

What's Your Authority?: How to deal with those pesky door to door missionaries (and maybe even some relatives!)

From: CATHOLIC ANSWERS

By *authority*, we don't mean his personal or academic credentials. We mean his authority to claim that he can rightly interpret the Bible. The missionary (unless he is a Mormon, of course, in which case his authority is the *Book of Mormon*) will always claim to fall back on the authority of Scripture. "Scripture says this," or "Scripture proves that," he will tell you.

So before you turn to the verses he brings up, and thus to the topic he brings up, demand that he demonstrate a few things.

First, ask him to prove from the Bible that the Bible is the only rule of faith (if he's an Evangelical or Fundamentalist Protestant, he holds to the Reformation theory of *sola scriptura* -- the Bible alone).

Second, have him tell you how he knows which books belong in the Bible in the first place.

And third, require that he prove to you both that he has the authority to interpret the Bible for you (remember that his doctrines will almost always be drawn from *interpretations* of the sacred text rather than the words themselves) and that his interpretations will always be accurate.

Imagine the conversation goes something like this:

"Good afternoon, neighbor. May I share a few words of Christian truth with you?"

"Sure," you say. "Where do you get this truth?"

"From the Bible, of course."

"That's your authority? The Bible?"

"Yes. It's the only authority for Christians."

"Can you prove that from the Bible?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I don't believe the Bible claims to be the sole rule of faith. I mean that the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is itself unbiblical. Please show me where the Bible claims such a status for itself."

A Sufficient Rule of Faith?

At this point the missionary will probably bring up one of several verses. The passage most commonly brought up by Evangelicals and Fundamentalists is 2 Timothy 3:16-17. In the King James Version, the verse reads this way: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Many claim that 2 Timothy 3:16-17 claims Scripture is sufficient as a rule of faith. But an examination of the verse in context shows that it doesn't claim that at all. It claims only that Scripture is "profitable" (Greek: *ophelimos*), that is, helpful. Many things can be profitable for moving one toward a goal without being sufficient in getting one to the goal. Notice that the passage nowhere even hints that Scripture is "sufficient" -- which is, of course, exactly what Protestants think the passage means.

Point out that the context of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is Paul laying down a guideline for Timothy to make use of Scripture and Tradition in his ministry as a bishop. Paul says, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God [Greek: *theopneustos*, "God-breathed"] and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:14-17). In verse 14, Timothy is initially exhorted to hold to the oral teachings -- the Tradition -- that he received from the apostle Paul. This echoes Paul's reminder of the value of oral Tradition in 1:13-14: "Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have *heard* from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us;" "what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2:2). Here Paul refers exclusively to *oral* teaching and reminds Timothy to follow that as the "pattern" for his own teaching. Only after this is Scripture mentioned as "profitable" for Timothy's ministry.

The few other verses that might be brought up to "prove" the sufficiency of Scripture can be handled the same way. Not one uses the word *sufficient* -- each one implies profitability or

usefulness, and many are given at the same time as an exhortation to hold fast to the *oral teaching* of our Lord and the apostles. The thing to keep in mind is that nowhere does the Bible say, "Scripture alone is sufficient," and nowhere does the Bible imply it.

Understanding the Bible's Role

After you have demonstrated that the verses the missionary brings up simply don't prove this point, continue the discussion this way:

"If you recognize Scripture for what it is, you'll see that it wasn't intended to be an instructional tool for converts. In fact, not one book of the Bible was written for non-believers. The Old Testament books were written for Jews, the New Testament books for people who already were Christians.

"The Bible is not a catechism or a full-scale theological treatise. Just look at the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. You won't find one that spells out the elements of the faith the way catechisms do or even the way the ancient creeds did. Those twenty-seven books were written for the most part (excepting, for example, the Gospels and the general epistles such as James and 1 and 2 Peter) as provisional documents addressed to particular audiences for particular purposes.

"Most of the epistles," you continue, "were written to local churches that were experiencing moral and/or doctrinal problems. Paul and most of the other New Testament writers sent letters to these local churches in order to rectify these problems. There was no attempt on the part of the writers to impart a vast body of basic doctrinal instruction to non-believers, nor even to simply summarize everything for the believers who received the letters."

"I don't agree with any of that," replies the missionary. "The New Testament is the basis of the Christian faith."

"But how can it be," you respond, "since the Christian faith existed and flourished for years *before* the first book of the New Testament was written? The books of the New Testament were composed decades after Christ ascended into heaven, and it took centuries for there to be general agreement among Christians about which books comprised the New Testament.

"And that brings up another point. How do you know what constitutes the New Testament canon? How do you know for certain that these twenty-seven books here in your New Testament are in fact inspired and should be in the New Testament? And how do you know for certain that some inspired books haven't been left out of the canon?"

Who Decided?

"Well, the early Christians agreed on the twenty-seven books of the New Testament," answers the missionary. "The Holy Spirit led them to this agreement."

"Sure the Holy Spirit did, but only over a pretty long period of time, and a study of early Christian history shows that there was a considerable disagreement among Christians until the issue of the canon was finally settled. Some early Christians said the book of Revelation didn't belong in the canon. Others said Pope Clement's letter to the Corinthians (written circa A.D. 80) and *The Shepherd*, an early second-century allegory written by a Christian writer named Hermas, *did* belong in the New Testament. How do you handle that?"

"We know by examining the contents of the books. Some books -- like 1 Corinthians and Revelation -- obviously belong. Others -- like Clement's letter to the Corinthians -- obviously don't."

"But is it really so obvious? Tell me, what is so obvious in Philemon to indicate that it is inspired? And what is so obviously unorthodox in *The Shepherd* or the *Didache* or Clement's letter or any of the other first- and second-century Christian writings? You've never even seen the autographs (originals) of the twenty seven books in the New Testament. Nobody today has. The earliest copies of those books we possess are centuries newer than the originals. Like it or not, you have to take the say-so of the Catholic Church that in fact those copies are accurate, as well as her decision that those twenty-seven books are the inspired canonical New Testament Scriptures. You *do* accept her testimony as trustworthy, or else your Protestant Bible would not have those twenty-seven books. See what I mean?"

Look to the Fathers

If you happen to have the writings of the early Church Fathers, this would be a good time to read from them. The writings are, at least in the case of the apostolic Fathers, rather short, and you can

demonstrate that many of these writings seem every bit as orthodox as the New Testament writings themselves. Then read aloud the book of Philemon or 3 John or some other short canonical book.

"Tell me: What's in these books that so obviously makes them inspired? If you didn't know that Philemon was written by Paul or that 3 John was written by John, would you give either a second reading? Would you automatically assume that they belong in the Bible as canonical Scripture? It's not disrespectful to say that they don't have much doctrinal content in them -- and that's not surprising, since they're too short to contain substantial doctrinal discussions. One can imagine the Christian Church surviving well enough without either.

"Neither book claims inspiration for itself. If there is, as a matter of fact, more solid Christian doctrine in other, non-canonical writings (that is, if they contain more Christian truths and no religious errors), then how can you say that it's obvious which books are inspired and which are not?"

Here the missionary will fumble around awhile, perhaps repeating his earlier statements. Then you say:

"Look, the fact is that the only reason you and I have the New Testament canon is because of the trustworthy teaching authority of the Catholic Church. As Augustine put it, 'I would not believe in the Gospels were it not for the authority of the Catholic Church.' Any Christian accepting the authority of the New Testament does so, whether or not he admits it, because he has implicit trust that the Catholic Church made the right decision in determining the canon.

"The fact is that the Holy Spirit guided the Catholic Church over time to recognize and determine the canon of the New and Old Testaments in A.D. 382 at the synod of Rome, under Pope Damasus I. This decision was ratified again at the councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397 and 419). You, my friend, accept exactly the same books of the New Testament that Pope Damasus decreed were canonical, and no others.

"Furthermore, the reason you accept the books you do is that they were in the Bible someone gave you when you first became a Christian. You accept them because they were handed on to you. This means you accept the canon of the New Testament that you do because of Tradition, because Tradition is simply what is handed on to us from those who were in the faith before us. So your knowledge of the exact books that belong in the Bible, such as Philemon and 3 John, rests on Tradition rather than on Scripture itself!

"The question you have to ask yourself is this: Where did we get the Bible? Until you can give a satisfactory answer, you aren't in much of a position to rely on the authority of Scripture or to claim that you can be certain that you know how to accurately interpret it.

"After you answer that question -- and there's really only one answer that can be given -- you have some other important questions to ask: If the Bible, which we received from the Catholic Church, is our sole rule of faith, who's to do the interpreting? Why are there so many conflicting understandings among Evangelicals and Fundamentalists even on central doctrines that pertain to salvation?"

"We Agree on the Essentials"

"Well, that I can answer easily enough," responds the missionary. "Evangelicals and Fundamentalists agree on the essentials, but we disagree on secondary matters."

"Is that so? Where in Scripture do we find some doctrines listed as essential, others as 'secondary'? The answer is: nowhere. Evangelicals and Fundamentalists disagree on central issues such as baptismal regeneration and the necessity of baptism (is it merely a sign to other Christians, or does it have a real role in the process of justification?), whether or not one can forfeit salvation (some Protestants say that's impossible to do, others say it is possible). You *all* claim to be 'Bible-only Christians,' but which group is right?"

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Catholic Answers. "What's Your Authority?" chap. 7 in *The Essential Catholic Survival Guide: Answers to Tough Questions About the Faith*, (San Diego: Catholic Answers Inc., 2005): 70-76.