

ROMAN
CATHOLICS
AND
EVANGELICALS

AGREEMENTS AND DIFFERENCES

NORMAN L. GEISLER
AND
RALPH E. MACKENZIE

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
Johannes von Staupitz ,
the vicar-general of the Augustinian Hermits
and Luther's father confessor, and others, who, throughout church history, have kept
alive the Pauline and Augustinian doctrine of salvation by grace

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FOREWORD

Co-belligerents, competitors, or fratricidal brethren? As so often happened in the Soviet gulags, Christians of varying denominations and emphases are discovering that they have more in common with each other than with the secular world that denies God. Indeed, committed “traditional” or “orthodox” believers from various denominations have more in common with each other than with “liberals,” revisionists, and modernists within their own groups. As the late Georges Florovsky said when queried why he, an Eastern Orthodox refugee from both Communism and Nazism, would turn up in an evangelical, even fundamentalist Calvinist circle: “The Christian is never a stranger where our blessed Lord is loved and worshiped.”

Roman Catholics and conservative evangelical Protestants often find themselves fighting the same enemies. Enemies are those who do not merely attack traditional Christian beliefs and what today are called “family values,” but who wish to ban every expression of faith in God, every trace of the moral standards of the Bible, from an increasingly secularistic, self-righteous, and—if God’s Word is true—self-condemning and doomed society.

How is it possible that Protestants and Catholics could rally together for the same cause? Both have memories and traditions of bitter conflict. Protestants can recall the martyrdoms under Queen Mary—“Bloody Mary”—in England and the Duke of Alva in the Low Countries; persecutions in Germany, Austria, and Spain; the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre in France; and even incidents in recent years, in countries where a reactionary kind of Catholicism prevailed. But Protestants have not only been victims. Where the machinery of the state was in Protestant hands it has frequently been employed

against Catholics, albeit perhaps less brutally (e.g., England, after it became Protestant, Sweden, the North American colonies). Where there was no outright persecution, there has often been discrimination; until the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960 it was commonly held that no Roman Catholic could ever become president of the United States. And we must not forget the wars of religion, the terrible Thirty Years' War that devastated central Europe being only the longest and most destructive example.

Of course there are misunderstandings that have divided Christendom. Catholics do not worship the Pope, and evangelicals do not think that it is fine to divorce at will a spouse with whom one is no longer pleased (or, in the case of Henry VIII, that king who embarrassingly began the rule of Protestantism in England, to cut off her head). But by no means are all the differences that divide based on misunderstandings. There are some real and fundamental-sounding differences in interpretation and application, where each side thinks itself right, but where the final and conclusive word is not apt to be pronounced until judgment day. In addition, some of the misunderstandings are all but impossible to clear away, because both sides have a long tradition of commitment to them and investment in them. Nevertheless, when all is said and done, evangelical Protestants and traditionalist, believing Roman Catholics have so many convictions and commitments in common that it would be foolish as well as wrong in the sight of the One whom we all claim as our Lord Jesus Christ to wrangle with each other in the face of the common enemy.

The Christian church has an incredibly rich spiritual and intellectual tradition. Simply in terms of volume, a tremendous part of this tradition has its repository in the Roman Catholic Church. Most of the great theologians of the early church wrote in Greek, but they were soon joined by the Latin speakers, and after the time of John of Damascus in the seventh century, virtually all of the major works of theology were written in Latin. Even Luther wrote in Latin, and the most important work in the Reformed tradition, John Calvin's *Institutes*, was written in Latin, although Calvin later produced a translation in his mother-tongue of French. Although Luther, Calvin, and the other great thinkers of the Reformation era and later criticized Roman Catholic doctrine and various interpretations of the Fathers and doctors of the church, they nevertheless learned much from them and relied extensively on them. It is impossible to reject Roman Catholicism and the teachers it honors (*tout court*)—for example, Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas—without also discarding much of the rich treasure of Christian faith, morals, and life.

When dealing with a rich intellectual and spiritual history that fills hundreds of volumes and contains much that is vital—as well as a significant amount of material that is superfluous, misleading, or actually harmful—it requires virtually infinite patience, care, and attention to detail to sort the wheat from the chaff, the wholesome from the harmful. The authors have approached this monumental task with energy and patience. They have done so, as they confess, not merely out of intellectual curiosity, or in order to present a more perfect and complete presentation of the fundamental core of the Christian faith, but because the hour demands and the Lord requires that we who name his name and claim his allegiance devote ourselves primarily to proclaiming him and defending his cause and his people, rather than wrangling among ourselves.

It is vitally important for those who love and worship the same sovereign Lord, Catholic and Protestant, to stand together against the forces of unbelief and moral evil that beset us on every side. In order to be able to do this, however, it is important for us to understand the foundational things that we have in common, as well as to identify the irreducible differences that remain, and to be able to assign these differences a proper place on a scale that ranges from matters of taste and style in worship to basic doctrines on which the gospel and salvation may depend. Professor(s) Geisler and MacKenzie, with dedication, delicacy, and skill, have undertaken the monumental task of showing us how to do this. Almost two thousand years of Christian history have produced a vast number of witnesses, testimonies, arguments, polemics, dogmatics, worship styles, spiritual communities, and parachurch organizations, scattered across several major and minor confessions and innumerable denominations. The authors display an encyclopedic knowledge of Christian life and thought through the centuries, and handle it with understanding, sympathy, and clarity.

This volume has the size and comprehensiveness of a reference tool. Issues are handled systematically and with elaborate, detailed footnoting. It would be a shame, however, to treat it merely as a source or tool; those who read it from cover to cover will find it informative, edifying, and stimulating. It will help them to see that while evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics have and will continue to have differences that cannot be swept under the table, in the words of Cardinal Suenens, “the walls of separation do not reach up to heaven.” He that is with us is stronger than those that are against us.

Harold O. J. Brown

Zermatt, Switzerland

Holy Week, 1994

INTRODUCTION

Before Vatican II, Roman Catholics and Protestants had little contact with each other. On the Protestant side, many thought that the Pope was the anti-Christ, that Catholics worshiped Mary, and that even Unitarians were to be preferred to Roman Catholics.

A case in point is that of Paul Blanshard, a well-known Catholic “basher” of a generation ago. Blanshard, author of *American Freedom & Catholic Power*, assured fundamentalists and evangelicals that the Vatican has sinister designs on our freedoms in general and religious liberty in particular. Blanshard was later revealed to be a garden variety secular humanist, and evangelical Christians probably had more spiritual common ground with Fulton J. Sheen, the popular Roman Catholic television preacher, who was a contemporary of Blanshard.

There were, to be sure, similar mistaken notions on the Catholic side. Some regarded Protestants as little better than pagans. We were perceived as ignoring the value of works and disregarding church history prior to the Reformation. The intervening years have seen some changes take place in the perceptions between these two groups. With the coming to the fore of the secularist agenda (e.g., anti-family values, abortion on demand, gay rights), some Catholics and evangelicals have been doing some soul searching and reevaluation.

The purpose of this book is to examine some of our common spiritual roots and see if we have any theological or moral bridges upon which we both can travel. We will examine similarities and differences in both doctrine and practice. Special attention will be given to the doctrine of salvation by grace. We will also speak to some interesting relationships and alliances that have developed between Catholics and Protestants, and address the issue of whether cooperation or conflict should characterize these unions.

This work will concern itself with traditional Roman Catholicism, which is expressed in the dogmas and authoritative pronouncements of the Roman Catholic Church. We take this approach for two reasons. First, this is the official Catholic position, however much other expressions of Catholicism may deviate from it. Second, evangelicals have less in common with the folk, cultural, or liberal varieties that exist in the Roman Catholic Church (see Appendixes C and D).

This work is divided into three parts. Part One (chaps. 1–8) deals with what Roman Catholics and evangelicals have in common. This contains surprises for many of our evangelical brethren who are unaware of the common core of doctrinal belief that permeates the two systems. Part Two (chaps. 9–16) discusses our differences with Roman Catholic teachings. No attempt has been made to downplay these significant differences

on infallibility, Mariology, purgatory, the role of works in salvation, the Apocrypha, transubstantiation, and others. In Part One, we agree. In Part Two, we must agree to disagree with Roman Catholicism. In Part Three, however, we wish to build bridges between mainline evangelicals and Catholics wherever possible. We acknowledge that, as long as Roman Catholics hold as dogma the kinds of things enumerated in Part Two, there is no hope for ecclesiastic union with Catholicism. However, we believe this should not be an unsurpassable obstacle to cooperation on common moral, social, and educational efforts. Rather, in view of the devastating effects of both Western secularism and Eastern mysticism on our culture, the time is overdue for Catholics and Protestants to hang together before we hang separately.

If you are a Catholic, we recommend you read Part One and Part Three of this book first. If you are an evangelical, particularly a conservative one, you should read Part Two first and then Part One and Part Three. This will help maximize the message we wish to convey and eliminate any unnecessary bias before being exposed to the conclusions of the book. If you are neither Catholic nor evangelical, read the book in the order in which it is written. But by all means, from whatever persuasion you may come, we urge you to get the whole message by reading it all!

PART 1

AREAS OF DOCTRINAL AGREEMENT

*“One should believe only what has been
held ‘always, everywhere and by all.’”*

Vincent of Lerins (died before A.D. 450)

In these chapters we try to put our best foot forward in Roman Catholic and evangelical relations by stressing what we have in common. Some of this will come as a surprise to many evangelicals, particularly those of a more conservative bent, who are used to stressing differences with Roman Catholics. The central thesis of these chapters is that both Catholics and orthodox Protestants have a common creedal and Augustinian doctrinal background. Both groups accept the creeds and confessions and councils of the Christian church of the first five centuries. Both claim Augustine as a mentor.

The doctrinal unity with Roman Catholics includes far more in common than many evangelicals have been wont to admit, including virtually all the so-called Fundamentals, such as the inspiration of the Bible, the virgin birth, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, his substitutionary death, his bodily resurrection, and his second coming. In addition, both Catholics and evangelicals hold to an Augustinian concept of salvation by grace. Our important differences notwithstanding (see Part Two), we believe this is too great a shared doctrinal heritage to ignore.

1

REVELATION

Catholics and evangelicals hold much more in common than is often recognized. In this section we will examine that body of doctrine shared by Roman Catholics and evangelicals.¹ In this endeavor, the following diagram (source unknown) is helpful. We hold in common:

One Bible	
Two Testaments	Old and New
Three	<i>Apostles Creed</i> (c. A.D. 150). Distinguished true believers from those

¹ Sources used will for the most part be the church fathers and/or Roman Catholic writers. Scripture cited throughout this work, unless otherwise indicated, will be from the *New American Bible*, St. Joseph Edition—with helps (New York: Catholic Book Publishing, 1986). This is a good translation, especially the New Testament, and it provides common ground with Catholics.

Creeds	who followed Gnosticism and Marcionism.
	<i>Nicene Creed</i> (A.D. 326). Condemned Arius, who was anti-trinitarian, denying the deity of Christ.
	<i>Athanasian Creed</i> (A.D. 428). Taught the doctrines of the trinity and the incarnation.
Four Councils	<i>First Nicea</i> (A.D. 325). Taught that Jesus Christ is the Son of one substance with the Father.
	<i>First Constantinople</i> (A.D. 381). Taught the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
	<i>Ephesus</i> (A.D. 431). Mary is <i>theotokos</i> : “bearer of God.”
	<i>Chalcedon</i> (A.D. 451). Affirmed that there are two natures in Christ: divine and human.
Five Centuries	From the Apostolic era to the end of the fifth century.

During these early centuries,² the church was concerned with the person of Christ, *who he was* . Later they discussed the subject of *what he did* . As a contemporary handbook of the official documents of Roman Catholic doctrine puts it: “The early professions of faith result, therefore, from the merger of two enunciations, one Trinitarian and one Christological, both of which are based on the New Testament.”³ Concerning later development it adds: “To those primitive data, later creeds have in the course of the centuries added such further precisions as concrete circumstances made necessary to maintain the primitive faith.”⁴

All cults and heresies depart theologically from doctrine which developed in this time period. For both Catholics and Protestants revelation is central to the understanding of

2 Valuable yet concise treatments of the doctrines that emerged from this formative period of church history can be found in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978), and Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

3 Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, p. 1. A current volume which includes contributions from evangelical scholars such as R. C. Sproul and Walter Martin says about the importance of the creeds: “Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Orthodox Christians have managed to embrace the creeds, even though they have diverse views on many issues; schismatics and heretics have denied them.” For evangelicals, the Scripture remains the only infallible authority for arriving at theological orthodoxy, but the creeds are important in that “they have formed the commonly, historically accepted summary of the Scripture’s teaching on the most fundamental points.” “Appendix A: The Ecumenical Creeds,” in *The Agony of Deceit: What Some TV Preachers Are Really Teaching* , ed. Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), p. 253.

4 Ibid., p. 2.

Christianity. As a traditional Roman Catholic catechism states, “The object is to introduce the child even at an early age to the Bible itself where we have the Person and message of Our Lord Jesus Christ presented by the Holy Spirit Himself” (*The Baltimore Catechism*).⁵ Concerning the uniqueness of Christian revelation, one theologian added, “Throughout man’s history and of all the religions in the world, the Judeo-Christian religion is the only one with a basis *in history*.”⁶

Although many Catholic theologians see tradition as a second source of revelation (see chap. 10), Roman Catholic scholar Louis Bouyer notes that “according to both the Council of Trent and *Vaticanum* Scripture *alone* can be said to have God as its author.”⁷ In this we can see a basic accord concerning the central place that revelation has in Christian theological formation.⁸ We will now move directly to the Scriptures.

THE BIBLICAL DATA

That the Scriptures are central to an understanding of God’s revelation is a truth stated throughout the documents of the Roman Catholic Church. While Catholics and Protestants differ over whether the apocryphal (Deutero-canonical) books belong in the Old Testament (see chap. 9), there is unanimous agreement on all the sixty-six books of the Bible. The First Vatican Council held that the Roman Catholic Church, “relying on the belief of the apostles, holds that the books of both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, . . . are sacred and canonical because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit . . . they have God as their author.”⁹

Augustine reflects the mind of the church—from the Apostolic era through the Medieval period—when he said that truth is that “which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation.”¹⁰ Also, the First Vatican Council states: “It is to be ascribed to this divine revelation that such truths among things divine . . . can . . . be known by everyone.”¹¹ The apostle Paul put it this way: “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” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

5 Official Revised Edition, No. 1, explained by Rev. Bennet Kelley, C.P. (New York: Catholic Book Publication, 1964), p. 4.

6 Ignace de la Potterie, “Exegesis: Truth as Event,” *30 Days*, no. 2, 1993, p. 64.

7 Gustaf Aulén, *Reformation and Catholicity* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), p. 21.

8 Differences in how Roman Catholics and evangelicals view the extent of the canon and problems concerning authority will be addressed in chaps. 9 and 10.

9 Augustine, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, quoted in Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, no. 1787, p. 444.

10 Cf. St. Augustine, “*Gen ad Litt*” 2.9.20: PL 34, 270–71.

11 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 1786, chap. 2, “Revelation.”

Concerning the purpose of Holy Writ: “All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and that one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ.”¹²

THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament God laid the foundation for salvation. First, a covenant was established with Abraham, declaring, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River [the Euphrates]” (Gen. 15:18). In obedience to God, Moses “took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words of his’” (Exod. 24:8). Therefore, “The plan of salvation, foretold by the sacred authors, recounted and explained by them, is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament.”¹³

Although the New Covenant was established through Christ, the church has always recognized that the gospel finds its roots in the Old Testament. Augustine caught this sense when he declared that “The New is in the Old concealed, the Old is in the New revealed.”¹⁴

THE NEW TESTAMENT

For both Catholics and Protestants it is in the New Testament that God’s plan of salvation enters its final phase. In the prologue of his Gospel, John writes: “And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).¹⁵ This occurred in “the fullness of time” mentioned by Paul in Galatians 4:4 . The writer of the Book of Hebrews describes the salvific transition as follows: “In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe” (Heb. 1:1–2).

In the Gospels Christ is revealed as the Son of God and the one who will usher in the kingdom of God. His nature is revealed in particular to the apostles, and Jesus in turn reveals the Father: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him” (Luke 10:22). The Second Vatican Council states: “The Christian dispensation, therefore, being the new and definitive covenant, will never

12 “Hugh of St. Victor,” *De arca Noe* 2.8: PL 176, 642; quoted in *Catechism 1994*, p. 37.

13 Walter M. Abbott, S.J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 122.

14 *Quest in Hept* 2.73: PL 34, 623.

15 The NAB study note on the above verse has the following: “*Flesh*: the whole person, used probably against docetistic tendencies (cf. 1 John 4:2 ; 2 John 7). *Made his dwelling*: literally, pitched his tent/tabernacle.”

pass away, and we now await no new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tim. 6:14 ; Titus 2:13).”¹⁶

In the Pauline Epistles, the emphasis is on the “mystery” of Christ. Paul considers the truth of salvation in Christ, although previously hidden, as having now been revealed by God (Eph. 3:5). “Now to him who can strengthen you, according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages” (Rom. 16:25). It is worth noting in passing that Jesus’ gospel and Paul’s are one and the same.¹⁷ Paul also treats the last stage of this revelation, the “Day of the Lord,” the parousia, “when he comes to be glorified among his holy ones and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, for our testimony to you was believed” (2 Thess. 1:10).¹⁸

THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

If God had not taken the initiative through general and special revelation we would have known nothing about him. “In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and make known to us the hidden designs of his will.”¹⁹ This revelation comes to us on two levels, first in the world of creation which he brought into existence through the direction of the Word, that is, Christ. The apostle John informs us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him” (John 1:1–3). This God of creation has revealed himself in nature so that all can “clearly” see. Those who refuse are “without excuse” (Rom. 1:19–20). Indeed, God has written his law upon the hearts of all people (Rom. 2:12–15). Second, God speaks to us through the Bible. This has been termed “special” revelation.

GENERAL REVELATION

General revelation is prior to special revelation, and does not consist of verbal communication. The psalmist said, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge” (Ps. 19:2–3). Concerning general revelation Pius IX states: “But

16 Ibid., Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* , “Revelation,” 4.

17 See G. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (1925; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

18 Cf. “Concept of Revelation,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 12 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), pp. 438–39.

19 John A. Hardon, S.J., *The Catholic Catechism* (New York: Image Books, 1966), p. 30.

how many, how wonderful, how lucid are the arguments at hand by which reason ought to be thoroughly convinced that Christ's religion is divine."²⁰

Primitive Revelation. Roman Catholics also use the concept of "primitive revelation" to identify supernatural truths revealed at the beginning of human history.²¹ The "passing down" of this revelation may account for the elements of truth to be found in primitive/non-Christian religions. Thus, these concepts inherent in primitive revelation can serve as pointers to faith.²²

Natural Law. When humans turn from God's general revelation, in nature and in the human heart, they end in moral disaster. Paul describes it this way: "they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. While claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes" (Rom. 1:21–23). Paul's somber recital has been graphically demonstrated throughout human history. When the glory of God is ignored idolatry is the result. But there is more: "Therefore, God handed them over to impurity through the lusts of their hearts for the mutual degradation of their bodies. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" (Rom. 1:24–25).

The Bishop of Hippo, an astute observer of the human condition, spoke to this issue. "As St. Augustine was later to explain in his *Confessions*, there is a grim recompense for man's refusal to acknowledge God as his master. God allows a man's spirit to lose mastery over his own body. Lust is the normal consequence of pride."²³ Paul continued to develop this sorry scenario by introducing the doctrine of natural law: "For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of *the law are written in their hearts*, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them" (Rom. 2:14–15 , emphasis added).

In the moral arena, general revelation has been termed "natural law." Thomas Aquinas developed this subject at length. Concerning natural law as a guideline in society, Aquinas taught that "since natural law is common to all people, not just believers, it can be used as a basis for civil law in religiously pluralistic societies."²⁴ In fact, "natural right is contained in the eternal law primarily, and in the natural judicial

²⁰ Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 1638, p. 411, Encyclical Letter, "*Qui Pluribus*" (1846).

²¹ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books, 1960), pp. 15f.

²² *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 12:440.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), pp. 164–70, 174.

faculty of human reason secondarily.”²⁵ Natural law is the human participation in eternal law by way of reason. It is “the natural light of reason, by which we discern what is right and wrong.” In it is “naught else but the impression on us of divine light.”²⁶ All rational creatures, not just believers, share in natural law. It is the law that is written on human hearts of which Paul speaks in Romans 2:12–15 .

For Catholics, as well as many Protestants, natural law is the moral basis from which social issues are addressed. Issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality can and are dealt with from the perspective of natural law. One of the authors made a convincing argument against euthanasia to the medical staff of a large hospital, using the natural law concept exclusively.²⁷ Clarence Thomas invoked the reality of “natural law” in his defense during his contentious confirmation for a seat on the Supreme Court.²⁸

A discussion of natural law is the task Pope John Paul II set for himself in his recent encyclical letter to Roman Catholic bishops. *Veritatis Splendor* (“the splendor of Truth”) is a finely reasoned thesis offering a restatement of the Church’s argument against moral relativism.²⁹ The encyclical “takes on anthropologists who believe that morality has no meaning outside the culture that defines it.” John Paul does not list a number of specific moral rules but rather describes “the universal law of nature that is discoverable by human reason; it exists in all people, regardless of culture, and leads us inevitably to judge actions as right or wrong—whatever their intentions and whether or not they help or harm others.”³⁰

Natural Theology. It is because of general revelation that the Catholic church believes that a natural theology is possible. Thus, the Council of Vatican I declared that “the beginning and end of all things can be known with certitude by the natural light of human reason from created things” for “the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20).³¹ Vatican II added that “God, who creates and conserves all things by his Word (cf. John

25 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae. 71, 6, ad 4.

26 Ibid., 1a2ae. 91, 2.

27 Norman L. Geisler, “*To Die or Not to Die: That Is the Fatal Question*,” paper presented at Naval Hospital, San Diego, Calif. (7 December 1992). Also see Francis Beckwith and Norman L. Geisler, *Matters of Life and Death* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991). For a treatment of homosexuality from this perspective, see Harry V. Jaffa, *Homosexuality and the Natural Law* (Montclair: Claremont Institute, 1990).

28 Charles Colson, *The Body* (Dallas: Word, 1992), p. 169.

29 “Encyclical Letter of John Paul II,” *The Splendor of Truth: Veritatis Splendor* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1993). In one week after the original publication the Daughters of St. Paul in San Diego sold 1,200 copies of the encyclical, mostly to lay people.

30 James Q. Wilson, “‘Calvin and Hobbes’ and the Pope’s Case for Morality,” *The San Diego Union-Tribune* (29 November 1993).

31 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 1785. Vatican I, “Dogmatic Constitution Concerning the Catholic Faith,” p. 443.

1:3), provides men with constant evidence of himself in created realities (cf. Rom. 1:19–20).”³² It is on the basis of this general revelation of God available to all men that Aquinas built his natural theology with proofs for the existence of God.³³

Natural theology examines what human reason can know about God apart from special revelation. It is therefore to be contrasted with “revealed theology.” The principal distinctions were established in the Middle Ages by scholasticism.³⁴ Both traditional Roman Catholics and conservative Protestants agree that general revelation is insufficient to lead one to a saving knowledge of the gospel. The entrance of sin into God’s creation has prevented humans from adequately grasping our desperate spiritual condition. While the *imago Dei* is not *erased*, it is *effaced*. For Aquinas, although the knowledge *that* God exists can be demonstrated by reason (general revelation), belief *in* God only comes through special/supernatural revelation.³⁵

The Nature and Value of General Revelation. The apostle Paul spelled out the nature of general revelation in Romans 1 , insisting that it was both clear and rendered all human beings, even those with the aid of special revelation, without excuse.

The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. For what can be known about God *is evident to them*, because *God made it evident to them*. Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity *have been able to be understood and perceived* in what he has made. As a result, *they have no excuse*; for although *they knew God* they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks ([Rom. 1:18–20](#) , emphasis added).

Even though it is limited, general revelation is not valueless. The general revelation of God forms the background for his message to us contained in sacred Scripture. Paul used general revelation to good effect when he preached to Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens. Since his address clearly shows the purpose of general revelation and also the transition to special revelation, we reproduce the sermon in its entirety.

Then Paul stood up at the Areopagus and said: You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious. For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, “To an Unknown God.” What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands because he needs anything. Rather it is he who gives to everyone life and breath and everything. He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though

32 *Vatican Council II* , vol. 1, p. 751.

33 See Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas*, chap. 9.

34 F. L. Cross, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* , rev. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 956.

35 Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas* , pp. 37–38, 43–49.

indeed he is not far from any one of us. For “In him we live and move and have our being,” as even some of your poets have said, “For we too are his offspring.” Since therefore we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divinity is like an image fashioned from gold, silver, or stone by human art and imagination. God has overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he demands that all people everywhere repent because he has established a day on which he will “judge the world with justice” through a man he has appointed, and he has provided confirmation for all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:22–31).

Clearly Paul believed that one could reason with unbelievers on the basis of general revelation because it can provide an opening for a more complete presentation of truth emanating from special revelation. This has been termed “pre-evangelism” by the late Francis Schaeffer.³⁶

SPECIAL REVELATION

In spite of his emphasis on natural theology, even Aquinas argued that special revelation is made necessary because of the limitations of the human mind and the sinfulness springing from the human will. Aquinas asserted emphatically that “human reason is very deficient in things concerning God. A sign of this is that philosophers, in their inquiry into human affairs by natural investigation, have fallen into many errors, and have disagreed among themselves.” Consequently, “in order that men might have knowledge of God, free of doubt and uncertainty, it was necessary for divine truths to be delivered to them by way of faith, being told to them as it were, by God Himself Who cannot lie.”³⁷

The grace of special revelation is needed to overcome the effects of sin on human reason. Aquinas concluded that “if for something to be in our power means that we can do it without the help of grace, then we are bound to many things that are not within our power without healing grace—for example to love God or neighbor.” Further, “the same is true of believing in the articles of faith. But with the help of grace we do have this power. As Augustine says, to whomever this help is given by God it is given in mercy; to whomever it is denied, it is denied in justice, namely because of previous sin, even if only original sin.”³⁸ However, Aquinas did not believe that sin completely destroyed people’s rational ability. Rather, he insisted that “sin cannot destroy man’s rationality altogether, for then he would no longer be capable of sin.”³⁹

Vatican II, in its *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, concludes that “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will (cf. Eph. 1:9).” Further, “wishing to open up the way to heavenly salvation, he manifested himself to our first parents from the very beginning. After the

36 See also Norman L. Geisler and Ron Brooks, *When Skeptics Ask* (Wheaton: Victor, 1990), pp. 9–10.

37 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2ae. 2, 4.

38 Ibid., 2a2ae. 2, 6, ad 1.

39 Ibid., 1a2ae. 85, 2.

fall, he buoyed them up with the hope of salvation, by promising redemption (cf. Gen. 3:15); and he has never ceased to take care of the human race. For he wishes to give eternal life to all those who seek salvation by patience in well-doing (cf. Rom. 2:6–7).”⁴⁰

The Council also stated that “By divine Revelation God wished to manifest and communicate both himself and the eternal decrees of his will concerning the salvation of mankind.”⁴¹ Concerning the Church’s attitude toward the Scriptures, “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures.” As to the need for Christians to read the Bible, the Council affirmed that “access to sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful.”⁴² Therefore, “all clerics, particularly priests of Christ and others who, as deacons or catechists, are officially engaged in the ministry of the Word, should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by constant sacred reading and diligent study.”⁴³ In the same context, Jerome is quoted as saying: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.”⁴⁴ So official Roman Catholicism seems to take seriously the presence of special revelation in the form of Holy Scripture. The study and preaching of the Bible are mandatory, not optional.

In the first part of this chapter we have identified spiritual roots of revelation in the Old and New Testaments. We now turn to some concepts that flow from a theological understanding of special revelation.

The Progressive Nature of Revelation. Special revelation is revelation about the history of redemption. It has for its purpose the redemption of humanity. It renews, illumines, and inclines the disposition to that which is good. It fills with holy affections and finally prepares us to partake of the beatific vision (blessed vision of God in heaven).

Such revelation is clearly progressive in nature. During biblical times new redemptive truths appeared that cast new light on previous ones. Finally they stand out, fully exposed, in the New Testament. In discussing the development of dogma, Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott says that “in the communication of the Truths of Revelation to humanity, a substantial growth took place in human history until Revelation reached its apogee and conclusion in Christ (cf. Heb. 1:1).”⁴⁵ In the same context, he quotes Gregory the Great: “With the progress of the times, the knowledge of the spiritual Fathers increased; for, in the Science of God, Moses was more instructed than Abraham, the Prophets more than Moses, the Apostles more than the Prophets.”⁴⁶

40 Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Collection: Vatican Council II* , vol. 1, rev. (North Port: Costello Publishing, 1992), pp. 750–51.

41 Ibid., p. 752.

42 Ibid., p. 762.

43 Ibid., p. 764.

44 Jerome, *Commentary in Isais* , Prol: PL 24, 17.

45 Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 6–7.

46 Ibid., p. 7. (In Ezechielem lib. 2, hom. 4, 12.)

One can also speak of stages of revelation. Aquinas divided sacred history into three great periods—before the Mosaic law, under the law, and under grace—and united them with the revelations given to Abraham, Moses, and the apostles respectively.⁴⁷

The Authoritative Nature of Revelation. “Concerning the authority of the Scriptures,” Augustine asserted, “the authority of these books has come down to us from the Apostles . . . [and] claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind.”⁴⁸ Aquinas, Augustine’s medieval successor, also believed that “we are bound to believe all the contents of Sacred Scripture.”⁴⁹ The Bible is as authoritative as the voice of God because it is the Word of God. For what the sacred authors affirmed, God affirms. The Scriptures are, therefore, as infallible and inerrant as is God.

The Inerrant Nature of Revelation. The twentieth century has seen in Christendom the rise of theologies which have attacked the integrity and authoritativeness of the Scriptures. Various approaches have been taken: (1) The Bible is inerrant in what it *teaches*, not necessarily in everything it *says*, and (2) The Bible is inerrant on matters of *faith and morals*, but perhaps faulty on issues of *history and science*. Traditional Roman Catholics have happily avoided these dangerous deviations. Augustine said, “it seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that *anything* false is found in the sacred books.”⁵⁰ Elsewhere he adds, “If we are perplexed by an apparent contradiction in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, the author of this book is mistaken; but either the manuscript is faulty, or the translation is wrong, or you have misunderstood.”⁵¹ Aquinas backs up his theological predecessor, contending that “it is heretical to say that any falsehood whatever is contained either in the gospels or in any canonical Scripture.”⁵²

Moving to the current situation, a contemporary Roman Catholic Scripture scholar affirms the Bishop of Hippo and the “Doctor Anglicus” (Thomas Aquinas): Inspiration rules out any sort of error in the Bible whatsoever. Thus Pope Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, wrote that since God is the author, “It follows that they who think any error is contained in the authentic passages of the Sacred Books surely either pervert the Catholic notion of divine inspiration, or make God Himself the source of error.”⁵³

The Council of Vatican I proclaimed the inerrancy of the Scriptures, saying, “they contain revelation without error . . . because having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they have God as their author.”⁵⁴ Leo XIII affirmed that “it would be

47 Cited by *New Catholic Encyclopedia* from vol. 12, ST 2a2ae, 174.6, p. 443.

48 *Against Faustus* 11.5; quoted in Norman L. Geisler, *Decide for Yourself* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), p. 34.

49 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.61.

50 *Letters* 23.33, p. 23, emphasis added.

51 *Against Faustus* 11.5, p. 24.

52 *In Job* 13. Led. 1, p. 25.

53 William G. Most, *Free from All Error* (Libertyville: Prow Books, 1985), p. 37.

54 Denzinger, *Sources of Catholic Dogma*, 1787, “The Source of Revelation,” p. 444.

entirely wrong either to confine inspiration only to some parts of Scripture, or to concede that the sacred author himself has erred.”⁵⁵ Vatican II added that, “since, therefore, all that the inspired authors, or sacred writers, affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture, firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that the truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures.”⁵⁶ More liberal Catholic theologians see a caveat in the phrase “for the sake of our salvation,” arguing that inerrancy covers only salvific truths, but this is contrary to the whole of the Catholic tradition up to modern times. All agree, however, that inspiration and inerrancy are limited to the meaning the sacred authors “intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of contemporary literary forms.” For “rightly to understand what the sacred author wanted to affirm in his work, due attention must be paid both to the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer, and to the conventions which the people of his time followed in their dealing with one another.”⁵⁷

Public vs. Private Revelation. The last topic to be addressed in this section is the matter of “public” vs. “private” revelation. Concerning the former, “St. Thomas holds that prophetic revelation, insofar as it is ordered to doctrine, ceased with the Apostles.”⁵⁸ Private revelation differs from public revelation in that “whatever God has communicated since apostolic times to privileged souls can add nothing to the deposit of Christian faith.”⁵⁹ Further, “Throughout the ages, there have been so-called private revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of the church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith.”⁶⁰ Differences between Roman Catholics and evangelicals over the relationship between public and private revelation, and also Scripture and tradition, will be addressed in chapter 10 .

THE CHURCH FATHERS AND SCRIPTURE

We have mentioned Augustine and Aquinas and examined their approach to Scripture. Many lesser church leaders also held God’s word written in highest esteem.

The Patristic Period. The *Didache* (c. A.D. 70), “The Teaching of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles,” is an early church manual on morals and practices. It instructs the church to test the authenticity of teachers and leaders by comparing their words with

55 Ibid., 1950, Encyclical, “*Providentissimus Deus*” (1893), p. 492.

56 *Documents of Vatican II*, “On Revelation,” p. 757.

57 Ibid., pp. 757–58.

58 *New Catholic Encyclopedia* , 12:444.

59 Ibid. Also see Most, *Free from All Error* , p. 2.

60 *Catechism 1994*, no. 67, p. 23.

sacred Scripture. Clement of Rome (A.D. 30–100) exhorted believers to “look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit.”⁶¹

Justin Martyr (A.D. 100–165) published his *First Apology* and addressed it to Emperor Antoninus Pius. It was a defense of Christianity and in it he gave an account of a regular worship service and the place of prominence given to the Scriptures: “And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together in one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read.”⁶² Irenaeus (c. A.D. 130–200) declared that “the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God (Christ) and His Spirit.”⁶³

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150–215) called the Bible the “infallible criterion of faith,” noting that “God is the cause of all good things; but of some primarily, as of the Old and the New Testaments; and of others by consequence, as philosophy.”⁶⁴ Tertullian (A.D. 160–225) insisted that “we are united. . . . Divine Scripture has made us congregate; the very letters are our glue.”⁶⁵ Pope Gelasius (d. A.D. 496), in a decree attributed to him, addressed the nature of Scripture: “The line of thought is clear. Holy Writ, in the proper sense, ensures the basis of the Church, being dependent on Jesus Himself.”⁶⁶ Indeed: “The clearest token of the prestige enjoyed by [Scripture] is the fact that almost the entire theological effort of the Fathers, whether their aims were polemical or constructive, was expended upon what amounted to the exposition of the Bible. Further, it was everywhere taken for granted that, for any doctrine to win acceptance, it had first to establish its Scriptural basis.”⁶⁷

The Medieval Period. John Scotus Erigena (c. A.D. 810–877) affirmed that “in everything the authority of Sacred Scripture is to be followed.”⁶⁸ The following prayer also indicates Erigena’s devotion to Scripture: “O Lord Jesus, no other reward, no other blessedness, no other joy do I ask than a pure understanding, free of mistakes, of thy words which were inspired by the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁹ Rupert of Deutz (c. A.D. 1075–1129) taught that “Whatever may be arrived at, or concluded from arguments, outside that of Holy Scripture . . . does in no way belong to the praise and confession of almighty God. . . . Whatever may be arrived at outside of the rule of the Holy Scriptures, no body can

61 *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* , p. 45; quoted in Geisler, *Decide for Yourself*, p. 24.

62 Chapter LXVII in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, p. 378; quoted in Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 18–19.

63 *Against Heresies* 2.28.2; quoted in Geisler, *Decide for Yourself*, p. 25.

64 *Stomata* 5.5, *ibid.*, p. 31.

65 *On Modesty* 5, *ibid.*, p. 27.

66 George H. Tavad, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 7.

67 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine*, p. 46.

68 *De Divina Natura* , bk. 1, ch. 64; PL, 122, 509; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 12.

69 *Ibid.*, bk. 5; PL, 122, 1010, pp. 12, 13.

lawfully demand from a Catholic.”⁷⁰ Anselm (A.D. 1033–1109) declared that “the God-man himself originates the New Testament and approves the Old. And, as we must acknowledge him to be true, so no one can dissent from anything contained in these books.”⁷¹

CONCLUSION

In the examination of the topic of revelation, we have covered the thinking of the church from the Apostolic Era through the Middle Ages. We have seen the honor and devotion that the early and later church fathers extended to sacred Scripture. Both Catholics and Protestants share this important tradition. On this subject, Donald G. Bloesch notes that “For the most part both the patristic fathers and the medieval theologians before the fourteenth century taught that the Bible is the unique and sole source of revelation.”⁷² Bloesch continues: “The priority of Scripture over tradition was clearly enunciated by Thomas Aquinas: ‘Arguments from Scripture are used properly and carry necessity in matters of faith; arguments from other doctors of the Church are proper, but carry only probability; for our faith is based on the revelation given to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books of the Scriptures and not on revelation that could have been made to other doctors.’”⁷³

Concerning *sola Scriptura*, at least in the material sense, there is more unanimity than one would expect. Of course, Roman Catholics deny the formal sufficiency of Scripture, insisting on the need for the infallible teaching magisterium of the Church (see chap. 11). Regarding this doctrine which was to become the “linchpin” of the Reformation, Harold O. J. Brown writes: “The principle that Scripture alone has the final authority in matters of faith and morals is an old one in Christendom, one that has never really been repudiated, *not even by the Roman Church*.”⁷⁴ Even some great Catholic theologians, such as Aquinas, can be cited in support of this position: “we believe the successors of the apostles and prophets *only in so far as they tell us those things which the apostles and prophets have left in their writings*.”⁷⁵

⁷⁰ *De Omnipotentia Dei* , 27; PL, 170, 477–78, *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷¹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 22, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. W. Deane (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1962), p. 288.

⁷² *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* , vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 57. Also, see Tavad, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, pp. 22f.

⁷³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 1.8.

⁷⁴ *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 308.

⁷⁵ Aquinas, *De veritate* XIV, 10, ad 11, emphasis added.

As for the basis for Christian faith in Scripture, a modern Roman Catholic work emphasizes “that faith is not a leap into the dark but has an unshakable foundation.”⁷⁶ Of course the question arises as to the relationship between the Scriptures and the church. This will be addressed in chapter 9 .

In conclusion, concerning the goal of revelation official Roman Catholicism states that “By revealing himself God wishes to make them [humankind] capable of responding to him, and knowing him, and of loving him far beyond their own natural capacity.”⁷⁷ Supernatural revelation is necessary to fulfill man’s supernatural end.

⁷⁶ Neuner and Dupuis, *Christian Faith*, p. 62. Comment on Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* , 16 October 1979.

⁷⁷ *Catechism 1994*, no. 52, p. 19.