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory

⁶⁴ Yves Congar, *Chrétiens désunis: Principes d'un "œcuménisme" catholique* (Paris: Cerf, 1937), translated as *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, trans. M. A. Bousfield (London: Bles, 1939).

⁶⁵ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 22.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 40–43.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, vii.

with her King.”⁶⁹ The Church must change in order to mature toward glory. Vatican II teaches that even the word of God is not complete yet in the Church: “As the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfilment in her.”⁷⁰ As she matures, the Church can blend together elements in her tradition that others regard as incompatible, waiting for them to synthesize into a whole. As Hans Urs von Balthasar states, “Catholic thinking remains open, indeed its special characteristic is that it tends to keep opening up even more.”⁷¹ De Chirico contrasts the *either-or* way in which evangelicals view Rome’s innovations with the *both-and* way in which Rome herself sees them. Rome, he maintains, has “sufficient cognitive equipment” to hold together contradictory theological positions.⁷²

It is vital to note that Rome’s new openness is a prelude to drawing all elements of grace in *toward herself*. While she views the “separated brethren” more positively, they are expected to move toward communion with the true Church. For all the gentler tone, Rome has not weakened her self-identification as the proper locus of divine grace. As De Chirico argues, she emphasizes catholicity, reaching out to all, and yet also *Romanitas*, drawing all in to communion with Peter, where the divine life is fully to be found.⁷³

The Church is understood to be the place where humanity and divinity properly meet. God and man meet first in Christ, the God-man, and now in the Church. Vatican II compares the Church’s existence, “by no weak analogy,” to the incarnation. The Church is so like Christ that the 1943 encyclical *Mystici corporis* states that the Church “is, as it were, another Christ [*quasi altera Christi persona*].”⁷⁴ This teaching leads De Chirico to speak of “the theandric constitution of the Church.”⁷⁵ The Church as the continuation of the incarnation is the presence of Christ in the world. It is therefore the sole vehicle for the full mediation of grace to nature. De Chirico comments, “That mediation is the theological *raison d’être* of the Roman Catholic Church *per se* and the chief role of the Church within the wider Roman Catholic system.”⁷⁶

The Roman Catholic Church of Vatican II therefore sees herself as a *centripetal* reality in the world, the goal toward which all who realize their

⁶⁹ *Lumen gentium*, 5, in *Compendium*, §4106.

⁷⁰ *Dei verbum*, 8, in *Compendium*, §4210.

⁷¹ Cited in De Chirico, *Perspectives*, 200.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 82.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁷⁴ *Compendium*, §3806.

⁷⁵ De Chirico, *Perspectives*, 257.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

inclination toward God are drawn. *Lumen gentium* states that the “many elements of sanctification and of truth” found outside the Church are “gifts belonging to the Church of Christ” and “forces impelling toward catholic unity.”⁷⁷ The work of the Church in the world is to take up and refine the good found outside her.⁷⁸

V. Protestant Truth Still Matters

How then should Protestants respond to the contemporary Roman Catholic Church? I am asking here how Protestant churches should respond to the Roman Catholic *Church*, not how individual Protestants should respond to individual Roman Catholics. Those two responses will often need to be very different. There are unorthodox Roman Catholics who believe very little of what the Church teaches, both in a more liberal direction and in a more biblical direction. The encouragement given to the laity to study the Bible at Vatican II must, given the power of the word of God, mean that there are more people within some Roman Catholic congregations discovering the truth of the gospel than previously possible. Such individuals need kind nurture in biblical teaching. They need to understand the errors of the Church, but the stance of Protestants toward them as individuals must be one of gentle encouragement. At the levels of ministry and denomination, however, the situation is very different because we are dealing with the Church’s official representatives and her defined doctrinal position.

Much of the impulse for ecumenism comes from a sense of increasing cultural isolation. Timothy George speaks of an “ecumenism of the trenches.”⁷⁹ Compared to an aggressively secular culture, Rome seems close to Protestants on some issues. But it is identity with the gospel, not relative proximity to it, that is the proper basis of unity. We must be confident that the gates of Hades cannot prevail against the church, no matter what enemies she has.

How then should a Protestant view the Roman Catholic Church today? Rome’s new open but embracing stance exists alongside the theology of revelation, justification, and worship that was taught at Trent and Vatican I. Some theological changes have rendered Rome’s total position incoherent—for example, on the question of salvation for those outside the Church. On that issue the new position simply contradicts the old. But on revelation,

⁷⁷ *Lumen gentium*, 8, in *Compendium*, §4119.

⁷⁸ *Lumen gentium*, 17, in *Compendium*, §4141.

⁷⁹ Cited in Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 192.

justification, and worship Protestants have to deal with the ongoing affirmation of the old doctrines and now *also* the centripetal stance within which Rome holds them.

The historian A. G. Dickens once wrote that the tenuous link between medieval Roman Catholic writings and the gospel “could be demonstrated with almost mathematical precision.”⁸⁰ The same is true of the Roman Catholic doctrines of revelation, justification, and worship. At each point, Rome rejects the biblical *solus*. Scripture is rendered only a partial deposit of the word of God and is subjected to the church. Justifying righteousness is found in the works of the believer. The glory that is due to God alone is wrongly given to the elements in the Mass. On three most crucial questions, Rome departs from Scripture: “How is the mind of God revealed?” “What must I do to be saved?” and “How is God to be worshiped?” Since the doctrine of revelation functions as an engine for all other doctrines, the departure here opens the door to multiple innovations that are not taught in Scripture. The departure on justification fosters a trust in the believer’s own works that if followed through fatally shifts his confidence away from Christ and onto himself. The worship of the elements in the Mass is quite simply idolatrous. In trying to prove transubstantiation, Thomas Aquinas himself argues that the substance of the bread cannot remain, because if it did this would mean the elements “could not be adored with adoration of latria.”⁸¹ Thomas rightly saw that if the bread remained bread, the worship would be unthinkable. And the bread does remain. Rome is not excuplated by *saying* it is Christ who is being worshiped, any more than a profession to be worshiping Yahweh excused Israel when she bowed down to the golden calf (Exod 32:5).

At the heart of the problems with Rome’s theology is the displacement of Christ by the Church itself and by Mary. It remains Rome, specifically the pope, who is at the heart of the Church’s claim to be the center of God’s gracious work in the world. *Romanitas* is as strong as it ever was. Peter (emphasized at Vatican I) and from him the whole Church (emphasized at Vatican II) has assumed the function of Christ. In this precise sense, Rome stands *anti Christou*, “in the place of Christ.” And it remains Mary who takes from Christ his unique place in heaven. Vatican II says that the assertion of Mary’s role in our redemption does not threaten the uniqueness of Christ because it “flows forth from the superabundance of the merits of Christ, rests on his mediation, depends entirely on it, and draws all its

⁸⁰ A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, rev. ed. (1967; repr., Glasgow: Fontana, 1988), 17.

⁸¹ Aquinas, *ST*, 3a 75. 2, 5:2442.

power from it.”⁸² But Christ’s is the kind of unique mediation that cannot be shared. Roman Catholic apologists sometimes point out that the Bible itself invites mere men to make intercession, but there is a world of difference between urging a man on earth to pray to the Lord Jesus in heaven and promoting a woman to be Queen of the universe. As *solus Christus* is in the order of being the first *sola*, so Rome’s failure to yield to Christ his unique place is her most serious error.

I find an analysis of contemporary Roman Catholicism that recognizes the changes within it more troubling than one that attempts to freeze-frame the picture in the 1560s. Rather than observing elements of Rome’s departure from the gospel in a piecemeal atomistic fashion, understanding the dynamic within Vatican II Catholicism highlighted by De Chirico opens our eyes to her entire global project. A more peaceful political and social relationship between Roman Catholics and Protestants is greatly to be appreciated given the tragic history of bloodshed. Nevertheless, Rome remains fundamentally acquisitive of what she regards as her own. I am not implying that there is anything underhanded about Rome’s stance, as if it were a cunning popish plot: she is perfectly plain in her official documents about how and why she conducts her relations with Protestants as she does. If we miss this, or willingly occlude it, it is our fault. Rome tells us frankly that the elements of grace that exist outside her are on the move: moving toward her, propelled by their own inner reality to rejoin the Mother of all humanity by submitting to Peter’s successor in Rome. De Chirico describes how the Church is “programmatically searching outside its circle for whatever can enrich and expand it.”⁸³ Given her departure from the biblical *solas*, it is a search by which we must determine not to be found.

⁸² *Lumen gentium*, 60, in *Compendium*, §4176.

⁸³ De Chirico, *Perspectives*, 235.