

SACRED SCRIPTURE AND SACRED TRADITION

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One of the key passages that adherents of Sola Scriptura turn to in the attempt to defend Scripture as the sole rule of faith for the Church is 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (NAB). However, when taken in context with the two verses that directly precede it, one sees that Paul appeals to more than just Scripture as a rule of faith—he charges Timothy to hold fast to what he has received from those who believed before him: "But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, and that from infancy you have known the sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" (14-15). This paper, therefore, shall examine all four of these verses (2 Tim 3:14-17) in order to help reveal the rich depths of their meaning, and to show why, from her earliest days, the Church has always been built up in and rooted firmly upon the two equal pillars of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.



The context of these verses begins with Paul's reminder to Timothy that he has followed and imitated his "teaching, way of life, purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, and sufferings" (3:10-11). Thus, the stage is already "set," so to speak, to show how faith and the Christian life "comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17). It is Christ's word which is heard when the Apostles preach; it is the Apostolic preaching which works in full communion with His Word in order to provide the Christian both a foundation and a rudder for his life in Christ. As our Lord Himself said to His Apostles, "Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you, rejects me" (Lk 10:16). In keeping with this tradition, then, St. Paul begins his exhortation to Timothy on how to stay faithful and grow in his life in Christ with the reminder that faith is always lived in communion with those who have gone before him—and in a particular way, with the faith and teaching of the Apostles.

Beginning with verse 14, Paul exhorts Timothy to "remain faithful" to what he has learned and believed. Fidelity—faithfulness—is a virtue, and like all virtues, it requires active exercise and practice. However, unlike other virtues that connote fidelity (perseverance and steadfastness, for example), the phrase "remain faithful" implies more of a spirit of rest and receptivity towards the gift received. Just as any who live a vocation of total self-giving to another can testify—whether they be Christian spouses in the Sacrament of Marriage, priests of Jesus Christ espoused to His Bride, the Church, or religious men and women consecrated to Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church—although love is a choice, it is lived in the very ordinariness of fidelity. This means remaining, being, and staying committed to the love that unites them, the love, which, though it continues to grow, is built upon the unchanging, fundamental choice that they made one day. It is in this same way that St. Paul presents the disposition which Timothy must have towards the deposit of faith he has received: he must cherish it, keep his eye always on it, and not swerve from the possession of this gift. The fundamental moment that he received the deposit of faith is unchanging; however, by remaining faithful to it, he will allow this faith to grow within him.

In his letters, St. Paul also presents the more active dispositions of fidelity that are also necessary to bear towards the deposit of faith received: "holding fast" (2 Thes 2:15, 1 Cor 11:2) and "guarding" (2 Tim 1:13, 1 Tim 6:20). As Fr. George Montague explains, "Holding means first of all clinging to [the tradition] in faith." He compares this to the attitude of Our Lady, who is reported by the Gospel of Luke two times to have kept everything that happened to her Son, as well as all of His words and actions, in her heart, pondering them (Lk 2:19, 51).<sup>1</sup> In the words of Jesus Himself, she is the disciple who is blessed because she "heard the word of God and kept it" (Lk 11:28). In this comparison with Our Lady, much can be gleaned of the dispositions required to "hold fast" to something in order to "keep" it preserved and intact. Firstly, as Jesus says, obedience is required to keep the word of God. Obedience is a virtue which cannot operate fully and freely without humility, the humility necessary to renounce one's own will, ideas, way of seeing things and

interpreting the word, in order to embrace another vision. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes this as the "obedience of faith," the full submission of intellect and will to God.<sup>2</sup> As it explains, the word "obey" comes from the Latin word which means, "to hear or listen to." Thus, in reference to faith, this is "to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself [ . . .] The Virgin Mary is its most perfect embodiment."<sup>3</sup> In reference to the Apostolic Tradition, then, one can see that this disposition of obedience—rooted in humility—is necessary in order to adhere to that which is not one's own, but is received from those who have gone before him.

Secondly, one's heart must be undivided and undistracted to hold fast to the Word of God and the deposit of faith. Mary could not have kept all of Her Son's actions, words, choices, and gestures if she was distracted when He spoke, or if she allowed her mind and heart to be filled with vain or useless thoughts. One can say that she lived to listen to her Son; "more than watchman for daybreak" (Ps 130:6) did Our Lady wait upon every word that would come forth from the mouth of God (c.f. Mt 4:4). So too must the hunger of the Christian's heart be: to hear, receive, and hold fast to every word which comes from the mouth of God, whether it is found in Sacred Scripture, or whether it is found in the living body of Apostolic Tradition, which has come to the Church from Christ Himself.

Returning to 2 Timothy chapter 3, St. Paul reminds Timothy that another reason to remain faithful to what he has received is because "[he] know[s] from whom [he] learned it" (14). He knows the trustworthiness of his teachers, who have principally been his mother, grandmother, and Paul.<sup>4</sup> This verse serves as a bridge from the one pillar (Sacred Tradition) to the other pillar (Sacred Scripture). For, all of Timothy's teachers in the faith have taught him with both pillars: from Paul, with Apostolic teaching and authority ["Take as your norm the words you heard from me [ . . .] guard this rich trust" (2 Tim 1:13)], and from his mother and grandmother, who from his infancy, taught him with the Sacred Scriptures (2 Tim 3:15). In this verse, the "Scriptures" referred to are the Jewish Scriptures, which Timothy's mother would have taught him before she became a Christian.<sup>5</sup> As St. Paul says, it is these Scriptures that give one "wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15)—that is, "they become a source of saving wisdom when one accepts them as fulfilled in Christ Jesus."<sup>6</sup>

This verse on Scripture leads Paul to explain the power and work of Scripture in the life of the believer. Although the "Scriptures" referred to in verse 15 are the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament), "it is a moot question to what extent this statement can be applied to any writings of the New Testament. [For ] how many of these books had been written, or, if written, recognized by the time 2 Timothy was composed?"<sup>7</sup> In the Sola Scriptura debate, many Protestants assume that here, "Scripture" refers to the entire canon of Scripture as it exists today; however, the question above is truly the question at hand. If we were to take St. Paul literally here, "Scriptures" likely referred to our present-day Old Testament, as well as any of the written words of Jesus and apostolic writings that were in circulation at the time of the writing of 2 Timothy.<sup>8</sup> The extent of this is unknown, but we do know that it is far from the New Testament that we have today. Thus, to claim that Sola Scriptura is based upon this verse is actually to limit the power of its defense. As Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote, "If the argument from this passage proved anything, it would prove too much, viz., that the Scriptures of the New Testament were not necessary for a rule of faith."<sup>9</sup> This is because, as has been seen, little (if any) of the New Testament would have been in circulation and accepted as divinely inspired at the time of St. Paul's writing of 2 Timothy.

If, then, it is clear that the entirety of the Bible is not what Paul is referring to, and although it is undoubtedly "inspired by God," he describes it as merely "useful" for teaching, refutation, correction, and training in righteousness, where does the Sola Scriptura argument hinge upon? The answer is in verse 17, where St. Paul says that Scripture has the power to equip the man of God for every good work. The Greek words used here—"artios" ("suitable," "correct") and "exartizo" ("thoroughly furnished")—are the basis for the lexical argument to defend the sufficiency of Scripture. As Patrick Madrid notes, "Although some Greek scholars note that artios and exartizo could mean sufficient [ . . .] A telling fact [as to their actual meaning] is that no major Bible translation, not even those produced by the most ardent supporters of Sola Scriptura, renders either artios or exartismenos 'sufficient'."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in lexicons which do list "sufficient" as a possible rendering of these two Greek words, it must be kept in mind that it is listed as a third or fourth possibility. This is significant "because lexicons list meaning beginning with the most common and ending with the least common."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is evident that "sufficient" is not at all a likely rendering of these Greek words—and as such, neither is Sola Scriptura likely from these verses.

From St. Paul's words to Timothy on the undoubtedly inspired (in Greek, literally, "breathed by God"<sup>12</sup>)

nature of Sacred Scripture, one cannot find any grounds for seeing it as the only and sufficient rule of faith and life for the Christian. What is found, however, is the power of Scripture that works in conjunction with the equally inspired and preserved Apostolic Tradition. These two pillars operate in communion with each other, so that one can only stand fully and freely when one stands upon both. In keeping with this Pauline understanding, may we always "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours" (2 Thes 2:15).

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1 George Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 97.

2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 142.

3 CCC, 144.

4 *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 57:44, p. 359.

5 Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, 185.

6 Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, 185.

7 *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 57:44, p. 359.

8 Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, 185.

9 John Henry Cardinal Newman, "Essay on Inspiration in its Relation to Revelation," London, 1884, Essay 1, Section 29, in Dave Armstrong, *A Biblical Defense of Catholicism* (Manchester: Sophia Institute Press, 2003), 15.

10 Patrick Madrid, "Sola Scriptura: A Blueprint for Anarchy." *Catholic Dossier* (1996), in Patrick Madrid, *Envoy for Christ: 25 Years as a Catholic Apologist* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2012), 15.

11 Patrick Madrid, "The White Man's Burden." *This Rock Magazine* (1993), 5.

12 Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, 185.

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