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Q&A#142 Sola Scriptura, Roman Catholicism, and the Quest for Certainty

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Today's question: "I have been having some struggles with the doctrine of sola scriptura & private interpretation. The issue I'm running into is whether the Bible alone is actually sufficient to come to answers on primary (or what I view as primary) doctrines.

For instance, for several years I have been unable to come to any conclusive answer about what communion "is" (real presence, symbolic etc.). One can try to exegete as best as possible, use early church writings etc, but at the end of the day, it seems that it boils down to one's best guess of what Jesus meant by "This is my body." Luther, Calvin, Zwingli all had their own best guesses that differed from each other. Given that communion is a command of Jesus, the variety of viable opinions in Protestantism on how to practice/think about communion makes me feel that I will never be able to achieve any sense of certainty that I am even obeying Jesus' command correctly or interpreting him correctly.

This same issue has been popping up for other doctrines, such as whether sacraments impart grace or not, is remarriage adultery etc.

At this point in my questioning, it is seeming to me that Protestantism, in framing Christianity by the Solas, is necessarily forced to subjectivize/be non-conclusive about matters that Protestants say are of secondary importance (communion, divorce etc) but may actually be of first importance.

This perceived "insufficiency" of fairly unanimously defining more crucial doctrines by Scripture alone is leaning me towards a Catholic position. On a practical level, I'm feeling that if I were to remain a Protestant, I would be piecing my religion together with no reasonable sense of assurance that I'm in the right ballpark, rather than accepting something revealed (ie. Catholicism) wholesale."

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, I have been having some struggles with the doctrine of Sola Scriptura and private interpretation. The issue I'm running into is whether the Bible alone is actually sufficient to come to answers on primary, or what I view as primary, doctrines.

For instance, for several years I have been unable to come to any conclusive answer about what communion is. Real presence, symbolic, etc. One can try to exegete as best as possible, use early church writings, etc.

But at the end of the day, it seems that it boils down to one's best guess of what Jesus meant by, this is my body. Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, all had their own best guesses that differed from each other. Given that communion is a command of Jesus, the variety of viable options in Protestantism on how to practice or think about communion makes me feel that I will never be able to achieve any sense of certainty that I'm even obeying Jesus' command correctly, or interpreting him correctly.

This same issue has been popping up for other doctrines, such as whether sacraments impart grace or not, is remarriage adultery, etc. At this point in my questioning, it is seeming to me that Protestantism, in framing Christianity by the Solas, is necessarily forced to subjectivise, or be non-conclusive about matters that Protestants say are of secondary importance, communion, divorce, etc., but may actually be of first importance. This perceived insufficiency of fairly unanimously defining more crucial doctrines by scripture alone is leaning me towards a Catholic position.

On a practical level, I'm feeling that if I were to remain a Protestant, I would be piecing my religion together with no reasonable sense of assurance that I'm in the right ballpark, rather than accepting something revealed, i.e. Catholicism, wholesale. This is an extremely important question. It's an important question not just as it relates to the

movement towards Catholicism, but as it relates to the underlying epistemological issues of how we come to know the things that we know.

Can we know with any certainty? How do we derive a sense of assurance that what we are doing is the right thing, that what we are believing is the right thing? And those questions are ones that nag all of us on some level or other. These are difficult pastoral questions. They're difficult theological questions.

And so it's important to consider what's going on here. First of all, we need to consider the issue of certainty. What lies behind this question is a quest for a certain level of certainty.

And the Roman Catholic Church will offer you certainty. It will give you the assurance that you are believing the right thing, or it will claim to do that. It will give you a sense of authority that tells you what you are to believe, and if you accept that authority, then you will have certainty about what is appropriate, in principle.

But then when you look at how these things play out in practice, it's seldom as easy as that. There are a lot of different views on what the supper means within the context of Catholicism itself. There are other things about the authority of Catholicism, the supposed authority of Catholicism and its ability to resolve all these questions.

We'll see the difference between the ways that people have argued for the authority of the Pope and the Pope as someone who's able to resolve all these issues of uncertainty. In the movement from Benedict XVI to Francis, people do not, many conservatives who would present the papacy as that great answer to the problem of uncertainty, are now considerably less likely to do so. Now we have the papacy of Francis.

This is, I think, a revelation that we can't get away from these questions. These questions are part of what it means to be a human being, acting within the world with imperfect, limited knowledge. As human beings, we have to come to knowledge on the basis of things that are less than certain.

And so this quest for certainty, it would seem fitting that if we're having these most important matters, that we should have absolute certainty. Now those matters can be certain in themselves. There can be no doubt and insecurity in these truths.

These truths may be absolutely rock solid, but that doesn't mean that our apprehension of them will have that same degree of certainty. And that quest for certainty is also one that's become more acute within the modern age. As you follow the Enlightenment and people like Descartes, that quest for what can I know with absolute certainty, where there's no doubt whatsoever, what can I know in that way, that becomes a criterion by which truth is measured.

Now that's a problem because on the hand it's very difficult to arrive at absolutely

certain knowledge, those things that cannot be gainsaid, those things that cannot be disputed. On the other hand, it's something that sheds shadow over all these other sorts of beliefs that we have, that are now relativised. So if you cannot arrive at an absolutely certain understanding of something, then it casts everything else into the realm of contestability and dispute and uncertainty.

Whereas many of the things within that realm are not actually that contestable, they're not actually that uncertain. They're not absolutely certain, but they are pretty certain. And there's a lot of things that we will put into that realm, almost that will be put into that realm, almost as a move to disqualify them from control upon our lives and our actions and our thinking.

A lot of truths, what you'll find people doing with scripture for instance, people will interpret scripture just to cast enough uncertainty upon it. And just that little bit of uncertainty, that you could read it in a slightly different way, will allow them to dismiss the force of the text when the text itself is fairly certain and it leads us in a fairly clear direction and we can act with some degree of assurance on the basis of it. But if people don't want to act in terms of that, then it's very easy for them to cast that little fragment of doubt in there and as a result use it to break everything apart.

Now, Roman Catholic Church will offer you certainty. It will give you that assurance that you are doing the right thing, that you're believing the right thing and it will do that by taking that burden of belief from you. The belief, the responsibility that you have to act in a way that is on the basis of knowledge and to think in a way that is on the basis of truth.

It will take that burden from you and as that is given off to displace to the authority of the church, it will give you reasons for acting, directives and those directives will give you a sense that I am doing the right thing even though you don't understand why you're doing the right thing. You don't understand if it is true or not and there is the difference then to be recognised between what's offering you certainty and what's offering you truth. Now, as a Protestant, I don't have the same degree of certainty as the Roman Catholic Church offers but I believe that when you look at what the Roman Catholic Church is saying, it can be seen to be deeply deficient on grounds of truth.

Now, as you look closer, of course, beneath the surface, it isn't actually offering certainty well either but that criterion of certainty is often a false one. It's a one that's been raised, raised this absolute level of certainty that's far higher than any human being can reasonably expect to operate with as a fallible and finite creature and it's raising that up as a standard that on the one hand disqualifies many things that are fairly certain and things that we should be acting in terms of and on the other hand presents us with this unrealistic standard into which we will force certain things that are less than certain, certain things that we, to resolve our sense of uncertainty, our lack of assurance, will put

things into a level of certainty that they just do not merit. When you think about the Roman Catholic Church's claims, where do they get their certainty from? What is the authority that, on what basis are you believing the papacy? Is there some certain argument for the papacy or is the papacy just the end and it's the end of all such arguments, that it just gives you absolute authority and closes down your questions even of its own foundations? I think those are questions that we must deal with.

As human beings, we have a responsibility to exercise our trust in a responsible and considered way. The fact that we are exercising trust does not mean that that trust should not be exercised reasonably and when we think about trust there are ways in which we can exercise trust responsibly without that trust being absolutely certain. There are certain things that will not bear the weight of a complete and absolute and total trust but they will bear a lot of weight of trust.

Now when we come to a knowledge of any particular area of life, we will have to exercise trust and trust has that element of uncertainty to it. To the extent that is based upon a lack of our complete knowledge, we will have to trust other people that they have acted responsibly and they have acted prudently and rationally in coming to certain beliefs that they give to us. Now when you think about authority, what authority gives is reasons for action in the absence of our own subjective reasons for action.

So when you say that something is authoritative, it can give you direction for action even when you do not fully understand how those reasons are arrived at. So when scripture tells us something authoritatively, we don't have to know all the reasons why to get from A to B but it tells us to do that sort of thing and we can act on the basis of that with assurance knowing that scripture is true, that scripture is the word of God to us and that provides us with reasons for action, authority giving us reasons for action in the absence of our full understanding. Now when we think about authority as giving reasons for action, at the best authority is promissory.

Authority promises that as you act in this particular way, these certain results will occur. It also promises that as you obey this, it will become more apparent why you are doing it. As you look through the movement from law to wisdom in scripture, you will see that pattern.

In law, you're told not to do something or to do something and those direct do this, don't do that commandments later on as you develop through time are through wisdom perceived in a different way. So the law can say do not commit adultery but Proverbs will describe the way that the experience of the adulterer, the adulterous woman and the consequences of their actions, how it turns out in the end. It will describe the shape of that sin, how it all works out, how it takes its first germ, how it first germinates in the heart and then how grows to its full size and what sort of fruit it bears.

Now wisdom can then go back to the law and understand the rationale of the law. When

we're thinking about our beliefs, I think it's a similar sort of thing. There can be certain authorities that we follow, certain authorities and understanding that we do not give absolute authority but we see them as having some degree of authority in giving us reasons for thought and action.

And as we follow those authorities through, we can come to a deeper self apprehension or a deeper apprehension of the reasons for the truths that they have presented to us or the actions that they have laid before us. And so authority at its best is promissory. It's not just an absolute thing that tells us you must do this, you must not do that or this is the truth, this is not, this is falsehood or this is the directive for action, this is what you must not do.

That can take its place. That's a childlike experience of obeying our parents and often when you see the approach to the Roman Catholic Church, it's a desire for the sort of absolute certainty that you can have in many ways as characteristic of childhood. An attempt to revert to that degree of certainty that we know as we grow up is not actually fitting or accurate.

The child has an absolute confidence and faith in their parents that will prove to be misfounded. As time goes on, it becomes clear that their parents are fallible, limited human beings and they have all their failures and lack of knowledge in different areas and they have all these problems with their own understanding. That doesn't mean that they aren't good authorities, good guides to follow and it doesn't mean that their authority doesn't have a promissory, a proper promissory force that as you obey these commandments it will be better for you and you'll also find that you achieve better results in your life.

You become a person of good character etc and you develop certain virtues and skills etc and competences. When you think about it that way, there's a limited authority. That authority is legitimate, that authority is a worthwhile authority and it will lead us towards knowledge but it doesn't have to be absolutely certain, even though from the child's perspective it may seem to be absolutely certain, as if their parents are gods who can never get anything wrong.

That's not how things are in fact but yet when we think about our knowledge about the Christian faith, very often we can want some human authority to exercise that parental role in relationship to us. So we are spared the responsibility of arriving at truths in a prudential or deliberative truth in terms of a prudential approach or truths of reason and understanding in terms of proper reflection. Now that requires trust of authorities, it requires development of skills in ourselves, it requires being part of a community of thought that works through these issues.

Now when you're reading Luther, Calvin and Zwingli they're not just giving their guesses as to what communion is, they're reasoning deeply and thinking and reflecting in depth

upon what the scripture is saying and they present detailed arguments. They're working in a realm of persuasion and in that realm of persuasion it's a different thing from the realm of authority. The realm of authority says do this, don't do that but the realm of persuasion tries to help you to understand the reasons for particular courses of action in a situation where action may not be completely certain and that's how human action is for the most part in the world.

We do not live in a certain order and so we must act in a way that is more deliberative and prudential and recognising that there aren't absolute answers for how we should go ahead. When we're reading scripture we'll find the same thing. There are many interpretations of scripture that are less than certain.

That doesn't mean that they don't have weight to them, that doesn't mean that they shouldn't have force within our lives, it just means that we can fall short of absolute certainty while still having enough assurance of the truth in order to act on the basis of it and that's what human responsibility is about. It's acting on the basis of what we have, recognising that the hidden things belong to the Lord but those things that are revealed are for us and for our children so that we might obey him and that quest for absolute certainty, that modern quest particularly, is one that we should resist. Rather we should be willing to accept a lower standard of certainty and seek to act in a way that puts appropriate amount of weight on different things.

Now when I talk about scripture I'll often give the illustration of a tree with certain things that have great strength like that great trunk that bears a lot of weight and we can think about the different branches that go off, the main branches. You could put all your weight on those branches and jump around on them and they'd bear your weight but then there are certain thinner branches. How much weight do they bear? Slightly less and yet there's still things that will bear some weight and you can act on the basis of them.

That's how we think in a realm of prudence and a realm of less than absolute certainty as finite and fallible creatures. That's also how we can act and understand scripture in a way that is proper. I think what people are looking for often is for scripture to be a different sort of book from what it actually is.

Scripture is revealed in a way that does not give absolute certainty on a great many different matters. Rather it leaves them to our prudence and to judgment and that judgment is partly a matter of becoming better attuned to the text. So I've taken James Jordan's illustration on occasions where he talks about the way that a well-attuned servant will be able to see the slightest hand movement of his master and know exactly what it means, what he needs to do on the basis of that.

And that's not just a subjectivisation of things. It's a recognition that you need to get on the same wavelength as the text to be able to act with better certainty. Now there are

certain texts that will not bear the full weight of a doctrine.

The other thing you'll find is as you bear the weight of a doctrine, distribute it between a great number of different texts. It's like a root system and it can bear a huge weight above it because it's widely distributed even though any single thread, any single part of that root system would easily snap under the weight of what it's bearing above. So when we're thinking about our understanding of certainty we need to accept a lower level of certainty.

We need to think about how we arrive at truths through reflection, through deliberation. And that requires arguments. It requires listening to people like Luther or Calvin and Zwingli and how they argue out, how the issues at stake are brought into a sharper relief through their arguments.

Now Luther or Calvin and Zwingli aren't just giving guesses about uncertain matters. They're giving arguments that are exploring something about the nature of the sacraments and there are ways in which those will help to sharpen our understanding of what's taking place. Now do we arrive at absolute certainty at the end of it? No we don't but we do arrive at a far greater understanding of what scripture is saying and certainly enough to act on.

And that acting will not be again with absolute certainty but it will be a form of action that is well grounded. And that well grounded action is also something that will include authority. It will include authority that is fallible and limited and finite authority.

The authorities of church fathers, the authorities of great theologians, the authorities of church leaders. And just as we do with our parents, just as we do with scientists, governments, just as we do with leaders in our communities, people who have written for journalists, other things like that, we need to exercise trust if we're to know anything. There has to be a certain measure of trust but that trust doesn't have to be absolute to be responsible.

In fact if it is to be responsible it will necessarily fall short of absolute certainty in most cases. When we're trusting scripture we can trust scripture in a more absolute way but that doesn't mean we can trust our reading of scripture in an absolute way. And so I think we need to tackle the quest for certainty here because what again what the Roman Catholic Church will offer you is something to scratch that epistemological itch, the modern quest for certainty.

And it will do that in a way that it seems to answer the questions when you actually look closer there are a vast number of different positions on the sacraments within Roman Catholicism, different understandings of its transubstantiation for instance. There will be many ways in which people will dispute the meaning of papal statements and so the papacy actually complicates things a lot of the time rather than making things simpler.

But it will offer you certainty at least on the surface but that certainty is an elusive one.

That certainty is not a real certainty. What we need is not that absolute certainty but reasonable assurance of what we're doing. I found Richard Hooker very helpful on this sort of issue because he gets at the epistemological issues underlying these questions and he challenges the idea that we should have absolute certainty for all these courses of action.

No we're finite and fallible human beings and we can work with something less than that. This quest for certainty is not just found in Roman Catholicism. It's found in many approaches to sola scriptura and it's found in people's desire to get certainty for everything, to have a biblical answer for every single question.

And so you need a proof text for everything. But yet in actual fact a lot of these things are less than certain. A lot of these things require deliberation and reflection upon nature and natural law.

It requires prudence and it requires the developing wisdom of the societies that rules its affairs. These are the sorts of things that will inform our judgment and our understanding on a great many issues. And they will do so with less than absolute certainty but on a reasonable basis enabling us to act with a certain level of assurance.

And so I would encourage people who are struggling with these issues to look very closely at the question of certainty. Why are we looking for that level of certainty? Is that a sort of idolatrous quest where we're seeking for something that we're putting over the status of truth, over the status of proper action and obedience to God? We're more concerned to find certainty than true obedience to God or truth. Now that may seem to be contradictory because what's being looked for here is certainty that I am obeying God.

But that certainty is the certainty of one's own heart. That's an assurance. It's not actually the certainty of the truth or the certainty of true righteous action.

That's the certainty that we should be seeking for. Not the subjective sense that I have that. Rather what I should be seeking for is a commitment to pursue the truth doggedly until I find it.

A commitment to pursue the right course of action. And that will, I believe, take you beyond the false certainties that are offered by the Roman Catholic Church. The false certainties that are offered by certain forms of Biblicism as well.

That will give you a biblical answer to everything. That will allay your sense of uncertainty. That will allay your sense of responsibility to trust people.

Your responsibility to search matters out. To think prudentially about issues and to

reflect and deliberate. It will allay your uncertainty on that front but with a false basis.

And so avoid Biblicism. Avoid the sort of desire to displace all your responsibility onto some absolute authority and revert to a childlike stage. Rather we need to act with responsibility and to develop some degree of assurance but to resist the urge to seek infallible and infinite assurance.

That's just not available for us as fallible and finite human creatures. And so if you're dealing with these issues, in whatever form you're dealing with them, get to the underlying nub of the issue which I think is the quest for an illegitimate level of certainty. And when you actually look at these debates I think what you'll find is there are a great many means by which we can think, arise at a proper understanding of what we should do and what we should believe.

And the debates that seem to be all these different voices, actually there's a great deal of light that is produced by these things. If you listen to the best voices you'll find that the issues at the heart are cast into a clearer light and that light will help you to act in a responsible and to think in a more assured way. Thank you very much for listening.

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