

Did the Noble-minded Bereans Believe in the “Bible Alone”?

By Steve Ray

[Intro to this Revised Article: Several folks have reviewed my original article published in This Rock Magazine. A few good comments and suggestions were made which I implemented into the article. With a bluster of sound and furry James White posted a response on his website, often dealing with issues outside the scope of the article. One in particular I have addressed. Taking these various critiques in hand, I have tried to sharpen my pencil and fine-tuned the argument. My premise is strong, my argument substantial, and the Catholic position true. I hope you find it helpful and instructive.]

A prominent anti-Catholic organization [Endnote 1] out of Oregon, with Dave Hunt at the helm, publishes a monthly newsletter entitled “The Berean Call.” The title is taken from Acts 17 where Paul refers to the Bereans in Asia Minor as “noble-minded,” and Dave Hunt chose the title to promote his belief in *sola Scriptura*. *Sola Scriptura*—or the “Bible only,”—is a Protestant doctrine developed in the sixteenth century, which says that the Bible is the sole source of infallible teaching and is the only and final judge in all matters of the Christian faith. It was developed and “institutionalized” by Martin Luther, though he had precursors who began to espouse the idea a century or so earlier as a reaction to the historic teachings of the Catholic Church and the Church Fathers of the first centuries.

The “stool” of authority had always had three legs, both in the Jewish economy and in the early Church. For the Jews it was the Law, the Oral Tradition and the teaching authority of Moses and his successors. In the Church the same three legs remained on the stool: the Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition and the teaching authority (magisterium) of the Church (the chair of Moses was replaced with the chair of Peter). Luther rejected the teaching authority of the Church and the apostolic tradition, and in so doing was left with *sola Scriptura*—the Bible alone—and a one-legged stool. [Endnote 2] There is a new movement afoot among Protestant apologists (and anti-Catholics) to imply that the Fathers in the early Church held to the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Unfortunately, what they actually prove is only that it is as easy to misinterpret and twist the Fathers as it is the Scriptures—both with the possible destruction of their own souls (2 Pet 3:15–18). I will move on since this is not the thesis of the current article.

Dave Hunt has unwittingly turned the Bereans on their head—severely misrepresenting them—since the noble-minded Bereans actually condemn Dave’s *sola Scriptura* position. Fundamentalists have turned this passage on its head for too long—claiming the Bereans as one of them—but it is high time that Catholics reclaim the passage. Many Catholics have been unnecessarily troubled by this text and explanations from a Catholic perspective have too often been mediocre. But, not only can this biblical text be easily explained by Catholics, it is actually a very strong argument against *sola Scriptura*, and a convincing defense for the teaching of the Catholic Church.

We are told that the Bereans were more noble-minded (open-minded, better disposed, fair-minded) [Endnote 3]. But an important question must first be answered: the Bereans were

more noble-minded than whom? The Thessalonians! It is very convenient for Fundamentalists to pull this passage out of its context and force it to stand alone. In so doing their case seems convincing, but the context tells us the real story. Before we look at the Bereans, let's take a look at those they are compared to, the Thessalonians. What did the Thessalonians do that made them less noble-minded?

Let's take a look at Acts 17:1–9.

“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, ‘This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.’ And some of them were persuaded, and joined Paul and Silas; as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked fellows of the rabble, they gathered a crowd, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brethren before the city authorities, crying, ‘These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.’ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard this. And when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”

The Thessalonians rejected Paul and his message, and after denouncing him, they became jealous that some believed, and they treated Paul with contempt and violence—they threw him ignominiously out of town. Why? “For three weeks he [Paul] reasoned with them from the scriptures” in the synagogue as was his custom. They did not revile Paul the first week, or the second, rather, they listened and discussed, but ultimately they rejected what he had to say. They obviously had listened, compared it to the Old Testament scriptures, and then decided that Paul was wrong. We must remember that there were many proclaiming a wide variety of new teachings, supposedly based on the Scriptures and revelations from God. Heresies, cults, and sects were as numerous in the Roman Empire as they are today. It would seem the Jews in Thessalonica had a right to be skeptical.

That Scripture was the basis and foundation of their arguments against Paul is clear. They “reasoned” with Paul from the Scriptures. [Endnote 4] Some were persuaded and some were not. Jealousy was not the initial action taken by Paul's opponents though that would be the argument made by those who would discredit my thesis. They would say, “The Bible does not say they opposed Paul because they rejected his teaching but because they were jealous.” The Bible does say their visible reaction to Paul was jealousy, but reason and context make it quite obvious that jealousy came as a consequence of the majority rejecting Paul's teaching and their subsequent anger and jealousy because of a small

minority that *did* accept and believe Paul’s teaching. They first reasoned, and second, unlike their believing neighbors, they were unpersuaded and therefore became jealous when many left their “flock”. [Endnote 5] Luke specifically says, “some were persuaded” which certainly implies that the others were *not* persuaded. The non-persuasion came first and resulted in jealousy.

Rejecting Paul’s teaching as a corruption of Judaism, they were zealous for the Jewish faith and the Jewish Scriptures. It was Scripture that was the basis for their argument and logically the material basis for their rejection of Paul’s new revelation. C. K. Barrett writes, “Paul has set up the Scriptures as his witness: does their testimony, when tested, prove his case?” (*The International Critical Commentary: Acts* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark: 1998], 2:818). The Thessalonians arguing from Scripture say Paul is not speaking truth and reject him. It should be obvious that if a Protestant wants to hold the Bereans up as an example of *sola Scriptura*—one who utilizes the Bible-alone—then they have to admit the Thessalonians into the same club. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.

Now, let’s look at Luke’s comment about the noble-minded Bereans:

“The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Beroea; and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men” (Acts 17:10–12).

First, we must realize that when Protestants use this passage as a proof text for the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, they should realize that those in question were not Christians; they were Hellenistic Jews. There was no doctrine of *sola Scriptura* within the Jewish communities, [Endnote 6] but the Scriptures were held in sacred regard. Also, the Jews had no reason to accept Paul’s teaching as “divinely inspired” since they had just met him. When new teachings sprang up that claimed be Jewish, or a development of Judaism, the rabbis would research to see if it could be verified from the Torah.

If one of the two groups of Jews could possibly be tagged as adherents to Protestant-style *sola Scriptura*, who would it be, the Thessalonians or the Bereans? The Thessalonians, of course. They also, like the Bereans, examined the Scriptures with Paul in the synagogue, [Endnote 7] yet they rejected his teaching. They did not accept the new apostolic message—the word of God—, deciding after three weeks of deliberation that Paul’s word contradicted the Torah. [Endnote 8] Paul’s teaching contradicted Scripture: how could the Messiah suffer and be accursed by hanging on a tree? When some of the Greeks and prominent citizens did believe, the Jews became jealous, and rightfully so, from their perspective, since Christian believers began separating themselves from the synagogue and began meeting elsewhere apart from the synagogue—at Jason’s house. [Endnote 9]

It seems logical that they first rejected Paul's words as untrue after analyzing them and arguing against them, and then rejected them further for pragmatic reasons—they were losing the adherents to Judaism. The fact that they opposed Paul demonstrates they rejected his message. If anyone could be classified as adherents to *sola Scriptura* it was the Thessalonians, who were less noble-minded from Luke's perspective. "For three Sabbaths [Paul] reasoned with them from the Scriptures" and they ended up their "Bible study" by concluding that Paul was wrong and his new teaching was wrong—in a word they concluded that Paul was teaching an "unbiblical" doctrine—and they rejected his conclusions and therefore the Messiah, based upon their reading of the Scriptures. [Endnote 10] This is certainly implicit in the text especially when compared with the Bereans' actions. One could say that the Thessalonians argued with Paul's interpretation of Scripture from their own interpretation of Scripture and they could be considered the adherents of *sola Scriptura* in their day—at least in a Protestant-type methodology.

I would make one digression here. I am not arguing that there is something wrong with "searching the Scriptures" to make sure a teaching is correct. Quite the opposite. Christians are encouraged to do this, to follow the Bereans' example, but to conclude that this passage proves the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is quite disingenuous. Many Evangelical preachers and commentaries will imply that the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is taught in this passage but that means very little to the objective reader who knows that the Evangelical is usually working off a set of Protestant assumptions which they then read anachronistically back into this passage.

The Church constantly searches the Scriptures to make sure her teachings are in line with the written word of God. It is from these Scriptures, the infallible, authoritative, inspired, inerrant Scriptures that all Catholic doctrine is mined, defined, developed, understood and taught. Nothing taught by the Church as official doctrine contradicts the Scriptures—it may contradict some Protestants' faulty interpretation of Scripture, but it does not contradict the Scriptures as understood from ancient times and espoused by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church. Developed organically yes, contradicting Scripture, no, never.

The Bereans, on the other hand, were not adherents to a Protestant-style *sola Scriptura* for they were willing to accept Paul's new oral teaching as the word of God (as Paul claimed his very oral teaching was). [Endnote 11] The Bereans, before accepting the oral word of God from Paul, a tradition as even Paul himself refers to it, [Endnote 12] examined the Scriptures to see if these things were so; however, it does not say they searched the Scriptures *alone*. They did so for it was their common ground with the Christian, Paul. They were noble-minded precisely because they "received the word with all eagerness." [Endnote 13] Were the Bereans commended primarily for searching the Scriptures? No. Their open-minded willingness to listen was the *primary* reason they are referred to as noble-minded—not that they searched the Scriptures. A perusal of grammars and commentaries make it clear they were "noble-minded" not for studying Scripture, but for treating Paul better, more civilly than the Thessalonians—with an open mind and generous courtesy. [Endnote 14] They were noble-minded for they were eager and warmly greeted Paul; the Thessalonians were not noble-minded for they abused Paul in an egregious manner. [Endnote 15] The Bereans were open-minded; the Thessalonians were closed-minded. The Bereans were open to receive new revelation; the Thessalonians were closed to the Gospel.

The Bereans accepted Scripture and the new tradition; the Thessalonians held to their wrong interpretation of their authority, the Jewish Bible.

Protestants often overstate their assumptions based on this verse. Luke does *not* say that the Bereans searched the Scripture *alone*. Luke affirms that the Bereans “searched the Scriptures daily” but does this make the dogmatic statement that James McCarthy would have us believe (citing Acts 17:11 as his proof-text) that, “Scripture is the only infallible interpreter of Scripture” (*The Gospel according to Rome* [Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publ., 1995], 308? He also uses Acts 17:11 as a proof-text that proves every believer has the “ability and the right to interpret Scripture” (ibid., 309), yet the Thessalonians did the same, exercising their right also, and they rejected the Messiah on the basis of their “ability and right to interpret Scripture”. Paul was pronouncing the official teaching of the Church and the Thessalonians used their Bible to reject the “magisterium’s” teaching. In so doing they condemned themselves. Men like McCarthy and Hunt continue the tradition of the rebellious Jewish Thessalonians by using their Bible, twisting it still today to reject the teaching of the apostolic authority today, the Magisterium.

But what were the Bereans doing when they listened to Paul? They were examining the Scriptures because the Old Testament Scriptures were the only point of common ground between the Christians and the Jews. Paul often related to the Greeks by quoting from their philosophers (Acts 17:22 ff.), using the source of authority the Greeks understood, were familiar with, and respected. The Jews in Berea, and Paul the Christian, claimed the Old Testament in common, and it was upon this common ground that they reasoned. [Endnote 16]

The Bereans were eager to accept words of God from the mouth of Paul, *in addition to* what they already held to be Scripture, that is the Law and the Prophets. Even if one says that Paul preached the Gospel and not a “tradition” it is clear that the Bereans were accepting new revelation that was not contained in their scriptures. There was also no basis in their Jewish Bibles to believe they should expect new revelation and new documents added to the Scriptures as additional infallible, inspired writings. This was definitely a new teaching. [Endnote 17] These Berean Jews were actually accepting oral teaching, the tradition of the apostles, to be equal to Scripture—the actual word of God—in addition to, and an “extension” of, the Torah. [Endnote 18] This is further illustrated by the reception of Paul’s epistles as divinely inspired scripture (see 2 Peter 3:16) [Endnote 19] when the Jews had no reason to believe God would provide further revelation in addition to the Old Testament, which is exactly what the New Testament is. [Endnote 20] From the perspective of anti-Catholics, the *Thessalonians* would have been more noble-minded for they loyally stuck to their canon of Scripture and rejected any additional binding authority (spoken or written) claiming to be infallible truth from the mouth of a Christian apostle. The Bereans did not operate from a Protestant-styled *sola Scriptura* and were willing to except extra-biblical revelation, provided it came from a divinely accredited teacher like Paul.

Why did the Bereans search the Scriptures? Because it was the *sole* source of revelation and authority? No, [Endnote 21] but to see if Paul was in line with what they already knew—to

confirm additional revelation. [Endnote 22] Remember, they were not Christians. They did not recognize or submit to the “Magisterium of the Church” for they were being evangelized, not trained as Christians. They could not submit to his apostolic teaching and oral tradition blindly. But, once they *did* accept the credibility and truth of Paul’s words as the oral and spoken word of God, they accepted the new revelation as God’s word, both what Paul gave them in writing, by practice, and by word of mouth. By practice? Yes, he lived the Gospel and the Christian revelation as an example in their midst for a period of time. He taught them to celebrate the Eucharist, how to baptize, how to marry, how to interpret Scripture, and how to teach others. He did not tell Timothy to pass the Book along to the next generation but to teach them so they could teach others (2 Tim 2:2). Five generations are covered in this one verse.

After this point, like the converts who believed in Thessalonica, they realized and believed that the new teaching of Paul was true and espoused the apostolic tradition and the Old Testament equally as God’s word. [Endnote 23] Therefore they accepted the apostolic authority and the councils, which means that the determinations of Peter in the first Church Council in Acts 15 would have been binding on these new Gentile converts. The Jews of Thessalonica would have condemned Peter’s biblical exegesis at the Church Council in no uncertain terms. They would have scoffed at the Church having authority over them—the Torah was all they needed. However, there is no question that Paul’s words, and those of the Church Council were morally binding on the new believers and they accepted it as such.

But if you think the Bereans needed to check everything Paul taught to make sure it didn't contradict their interpretation of the Old Covenant, then let's try an experiment. Suppose Paul says to the Bereans, "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all . . . For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value." (Galatians 5:2, 6). Okay, let's check that out. Let's whip out our Pocket Tanakhs (with words of Moses in red) and "search the Scriptures . . . to see if what Paul said was true." (Acts 17:11). What will we find if we double-check his message against the Scripture? Well, we'll find Genesis 17:10-14:

This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. . . For the generations to come every male among you . . . must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

The Scriptures say that circumcision is to be an "everlasting covenant" that cannot be broken. Now here is Paul telling us to reject it. What should we do? If we really do hold Scripture as the "supreme rule of faith," we should send Paul packing. Perhaps we should even stone him.

If you reply that Paul was teaching a new covenant, and therefore the details of the old covenant may not necessarily apply, I would point out that the same could be said of virtually any Scriptural objection the Bereans could have raised. So then, what's the point of continuing to check Paul's new teaching against Scripture? If it agrees, great. If not, then Paul would probably

tell them that they are either misinterpreting the Scripture, or that it no longer applies to the New Covenant.

If those who claim the Bereans held to *sola Scriptura* theology, must then realize that the Thessalonians also searched the Scriptures and debated the passages from the Jewish Bible which he quoted. They rejected Paul because Paul claimed to be the voice of “additional revelation” (something the Church has never claimed for herself, since public revelation ended with the death of the last apostle); [Endnote 24] those who were willing to accept the apostolic tradition—the new revelation hidden from the foundation of the world (Eph 3:9; Col 1:26)—as binding were more noble-minded.

Is this passage a proof text for those who espouse *sola Scriptura*? Hardly, in fact this biblical text proves too much for anyone adhering to *sola Scriptura*. Anti-Catholics love to associate themselves with the Bereans, but the Bereans actually condemn them. So, Luke rebuked the Thessalonian Jews in his praise of the Bereans, but the praise for the Bereans falls far short of application to Fundamentalist Protestants. Fundamentalists fall into the category of those less noble-minded, those who held to a form of *sola Scriptura* and rejected the oral word of God contained in the apostolic tradition and the teaching authority of the Church.

To be consistent with his novel theology of *sola Scriptura*, Dave Hunt really ought to rename his monthly newsletter. Let me suggest a new title: *The Thessalonian Call*.

Appendix A: A Challenge from Gary Hoge to a Protestant Friend on the Internet

I want you to pretend for a moment that you are a first-century Berean Jew. Now suppose one Saturday a stranger comes into your synagogue and addresses the congregation. He says that his name is Paul, and he brings you the exciting news that the long-awaited Messiah has finally come! No, he didn't actually restore the kingdom to Israel, as expected. In fact he was murdered a few decades ago by the Romans. But, Paul says, that this is exactly what was supposed to happen to the Messiah, and he offers to prove it from Scripture. As he does so, you read along with him to make sure he's giving you the straight scoop. Eventually, you're convinced. Jesus is the Messiah, and Paul is his "ambassador" (2 Cor. 5:20). So now that that's out of the way, Paul can get down to the business of sharing with you the Messiah's new teachings. What I want you to do, being the good *sola Scriptura* Jew you supposedly are, is whip out your pocket Tanakh (with words of Moses in red) and show me the verses you'd use to verify the following apostolic teachings:

- "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all." (Gal. 5:2. HINT: see Gen. 17:10-14).
- "You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you." (Gal. 4:10-11. HINT: see Ex. 12:17, Ex. 31:13, Lev. 23:31, Lev. 23:41).
- "[B]y observing the Law no one will be justified." (Gal. 2:16. HINT: see Lev. 18:5).
- "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." (1 Thess. 4:16-17).
- "As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself" (Rom. 14:14).
- "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. . . . When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." (1 Cor. 15:22-26, 28).
- "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!" (1 Cor. 6:2-3).

- "And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming." (2 Thess. 2:8).
- "The law was put into effect through angels by a mediator." (Gal. 3:19 *Where does the OT say the law was put into effect through angels?*)

I don't think you can do it. I don't think the Bereans could either, and I don't think they tried. I think they accepted Paul's teachings, not because they could prove every one of them from the Old Testament, but because they acknowledged his apostolic authority as "Christ's ambassador" (2 Cor. 5:20). Like the Thessalonian converts, they accepted his teaching "not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God" (1 Thess. 2:13). Your attempt to read back into the Berean community a *sola Scriptura* methodology is entirely anachronistic. However, I invite you to prove me wrong. If you can prove that Paul's new teachings were true, from the Old Testament alone, I'll be mighty impressed. Happy hunting!

Endnotes

Endnote 1: I have no problem calling Dave Hunt and his organization “anti-Catholic” since one of their express purposes is to debunk and discredit the Catholic Church—something I don’t think they would deny. Anti-Catholics often claimed that they *love* Catholics and want to help them understand the “true Gospel” and since they *love* Catholics, they couldn’t possibly be anti-Catholic. However, I am not commenting on their “love” for individual Catholics but their disdain for and opposition to the Catholic Church herself. “Protestant apologists” is what some prefer to be called, and such is appropriate to a degree, unless of course they go beyond defending their own Protestant beliefs to an outright attack on the Church herself—which is, in my opinion when the description “anti-Catholic” begins to apply. There are Protestant apologists and there are anti-Catholics. For “anti-Catholics” to deny they are “anti” or against the Catholic Church seems to be disingenuous to me.

The prefix “anti” means *against* and “anti-Catholic” well describes many Protestant ministries (such as Bartholomew Brewer, Dave Hunt etc.), though of course not all or even most of them. There are many organizations and individuals who make it their express purpose to oppose the Catholic Church. Since I myself argue with various Protestant doctrines, does that then make me and others defenders of the faith “anti-Protestant”? No. I am not expressly opposed to Protestantism and consider Protestants who believe in Christ as my brothers and sisters in the faith. I hold no contempt or hostile feelings toward the Protestant churches or individual Protestants. I love and respect my Evangelical roots and I don’t hate them or harbor disdain. People who leave the Catholic Church often become hostile and hateful of their roots whereas I don’t know any Protestants-turned-Catholic who demonstrate the same hostility. I do, however, argue with the unbiblical and unhistorical theology of the many and varied Protestant sects. If someone implies that my argument to some Protestant theology (especially in the area of ecclesiology) qualifies me as an “anti-Protestant”, then I guess in a very limited sense the term might be appropriate.

Endnote 2: Some proponents of *sola Scriptura* try to paint Catholics as putting up a straw man

by misrepresenting *sola Scriptura* and then triumphantly knocking it down. The first problem that presents itself is this: What *is* the official teaching of Protestants on *sola Scriptura*? One fellow said to me, “You misrepresent Protestantism. When I criticize the Catholic Church I go directly to the authoritative documents of the Catholic Church, therefore making sure to represent it fairly.” I answered, “You have a great advantage over me in that you *have* an official documents to consult. Where do I find the *official* documents of Protestantism? Are *you* and *your* writings the authoritative dogma of Protestantism? Is *your* definition of *sola Scriptura* the *official* definition for all Protestants?” This is the classic dilemma. As even Martin Luther stated, “There are almost as many sects and beliefs as there are heads... There is not an individual, however clownish he may be, who does not claim to be inspired by the Holy Ghost, and who does not put forth as prophecies his ravings and dreams” (cited in Leslie Rumble, *Bible Quizzes to a Street Preacher* [Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1976], 22 as quoted in *Crossing the Tiber*, pg. 45).

Every time a Catholic tries to define “*sola Scriptura*” some good intentioned Protestant—or not-so-good-intentioned “anti-Catholic”—screams foul saying something like, “You do not accurately portray (or possibly even understand) the Protestant position.” I am forced to laugh at such an assertion as though this poor fellow actually thinks there IS a Protestant position. The funny thing is, in the first generation of Reformers they couldn’t even agree among themselves on their doctrine. John Calvin wrote to Melanchthon saying, “It is of great importance that the divisions, which subsist among us, should not be known to future ages; for nothing can be more ridiculous than that we, who have broken off from the whole world, should have agreed so ill among ourselves from the very beginning of the reformation” (Patrick F. O’Hare, *The Facts About Luther* [Rockford, IL: TAN Books, rev. ed., 1987, orig. Cincinnati, 1916], 293 quoted in *Crossing the Tiber*, pg. 44).

James McCarthy gives a simply definition of *sola Scriptura* by saying “Scripture is the church’s only rule of faith” (*The Gospel According to Rome* [Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publ., 1995], 308). This seems simply enough. There may be a lot of qualifications that various Protestant theologians may want to add to this simple statement, but this is sadly the essence of *sola Scriptura*. Without the Church’s authoritative teaching and determination, we would not even have a closed canon of Scripture for it is the Church’s prerogative to close the canon of Scripture. If not the Church, then who?

Quoting from the verses on the Bereans, anti-Catholic author James G. McCarthy gives a practical application of his simple definition of *sola Scriptura*, writing, “Scripture is the only infallible interpreter of Scripture” (*The Gospel According to Rome* [Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publ., 1995], 308). What he seems to forget in this passage on the Bereans (which he cites as his authority for this statement) is that it is Paul and the Bereans who are interpreting the Scripture. What they are interpreting is also Paul’s oral teaching, considering that his tradition is what he claims it to be, the word of God (1 Thes 2:13). Paul is infallibly interpreting the Scriptures, acting as a member of the Church’s first Magisterium.

Another recent book; in fact, the first book I know of to officially defend *sola Scriptura* since its invention in the 16th century (though it had precursors a few years earlier though it was not the teaching of the early Church as some would like to twist the Fathers to assert it was), states a similar definition as McCarthy’s. In the chapter *What Do We Mean by Sola Scriptura*, Dr. W. Robert Godfrey echoes McCarthy by saying, “As Protestants we maintain that the

Scripture alone is our authority (*Sola Scriptura*, ed. Don Kistler [Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publ., 1998], 1). He then goes on to qualify his statement on page 3 by stating, “The Protestant position, and my position, is that all things *necessary* for salvation and concerning faith and life are taught in the Bible clearly enough for the ordinary believer to find it there and understand.”

Oh really! Evangelicals, even among themselves, cannot decide whether baptism is necessary or not. Others cannot determine whether “eternal security” exists or not. There are at least a thousand variations on these doctrines. Even the very Reformers themselves could not come to an agreement as to whether the Eucharist was essentially the Body of Christ and involved in eternal life or merely a symbol. In fact, some left the castle in Marburg in 1529 refusing to shake hands and acknowledge brotherhood with their Protestant cohorts. Things have not improved over the centuries and Protestants today are in more of a quandary now than then, even though some may chant the mantra “Official Protestant teaching, official Protestant teaching, official Protestant teaching!”

Endnote 3: “*Noble-minded, open-minded* ou|toi h\san eujgenevsteroi tw`n ejn Qessalonivkh/ *these were more open-minded than those in Th. Ac 17:11*” *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, 2nd ed., rev. and augmented [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 319).

“Thus the Jews of Berea ‘were more noble [in character] than those of Thessalonica’ in their welcome and cordial treatment of the apostles” (Celas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publ., 1994], vol. 2, pg. 94).

“eujgenhv”, ev”: a willingness to learn and evaluate something fairly—‘willingness to learn, to be open-minded, to be noble-minded.’ ou|toi de; h\san eujgenevsteroi tw`n ejn Qessalonivkh/ ‘the people there were more open-minded than the people in Thessalonica’ Ac 17.11” (*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* ed. by Johannes Louw and Eugene Nida [New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1989], no. 27.48).

“Originally refers to nobility of birth, it came to denote those qualities which were expected in people so born, in the same way as Eng. ‘noble’. Moffet renders ‘more amenable’, LC (better) ‘more generous’, . . . It is the equivalent of Lat. *generosus*, ‘noble’, ‘liberal’, ‘free from prejudice’” (F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975], 238).

Endnote 4: I am not trying to make the case that the Thessalonians believed in *sola Scriptura* as propounded by Protestants today, for I state clearly in this article that NONE of the Jews did so at this time. I am saying that if the Bereans are held up anachronistically as adherents of *sola Scriptura*, then let's put that shoe where it really belongs--on the Thessalonians. Let's expose them as the ones actually holding to a Scripture-alone theology. It makes more sense, if one or the other is to be painted as believers in *sola Scriptura* that it be the Thessalonians since they didn't accept Paul's extra-biblical revelation, but the Bereans did.

Endnote 5: G. Campbell Morgan writes that the word “jealous” would better be translated “zeal”: “The word ‘jealousy’ is a very awkward word here. It should read springing out of the zeal of the Jews; for it is the very word that Paul used concerning them in his Roman letter, ‘I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge’” (*The Acts of the Apostles* [Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1924], 403).

Endnote 6: Although they are frequently referred to as the “people of the book” in reality the Jews had a strong unwritten tradition that accompanied their scriptures, along with an authoritative teaching authority as represented by the “seat of Moses” in the synagogues (cp. Mt 23:2) (For more background and information on the “seat of Moses”, see my book *Upon this Rock*).

Exegetical scholar Floyd V. Filson writes: “The scribes, mostly Pharisees, copied, taught, and applied the Mosaic Law and the oral tradition, which they claimed was an integral part of the Law, *received through a direct succession of teachers going back to Moses*. Moses’ seat [was a] synagogue chair which symbolized the origin and authority of their teaching. Jesus does not challenge their claim; he seems here to approve it” (*A Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pg. 243; italics mine).

Endnote 7: Acts 17:2, 4 “For three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ... And some of them were persuaded.”

Endnote 8: The Jews were rejecting the message of Paul based on their understanding of the Old Testament. Paul’s teachings were unjustified looking at it from their Scriptural perspective. How could the Messiah of God be cursed by hanging on a tree like a common criminal, publicly displayed as one who bore the judgment of God? What kind of king and Messiah would that be? This was a seeming irreconcilable situation to the Jews and they rejected Paul’s teaching on the Messiah because of their interpretation of the Torah. “In his presentations, Paul discusses three facts: the Christ had to suffer, he had to rise from the dead, and he is Jesus proclaimed by Paul. The Jews objected to the teaching that Christ died on the Cross, because to them a criminal hanging on a tree (cross) was under God’s curse (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13)” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990], 614).

Paul discussed passages which “foretold the sufferings of the future Messias. And this was precisely the greatest obstacle to overcome. For the Jews looked forward to the Messias as the supreme national hero, who would march triumphantly from victory to victory, whereas Paul described him as a poor, humble artisan who had died on the cross” Giuseppe Ricciotti, *Paul the Apostle* [Milwaukee: Bruce Publ. Co., 1953], 307.

According to Richard N. Longenecker, “For Jews, the proclamation of a crucified Messiah was scandalous (cf. 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 5:15), a “blasphemous contradiction in terms (Bruce, Galatians, 166). Undoubtedly the central problem for all Jewish Christians was how to understand Jesus as God’s Messiah and yet as cursed by God, with the magnitude of the problem only heightened by the pronouncement of Deut 21:23” (*Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990], 41:122).

Endnote 9: The Jews had the Scriptures and they considered themselves the authoritative interpreters of the Torah (e.g., Mt 23:2). The Gentiles were leaving the synagogue to follow Paul. Who were the Gentiles to interpret Scripture and decide important theological issues and accept additional revelation? They were the dogs, not the chosen custodians of the oracles of God? William Barclay writes, “As usual Paul began his work in the synagogue. His great success was not so much among the Jews as among the Gentiles attached to the synagogue. This infuriated the Jews for they looked on these Gentiles as their natural preserves and here was Paul stealing

them before their eyes” (William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976], 128).

“Paul’s successful drawing away of the Gentiles roused the envy of the Jews. The Gentiles were potential converts to Judaism, but Paul had proved more effective than the synagogue in persuading them to take the step of full commitment. Many Gentiles who were attracted by the more spiritual aspects of Judaism were unwilling to take the step of circumcision and were content to remain as God-fearers. So the Jews resolved on action” (I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981], 5:278).

Endnote 10: “[Paul’s evangelism] was based on the Scriptures, the common authority accepted by Jews and Christians, and it was conducted by means of argument. He opened up the meaning of the Scriptures (Lk. 24:32) and brought forward what they said as evidence for his case” (I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1981], 277).

The Greek word used for “opening” (as in “opening the Scriptures”) is *dianoivgw* and means to “open completely” as in expounding. The basis of their argument and discussion was Scripture. “Paul’s argument turned (as in the synagogue might be expected) on the interpretation of the OT Scriptures.... Paul’s argument as a whole is based on Scripture; it is Scripture that he ‘opens’ (expounds). The more general sense is probably better: he argued on the basis of Scripture, and the argument consisted of exposition and affirmation” (C. K. Barrett, *The International Critical Commentary: Acts* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998], 2:810). The Scripture was the basis of argument. The Thessalonians argued from Scripture to refute Paul and the apostolic teaching.

Endnote 11: 1 Thes 2:13: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.” Interestingly, Paul acknowledges that those Thessalonians who *did* believe, as distinct from “the Jews” that did not, received Paul’s word as the word of God. His tradition was the word of God. His tradition was additional revelation added to and equal to the Bible the Jews already had. They went beyond what was already written and accepted new revelation, new tradition, new Scripture. “The Jews” refused, holding to the Scripture as they knew it.

Endnote 12: 2 Thes 2:15: “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.”

2 Thes 3:6: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

1 Cor 11:2: “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.”

Endnote 13: “[Eagerness defined as] willingness, readiness, good will; Ac 17:11 here with emphasis on goodwill and absence of prejudice” (*A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich.–2nd ed., rev.

and augmented [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], defining *proquimiva*).

Endnote 14: “The account of Paul’s reception at Berea is the classical description of a more well-disposed and open-minded response by the Jews to the Gospel. They were zealous to hear what Paul had to say, and so they met with him daily (and not merely on the Sabbath)” (Marshall, 5:280). There are some who espouse the idea that the Jews were “more noble minded” because they studied the Scriptures, not primarily because of their kind acceptance of Paul. They argue that receiving and searching are presented in the Greek not as two separate actions but as one action. Such is certainly not proved but seems an idea forced by a *sola Scriptura* Protestant tradition. The Bereans were more noble minded, more amenable, more open and kind in the way they treated Paul, not primarily because they studied the Bible. Their reception of Paul, and their study of the writings were a *result* of their noble character, not the *cause* of it. Luke’s contrast is with the ignoble mob that beat people up and the Bereans who graciously received Paul and his message. As Spicq writes, “The Jews of Berea ‘were more noble [in character] than those of Thessalonica’ in their welcome and cordial treatment of the apostles” (Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publ., 1994], 2:94, brackets his).

Endnote 15: F. F. Bruce writes, “For, with commendable open-mindedness, they brought the claims made by Paul to the touchstone of Holy Writ instead of giving way to jealousy” (*The Book of the Acts* in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* series [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ., 1984], 347). Catholics also hold to the Scriptures as the touchstone of the Faith.

Endnote 16: Did the Bereans check out every aspect of Paul’s teaching to verify it with the Old Testament in a “*sola Scriptura* manner”? They *couldn’t* have checked out everything Paul revealed because much of what he disclosed and taught was new revelation. According to Paul himself, this new Gospel, this new revelation “was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to god’s holy apostles and prophets (Eph 3:5). It had been “kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints” (Col 1:26). Protestants today cannot do what they claim the Bereans did, comparing everything the Apostles taught with Scripture. They just accept the canon of the New Testament without the full confirmation of every point from the Old Testament and assume the books are new and true revelations since the tradition of the Church decided upon these books of the New Testament and closed the canon for all Christians.

Endnote 17: See the Appendix by Gary Hoge demonstrating the improbability of the Bereans practicing *sola Scriptura*.

Endnote 18: The argument may be put forward that *sola Scriptura* is only valid during times when there is no new revelation. During “normative times” in the Church, times when revelation is not forthcoming, *sola Scriptura* is the rule. Where are we given an explicit retirement clause on tradition? Where are we told “tradition and the words of the apostles will become null and void as soon as the Bible is published”. One’s breath is taken away by such a huge leap of assumption. If the Book was to be the sole authoritative basis of infallible truth for the Christian, why doesn’t it say so of itself? Where do we find *sola Scriptura* taught in the Bible? It takes a

great leap of faith and presumption to attempt to force such a doctrine down the throats of all believers when it is not even taught in the book from which all doctrine supposedly must be explicitly, if not implicitly taught. Where is it taught? We find Paul nearing the end of his life and very concerned about the stability of the churches he had founded and the bishops he had appointed. He reminds Timothy that it is the CHURCH that is the “pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). Why not the Bible? Why not say, “The time of revelation is about to end so prepare yourself to teach the churches *sola Scriptura*, teach them that the only authoritative source for the Church is the Book that won’t actually be finally collected for almost 400 years, but after that time the Book is the only infallible guide.” Well the young bishop might ask, “What shall we do in the meantime and who will interpret the Book in four centuries once it is given to us? And, who will decide what it contains and its limitations?” Protestant apologists need to analyze their assumptions a bit more closely and recognize the chaos their recently invented doctrines have brought into Christendom.

Endnote 19: 2 Pet 3:15–16: “So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.” Here Peter seems to acknowledge Paul’s writings as equal to the “other scriptures” which can be presumed to refer to the Old Testament. New revelation was added to previously revealed scripture.

Endnote 20: At the “Council” of Jamnia in about 90 A.D. the Jews determined that anything written after Ezra was not infallible scripture. They also commented that the gospels concerning Christ were neither inspired nor canonical. We do not know much about the deliberations at Jamnia, but we do know that they mentioned the Gospels of the New Testament. They specifically mentioned them in order to specifically reject them. F. F. Bruce writes, “Some disputants also asked whether the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), and the gilyonim (Aramaic Gospel writings) and other books of the *minim* (heretics, including Jewish Christians), should be admitted, but here the answer was uncompromisingly negative” (*The Books and the Parchments* [Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984], 88).

Endnote 21: The Jews always had a strong oral tradition and the teaching authority passed down from Moses.

Endnote 22: There is no doubt that Paul did not *just* teach the Old Testament. He clearly sees himself as the presenter of new revelation. An example is Ephesians 3:1–5: “For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.”

Endnote 23: Someone may say there was no apostolic tradition but that Paul merely taught them the simple gospel. However, Paul was an apostle and he deposited with them a tradition so the Church is correct in “assuming” it was apostolic tradition. Passages in Paul’s epistles show

that he is passing on a tradition and he gives no “retirement clause” to accompany it. When did this tradition cease to be God’s word and binding on believers?

2 Thes 2:15: “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter.” Paul’s spoken words (“taught”) were equal to his written epistles. The “us” refers not only to Paul, but also to Silvanus and Timothy (2 Thes 1:1).

2 Thes 3:6: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

1 Cor 11:2: “I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I have delivered them to you.”

Endnote 24: The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoting *Dei Verbum*, says, “The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (CCC 66). Public revelation ceased with the death of the last apostle.