

Solo Scriptura, Sola Scriptura, and Apostolic Succession: A Response to Bryan Cross and Neal Judisch

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Introduction

In November 2009, the Roman Catholic website Called to Communion posted an article titled [Solo Scriptura, Sola Scriptura, and the Question of Interpretive Authority](#), critiquing one of the claims of my book *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Canon Press, 2001). The article is attributed to Bryan Cross and Dr. Neal Judisch. According to their website, Cross is a graduate of Covenant Theological Seminary (M.Div.) and currently a Ph.D. student at Saint Louis University. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 2006. Judisch is a professor of philosophy at the University of Oklahoma and a 2008 convert to Roman Catholicism. Like the other regular authors at Called to Communion, Cross and Judisch come from a Reformed background and are relatively recent converts to Roman Catholicism.

The main point of their article is stated in the opening paragraphs:

In this article we argue that there is no principled difference between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* with respect to the holder of ultimate interpretive authority, and that a return to apostolic succession is the only way to avoid the untoward consequences to which both *solo scriptura* and *sola scriptura* lead.

Given the twofold purpose of the paper, my response to it will also be twofold. In defense of the claims of my book, I will argue that there is in fact a real principled difference between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura*¹ with respect to the holder of ultimate interpretive authority. I will suggest that the difference becomes invisible only when one begins by assuming the correctness of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church. This will require an evaluation of the Roman Catholic alternative that Cross and Judisch present. I will argue that a call to return to apostolic succession by Roman Catholics is problematic for a number of reasons. Because our understanding of both of these arguments is closely related to our understanding of the church and of the claims of Rome, I will address those claims first.

I must also observe that it is impossible to respond to this particular article without also interacting with several other articles on the Called to Communion website. There is much in this article that presupposes arguments made in other articles by Cross. This is because the primary issue in this debate is not the doctrine of Scripture. It is the doctrine of the Church. The other articles by Cross that I will reference in this response are: “[Christ Founded a Visible Church](#),” “[Ecclesial Deism](#),” and “[Branches or Schisms?](#)” In addition, Cross recently wrote

a follow up to the Sola Scriptura article responding in more detail to one particular objection raised by many readers. This article is titled "[The Tu Quoque](#)."

On the Inevitability of Offense

Because this is not merely an academic discussion, but instead a discussion of issues of eternal consequence, I should note that it is almost impossible to avoid all offense. Cross acknowledges as much in his paper "Christ Founded a Visible Church" when he writes:

And that is what makes the Catholic Church's approach to ecumenicism almost intrinsically offensive to all other Christians.

In the same way, Protestant claims are going to be intrinsically offensive to Roman Catholics. Protestants are questioning things Roman Catholics hold sacred. The only relevant question, however, is whether certain claims are true, not whether those claims offend someone's sensibilities. In sum, while things will be said in my response that Roman Catholics will undoubtedly find offensive, I do not know of any way to avoid it completely in this discussion. I trust that Roman Catholic readers will understand that my purpose in this response is not to offend for the sake of offending but to deal with the issues.

On Rome-Colored (and Geneva-Colored) Glasses

A final preliminary observation is in order. One of the most frustrating difficulties encountered in discussions such as this is the fact that the starting assumptions of Roman Catholics and non-Roman Catholics are so different. Because these starting assumptions dramatically affect the way we read and evaluate evidence and arguments, it becomes difficult to avoid speaking past one another. For example, as I mentioned above, if one assumes the correctness of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church, then the differences I allege between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* become invisible. Likewise, if one does not assume the correctness of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church, the differences can be discerned.

The same phenomenon occurs when it comes to discussing historical evidence for and against the claims of Rome. A person who believes that the Roman Catholic Magisterium has special divine authority naturally looks at evidence for the claims of Rome in a much different way than a person who does not believe that the Roman Catholic Magisterium has divine authority. If a person firmly believes that the Roman Magisterium is infallible (i.e. incapable of error) under certain conditions; in short, if that is his basic theological axiom, then by definition he cannot at the same time believe that there is any real evidence of error. This is the reason that for faithful Roman Catholics, the very possibility of there being

evidence contradicting the claims of the Roman Church is non-existent. Any alleged evidence of error offered by Protestants or others must be explainable in some other way.

Those who do not begin with the basic theological axiom of Roman Catholicism see abundant evidence against the claims of Rome in Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the documented events of church history. This evidence prevents them from believing that the Roman Catholic Magisterium has divine authority. For those who adopt the basic theological axiom of Roman Catholicism, all of this “alleged” evidence essentially ceases to exist. From the perspective of the non-Roman Catholic, the Roman Catholic is doing something comparable to reading a red-letter Bible with red tinted glasses. If he sets aside the glasses, he can see all the words printed in red. If he puts the glasses on, all the words printed in red disappear from his sight. From the Roman Catholic perspective, it is non-Roman Catholics who are reading the evidence with a distorted lens.

To be fair, Roman Catholics are not alone in dealing with this kind of criticism. All of those who believe in the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture are criticized in a similar way by liberals and skeptics who say they have found abundant evidence of error in Scripture. If a person truly believes that the Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God, he cannot at the same time believe that there is any real evidence of error in the Scriptures. He trusts that there is an explanation for any apparent errors, even if he does not know what that explanation is. In the same way, a Roman Catholic who truly believes in the infallibility of the Magisterium will trust that there is an explanation for any alleged errors presented by non-Roman Catholics.

So, knowing that none of us is completely objective, how do we deal with the claims of Rome? Rome claims special divine authority and infallibility. Rome claims to be the one Church Christ founded on earth. Rome claims that those who are not in communion with the Pope are schismatics. These are very big and very consequential claims. When faced with such claims, one does not simply make a blind leap of faith one way or the other. One needs to know whether the claims are true before making any kind of commitment. Why? Because if an institution is making those kinds of claims and they are false, one would be committing oneself to a lie of monumental proportions. On the other hand, if the claims are true, rejecting them is equally serious.

I submit that the claims of Rome do not stand up to close scrutiny when measured by any standard other than Rome herself. While the claims of Rome have a theoretical plausibility when considered alone, that plausibility evaporates when we evaluate the evidence for and against those claims. At issue, then, is the truth or falsity of the premise regarding the special divine authority of the Roman Catholic Church. If that premise is granted, many of the remaining claims of Rome follow. The problem, however, is that there is abundant evidence from Scripture, tradition, and history that renders the truthfulness of the basic premise

entirely implausible. In other words, while Rome's arguments using this premise may be logically valid, none of them are sound because the key premise is false.

I do not harbor any illusions that any Roman Catholics will find what I have to say below persuasive. They have heard many of these arguments before. The point I wish them to understand is that I (and many others) see the evidence as more than sufficient to raise reasonable doubt about the claims of Rome.

The Claims of Rome

Although the paper by Cross and Judisch begins with a critique of my *sola/solo* distinction and then moves on to the issue of apostolic succession and the nature of the church, it is necessary to deal with the issue of the church first because presuppositions about the church color all of the rest. If one assumes the correctness of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church, then the differences I allege between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* become invisible, but if one does not assume the correctness of the Roman Catholic doctrine of the church, the differences can be discerned. It is necessary, therefore, to begin with a discussion of the claims of the Roman Catholic Church.

What Does the Church of Rome Claim?

The Roman Catholic doctrine of the Church has developed over the course of centuries and is much more complex than the following brief account might seem to indicate. In order to keep this discussion manageable, however, it is necessary to single out a few of those aspects of the Roman Catholic doctrine that are central to the dispute between Roman Catholics and non-Roman Catholics. The purpose at this point is not to critique the Roman Catholic claims, but merely to state them as succinctly and accurately as possible. NOTE: In compiling this list, I have made extensive use of Ludwig Ott's *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 4th ed. (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1960). Most of the doctrinal summaries in this list are either quotations from or paraphrases of Ott. I have also cross-checked these with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

1. Rome claims that the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy was instituted by Christ.
According to Rome, the ecclesiastical hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons did not arise merely as an historical contingency. Instead, it was divinely instituted by Christ. Furthermore, the powers delegated to the Apostles by Christ were handed down to the bishops who succeeded them.
2. Rome claims that Christ appointed Peter to be the visible head of the whole Church and gave him jurisdictional primacy.

According to Rome, Peter is the visible representative of Christ on earth and has jurisdictional primacy over the whole church. The possession of jurisdictional primacy means that Peter was given “possession of full and supreme legislative, juridical and punitive power” (Ott, p. 279). Peter was directly given this primacy by Christ.

3. Rome claims that the bishops of Rome are the successors of Peter. Rome teaches that Christ’s appointment of Peter as the visible Head of the Church implies that there would be perpetual successors to this role. The bishops of Rome are those successors and they therefore have jurisdictional primacy over the universal Church.
4. Rome claims that the Church is indefectible. Roman Catholics believe that the church (by which they mean the Roman Church) will endure to the end of the world and that the Roman Church is immutable in respect of her teaching.
5. Rome claims that the Pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*. The Vatican Council defines papal infallibility as follows: “The Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra* – that is, when in discharge of the office of Pastor and Doctor of all Christians, by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine regarding Faith or Morals to be held by the Universal Church – by the Divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter, is possessed of that infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed that His Church should be endowed in defining doctrine regarding Faith or Morals; and therefore such definitions of the Roman Pontiff are irreformable of themselves, and not in virtue of the consent of the Church.”
6. Rome claims that the teaching Magisterium of the Roman Church is infallible. Ott explains the infallibility of the Magisterium as follows: “The Bishops exercise their infallible teaching power in an extraordinary manner at a general or ecumenical council” (p. 300). “The Bishops exercise their infallible teaching power in an ordinary manner when they, in their dioceses, in moral unity with the Pope, unanimously promulgate the same teachings on faith and morals” (p. 300). Individual bishops are not infallible.
7. Rome claims that ecumenical councils are defined in terms of the papacy. Rome claims that an ecumenical council “is an assembly of bishops and other specified persons, convoked and presided over by the pope, for the purpose of formulating decisions concerning the Christian faith and discipline, which decisions require papal

confirmation” (Leo Donald Davis, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, p. 323).

8. Rome claims that the “oneness” of the church is to be defined in terms of faith *and* communion with Rome.
According to Rome, Peter and his successors act as the principle of unity. Unity is first defined in terms of a unity of faith, by which it is meant that the Church believes and confesses the truths taught by the Magisterium. Unity is also defined in terms of a unity of communion, by which it is meant that the Church submits to the Pope and the Magisterium and participates in the same liturgy.
9. Rome claims that the “apostolicity” of the church is to be defined in terms of origin, teaching, and succession in office.
Roman Catholicism teaches that the Roman Catholic Church has its origin in the Apostles and has always adhered to the teaching of the Apostles. The Pope and the Bishops of the Roman Church have succeeded the Apostles in their office. “The apostolicity of the succession guarantees the unfalsified transmission of doctrine and makes manifest the organic connection between the Church of the present day and the Church of the Apostles” (Ott, p. 308).
10. Rome claims to be *the* church founded by Christ.
This is the single overarching Roman claim. All of the other claims lead to this. When Roman Catholics speak of the Church of Christ, it is a given that this Church is the Roman Church. Pope Pius XII is typical here: “To describe this true Church of Christ – which is the Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, **Roman** Church – there is no name more noble, none more excellent, none more Divine, than the expression, ‘the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ’” (cited in Ott, p. 270, emphasis mine). When one encounters statements about “the Church” in the writings of Roman Catholics, it is crucial to understand that the adjective “Roman” is always implied if it is not stated explicitly.

Are the Claims of the Roman Catholic Church True?

The claims of Rome listed above are not insignificant. If these claims are true, it is the duty of every Christian to submit to the Roman Church. If these claims are false, it is the duty of every Christian to call the Church of Rome to repent. So the important question is: Are the claims of the Roman Catholic Church true or not? What evidence is there for the claims? What evidence is there against the claims? What would we expect to see if the claims were true? What would we expect to see if the claims were false?

One preliminary difficulty we face here is that although the overarching claim of Rome to be *the* Church Christ founded rests upon the truth or falsity of the other

claims, Roman Catholics who have been persuaded of the truth of these other claims sometimes begin to use the overarching claim as evidence for the supporting claims. This may be convincing to those already persuaded of Rome's authority, but it is hardly convincing to those evaluating the claim for such authority. Appealing to Rome's authority in support of claims for Rome's authority is circular and question-begging. So let us look at these claims individually.

1. Did Christ institute the Roman Ecclesiastical Hierarchy?

No. If the claim that Christ instituted the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy were true, we might actually expect to read of Christ instituting the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy in the documents of the New Testament written by the Apostles. There is certainly precedent for this expectation in the Old Testament. There we see Moses setting forth the details of the old covenant priesthood and the priestly succession. God did not leave all of this to chance and hope the Israelites would figure it out on their own. Nor did this Old Testament hierarchy emerge out of a process of "development." Furthermore, Moses did not hand down the instructions through any kind of proto-gnostic secret tradition. The priestly hierarchy was an institution of such importance that it was given publicly.

As important as the new covenant ecclesiastical hierarchy is supposed to be according to Rome, we might expect to see Jesus set forth similar instructions were the claim true. Do we see any evidence of this in the New Testament? No. What we see is Jesus choosing twelve apostles and sending them out to proclaim the gospel to the Jews and then later to the Samaritans and Gentiles (Acts 1:8). We don't see him placing each of his Apostles, or anyone else for that matter, as a residential bishop over one local church (or diocese). For some time after the ascension, all of the Apostles remain in Jerusalem, building up the church. There was a plurality of apostolic leadership in the Jerusalem church. When some of the Apostles finally begin moving outward from Jerusalem, they act more as church planters and travelling missionaries. They do not each settle down in one city as a residential bishop. James, who remained in Jerusalem, is the closest thing to a residential bishop at this point, but even he is still accompanied there by most of the other Apostles (e.g., Acts 9:27). Among those who eventually travel outward, Peter and Paul are the most significant in the Book of Acts. Paul's missionary journeys are well known, but Peter travelled as well. Of the places we know Peter visited on his missionary journeys, we can list Antioch (Gal. 2:11), Samaria (Acts 8:14), Lydda (Acts 9:32), Joppa (Acts 9:36–39), and Caesarea (Acts 10).

If the Roman claim were true, we would also expect to find abundant evidence of the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy in the years immediately following the ascension and in the first decades of the post-apostolic church. If Christ instituted it and if the Apostles were obedient to Christ we would expect to find some evidence of it. We would expect to find evidence that each local church had

a bishop, and that this bishop was assisted by subordinate presbyters and deacons. However, when we examine the evidence we do not find this. What we find is summed up in Titus 1:5, where Paul instructs Titus to “appoint elders (plural) in every town.” We see this in Paul’s first missionary journey, when he and Barnabas “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). The evidence, biblical and non-biblical, points consistently to a plurality of leaders in each of the first churches.

The transition from a collegial form of church government toward the monepiscopal form of church government occurred at different rates in different geographical locations. The historical evidence indicates that monepiscopacy developed most rapidly in Asia Minor and more slowly in European cities such as Corinth and Rome.² The numerous house churches scattered throughout Rome, for example, were led by presbyters until the latter half of the second century.³ The ecclesiastical hierarchy as it exists today in the Roman Catholic Church evolved over time. There is nothing that lends any credence to the claim that it was directly instituted by Christ or the Apostles in the first century.

Addendum

At this point, I need to say some words in response to a few miscellaneous statements made by Bryan Cross in his paper “Christ Founded a Visible Church,” his attempt to argue that Christ instituted the Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Cross writes in section I.A:

This unity of the Mystical Body is a visible unity, precisely because it is the unity of a Body. Bodies are visible and hierarchically organized, not invisible.

This is a confusing statement for several reasons. Cross himself argues (in Section I.C), that the Head of this Body, Jesus Christ, is at present invisible to us. (It should be noted that Christ is not invisible to the Church triumphant). However, for the sake of argument, if we were to push the figurative language as far as Cross does, we would assert that yes, bodies are visible, but so are their heads. And if the Head of the Body can be invisible, as Cross says it is, so too can the body itself be invisible.

This whole line of argument, however, is built on a faulty analogy. It is built entirely on unproven assumptions about what “must be” the case regarding visibility and invisibility, and it does so by using an analogy that does not work. The Church is the body of Christ, but this is figurative language, and determinations about the visibility and invisibility of the Church cannot be based on what happens to be true of literal human bodies. The Church as the body of Christ is not entirely analogous to a human body. Some of the body of Christ (those who have died) are in

heaven, present with the Lord. Some of the body of Christ (those still living) are on earth. Those who have died are invisible to those who remain. Furthermore, the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, did not shed his (visible) human body, and therefore, He is not inherently invisible. Those believers who have died see Him. In short, this entire line of Roman argumentation is faulty and misleading.

In section I.C., Cross writes:

If the visible head of the hierarchy were plural, then the visible hierarchy would not be essentially unified, but at most only accidentally unified.

This is mere assertion. It also implies an anti-trinitarian concept of unity. Christians confess faith in one God, a unity, yet this one God subsists in three persons, a plurality. If our God is the paradigm of what true unity, true oneness, is, then it is false to assert that unity cannot be expressed in or co-exist with plurality. Cross likes to refer to Protestantism as Ecclesiastical Deism. I would suggest that what he (and Rome) is advocating in this instance is Ecclesiastical Unitarianism.

In the same section, Cross quotes Pope Leo XIII:

The unity of the Church is manifested in the mutual connection or communication of its members, and likewise in the relation of all the members of the Church to one head [i.e. the Pope].

In short, although the church cannot have real unity by the relation of all the members of the church to Christ, it can have unity by the relation of all the members of the church to the Pope. Such an assertion makes the Pope a greater source of unity than Jesus Christ. It makes the Pope's seat in Rome a greater source of unity than Christ's seat at the right hand of God. And by what authority is such a claim for Rome made? The claim is made on the authority of Rome herself?

In section II.A, Cross continues with his implicitly Unitarian concept of oneness, saying:

The Church must be one, because Christ is one, and God is one.

Of course, what is meant by the Church's "oneness" here depends entirely on what oneness is in the Godhead; and in the Godhead, oneness does not preclude plurality. I submit again that if Cross's (Rome's) concept of oneness is applied to the Godhead, Unitarianism is the result. The threeness in the Godhead, the *plurality*, does not destroy the oneness, the unity. And given that Christ prays for the oneness of the Church to be like the oneness of God (John 17), a plurality that is equally as ultimate as

unity, would not (and does not) destroy real unity in the Church any more than it does in the Godhead.

In section II.B, Cross quotes Augustine:

There is nothing more grievous than the sacrilege of schism.

Perhaps, but there is also nothing more ironic than the original schismatic, the bishop of Rome, defining schism in relation to himself.

In the same section, Cross adds:

And this is how 'schism' has been understood and defined in the Catholic Church: schism is defined as "the refusal of submission to the Roman Pontiff or of communion with the members of the Church subject to him." No other definition makes sense, in part because no other definition distinguishes schism from excommunication. Otherwise each party in the schism could with equal warrant say, "No, I excommunicated **you**."

Here we are told that according to Rome, schism is separation from Rome. We see here again the complete circularity of Rome's claims. Unless it is proven that Rome is the one true Church, exclusive of anyone else, this definition of schism is merely a self-serving, circular assertion. The last half of the quotation above is also interesting in that it is exactly what happened with the East and West in 1054. Who was in schism at that time, and who says? If you ask the East you get one self-serving answer. If you ask Rome, you get another self-serving answer.

Cross titles section III: "Denial of Visibility is Ecclesial Docetism."

To be clear, most Protestants do not deny the visibility of the Church. They simply deny the definition of visibility provided by what they believe to be a rogue local church possessed by the spirit of Diotrephes (3 John 9).

Interestingly, Cross cannot remain consistent with his own definitions, as seen in this comment:

Wherever schism is treated as not separating a person (to some degree) from Christ, there the Church is being treated as fundamentally and intrinsically invisible, with some visible members.

The problem with Cross's argument is that Rome now grants that believers not in submission to the Pope are actually joined to the Church in some way or another. Paragraphs 836–8 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speak of an "imperfect" communion with the Catholic Church

enjoyed by non-Roman Catholic Christians. Paragraphs 839–45 even speak of a communion with the Church enjoyed by non-Christians. This is an invisible church concept on steroids. If everyone is in “communion” with the Church to one degree or another regardless of their faith, or lack thereof, the Church is, according to Cross’s definitions, being treated by the Catholic Church as fundamentally and intrinsically invisible, with some members of varying degrees of visibility.

In section IV.B, Cross writes:

Many Christians do not realize that the Catholic Church is and claims to be the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, in the Kingdom’s nascent stage.

The interesting term here is “nascent.” Nascent means “just beginning,” “dawning,” “embryonic.” The curious thing is that although Rome claims to be the Kingdom in its nascent stage, at the beginning of its development, her doctrine of the church displays an entirely over-realized eschatology that demands the perfection of the *eschaton* here and now. If a Protestant suggests that the Church sinned as Israel sinned, needs to repent and work toward the eschatological goal of unity, we are told that we are denying Christ’s promise and denying the confession of faith in the “one” Church. Of course, a different standard is applied by Rome to the credal statement about belief in the “holiness” of the Church. That can be something that is imperfect now, something toward which we aspire. But “oneness”? No. Oneness has always been perfect, we are told, or else Jesus’s promise failed. Such arguments are completely arbitrary.

In section V.B, Cross makes a statement about Reformed views of visibility that is quite revealing and shows how much the Roman view dishonors and insults Jesus Christ. He writes:

Therefore under both descriptions what is absent is a unified visible hierarchy, and that is why the result can be nothing more than a mere plurality of visible things, united at most by their invisible union to the invisible Christ.

“United *at most* by their invisible union to the invisible Christ.” This is said as if union with Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit is some kind of second-rate consolation prize, clearly inferior to the kind of unity offered by the Pope. The Holy Scriptures do not denigrate union with our Lord Jesus Christ the way Cross repeatedly does in this paper.

Some of the other questions Cross raises in this paper will be addressed in other parts of this response. At this point, it is necessary to move on to Rome’s second claim.

2. Did Christ appoint Peter to be the visible head of the whole Church and give him jurisdictional primacy?

No. The only Person spoken of in Scripture as the Head of the Church is Jesus (Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Col. 1:18). Peter is never spoken of as the head of the Church, either before or after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. The Church is the body *of Christ*. It is not the body of Peter; it is not the body of the Pope; and it is not the body of the Pope *and* Christ. The Church is not polycephalous. It does not have more than one head. Christ, as the one Head of the Church, continues to exercise His headship even after His ascension.

There is nothing in Scripture indicating that Christ appointed Peter to be the visible head of the whole Church and gave him jurisdictional primacy. In fact, what we do find indicates the opposite. Christ appointed twelve Apostles, one of whom was Peter (Matt. 10:1–2). The apostles as a group were given the highest office in the Church (1 Cor. 12:28). No one apostle is singled out as having a higher office than the rest. They were all sent (John 20:21); they were all commanded to preach and baptize (Matt. 28:29); and they were all promised an equal standing at the judgment: “you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt. 19:28). Peter’s throne is not distinguished from the rest. After Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon all equally, Peter is sent by the other Apostles to the Samaritans (Acts 8:14) in the same way that Barnabas (Acts 11:22) and then Silas and Judas (Acts 15:22) are later said to be sent. There is no hint that he alone is in charge of things in some unique sense.

Further evidence that this claim of Rome is false is found in an examination of the first church council. The very first major problem in the church is not resolved by an appeal to Peter as we would expect had Christ given Peter jurisdictional primacy (recall the very definition of “jurisdiction”). It is resolved instead by a council in Jerusalem. In other words, a council, not Peter, is assumed to have jurisdiction. In the council itself, James, rather than Peter, exercises the necessary leadership (Acts 15). It is James who declares the definitive judgment, saying: “Therefore my judgment is...” (v. 19). The final decision of the council is described as a consensus of the apostles and elders (v. 22). In the entire account of the Jerusalem Council, neither Peter nor anyone else present shows any awareness of Petrine jurisdictional primacy.

Paul’s description of Peter’s ministry gives no indication that he was aware that Peter had been appointed head of the entire Church. Peter’s ministry, according to Paul, is to the Jews, while his own is to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7–8). Paul also feels no qualms about publicly rebuking Peter to his face when his conduct is hypocritical (Gal. 2:11). Even Peter himself shows no recognition of universal headship or jurisdictional primacy. He recognizes that he is on the same level with the other elders (1 Pet. 5:1).

Today, Rome appeals to Matthew 16:18 and a few other passages to back up her claim, but it is worth noting that appeals to Matthew 16 in support of Petrine supremacy first appear in the middle of the third century in the disputes between Cyprian and Stephen.⁴ Appeals to this text did not begin earlier because the idea of Petrine supremacy itself was a late development. It is only when Rome begins her attempts to assert universal jurisdiction that Scripture is mined for potential proof texts such as Matthew 16. I have already addressed the various proof texts appealed to by Rome in *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (pp. 184–96), and they have been addressed even more substantially by numerous other authors, so there is no need to repeat all of that in this summary response.

3. Are the bishops of Rome the successors of Peter?

No. Had the idea of Petrine Roman succession originated with Christ and not with the church of a much later generation, one would have expected to see an unbroken line of succession from Peter in Rome forward through a series of bishops. Instead, the historical evidence clearly indicates that the moniscopacy did not develop in Rome until the second half of the second century. If Peter had appointed a successor, the papacy would not have had to await the latter half of the second century before gradually beginning to come into existence.

Textual and archaeological evidence indicates that in the first two centuries of Christianity's existence in Rome, there were a good number of house churches spread throughout the city, primarily in Trastevere and along the Via Appia, and the number of these churches increased as the number of Christians grew. Christians represented the lower and poorer strata in Roman society and had small houses, which could only accommodate so many - thus the need for a good number of dispersed house churches. There was no single centralized location, no central cathedral, where all Roman Christians met for worship under the oversight of a single bishop. Individual presbyter/bishops presided over these various house churches. They led the worship and directed care for the poor. The house churches were bound in spiritual fellowship with each other, even though they worshiped separately, and the evidence indicates that the various presbyter/bishops would occasionally convene to deal with situations affecting them all (e.g. collections of aid for Christians in other cities). At some point in time, the presbyter/bishops assigned a single individual presbyter to deal with external affairs. This person was responsible for correspondence with other churches in other cities. It is likely that collections of aid for Christians in other cities were also administered by this person. From the middle of the second century on, there is evidence that this individual began to gain more prominence. Men such as Anicetus, Soter, Eleutherus, and Victor, who held this position responsible for "external affairs," were transitional figures toward the moniscopacy.⁵

The claim of Roman bishops to be successors of Peter ignores the well-established historical fact that there was no single monarchical bishop in Rome

for well over 100 years after the death of Peter. The house churches in Rome were originally led by a plurality of presbyter/bishops. The papacy gradually evolved out of the need for a single person to act as a go-between for the churches of Rome and churches outside of the city. There was no consciousness that this individual was in succession from Peter. The lists that were later compiled, first by Hegesippus and then by Irenaeus, were based on later memories of those men who had been tasked with external affairs. Irenaeus read the monepiscopacy that existed in his day back into the earlier history of Rome where it did not exist.

Even later, when there were monarchical bishops in Rome attempting to establish the primacy of the church at Rome, the basis for such notions initially rested not on claims of succession from Peter, but on the claim that Rome had the relics of Peter and Paul. But even if this claim concerning the relics were true, why should that claim elevate the Church of Rome above any other churches? If any earthly city has a right to claims of primacy, it would be Jerusalem. While Rome claims the honor of being the city where Peter and Paul were martyred and buried, Jerusalem is the location of the Last Supper, the crucifixion of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the first preaching of the Gospel by the Apostles, the first church council, and the home base of Peter, James, and John (the “pillars” of the church). Jerusalem was the center from which the Gospel of Christ spread (Acts 1:8).

The bishops of Rome are not the successors of Peter. Christ did not institute any such succession. Peter certainly did not do or say anything that would indicate any knowledge of such succession. The absence of a monarchical bishop in Rome for over 100 years after the death of Peter and its slow gradual development in the latter half of the second century indicates that the early house churches of Rome had no consciousness that such a succession ever existed or was ever intended. In short, the church existed and did quite well for over 100 years without the existence of the papacy or even a succession of monarchical Roman bishops.

4. Is the Church indefectible?

Not in the sense that Rome defines it. In claiming that the Church is indefectible, Rome is saying two things. First, she is saying that the Church will never perish. This is certainly true if we are speaking of the Church as the body of Christ. Protestants have never denied this. Even Bellarmine acknowledged this saying: “It must be observed that much time is wasted by our men, in proving that the Church cannot absolutely fail, for Calvin and the rest grant that.” But while it is true that the Church of Christ will exist on earth until the final day, it is not correct to claim indefectibility for any particular local church, such as the Church of Rome. The second thing that Rome is claiming is the basic immutability of the Church’s teaching. According to Rome her teaching has never and will never change. The only way to maintain this idea, however, is for Rome to appeal to a doctrine in which change can be redefined as “development.”

Scripture paints a different picture. As often and as far as the Old Testament incarnation of the Church fell, it never completely ceased to exist, and what happened then can happen now. Otherwise, Paul would have been wasting his breath saying that examples of Old Testament apostasy “took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). We are given specific warning about the possibility of particular churches apostatizing in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3. The Church of Rome herself is *specifically* warned of the possibility of being cut off by Paul in his epistle to the Romans (11:17–22). The gates of hell will never prevail against Christ’s Church. They might prevail against particular local churches, such as Rome.

Addendum

At this point I need to make a few comments about some miscellaneous statements in Cross’s essay “Ecclesial Deism,” which seems foundational to all else he has written. Ecclesial Deism begins by recounting Cross’s encounter with Mormon missionaries soon after his graduation from a Reformed seminary. Cross explains how he would appeal to Scripture and then the Mormons would appeal to the Book of Mormon. He says he would respond by saying that the Book of Mormon is contrary to Scripture. I don’t know what type of apologetics Cross was taught in seminary, but he could have responded by pointing out that the Book of Mormon was written by a con man and has no connection with real history. The fact that Mormon professors have become more adept at wrapping their historical fabrications in pseudo-scholarly attire doesn’t mean it should be treated as if the claims were now more plausible. The emperor still has no clothes.

In Section I, Cross explains part of the difficulty he faced by recounting a comment made by Al Mohler in a debate with a Mormon:

Mohler claims that we have an “objective standard” by which to define what is and what is not Christianity. That objective standard is “traditional Christian orthodoxy.” But this subtly pushes back the question: What is the objective standard for what counts as “traditional Christian orthodoxy”?

In the earliest days of the Church, the objective standard was the apostolic doctrine. This doctrine would in the middle decades of the first century be written in the Gospels and epistles of the New Testament. A summary of this core doctrine was taught to all new Christian catechumens. An examination of the relevant texts indicates that this catechetical summary looked very much like the Apostles’ Creed into which it later developed.⁶

Cross criticizes Mohler for accepting certain patristic doctrines while rejecting others:

But Baptists such as Mohler reject both the doctrine of apostolic succession and the episcopal form of Church polity which all those bishops believed and practiced.

Of course, the bishops who lived after the ideas of apostolic succession and the Episcopal form of Church polity evolved believed and practiced them. As Sullivan, a Roman Catholic historian (not philosopher), correctly observes: “They [Christian scholars] agree...that the historic episcopate was the result of a development in the post-New Testament period, from the local leadership of a college of presbyters, who were sometimes also called bishops (*episkopoi*), to the leadership of a single bishop.”⁷ In his criticisms, Cross is constantly assuming the truth of simplistic revisionary versions of early church history promulgated by Roman Catholic apologists but not by trained historians. Serious historians (including Roman Catholic historians) acknowledge the messy facts of history regardless of whether they fit preconceived notions of what “must have been the case,” while the apologists rehash essentially mythic reconstructions of the past that have no basis in reality. The claims of Roman Catholic *apologists* regarding the history of the early church are unfortunately on par with the claims of Mormon apologists regarding the history of early America.

Cross continues his criticism of Mohler:

Baptists reject what all those bishops believed and taught as being essential to the Christian faith regarding baptismal regeneration: “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” Many of the canons of the Council of Nicea (AD 325) do not even make sense from a Baptist point of view. Mohler is critical of the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (AD 431) in its declaration of Mary as the ‘Theotokos,’ claiming that doing so “brought ill effects upon the Catholic Church.” He accepts the Christology taught by the Fourth Ecumenical Council (Chalcedon, AD 451), but rejects the teaching of the Fifth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople, 553 AD) which affirmed the perpetual virginity of Mary, claiming that it “moved Roman Catholic theology and devotion increasingly away from the Holy Scriptures and toward human innovation.” And he rejects the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicea, AD 787) in its condemnation of iconoclasm.

While it is important for Protestants to explain why they accept certain councils and/or canons and not others, Cross conveniently ignores church history here. This question is not as cut and dried as he would have his readers believe. In the first place, let us look at which councils were ultimately accepted by which churches. The Church of the East accepted only the first two councils (Nicaea and Constantinople). The Oriental

Orthodox Churches accepted the first three councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, and Ephesus). The Eastern Orthodox Churches accepted the first seven councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople II, Constantinople III, and Nicaea II). The Roman Catholic Church accepts twenty-one councils. Many of these councils were disputed for generations.⁸ Regarding the canons, there are also disagreements. As an example, the Orthodox recognize seven canons from the Council of Constantinople, while Rome recognizes only four.

As far as the specific canons of these councils are concerned, Rome has been as selective in her observance and acceptance of them as others have. Numerous priests and bishops in the Church of Rome throughout history have not been deposed for crimes as they should have been according to the ninth canon of Nicaea.⁹ The priests and bishops of Rome for centuries violated the spirit if not the letter of canons 15 and 16 of Nicaea. Canon 3 of the Council of Constantinople, which referred to Constantinople as the new Rome, occasioned many arguments. The Eastern Orthodox often accuse Rome of violating canon 7 of the Council of Ephesus by introducing the *filioque* into the creed. Canon 2 of the Council of Chalcedon invalidates the ordination of those who obtained their office by simony, which would render null and void the offices of numerous medieval Roman bishops, including Popes, who both bought and sold offices. Rodrigo Borgia, perhaps the most infamous and ungodly Bishop of Rome, flagrantly bought the Papacy to become Pope Alexander VI. If canon 2 of Chalcedon is granted, then his ordination was invalid. Many of the medieval bishops of Rome also violated Canon 3 of Chalcedon. Canon 28 of the Council of Chalcedon, with its granting of privileges to Constantinople that Rome believed belonged to her, was a source of contention. If one looks closely at the canons of the ecumenical councils, it is evident that Rome too has adopted the pick-and-choose approach that Cross criticizes.

We will examine below the problems associated with the way Rome defines ecumenical councils, but the point here is simply that Roman apologists would do well to stop talking about church history for a time and begin actually studying it because even as their own historians acknowledge, the presentations of history by the apologists are grossly oversimplified.¹⁰

Cross continues by observing what he believes to be an arbitrary way of dealing with the Church Fathers.

The problem with the pick-and-choose approach is that it is entirely *ad hoc* insofar as one picks and chooses from among Church Fathers and councils only those statements one agrees with, to be 'authoritative.'

This statement would make some sense if weren't for two facts:

1). The fact that Rome is also arbitrary in its acceptance of councils and church fathers. Elsewhere Cross criticized Mohler for having a “pick-and-choose approach to the tradition” that showed it was “not the fact that an Ecumenical Council declared something definitively that makes it ‘authoritative’.” Yet the fact that an Ecumenical Council declared something definitively doesn't make it authoritative for Rome either. Rome rejects Canon 28 of Chalcedon, for example, so Rome too accepts only those conciliar statements with which it agrees.

2). The fact that no one, Rome included, can accept everything the Church Fathers say indiscriminately simply because the early Church Fathers do not always agree on everything. In this vein, it is interesting to note what the Roman Catholic biblical scholar Joseph Fitzmyer has written:

When one hears today the call for a return to a patristic interpretation of Scripture, there is often latent in it a recollection of Church documents that spoke at times of the “unanimous consent of the Fathers” as the guide for biblical interpretation. But just what this would entail is far from clear. For, as already mentioned, there were Church Fathers who did use a form of the historical-critical method, suited to their own day, and advocated a literal interpretation of Scripture, not the allegorical. But not all did so. Yet there was no uniform or monolithic patristic interpretation, either in the Greek Church of the East, Alexandrian or Antiochene, or in the Latin Church of the West. No one can ever tell us where such a “unanimous consent of the fathers” is to be found, and Pius XII finally thought it pertinent to call attention to the fact that there are but few texts whose sense has been defined by the authority of the Church, “nor are those more numerous about which the teaching of the Holy Fathers is unanimous.”¹¹

To accuse someone of a “pick-and-choose” approach to the church fathers assumes the existence of the “unanimous consent of the Fathers.” In reality, however, such a creature, like the unicorn, exists only in the land of make-believe.

Cross defines “ecclesial deism” as follows:

Ecclesial deism is the notion that Christ founded His Church, but then withdrew, not protecting His Church's Magisterium (i.e., the Apostles and/or their successors) from falling into heresy or apostasy. Ecclesial deism is not the belief that individual members of the Magisterium could fall into heresy or apostasy. It is the belief that the Magisterium of the Church could lose or corrupt some

essential of the deposit of faith, or add something to the deposit of faith.

If this were true, we would be forced to define God's relationship with Old Testament Israel as "ecclesial deism," for God did not preserve Israel from apostasy. Was God's relation to Israel "deistic"? We must also deal with the sad truth that one of the twelve Apostles of Christ apostatized. Was Christ's relation to them "deistic"? If an apostle of Christ could apostatize, it is not inconceivable that one or more local churches could apostatize – especially when we consider the fact that Scripture repeatedly warns local churches of the danger of apostatizing.

Cross continues his criticism, saying:

Of course ecclesial deists typically do not describe their own position as a form of deism, nor do they see it as such. One very significant factor preventing ecclesial deists from seeing their own ecclesial deism as such is an implicit Gnosticism (anti-sacramentalism) regarding the nature of the Church.

Stating that Protestants have an implicitly Gnostic view of the church is not the same thing as demonstrating it. The irony here is that Cross is accusing Protestants of an implicit Gnosticism when Rome herself adopted one of the key tenets of early Gnosticism, namely the idea of secret oral traditions, not publicly revealed to all (See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*).¹²

Cross adds:

Conceiving of the Church as in itself spiritual and invisible allows a person to believe that Christ has always faithfully preserved His [invisible] Church, even while allowing the leaders of the Catholic Church to fall into heresy, apostasy, or perversion of the Gospel.

This is not the problem Cross believes it to be. God preserved the Old Testament church, even through periods of gross apostasy among the anointed leaders (as well as the people). And again Cross's use of the word "invisible" is confused. It should be observed in this connection that the 7000 who did not bow the knee to Baal were visible (1 Kings 19:18).

Cross continues:

In the Old Testament the prophets looked forward to the Church age. From their writings we see that the Church enjoys an everlasting covenant that cannot be revoked, that the Church is everlasting and indestructible, and that David's throne will exist for all time. For all these reasons, the Apostle Paul teaches that the Church is "the pillar and bulwark of the truth."

None of these promises apply unconditionally to any single local church such as the Church in Rome. David's throne does exist for all time now, and the one seated on it is Jesus Christ. His throne at the right hand of the Father (which happens to be invisible to us at the present time) is the fulfillment of the promise regarding David's throne (Acts 2:29–32).

Cross adds:

Ecclesial deism tends to see the changes over the first fifteen hundred years of Church history as corruptions, not developments. That is why it seeks to jettison all these 'accretions' and return to the "purity of the Scriptures." In combination with a *sola scriptura* approach, it is inclined to view anything in the Christian tradition that is not explicitly stated in Scripture or does not necessarily follow from it as a corruption or paganization of the Church. In that respect it is fundamentally pessimistic, skeptical of the possibility of a providentially-guided deepening of the Church's understanding of the deposit of faith, until some later restoration is initiated.

Not at all, but it does require more than a mere assertion to demonstrate that something is a development rather than a mutation, especially when Rome teaches things today that are in direct contradiction with what she taught in previous centuries (e.g. the possibility of salvation for those not in communion with Rome). To call the worship of the golden calf a "development" of the Ten Commandments does not make it so.

Cross continues:

This division of the Church into an outward Church and an inward Church is an ecclesial Nestorianism which necessarily collapses into ecclesial Docetism...

So, ecclesial deism is ecclesial Nestorianism, which collapses into ecclesial Docetism. We might as well throw in ecclesial patripassionism, ecclesial apollinarianism, and ecclesial montanism, while we're at it. Adding the modifier "ecclesial" to Docetism and Nestorianism and whatever other Christological heresy occurs to Cross is obviously a rhetorical ploy rather than a serious theological analysis. If the theological distinction between the visible and invisible church is ecclesial Nestorianism/Docetism, then Augustine was an ecclesial Nestorian/Docetic. Cross should understand that the doctrinal categories that apply to one doctrine (e.g. Christology) do not necessarily apply to another doctrine (e.g. Ecclesiology). Unlike Christ, the Church is not one person with two natures, so Cross's analogy does not clarify anything. It makes about as much sense as if I were to label his view ecclesial premillennialism.

Cross adds:

So in order to justify separating from the Catholic Church, Protestants *must* hold that the Catholic Church apostatized, either earlier in her history, or later.

Well, all available historical evidence indicates that the Roman Magisterium *did* apostatize. But the Roman Magisterium is not identical to the Church Catholic so the Church was not overcome when this occurred. The Catholic Church continued to exist even when the local Magisterium of Rome joined the gates of hell in an attempt to prevail against her. While the bishops of Rome and the Roman Magisterium were busy deserting the sheep entrusted to them and abandoning the doctrine of the Apostles with which the Church of Rome (and all of the other local churches) had been entrusted, the Catholic Church continued. Believing Christians in the Western Church were deserted by their shepherds, who were more interested in worldly gain than they were in spiritual things,¹³ but the desertion of the sheep by their shepherds did not destroy the church. It survived the apostasy of these “priests” just as the Old Testament church survived the apostasy of her priests.

Cross explains what led him to reconsider his views:

Aquinas believed that divine providence guided the Church Fathers and the development of the Church. This professor pointed out that Aquinas was not a deist about the Church. That short answer provoked me to do a great deal of reflecting, because I realized then that I did not share Aquinas’s non-deistic way of conceiving of the development of the Church.

Apparently, Cross did not realize at the time that this was a completely false dilemma. Cross believes that the choice is between deism (God’s abandonment of the church) or divine guidance into infallibility. This ignores God’s dealings with Israel, which fits neither category. God providentially guided Israel. He was with her every step of the way, yet He did not gift her with infallibility. Therefore a third option exists.

Cross continues:

I had not apprehended the ecclesial organ Christ established *through which* the members of His Body are to trust Him. I came to see that faith in Christ is not something to be exercised invisibly, from my heart directly to Christ’s throne, as though Christ had not appointed an enduring line of shepherds. Inward faith was to be exercised outwardly, by trusting Christ *through* those shepherds Christ sent and established.

Again, Cross failed to think it through completely because we are to trust only those shepherds who are not wolves in sheep's clothing. Old Testament Israel was called to trust and hear God's prophets, but they were to test the prophets because there were false prophets roaming about (Jer. 5:31; Lam. 2:14; Ezek. 13:9). The same is true in the New Testament era. Even Apostles were to be tested according to Galatians 1:8. Paul here explicitly conditions his apostolic authority, and he calls on the Galatian believers to judge his teaching.

It is significant that according to Scripture there are "false apostles" (2 Cor. 11:13; Rev. 2:2), "false teachers" (2 Pet. 2:1), and even "false Christs" (Matt. 24:24). This supports fully our contention that while the Church as a whole cannot fall, parts of it can be led astray. Again, the problems dealt with in the Pauline epistles, General epistles, and the seven letters of Revelation 2–3 attest that this was happening already in the first century. Cross is betting eternity that the bishop of Rome could never be one of these false teachers when there is absolutely *zero* evidence that the leadership of the local church of Rome is uniquely protected and abundant biblical and historical evidence that it is not.

Cross continues:

The gift of indefectibility does not imply that the members of the Church, even members of the Magisterium, cannot sin or err. But it does entail that the Magisterium of the Church can never lose or corrupt any part of the revelation of Christ, which includes both matters theological and moral.

This is a fine theory, but it is invalidated by the fact that the Roman Magisterium has lost and corrupted and changed her theological and moral teachings over time. It takes the genius and ingenuity of a Cardinal Newman to blind one to this fact. The doctrine of papal infallibility itself is one of the most obvious examples of an invented doctrine that was never believed always, everywhere, and by all, but more on this below.

A quick note on something Irenaeus says that is cited by Cross.

...the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul...

Irenaeus is speaking of Rome, but his sources have led him astray. The various house churches of Rome were established and existed before either Peter or Paul ever set foot in that city. It is likely that Peter did eventually come and stay in Rome for a time, but it was years after the ascension. However Christianity reached Rome, it wasn't through his missionary

endeavors. Paul too addressed existing churches in Rome before he had ever been there (See his Epistle to the Romans).

Cross continues:

Because the life of Christ is indefectible, and because the life of the Church is the life of Christ, therefore the Church is indefectible.

There are at least two problems with this statement. First, it inappropriately equates Christ with the Church. Using this reasoning, because Christ is God, and because the Church is the body of Christ, therefore the Church is God.

Second, this is another of the innumerable comments made by Cross in this paper that equates the Church with Rome. The church is indefectible. Rome is not because Rome is (was) *a* church, not *the* church.

They imply that Christ's Mystical Body can become corrupted such that He may abandon His Body and take on a different body.

To be clear, Protestants don't deny the church's indefectibility. We do not claim that Christ can abandon His body. We claim exactly what Christ himself claimed, namely that local churches can have their lamp stands removed, and that apostles and prophets are to be tested. The problem is that Cross has taken a promise intended for the church as a whole and presumptuously localized it to Rome to the point that he is echoing ancient Israelites who believed God would never judge Jerusalem and the Temple regardless of what Israel did. Jeremiah warned against those who were saying "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (Jer. 7:4). The underlying principle applies to those today who are acting presumptuously against God by saying, this is the Church of Peter, the Church of Peter, the Church of Peter. God withdrew His presence from the Temple when the people whored after false gods (Ezek. 10), and God can remove the lamp stand from any local church, including Rome, that does likewise (Rev. 2-3).

In his conclusion, Cross writes:

When I began to recognize my ecclesial deism for what it was, I found myself taking a much greater interest in the early Church Fathers. If they were not corrupting the faith, but being guided by the Holy Spirit to preserve and expound it, then I wanted both to know what they said and to understand Scripture through their eyes.

The interesting thing to this reader is that Cross makes no mention of the disagreements one finds in the Fathers. This is a common phenomenon in

apologetic writings. Cross gives us the impression that the early church Fathers speak with one clear and consistent voice about everything. All one need do to discover the reality is to read them.¹⁴

Cross adds another interesting quote from Pope Pius XI:

Christ our Lord instituted His Church as a perfect society...

This statement is a textbook example of over-realized eschatology. Cross, following this bishop, assumes that the Church (the Roman Church) is already perfect. The goal of the Church is read back into her present state.

Christ our Light has come into the world to bring Light to the whole world, for He is not a God of confusion. For this purpose He established His universal Church on a man He named 'Rock,'"

Interestingly, the early Fathers, those who Cross wants to follow, disagree among themselves about the interpretation of Matthew 16, with most saying the "rock" is either Christ or Peter's confession and a few saying it is Peter Himself. So much for preserving the "unanimous" teaching of the Fathers.

5. Is the Pope infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*?

No. The word "infallible" means "incapable of error." Popes can and have erred. Therefore Popes are fallible.

However, whether Popes can and have erred is not precisely the question here. The question is whether the Pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*. As Ott explains, this requires that the Pope "speak as pastor and teacher of all the faithful with the full weight of his supreme apostolic authority; If he speaks as a private theologian or as the bishop of his Diocese, he is not infallible"¹⁵ Ott here grants the point I made above, namely that Popes can err under certain circumstances (i.e. when not speaking *ex cathedra*). There is another condition as well. The Pope must:

"have the intention of deciding finally a teaching of Faith or Morals, so that it is to be held by all the faithful. Without this intention, which must be made clear in the formulation, or by the circumstances, a decision *ex cathedra* is not complete. Most of the doctrinal expressions made by the Popes in their Encyclicals are not decisions *ex cathedra*."¹⁶

There are a number of problems here. In the first place, what is being claimed is a doctrine of limited or conditional infallibility. In other words, the Pope is infallible only under certain circumstances. The nature of these circumstances or conditions raise other problems. They are so unclear that no Roman Catholic can

provide an inerrant list of these alleged infallible papal pronouncements. How does one determine whether the Pope's intentions are made clear by the circumstances (if they are not made clear in the formulation)? Even more importantly, who determines whether his intentions were made clear by the circumstances? Those who hear the pronouncement? A later Pope speaking *ex cathedra* about the earlier disputed pronouncement?

It almost seems as if the definition of an *ex cathedra* statement was made to be deliberately vague in order that Roman theologians could find ways to explain away past erroneous papal pronouncements. If Pope Honorius officially said something heretical and was condemned as a heretic, it must be that he was not speaking *ex cathedra*. If other Popes spoke in ways contrary to Scripture, they weren't speaking *ex cathedra*. In other words, the Pope is infallible except when he isn't.

The problem is that the entire doctrine of papal infallibility is predicated on the idea that "the unity and solidity of the Church is not possible without the right Faith," and Peter is the "supreme teacher of the Faith."¹⁷ In other words, the Church allegedly needs a supreme teacher whom she can trust, whom she knows will not lead her astray. But how does the doctrine of papal infallibility protect this idea when it can allow for heretical Popes? If a Pope, the supposed "supreme teacher of the Faith," can be a heretic, and if that possibility can be worked into a doctrine of papal infallibility, then I submit that such a doctrine of infallibility is completely useless as a guarantee of any kind of assurance that one's Pope is leading the Church in the right path.

Thankfully, we are not forced into such mind-numbing conundrums because there is no evidence in Scripture for a doctrine of papal infallibility and plenty of evidence from history showing where and when the idea first arose. Peter, the alleged first Pope, wasn't infallible. In his first act after being named the "Rock," he had the audacity to rebuke Jesus (Matt. 16:22). Jesus' judgment of this action is well known. He said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of men." After Jesus' arrest, Peter repeatedly denied the Lord Jesus, going so far as to curse and swear (Matt. 26:69–75). Years later, Peter continued to demonstrate his fallibility when he acted the hypocrite and was rebuked by Paul (Gal. 2:11–14). There is nothing indicating any kind of gift of infallibility in this. Now, unlike Judas, Peter repented of his sins and was forgiven, but the point is that he made errors in terms of both faith (denying Christ) and morals (playing the hypocrite). He was not infallible, and neither Paul nor anyone else was obliged to follow him in those sins. Like Paul, the church is called to resist and rebuke any leader (including Peter or those who claim to follow him) when they depart from Christ. If the Pope is Peter, Protestants are being forced into the role of a Paul and have been calling "Peter" to repent for centuries. Unlike Peter, however, those who claim to be his heirs proudly refuse.

The historical origins of the doctrine of papal infallibility can be traced to the Middle Ages. I have already summarized the historical evidence in *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, so there is no point repeating it here.¹⁸

It is worth observing at this point a statement that Cross makes in his paper “The Tu Quoque.” Cross writes,

So if a particular bishop were to teach contrary to what the magisterium of the Church has infallibly defined, the Catholic faithful should in that case remain true to the magisterium, and not follow the heretical bishop. That is not making oneself a higher authority than the bishop; it is remaining faithful to the still more authoritative visible magisterium of the universal Church.

The interesting thing about this quote is that it not only seems to grant the possibility of heretical Roman bishops, but it also implies what I and other non-Roman Catholics argue, namely the conditionality of submission to all human authorities. The contention of the Reformers was precisely that they had to stop following the heretical bishop of Rome in order to remain true to the historic church because the two were not teaching the same thing.

6. Is the teaching Magisterium of the Roman Church infallible?

According to Rome, the Magisterium exercises infallibility when gathered in an ecumenical council or when they, although scattered, unanimously propose a teaching regarding faith or morals while in moral unity with the Pope. I will address the problems inherent in the Roman Catholic definition of an “ecumenical council” below. At this point, I will simply address the issue of infallibility. Ott provides a definition: “Infallibility is the impossibility of falling into error.”¹⁹ There is a distinct connection in Roman Catholic theology between the idea of infallibility and the idea of indefectibility addressed above. The alleged promise of Roman indefectibility supposedly requires the reality of infallibility.

First, however, as we have already seen, indefectibility does not mean what Rome thinks it means. It refers to the church as a whole, not to any particular local church such as the Church of Rome. Furthermore, as we have seen, indefectibility is not synonymous with perfection. To stumble is not to fall, and to fall is not necessarily to fall beyond recovery.

The claim of infallibility, however, raises other problems. What we find in the history of redemption recorded in Scripture is that while the church never completely and finally fell, it has erred and apostatized repeatedly. The history of the church under the old covenant is an almost unbroken history of idolatry and apostasy, from the building of the golden calf (Exod. 32) to the idolatry that resulted in the fall of Israel to the Assyrians and the fall of Judah to the

Babylonians. When the Messiah came, things continued along the same path. The old covenant church rejected him. Only a remnant believed. But what about the church under the new covenant? The New Testament affirms that it too can apostatize (Matt. 7:15; Acts 20:28–30; 1 Tim. 4:1). The Apostle Peter explicitly compares what will happen to the church under the new covenant to what happened to the church under the old covenant (2 Pet. 2:1–3).

Regarding particular church councils, there have been far more than the twenty-one accepted as ecumenical by Rome, so the ecumenicity (and thus the infallibility) of a council is not determined by the mere gathering of a council according to Rome. It is determined by something else, namely the papacy. The relationship between the authority of popes and councils, however, provides another example of the confusion caused by Rome's claims. The ecumenical council of Constance, to which the modern papacy essentially owes its existence, subjected popes to councils. Later councils, however, such as the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council, subjected councils to popes. Using Cardinal Newman's doctrine, such a contradiction would be termed "doctrinal development." In the end, the popes won the power struggle by cutting off the very branch on which they were sitting.

7. Are ecumenical councils defined in terms of the papacy?

Not if the first seven councils are to be considered ecumenical. Rome claims that an ecumenical council "is an assembly of bishops and other specified persons, convoked and presided over by the pope, for the purpose of formulating decisions concerning the Christian faith and discipline, which decisions require papal confirmation."²⁰ The problem with this understanding is that it would mean the first seven ecumenical councils, which are regarded as ecumenical by Rome, cannot be regarded as ecumenical according to Rome's own criteria. Why? Because the first seven ecumenical councils were all convoked by the emperor, not by the pope.

The Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) was convoked by the emperor Constantine, not by Sylvester as later legend had it.²¹ Sylvester did not even attend much less preside. Instead, Rome was represented by two papal legates, Vito and Vincent.²² The Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381) was convoked by the emperor Theodosius, and the bishop of Rome was not even invited. The Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431) was convoked by the emperor Theodosius II to deal with Nestorianism. The emperor Marcian and the empress Pulcheria convoked the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) against the wishes of Pope Leo who reluctantly concurred. The Second Council of Constantinople (A.D. 553) was convoked by the emperor Justinian, and the Third Council of Constantinople (A.D. 680) was convoked by the emperor Constantine IV. Finally, the Second Council of Nicaea (A.D. 787) was convoked by the empress Irene.

The point here is that not one of the first seven ecumenical councils accepted as such by Rome meets Rome's standards for an ecumenical council. Not one of them was convoked or presided over by a pope. Furthermore, adherence to the decrees of these councils was signified by the vote of the attending papal legates, not by subsequent papal approval.

8. Is the "oneness" of the church to be defined in terms of faith *and* communion with Rome?

No. It is to be defined in terms of Christ. Individual believers are all members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), and that body is one (1 Cor. 12:12). This one body has one head, Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22–23). It is important to remember that the Apostle's words in Ephesians were spoken after the ascension, after Christ was no longer visibly present with the church militant. Even so, no mention is made of another head, whether a bishop of Rome or anyone else.

Must the visible expression of the church's oneness be perfect at the present time? Here, Rome's definition of oneness is inconsistent with her definition of holiness and catholicity. Rome does not deny that sin can and does exist in a church that we confess to be "holy," but she does deny that imperfections in oneness can exist in a church that we confess to be "one." In connection with "catholicity," Ott distinguishes between Virtual Catholicity "the intention to extend over the whole earth" and Actual Catholicity "the actual extension of the Church over the whole earth."²³ Virtual catholicity was the only kind of catholicity that existed during the first centuries of the church's existence. Actual catholicity took time to accomplish. Yet Rome will not allow a similar kind of progress toward oneness. There is no "virtual oneness" and "actual oneness."

An additional note here must be added about Rome's concept of oneness. As seen above, Roman Catholics at times speak of oneness in a way that if applied consistently would rule out the possibility of the Trinity and result in a Unitarian concept of God. According to Scripture, the Lord our God is one (Deut. 6:4). Yet our God, who is one being is also three persons. If "oneness" is ultimately defined in terms of God, then oneness cannot rule out plurality. A branch concept of the church, then, cannot be ruled out simply on the basis of an unwarranted and anti-trinitarian concept of oneness.

Addendum

At this point it may be appropriate to add a few comments about some statements in Cross's paper "Branches or Schisms." In this paper, Cross refers back to his earlier article "Ecclesial Deism," and referring to the concept of an invisible church writes:

This conception of the Church eliminates unity as one of the four essential marks of the Church specified in the Nicene Creed, either

by treating unity as only a '*contingent* mark of the Church,' or by treating unity as a '*necessary but invisible* mark of an *invisible* Church.'

This is untrue. The concept of an invisible church does not eliminate unity as a mark of the Church. It simply does not define it in Rome's self-serving way. Nor does it define unity in Rome's anti-trinitarian way. It allows the Word of God to inform our understanding of unity. It allows the biblical doctrine of the Trinity to inform our concept of oneness.

Cross includes a diagram he found that pictures the various Christian communions as branches on a tree. He then comments:

The person who made the diagram determined that there must be no 'branch' that is the continuation of the 'trunk.'

No, it may simply be that the person who designed the diagram considered all of the branches to be continuations of the trunk, as is the case with many real trees. With many real trees (such as live oaks) the trunk doesn't continue. It divides into branches, which themselves divide into more branches.²⁴ Not all trees look like giant redwoods.

Cross continues:

The person who made Diagram 1 assumed that the Church's visible unity is not essential to her being. No one would claim that the integrity of a living body is not essential to its being, as though a living body's being disintegrated by a bomb, for example, does not detract from the existence of that body.

This is a bad analogy since the existence of branches does not detract from the existence of a tree. In a real tree, the plurality of branches does not preclude the existence of that single tree. Cross's analogy is a stretch, even granting Rome's understanding. Individual Roman Catholics are not visible appendages to the Pope's body, so visible oneness can exist in more ways than the way the members of a living human body manifest their unity. Paul uses the concept of a body in 1 Cor. 12 metaphorically, not literally. Although Christians are members of the one body of Christ, the bodies of Christians are not physically united to each other in a way similar to Siamese twins. Visible unity does not require such an absurd extreme, but that is exactly what Cross is implying by his forced appeal to the wrong details of such analogies. Since Cross himself would not promote such absurdity, he should use more care in his selection and use of analogies.

Cross concludes his critique of the diagram:

Hence Diagram 1 carries with it the implicit assumption that the Body of Christ is invisible, not a visible hierarchically ordered Body.

This simply does not follow. I've seen, and Cross has surely seen, many trees with multiple branches, and if we've seen these trees, they are, by definition, visible. The existence of multiple branches in a tree (plurality) does not imply that a tree is not a single tree (unity). In fact, the only time one usually sees a tree with no branches is when one is looking at a dead tree trunk. Many branches does not imply more than one tree. Many branches in a tree also does not imply that a tree is invisible.

Cross does eventually get to the main point of this particular paper when he asks:

What is it that makes separations of the first millennium *schisms and heresies*, but makes separations of the second millennium mere *branchings within* the Church? Whose determination about whether something is a mere "branch of the Church" or a "schism from the Church" is authoritative?

At another place, he phrases the question this way:

He [the Protestant] will need to show the principled difference between a '*branching within*' and a '*schism from*,' and the basis for determining, in any division, whether it is a '*branching within*' or a '*schism from*,' and, if it is a '*schism from*,' which of the separating groups is the continuation of the Church Christ founded, and why.

The difference, again, has to do with faithfulness to Christ and to the doctrine He taught the apostles – doctrine that was written down before the first century ended. Unfortunately, Rome does not answer the question in this way. Rome has decided to answer the question in a self-serving way. But if anything is clear, it is that the Roman Catholic answer to the question never so much as occurred to Jesus or the Apostles. They made statements such as "You will recognize them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16), not, "You will recognize them by their submission to and communion with the Bishop of Rome." In another place, the Apostle Paul explicitly warns the church in Corinth about divisions, but his answer is not that unity is found in communion with Rome (1 Cor. 1:10–17). In fact, the kind of thing Paul describes as divisive is what Roman Catholics now claim as the basis of unity, namely the declaration: "I follow Cephas" (v. 12). Rome is explicitly mentioned only once in the epistles outside of Romans itself, and that one comment is in a brief autobiographical statement (2 Tim. 1:17). If Rome were the criterion by which branches and schisms were to be identified, we might expect that the Apostles themselves would show at least some awareness of that fact. But they don't, and when Rome says something the apostles never mention is of the

utmost importance, Rome's claim to the apostolic faith is revealed for what it is.

Part of the difficulty with this question is that many Roman Catholics and Protestants have a view of the early church that is grossly distorted. The idea exists in the minds of many that the first century or so was some kind of virtually perfect "golden age" for the church with no divisions, no differences, no disagreements, no disharmony. According to Rome, this "golden age" church still exists – in the Roman Catholic Church.

Both Scripture and history, however, point to a different reality. Already, in the first century church, there were numerous problems, and this is precisely what we would expect given that sin has not yet been completely eradicated. Many of the New Testament epistles were written specifically to address problems and divisions in the first century church. One cannot read the epistles to the Corinthians, Galatians, or the letters to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2–3 and conclude that this was a golden age with no problems, no divisions, no errors.

The fact is that there were both branches and schisms from the very beginning. It is not that there were only schisms until a particular year (e.g. 1054), and then after that point, there were only branches. No, the church was a tree with branches even during the time when the apostles were still preaching. Rome (or at least Cross) cannot see this because of the erroneous idea that unity precludes plurality. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul uses a tree branch metaphor in his letter to the church of Rome (11:11–24). Paul uses the metaphor of an olive tree to speak of the people of God. This "tree" existed prior to the first advent of Christ. *Unbelieving* Jewish branches were broken off and *believing* Gentile branches were grafted in (v. 17). The important points to note for our purpose are, first, that the Roman church is not identified as the tree. Second, the principle of unity was covenantal and pertained to *belief*. Third, the tree pre-existed Rome and the other Gentile branches, therefore Rome does not support the tree; the tree supports Rome (v. 18). Fourth, the church of Rome is among the many Gentile branches that were grafted into the pre-existing tree. It is one among many branches, including the church of Corinth, the church of Ephesus, the church of Philippi, and more. This is an implication of the fact that Paul is speaking of Gentiles generally in the history of redemption, not merely Roman Gentiles. Fifth, the Gentile branches, including the church of Rome, can be broken off, just as many Jewish branches were broken off for unbelief. The Roman branch is not given any special guarantees (vv. 21–22).

According to Paul's use of the tree analogy, every local church (and the households that make up each church) that is connected to the root can be considered a branch in some sense. In other words, those local churches that are connected to Christ are branches. Those that deny Christ, like the

unbelieving Jews of the first century, are schisms and are broken off by the Lord.

9. Is the “apostolicity” of the church to be defined in terms of origin, teaching, and succession in office?

As noted above, Roman Catholicism teaches that the Roman Catholic Church has its origin in the Apostles and has always adhered to the teaching of the Apostles. According to Rome, the Pope and the Bishops of the Roman Church have succeeded the Apostles in their office. Furthermore, as the Roman Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott explains, “The apostolicity of the succession guarantees the unfalsified transmission of doctrine and makes manifest the organic connection between the Church of the present day and the Church of the Apostles.”²⁵

There are numerous problems with Rome’s claim. First, and most importantly, as we have already observed in several places, the Roman Catholic Church did not have its origin in the Apostles. That is a popular myth, but it has no correspondence with reality. New Christians, perhaps returning from the celebration of Pentecost in Jerusalem, established churches in Rome in the first century, churches which Paul and perhaps even Peter visited after they were founded, but these churches cannot be equated with “the Roman Catholic Church,” an entity that evolved much later from these early churches.

It is also false to claim that the Roman Catholic Church has always adhered to the teaching of the Apostles. As we have already seen, the Roman Catholic Church has created a whole host of doctrines concerning the church, the papacy, infallibility, and more that the evidence indicates never entered into the minds of the Apostles. These additions and alterations to apostolic teaching are usually (since the time of Newman at least) termed “developments.” The fact that Roman Catholicism teaches numerous doctrines never conceived of by the Apostles and some that were opposed by the Apostles dispels any notion that her purported succession guaranteed the unfalsified transmission of apostolic doctrine.

The church is “apostolic” in the sense that it is organically connected to the church Christ founded. It is built on an apostolic foundation (Eph. 2:20). It maintains the Apostolic doctrine that is now found in the books written by the Apostles.

10. Is Rome *the* church founded by Christ?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this section the claims of Rome are not insignificant. If these claims are true, it is the duty of every Christian to submit to the Roman Church. If these claims are false, it is the duty of every Christian to

call the Church of Rome to repent. All of the relevant available evidence indicates that the claims of Rome are false. Because they are false, Rome's most fundamental claim to be *the* church founded by Christ is also false.

Since the evidence gives us no reason to believe Rome's claims, those claims should be rejected.

Sola vs. Solo: Is There a Difference?

As noted in the introductory paragraphs, the main purpose of the Called to Communion article is summed up by the authors in the following statement:

In this article we argue that there is no principled difference between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* with respect to the holder of ultimate interpretive authority, and that a return to apostolic succession is the only way to avoid the untoward consequences to which both *solo scriptura* and *sola scriptura* lead.

Their article first criticizes my presentation of the *sola scriptura* view. It then presents the Roman Catholic version of apostolic succession as the only real alternative. Because presuppositions concerning the claims of Rome determine whether one can discern any differences between the solo and sola views, I have addressed those claims in the first major part of this paper. At this point, I will turn to the question of whether there is a principled difference between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* with respect to the holder of ultimate interpretive authority and to the question of apostolic succession.

Section one of the paper by Cross and Judisch is introductory. Sections two and three of the paper are largely devoted to a summary of the case I made in my book for the distinction between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura*. The bulk of their argument against this distinction is found in section four. Section four, then, is where I will focus my attention.

In the last paragraph of section three, Cross and Judisch summarize their overview of my distinction between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* by saying:

We can summarize Mathison's explanation of the distinction between *solo scriptura* and *sola scriptura* as follows. Whereas *solo scriptura* rejects the interpretive authority of the Church and the derivative authority of the creeds, *sola scriptura* affirms the interpretive authority of the Church and the derivative authority of the creeds, except when they teach something contrary to one's conscience, as informed by one's own interpretation of Scripture.

The final phrase is based on a quote by the Reformed theologian Francis Turretin that I cited in my book. Turretin wrote:

Hence if they think they observe anything in them worthy of correction, they ought to undertake nothing rashly or disorderly and unseasonably, so as to violently rend the body of their mother (which schismatics do), but to refer the difficulties they feel to their church and either to prefer her public opinion to their own private judgment or to secede from her communion, if the conscience cannot acquiesce in her judgment. Thus they cannot bind in the inner court of conscience, except inasmuch as they are found to agree with the word of God (which alone has the power to bind the conscience).²⁶

Cross and Judisch obviously disagree with Turretin's point because of their view of the Church. However, the fact that an individual must determine whether or not to submit to an authority does not eliminate the real authority of the church or of the creeds. Paul calls on the Galatians to judge his preaching. This does not eliminate his apostolic authority. The underlying principle that Turretin wishes to bring out in this discussion is the qualitative difference between the Creator and the creature. The authority of God is absolute and unconditional. The authority of human creatures, including human creatures given ecclesiastical authority, is not. Paul had apostolic authority, but such authority did not give him *carte blanche* freedom to say anything he wanted. He did not have the authority to preach a different Gospel (Gal. 1:8). We will have occasion to discuss this issue further as we proceed because Cross and Judisch repeatedly refer back to this Turretin quote and to my use of it.

Is There a Principled Difference Between *Sola Scriptura* and *Solo Scriptura*?

Section four of the paper by Cross and Judisch is where we find the main critique of my argument. This section is titled "Why There Is No Principled Difference Between *Sola Scriptura* and *Solo Scriptura*." The first subsection is titled: "Direct and Indirect Ultimate Interpretive Authority."

Cross and Judisch first note what I believe to be the primary problem with the *solo scriptura* view:

What makes the *solo scriptura* position problematic, according to Mathison, is not its high view of Scripture, but its presumption that the individual has higher interpretive authority than does the Church. *Solo scriptura* treats the individual as having the ultimate or final interpretive authority regarding whatever matters he or she considers to be theologically essential or important. That is precisely why *solo scriptura* leads to the situations Mathison describes in his book.

They then argue that there are two ways to make oneself one's own ultimate interpretive authority. Rather than attempt to summarize their main argument and risk misrepresentation, I prefer to quote it in their own words:

[T]here are two ways to make oneself one's own ultimate interpretive and magisterial authority. One is a direct way and the other is an indirect way. The direct way is to subject all theological questions directly to the final verdict of one's own interpretation of Scripture. That is the *solo scriptura* position. Because it is direct, the nature of the position is quite transparent; we can see clearly in such a case that the individual is acting as his own ultimate interpretive authority.

The *indirect* way of making oneself one's own ultimate interpretive and magisterial authority is more complicated and subtle. In this case the individual, based upon his own interpretation of Scripture, either establishes or chooses an ecclesial community that conforms to his own interpretation in matters he considers to be essential or important. Then, he 'submits' to this institution so long as it continues to speak and act in accordance with his own interpretation of Scripture. If it deviates from his own interpretation of Scripture in matters he deems important, he repeats the process of either establishing or choosing an institution or congregation that conforms to his own interpretation in matters he considers to be essential or important.

In both the direct and indirect ways, the individual is acting as his own ultimate interpretive and magisterial authority. But his doing so is more difficult to see in the indirect case because he *appears* to be submitting to the interpretive authority of a body of persons other than himself. Yet, because he has established or selected this body of persons on the basis of their conformity to his own interpretation of Scripture, and because he 'submits' to them only so long as they agree with his interpretation on matters he considers to be essential or important, therefore in actuality his 'submission' to this body is in fact 'submission' to himself. To submit to others only when one agrees with them, is to submit to oneself. But submission to oneself is an oxymoron, because it is indistinguishable from not submitting at all, from doing whatever one wants. Yet because this indirect way of being one's own ultimate interpretive and magisterial authority maintains the *appearance* of being in submission to another body of persons, it allows those who practice it to believe falsely that they are genuinely submitting to another body of persons, and not acting as their own ultimate interpretive and magisterial authority. Accumulating for themselves this body of persons to whom they 'submit' allows them to remain under a delusion that they are submitting to the Church.

According to Cross and Judisch, *sola scriptura* entails the indirect way of making oneself one's own ultimate interpretive authority. They argue that *sola scriptura* does not truly allow for the interpretive authority of the church. They then proceed to explain why my method of determining where the church is results in a tautology.

But how does he determine what is the Church? Being Reformed, he defines 'Church' as wherever the gospel is found, because the early Protestants defined the marks of the Church as including "the gospel," where the gospel was determined by their own private interpretation of Scripture. So he claims that is in the Church that the gospel is found, but he defines the Church in terms of the gospel. This is what we call a tautology. It is a form of circular reasoning that allow anyone to claim to be the Church and have the gospel. One can read the Bible and formulate one's own understanding of the gospel, then make this "gospel" a necessary mark of the Church, and then say that it is in the Church that the gospel is found. Because one has defined the Church in terms of the gospel [as arrived at by one's own interpretation of Scripture], telling us that the gospel is found "in the Church" tells us nothing other than "people who share my own interpretation of Scripture about what is the gospel are referred to by me as 'the Church.'" This kind of circular reasoning allows falsehood to remain hidden.

It should be observed that this is not what I argued in my book. I defined the church in terms of the rule of faith, and I as an individual did not determine the content of the rule of faith.²⁷ Let me attempt to summarize again what happened in the first centuries and how it influences my argument about the rule of faith and the church.²⁸

From the ascension of Christ until the writing of the earliest New Testament documents began in the middle of the first century, the apostles were orally preaching the content of the Gospel doctrine given to them by Christ. For ease and clarity of explanation, let us call the content of apostolic doctrine "X".

During this same period of time, *uninspired* summaries of "X" were apparently being used in various churches for the catechetical instruction of new believers given prior to their baptism. The evidence for this is found in the records of the content of the early baptismal interrogations.

In the middle of the first century, the apostles, began putting "X" in writing in all of its fullness. These writings were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This process of inscripturating "X" was completed before the end of the first century.

By the time of Justin Martyr (*ca.* 100–165), if not earlier, the questions and answers used in the baptismal interrogations began to acquire a fixed form.

In the second and third centuries, semi-formal declaratory creeds began to develop out of the catechetical system. If we compare the questions and answers in the baptismal interrogations with the earliest semi-formal declaratory creeds, it appears that these creeds evolved out of these summaries of "X" that were used for the training of catechumens. Irenaeus, for example, speaks of the "rule of faith" he received at baptism (*Adv. haer.* 1,9,4).

Both Irenaeus and Tertullian, in the second century, use the phrase “rule of faith” to speak of “X” - the body of apostolic doctrine, the content of which by the time they wrote was found in Scripture, but which they also summarize in language very similar in form to the material found in the baptismal interrogations.

The earliest instances of formal official creeds occur around the end of the second and beginning of the third century with creeds such as the old Roman creed. These early creedal formulations appear to be different ways of stating the same language that had long been used in the baptismal interrogations, which themselves had always been uninspired summaries of “X.”

Over time, the language of these earliest declaratory creeds was supplemented with more material drawn from in-depth study of the inspired Scriptures in order to combat various heresies, with the most important result being the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed.

Now I argued in my book that the church is defined in terms of “X” – the apostolic doctrine – found in its fullness in the inspired Scriptures, and in an uninspired “summary” form in the Nicene Creed. I did not define it in the way that Cross and Judisch have described.

Cross and Judisch continue by arguing that the Catholic Church does not have the problems I have in terms of defining the church.

The Catholic position does not suffer from this circularity, because ‘Church’ is not defined in terms of “gospel,” but in terms of apostolic succession, involving an unbroken line of authorizations extending down from the Apostles. Just as Christ authorized and sent the Apostles to preach and teach in His Name, and govern His Church, so the Apostles, by the laying on of their hands, appointed bishops as their successors, and by this mystery handed on to them the divine authority to preach and teach and govern the Church.

As we have already seen, the historical evidence does not support the assertion that the Apostles did any such thing. They certainly didn’t appoint any bishops in Rome. As far as circularity is concerned, the Roman Catholic view does suffer from it. If apostolic succession were the criterion, one would still be forced to ask, “which apostolic succession,” since there are multiple claims to apostolic succession. One cannot resolve the problem of multiple competing claims to apostolic succession by picking one of the claimants (Rome) and asking it which one is correct. Cross and Judisch, however, gloss over this problem.

For that reason, the Church is defined not by the gospel (as determined by one’s own interpretation of Scripture). Rather, the content of the gospel is specified by the Church, and the Church is located by the succession from the Apostles.

Cross and Judisch completely ignore the fact here that there are multiple competing claims of apostolic succession. Because they ignore it, they do not realize that they are engaged in their own kind of circularity.

One side note here. Contrary to what Cross and Judisch claim in the quote above, the content of the gospel is not specified by the church. The content of the Gospel was specified by Jesus Christ and His apostles.

Cross and Judisch continue their critique:

But given Mathison's account, what counts as 'church' is always and ultimately up to each individual to decide on the basis of his or her own determination of the gospel, on the basis of his or her own interpretation of Scripture.

This is untrue because no individual today came up with the rule of faith, the apostolic doctrine found in Scripture and summarized in the Nicene Creed - an historically objective and verifiable set of propositions by which churches that are true branches can be identified.

So on Mathison's account, no one has any more authority than anyone else to say definitively what is the Church and where is the Church, and what is her doctrine and what is not her doctrine.

Again, this is an inaccurate description of what I argued in my book. It is a straw man. My argument is that the branches which have a plausible claim to be part of the church are those who adhere to the rule of faith, to the doctrine of the apostles. The rule of faith can be historically verified, and it is not something that I or any other Protestant created.

Cross and Judisch continue:

That can be seen in the very events of the Protestant Reformation. The first Protestants did not submit their interpretations of Scripture to the judgment of the Catholic Church in which they had each been baptized and raised. Rather, the first Protestants appealed to their own interpretation of Scripture to judge the Church to be apostate, and thus justify separating from her.

To put it mildly, the events leading up to and surrounding the Reformation, and the motives and processes by which the various reformers came to the conclusions they did, were *far* more complex and involved than Cross and Judisch's oversimplified statement would lead readers to believe. If Protestant sources are deemed untrustworthy, perhaps Cross and Judisch could take the time to read a Roman Catholic historian such as Alexandre Ganoczy, whose biography of the young Calvin presents a much more nuanced and historically informed evaluation of the times.

Cross and Judisch continue:

They did this by redefining the marks of the Church. The first generation of Protestants, without any authorization from their bishops, appealed to their own interpretation of Scripture to determine three (or two) new “marks of the Church,” beyond the four marks given twelve hundred years earlier in the Nicene Creed.

It is ironic that Cross and Judisch should say that the Reformers did these things “without any authorization from their bishops.” It is ironic given the fact that much of the flock in Western Europe at this time had been effectively abandoned by their bishops, men who were far more interested in wealth and worldly power than in spiritual duties.

Cross and Judisch continue:

These new marks consisted of: (1) the preaching of the gospel (or ‘sound doctrine’), where what counts as ‘gospel’ and ‘sound doctrine’ was determined according to their own interpretation of Scripture, (2) the proper administration of the sacraments, where what counts as a sacrament and what is its proper administration were determined again by their own interpretation of Scripture, and (3) the right exercise of church discipline, again, as determined by their own interpretation of Scripture. By these new marks derived from their own interpretation of Scripture, they determined that the Catholic Church governed by the successor of the Apostle Peter had become apostate, and thus that the Catholic bishops under whose authority they lived, had no ecclesial authority, and that they themselves [i.e. these first Protestants] were the continuation of the Church.

A few points are in order. First, these marks are not really “new” or in addition to the four found in the Nicene Creed. The first two are simply an elaboration of the mark of “apostolicity,” and the third is an aspect of the mark of “holiness.” Second, the leadership of the Roman Church had apostatized whether one measures apostasy by the four Nicene marks or the three “new” marks mentioned above. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Renaissance Popes had become little more than pagan Italian princes competing with other princes for land, power, and wealth. They bought and sold ecclesiastical offices without shame, and when they obtained an office, they used it for personal gain. The fact that Cross and Judisch ignore the real history of the Renaissance Popes and Bishops is seen again and again. They say, for example:

By that very fact (i.e. change of this sort) they no longer satisfy his criteria for what is essential to the Church, just as the Catholic bishops were simply defined out of authority by the first Protestants.

First the criteria for what is a church does not depend on my judgment. The rule of faith was not created by me. Second, the Catholic Bishops were not defined out of authority. They abdicated their authority when they ceased to follow Christ. Apostolic succession means nothing when the office of bishop was being bought and sold by men with no concern for Jesus Christ.

Cross and Judisch sum up the problem in their view when they write:

‘Submitting’ only to those with whom I agree, is merely a species of “submitting only when I agree,” which is itself an indirect form of “submitting only to me,” which is submitting only in semblance.

Cross and Judisch deny it, but this is exactly what they did when they chose Rome over the Eastern Orthodox Church or some other communion. They submitted to the communion that agreed with their individual interpretation of Scripture, history, and tradition. The only difference is that the communion that agreed with their interpretation also claims to have the infallible authority of God, so part of submitting to it entails defying the injunctions of Christ and the Apostles to all believers to test those who teach against a known public standard. Were the Roman Catholic position as explained by Cross and Judisch true, the injunctions of Christ and His apostles on this subject would not have been necessary.

More confusion in the Roman Catholic position can be seen in this statement by Cross and Judisch:

Since apart from apostolic succession the determination of ‘the gospel’ and ‘sound doctrine’ rests ultimately and irrevocably on the individual’s own interpretation of Scripture in order to identify the Church, it follows that any particular line of any creed or Church decree becomes ‘authoritative’ only if the individual approves it as being sufficiently in agreement with his own interpretation of Scripture.

It never occurs to Cross and Judisch to ask: Upon what does the determination of the true apostolic succession rest? Remember there are multiple claimants to apostolic succession. So upon what does the choice of the right one rest? It rests either on the individual’s own interpretation of Scripture and church history or it rests on a blind leap of faith. The determination of the true apostolic succession cannot rest upon the true apostolic succession since that would require knowing which one is true before you know which one is true.

If, however, apostolic succession is true, and the Church has final interpretive and teaching authority in determining what counts as the ‘gospel’ and ‘sound doctrine,’ then the first Protestants were not justified in separating from the Catholic Church.

The Protestants did not separate from the Catholic Church. True believers in the Western Church were part of (not the whole of) the Catholic Church. Their leaders, the Pope and the bishops, deserted them. Furthermore, their actions were justified when this particular claimant to apostolic succession proved its true nature by abandoning what apostolic succession was supposedly intended to protect, namely the apostolic faith and life.

The Alleged Contradiction Internal to the *Sola Scriptura* Position

The second subsection of section four is titled “The Contradiction Internal to the *Sola Scriptura* Position.”

In this subsection Cross and Judisch note first that I say all appeals to Scripture are appeals to interpretations of Scripture. They then note that I say Scripture is the final authority. They then explain how these two ideas are supposedly contradictory

But, if all appeals to Scripture are appeals to interpretations of Scripture, then it follows necessarily that either someone’s interpretation of Scripture is the final and authoritative norm of doctrine and practice, or Scripture itself cannot be the final and authoritative norm of doctrine and practice.

The conclusion does not follow. Interpretation is inherent in all communication and occurs whether we are consciously aware of it or not. Yet interpretation does not eliminate authority. If Jesus is standing before you and tells you something, the fact that you must interpret what He says in order to understand it does not mean that you have more authority than Jesus. But here is where the church comes into play and where one difference between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* can be seen. Imagine Jesus is standing before you and thousands of other believers, and imagine that he commands all of you to turn a certain direction and march to a certain city. Now imagine you turn right and start walking only to notice that everybody else turned left and started walking. If you are an adherent of *solo scriptura*, you aren’t going to pay any attention to what anybody else did. You heard what Jesus said. There’s no interpretation involved. If you are an adherent of *sola scriptura*, you are going to notice that everybody else started marching in a different direction and you are going to stop and ask whether you misinterpreted what Jesus said because you realize that interpretation is involved in all communication and that as a sinner, you might have misinterpreted what He said. In any case, the fact that interpretation of Jesus’ words is necessary does not mean that those hearing and interpreting His words have more authority than Him.

According to Cross and Judisch: “Mathison’s position thus creates a dilemma for himself that cannot be resolved without ceasing to be Protestant.” As explained above, the dilemma they create is a false dilemma. Cross and Judisch continue:

There is no middle position between the Church having final interpretive authority and the individual having final interpretive authority. Mathison recognizes that all appeals to Scripture are appeals to interpretations of Scripture, and denies that the individual has final interpretive authority. But at the same time, as a Protestant, Mathison maintains that the individual can appeal to his or her own interpretation of Scripture to hold the Church accountable to Scripture, even to walk away from the Church (and thus treat himself as the continuation of the Church), otherwise Mathison would undermine the very basis for Protestants separating from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century.

These sentences are based on Cross and Judisch's already mentioned false assumption that the interpretation of an authoritative speaker somehow transfers that speaker's authority to the hearer. One also sees in these sentences the assumption of Rome's claim to be equivalent to the Catholic Church, when in fact, the church of Rome was one local church among many. Finally, Protestants did not separate from the Catholic Church. The papacy did that. The bishops deserted the flock. If the action of the Protestants is separation, it is separation from the local church of Rome, a branch that had become diseased to the point of death.

Is the Idea of Derivative Authority a Delusion?

Cross and Judisch state their objective for the next section of their paper in the following words:

We showed above how Mathison argued that the proponents of solo *scriptura* do not recognize the secondary (or derived) authority of the Church and of the creeds. But here we want to show that Mathison's own position is essentially equivalent to the denial of secondary authority.

They explain:

Mathison claims here that the authority of the creeds and other judgments of the Church "derives from and depends upon their conformity with the inherently authoritative Word of God." But recall that according to Mathison, all appeals to Scripture are appeals to interpretations of Scripture. Therefore, the notion that the authority of the creeds and other judgments of the Church "derives from and depends upon their conformity with the inherently authoritative Word of God" entails that the authority of creeds and other judgments of the Church depends upon their sufficient conformity to the individual's interpretation of Scripture. In other words, Mathison's position entails that the creeds and other judgments of the Church are 'authoritative' only insofar as they agree with the individual's interpretation of Scripture.

No, as we observed above, the fact that all communication involves interpretation does not automatically change the locus of authority. To repeat, if Jesus is speaking to you, the fact that you have to interpret his words, does not mean that you are a higher authority than Jesus. If you are a soldier in the army listening to orders from your commanding officer, the fact that you have to interpret his words does not mean you are a higher authority than your commander. Furthermore, if you reject your commanding officer's words, that does not mean that his authority is not real.

Cross and Judisch continue:

Here Mathison is arguing that solo *scriptura* undermines legitimate ecclesial authority established by Christ. It does so by denying the "authoritative teaching office" in the Church, and the "hermeneutical authority" of those holding that office. How does it do that? Mathison is explicit: "the individual measures his teacher's interpretation of Scripture against his own interpretation of Scripture." For Mathison, God did not establish the Church as a democracy; rather, He gave specific gifts to men to teach and govern His Church.

The problem, however, is that the very basis for the existence of Protestantism as such, the very basis for the separating of Protestants from the Catholic Church, is this very act. The individual measured his teacher's interpretation of Scripture against his own interpretation of Scripture, and in doing so performatively denied the authority of the teaching office of the Catholic Church.

No, the basis for Protestantism, the reason the Reformers were forced to separate from the local church of Rome was due to Rome's rejection of Jesus Christ and the Apostolic faith and life. The Magisterium of Rome, not the Protestants, rejected the true Catholic Church.

Cross and Judisch continue:

Mathison wants to affirm genuine ecclesial authority as a secondary authority to which individuals should submit, but his position is contravened in two ways. First, the existence of Protestantism as such is based on the legitimacy of the individual rejecting the established ecclesial authority on the basis of his own interpretation. So Mathison is trying to propose a system incompatible with Protestantism's historic foundation, and thus intrinsically incompatible with Protestantism as such.

The fact that an ecclesiastical authority is established, does not mean that it should be followed unconditionally. If that authority departs from God, it is no longer an ecclesiastical authority. The priests of Israel were an established ecclesiastical authority, but when they began following other gods, they lost their rightful authority. Those Israelites who refused to follow them and bow the knee

to Baal should not be considered schismatics. The Protestants were in the same situation as the Israelites under the idolatrous priesthood. In both situations, the ecclesiastical authorities had abandoned the ancient faith.

Cross and Judisch continue:

Second, given Mathison's denial of apostolic succession, he cannot make a principled appeal to any ecclesial authority as that to which every individual ought to submit. Nothing can give what it does not have. But Mathison's foundational starting point does not include apostolic succession, and hence *de facto* it begins with each individual as his own highest interpretive and teaching authority. Therefore no qualitatively greater ecclesial authority than the teaching and interpretive authority derived from the "permission of those who sufficiently agree with me" is available to Mathison.

The idolatrous priests of Israel could have criticized those who refused to follow them in the same way. Should the faithful of Israel have followed those with legitimate claims to (priestly) succession into idolatry? No.

Because of the very real possibility of false prophets, false apostles, false teachers, etc., human authorities do not have absolute authority. Their authority is derivative and dependent. When Paul (an *Apostle*) told the Galatians that even he himself should be rejected by them if he were to preach another gospel, he is appealing, as it were, to an objectively known, public rule of faith, which is itself an ecclesial authority. The criterion is conformity to this publicly verifiable rule of faith. Paul does not appeal to hierarchical succession.

Cross and Judisch add:

He [Mathison] is correct that solo *scriptura* undermines the possibility of authoritatively defining the propositional doctrinal content of Scripture. He is correct that undermining the authority of the creeds practically entails that "there are no essential or necessary doctrines of the Christian faith." But Mathison's position does exactly the same thing, because by denying apostolic succession, he undermines the possibility of a creed having any more authority than anyone's subjective opinion. Apart from apostolic succession, the only ultimate basis for a creed's 'authority' is (1) it agrees with one's own interpretation of Scripture and/or (2) it was formulated by persons who sufficiently shared one's own interpretation of Scripture. But both of those reasons reduce to "when I submit (so long as I agree), the one to whom I submit is me," the very essence of the solo *scriptura* position Mathison rightly rejects.

A creed's authority does not depend on anyone's agreement with it. A creed's authority depends on whether it is true to the doctrine of Christ and the Apostles. Creeds are a written form of the confession of faith of the universal church. The

early creeds evolved out of the context of the early church's catechetical practices and were eventually put in written form.²⁹ The Nicene Creed is the culmination of this process.

Cross and Judisch note my claim that the authority of creeds follows from the fact that Scripture is clear on essential matters. The creeds are a confession of what the whole of the Church has read in Scripture. They argue that this raises problems:

This only compounds the problems with Mathison's position. If the authority of the ecumenical creeds only followed from the perspicuity of Scripture, there would be no need for the creeds in the first place, since the creeds would have restated only what was already plainly explicit in Scripture.

This is false. The perspicuity of Scripture does not preclude the need for creeds. This need exists because some do not accept what Scripture clearly teaches. Cross and Judisch say that such a view leads to an absurd conclusion:

This would entail that all those who opposed the creeds were blind, deaf, and stupid.

Actually, all that it entails is that some missed the plain teaching of Scripture. It does not say anything about why they may have missed it.

But history does not support that notion. The Arians, for example, were not unintelligent. They argued from the Scriptures that Christ was the first of God's creation, a lesser deity, and the highest of all created things. The Macedonians and Nestorians and Sabellians, etc. all argued from Scripture for their respective heresies. Resolving these disputes was precisely the primary purpose of the ecumenical councils. So the purpose of the ecumenical councils shows that Scripture alone was not sufficient to resolve the theological disputes.

And yet, Scripture was the standard to which the orthodox fathers appealed in their writings and in their arguments against heretics. They were opposing a false interpretation of Scripture with the true interpretation. The results of their deep study of Scripture is found in the conciliar documents of Nicea and Chalcedon. The fathers, whom Cross and Judisch, claim to follow, understood that God is a higher authority than any man and that, therefore, God's word is a higher authority than any man's word.

Cross and Judisch conclude this section by summarizing the problem they find with *sola scriptura*:

His [Mathison's] position also faces similar problem consisting of the following dilemma. He claims that it is "to the Church that we must turn

for the true interpretation of the Scripture, for it is in the Church that the gospel is found.” But at the same time he claims that “Because of the Church’s propensity to wander from the true path, she needs a standard of truth that remains constant and sure, and that standard cannot be herself. It can only be the inspired and infallible Scripture.” So, since for Mathison all appeals to Scripture are appeals to interpretations of Scripture, then when, as Mathison claims, the Church wanders from the true path, whose interpretation of Scripture will correct her? If it is the individual’s, then it is false that we must turn to the Church for the true interpretation of Scripture. The individual has no more reason to believe *a priori* that the Church’s present interpretation of Scripture is correct than he has to believe that the Church now stands in dire need of correction from his own lips on the basis of his own personal interpretation of Scripture. On the other hand, if it does not belong to the individual to correct the Church when she “wanders from the true path,” then it can belong to none other than the Church to correct herself when she wanders from the true path.” So the errant Church is then supposed to be corrected by her own erroneous interpretation of Scripture. Not only does that seem implausible, if Protestants truly believed that to be the case, they would simply have remained in the Catholic Church, waiting for the ‘erring’ Church to be corrected back to the truth on the basis of her own erroneous interpretation of Scripture. But Protestants did not remain in the Catholic Church; and this indicates that Protestants did not and do not in fact believe that Scripture corrects the Church when she “wanders from the true path.” The problematic assumption in Mathison’s position entailing this dilemma is his notion that the Church “wanders from the true path,” something he has to hold in order to justify being a Protestant.

The problematic assumption in Cross and Judisch’s entire critique here is that “the Church” is equivalent to “the Roman Catholic Magisterium” and that this Roman Magisterium/Church cannot wander from the truth. I have already addressed this presumptuous claim in the section above on the claims of Rome. It is an unwarranted and un-Christian claim. The church can and has wandered from the truth from the time of the patriarchs until today. Attempts to call the people of the church back to the true path has taken a variety of forms throughout history.

Section five of the paper by Cross and Judisch is devoted to answering potential objections to their argument. The first subsection is devoted to the *Tu Quoque* argument.

Tu Quoque: The Catholic Position Does Not Avoid Solo *Scriptura*

The *Tu Quoque* objection is rather important to this discussion. Cross and Judisch address it at length in this paper, and Cross addresses it elsewhere in a paper solely devoted to the subject. Rather than risk misrepresenting the point

Cross and Judisch want to make, I prefer to quote them at length in their own words:

One objection to our argument that there is no principled difference between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura* is that the Catholic position likewise ultimately reduces to *solo scriptura*. This is so, according to the objection, because the individual who becomes Catholic must start in the same epistemic position as the person who becomes Protestant. In choosing to become Catholic, he has simply chosen the denomination that best conforms to his own interpretation of Scripture. He places himself under the authority of the Catholic bishops in the same way that a Lutheran places himself under the authority of a Lutheran pastor, that a Baptist places himself under the authority of a Baptist pastor, or that a Presbyterian places himself under a Presbyterian pastor. Hence if the person who becomes Protestant retains final interpretive authority, then so does the person who becomes Catholic.

The objection is understandable, but it can be made only by those who do not see the principled difference between the discovery of the Catholic Church, and joining a Protestant denomination or congregation. Of course a person during the process of becoming Catholic is not under the authority of the Church. At that stage, he or she is like the Protestant in that respect. But the Catholic finds something principally different, and properly finds it by way of qualitatively different criteria. The Protestant is seeking a group of persons who believe, teach and practice what his interpretation of Scripture indicates was the belief, teaching and practice of the Apostles. He retains his final interpretive authority so long as he remains Protestant. No Protestant denomination has the authority to bind his conscience, because [in his mind] the Church must always remain subject to Scripture, which really means that the Church must always remain subject to [his interpretation of] Scripture, or at least that he is not ultimately subject to anyone's interpretation but his own.

The person becoming Catholic, by contrast, is seeking out the Church that Christ founded. He does this not by finding that group of persons who share his interpretation of Scripture. Rather, he locates in history those whom the Apostles appointed and authorized, observes what they say and do viz-a-viz the transmission of teaching and interpretive authority, traces that line of successive authorizations down through history to the present day to a living Magisterium, and then submits to what this present-day Magisterium is teaching. By finding the Magisterium, he finds something that has the divine authority to bind the conscience.

The last paragraph is important because here is where Cross and Judisch see the difference between their view and that of Protestants. Cross and Judisch argue that the nature of that which they are seeking is fundamentally different. Because

they are seeking the Church Christ founded (as if Protestants aren't), they are not submitting to something that conforms to their own interpretation of Scripture.

While I was writing this section of my response, Cross posted another article on the Called to Communion website, entitled "[Sola Scriptura: A Dialogue Between Michael Horton and Bryan Cross](#)." In the article, Cross makes a point in response to Horton's use of the *Tu quoque* argument that in my opinion strips away a lot of the unnecessary verbiage and gets to the key issue underlying this entire debate. Cross writes:

Of course the inquirer has to determine whether there is a succession of authority from the Apostles to the bishops of the present day, and whether Christ gave to St. Peter and his successors the primacy. But just as our discovery of Christ does not entail that the basis or ground of His authority is our judgment that He is the Son of God, and just as a first century Roman citizen's discovery of the Apostles would not entail that the basis or ground of their authority is his judgment that they were sent by Christ, so the contemporary inquirer's discovery of the Catholic Magisterium extending down through the centuries by an unbroken succession from the Apostles to the present day does not entail that the basis or ground of this Magisterium's authority is the inquirer's judgment that it is the divinely authorized teaching authority of the Church Christ founded. The reasons by which he grasps its authority are not the ground of its authority, whereas without apostolic succession the only ground for the authority of any confession or pastor is its or his general agreement with one's own interpretation of Scripture.

This paragraph is key for two reasons. First, as Cross indicates, the inquirer is the one making the determination. In other words, even if Scripture were to play no part in the search, the element of subjectivity remains, and it is more significant than Cross and Judisch are willing to concede. If one takes a look at converts to Roman Catholicism as opposed to converts to Orthodoxy, it becomes clear that Cross and Judisch have submitted to an institution which *they have determined* is the Church Christ founded *according to their interpretation* of church history and apostolic succession – just as the convert to Orthodoxy has submitted to the institution he has determined is the Church Christ founded according to his interpretation of history and apostolic succession. Just as all appeals to Scripture are appeals to interpretations, so too, all appeals to apostolic succession are appeals to interpretations.

The second reason this paragraph is important is because it shows rather clearly that all of these debates really boil down to one issue. As Cross says, "the inquirer has to determine *whether there is a succession of authority from the Apostles to the bishops of the present day, and whether Christ gave to St. Peter and his successors the primacy.*" In other words, all of these debates boil down to the veracity of Rome's claims for apostolic succession from the Apostles. It boils down to the historical evidence. If the evidence for Rome's claims were solid,

much of the rest of this discussion would be beside the point. If the evidence is not solid, then one is forced to look elsewhere. If the evidence for Rome's claims is weak or non-existent, we have no choice but to look elsewhere for an explanation, which is essentially what I attempt in my book. The point is that the question of Rome's claims to apostolic succession is key, and I will conclude my response by tying up a few loose threads related to that doctrine.

Apostolic Succession, specifically the Roman Catholic doctrine, is Cross and Judisch's solution to the problem of identifying the church. Let us look again at what Cross writes:

Only those having the succession from the Apostles are divinely authorized to preach and teach and govern Christ's Church. For that reason, the Church is defined not by the gospel (as determined by one's own interpretation of Scripture). Rather, the content of the gospel is specified by the Church, and the Church is located by the succession from the Apostles.

In other words, as Cross states in the main thesis statement of the paper: "apostolic succession is the only way to avoid the untoward consequences to which both *solo scriptura* and *sola scriptura* lead."

Problems with Apostolic Succession

Does the Roman Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession solve all of the problems? Actually, it does not. There are, in fact, a number of problems with the doctrine. Some of these have already been addressed in the section above examining the claims of Rome.

The first problem is historical. We have already discussed this problem at some length in our discussion of the claims of Rome, and I refer the reader to that section for more detail. In short, the historical evidence does not support the claims of Rome for apostolic succession.

The second problem involves the impossibility of the concept of succession having any coherent epistemological value after the East/West schism. Cross and Judisch claim that the only solution to multiple competing interpretations of Scripture and dogma is apostolic succession. What then is the solution to multiple competing claims to apostolic succession? If I ask the bishops in the east, who claim to be successors of the Apostles, they tell me the bishops of Rome are in schism from the church. If I ask the bishops of Rome who claim to be successors of the Apostles, they tell me the bishops of the East are in schism. If I ask the Oriental Orthodox, Assyrian Church of the East, Old Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, or Anglican bishops (all of whom would claim to be successors of the Apostles), they would all tell me conflicting things. How can apostolic succession possibly be the solution to multiple conflicting claims of apostolic succession? It cannot.

The third problem is that even if we were to grant, for the sake of argument, the plausibility of the Roman Catholic version of succession, this plausibility vanishes when we realize that it failed to accomplish what Roman Catholics say it accomplishes. The presumption of apostolic succession did not prevent Rome from separating from the Eastern Church – leaving two communions claiming succession and contradicting each other on significant points of doctrine and practice (e.g. papal supremacy, the *filioque*, etc.). Nor did it prevent Rome from rejecting apostolic doctrine and worship. It did not prevent Rome from adopting non-apostolic doctrines and practices found nowhere in the history of the church (e.g. papal infallibility). Instead, Rome’s version of apostolic succession ultimately led her to replace the Vincentian canon with the “magisterium of the moment.” Instead of that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all, the Roman standard is whatever Rome happens to be teaching today. If she teaches it now, it *must* have been taught by the apostles and the early church, even if there is no evidence of that in Scripture or the history of the church. The Vincentian Canon is an inductive principle based on the evaluation of evidence. The Roman standard is a deductive principle based on a bare assertion.

Conclusion

I appreciate the time and effort that Bryan Cross and Dr. Neal Judisch put into their response to my book. Although my response to their paper has taken *far* longer than I expected to complete, it has been helpful for me to revisit these questions. I do believe that there is a principled difference between *sola scriptura* and *solo scriptura*, but I am convinced that the difference is all but invisible to those who are convinced that the evidence for Rome’s claims is strong. Once Roman Catholic presuppositions are accepted, the difference I allege disappears. For those of us not persuaded of the claims of Rome, the difference is not only real, but obvious. I don’t claim to have answered in this paper all of the questions that could be raised, but I have answered those that seemed most pressing. Another book would be necessary to deal with everything involved in this discussion.

¹ I am aware that the phrase “solo scriptura” is not proper Latin. I wouldn’t mention this, but at least one commenter on the Called to Communion website has repeatedly expressed his exasperation at the use of this term. The term was coined by Doug Jones. It is a tongue in cheek neologism.

² See Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: The Newman Press, 2001), 130.

³ Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall D. Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 397–408. See also Henry Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society: From*

Galilee to Gregory the Great (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 64. Even Klaus Schatz grants this historical fact in his *Papal Primacy: From Its Origins to the Present* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 4.

⁴ See Henry Chadwick, *East and West: The Making of a Rift in the Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9–10.

⁵ Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, esp. pp. 397–408. Lampe’s magisterial study is a must-read for anyone interested in the early church at Rome.

⁶ See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edition (New York: Continuum, 1972), 30–61.

⁷ Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, viii.

⁸ For a good summary overview of the first seven councils, see Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1983). For a good survey of the history behind issues such as the *filioque* and iconoclasm and how they affected the councils and the churches, see Chadwick, *East and West*.

⁹ The crimes committed by the Renaissance popes being among the most egregious. Any Roman Catholic who cannot grasp why the Reformation occurred should read chapter three of Barbara Tuchman’s *The March of Folly* (New York: Ballantine, 1984), 51–126. In this chapter, Tuchman discusses the renaissance popes from Sixtus IV to Clement VII.

¹⁰ See Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops*, 13–6; Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 4.

¹¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture: The Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 70.

¹² Chadwick, *The Church in Ancient Society*, 103.

¹³ See, for example, Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. David Foxgrover and Wade Provo (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 56. Ganoczy, it should be noted, is a Roman Catholic historian.

¹⁴ Fitzmyer, *Scripture*, 70.

¹⁵ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 281.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, pp. 58–61; for a full history of the origins of the doctrine, see Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility 1150–1350* (Leiden: Brill, 1988).

¹⁹ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 297.

²⁰ Davis, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 323.

²¹ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318 – 381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 153–4; cf. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, revised ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1975), 1:153–4.

²² Davis, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 58.

²³ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 306.

²⁴ A beautiful example of such an oak tree is [Angel Oak](#) in South Carolina.

²⁵ Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 308.

²⁶ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1997), 3:284.

²⁷ *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, pp. 319–36.

²⁸ For a very helpful and detailed study of what happened in these early centuries, see Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*.

²⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 49–52.