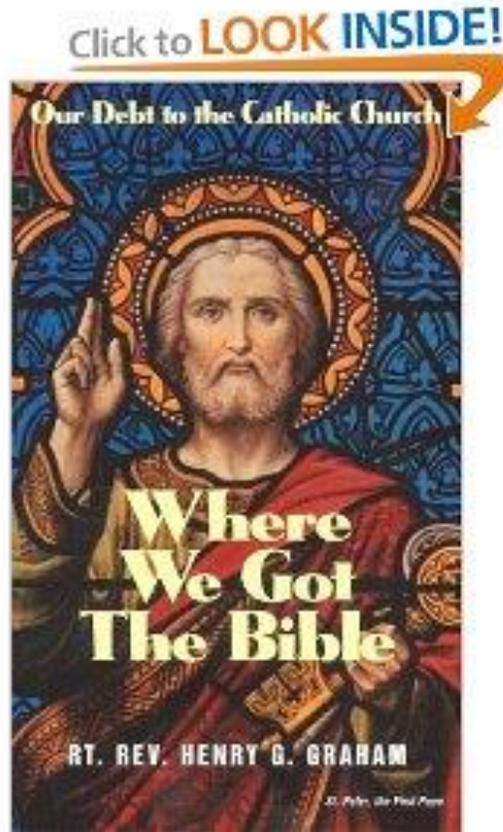


A Summary of *Where We Got the Bible* by Rt. Rev. Henry G. Graham



A Summary of *Where We Got the Bible...Our Debt to the Catholic Church* by Rt. Rev. Henry G. Graham

Saint Benedict Press W/Tan Books, 2004

ISBN: 978-0895557964

Summary by Rosie Prever, written exclusively for The Goldhead Group, Ltd

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General Overview

The Catholic Church has been the victim of slander on the subject of her relationship with the Bible. Protestants are taught that the Church hates the Bible, that her doctrines are not based on it, and that she has tried to keep it out of her people's hands. These beliefs are the result of a "falsification of history." In order to set the record straight, the Protestant accusations must be explained and answered individually, and the true history of the Catholic Church's glorious legacy must be set forth to take their place.

In order to support their doctrine of *sola scriptura*, which teaches that the Bible alone is necessary for salvation, Protestants act as if the Bible has always been readily accessible to all men. They ignore the fact that the intervention of an extra-scriptural authority – namely the Catholic Church – was necessary to create that Bible, and to protect it from corruption and false interpretation through the ages. To carry out this duty, the Church has done everything possible to spread the Bible among its people – contrary to her reputation, which asserts that she tried to prevent its translation and printing, and that she persecuted anyone who opposed her.

The true history of the matter proves that the Church is neither opposed to the Bible – as her enemies claim – nor exclusively committed to it, without the intervention of another authority – the way Protestants are. The Church's relationship with the Bible, vindicated by history, has been one of respect for God's word tempered by prudent consideration of its limitations.

The Protestant Case

The Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* rests on a series of misconceptions about the origin and history of the Bible and its relation to the Catholic Church. The first set of mistakes results from a lack of common sense. Many people subconsciously assume that the Bible, being absolutely necessary for salvation, was written all at once, by one man, in English, and readily available to all – in short, that it dropped "down from Heaven ready-made."

This mindset ignores the historical reality that the books of the Bible were written and collected over a long span of time, in ancient languages and during a wide range of historical contexts. The second set of mistakes concerns the periods during and after the Reformation and addresses the Church's alleged enmity towards the Bible. *Sola scriptura* presupposes that, since the Bible contains everything necessary for salvation, anyone who read it for himself would immediately arrive at the truth, and consequently convert to Protestantism. The Catholic Church, then, has done everything she could to keep the Bible out of her people's hands, for if they read it, they would realize that Catholicism is unbiblical. Many Protestants believe that, to this end, the Catholic Church has tried to prevent the Bible from being printed or translated into English. To support these assertions, they cite the condemnations of John Wycliffe and William Tyndale as examples of the Church's efforts to keep the Bible hidden.

To answer these charges, a history of the Bible must be set forth. The first group of mistakes can be corrected by investigating the sources of the Old and New Testaments, and the second by relating the true history of the Catholic Church's actions to preserve and spread the Bible.

The Catholic Response

In reality, the Catholic Church is not only the protector and promoter of the Bible, but its author as well. She received the Old Testament canon from the Jews, perfected it by affirming the authenticity of the Deutero-Canonical books, and chose the writings of her own disciples to form the canon of the New Testament.

When Christianity was in its earliest stages, there was no New Testament. There were many Christian writings, some of which were acknowledged to be divinely inspired—and therefore deserving of a place in the canon of scripture—and some which were disputed. Many people read books like the “Epistle of St. Clement” or the “Gospel according to the Hebrews” at public worship and considered them to be at the same level of authority as the writings which all Christians now accept. The confusion reached a crisis when Christians began to be persecuted by the Romans, who forced them to hand over their holy scriptures or be killed. With the profusion of “scriptures,” Christians had no way of knowing which ones were really inspired—and as such worth dying for—and which were not. The New Testament canon needed to be settled once and for all.

In 397 A.D., the Church called the Council of Carthage to settle this problem. Under the authority of the Pope, with the help of sacred tradition and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church decided which writings belonged in the New Testament canon. This canon, combined with the Old Testament received from the Jews, whose canon had been settled by 100 B.C., formed the only Bible Christians knew until the Reformation. The Bible which the Protestants use to attack the Catholic Church would not exist had it not been for that same Church’s authoritative intervention.

This was not the end of the Church’s dealings with the Bible. By writing and collecting its books, she had established herself as its author and guarantor. Thus she alone had the right and duty to say which versions of the Bible were whole and which corrupt, and to promote the former and suppress the latter. In this capacity, the Catholic Church has handed down the same Bible from its conception to the present day.

Of course, the original manuscripts no longer exist; but there is still enough evidence to support the Church’s claim that her Bible is a faithful copy of them. There is as ample proof of her role in spreading the Bible, as there are reasons that her actions were not more effective.

The preservation of the Bible through the centuries has been mainly due to the work of Catholic monks and nuns. There are copies of the Holy Book surviving from as early as the fourth century, when the canon was settled at the Council of Carthage, and there are thousands of manuscripts still existing which date from then onwards. In the Dark Ages the chaos that followed the dissolution of the Roman Empire might have stifled the supply of Bibles had it not been for the Church—whose history in this period, in contrast to the rest of the world’s, was not “dark,” but in fact rather glorious.

These “dark” ages saw great innovations in education, architecture, and religious orders. A flowering of European learning produced great universities, scholars like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and Albertus Magnus, and the theological school of thought known as Scholasticism. Beautiful cathedrals and abbeys were built, and the Dominican and Franciscan orders were founded. The Crusades were undertaken to defend the Holy Land. But most importantly, the whole of Christendom was nourished by the powerful network of monasteries and convents which carried out the Church’s duty of educating its people in the Faith. The work of copying Bibles by hand was slow, hard, and expensive; but the dedication of the religious orders to this task assured that not only every monastery and every church, but many individuals owned a copy of the Bible. The Church did her best to make sure that everyone who could read had access to the Bible, even chaining copies of it to public places near churches to assure that those too poor to own a Bible would be able to read someone else’s.

Protestants object that, if the Church really provided so many copies of the Bible, then those copies would still be around today; but they are overlooking three things that account for the disappearance of many of the manuscripts: natural destroyers like fire, human destroyers like pagan persecutors or reformers, and the primitive copying methods of the day. A brief review of these methods is necessary to put the issue in perspective.

For the first few centuries of Christianity, the Scriptures were written on papyrus, a material invented in ancient Egypt which consisted of many thin sheets of reed bark posted together. Papyrus was extremely brittle

and perishable, and consequently most of the books of the Bible written on it—including all the originals—have been destroyed by time. By the fourth century, parchment—a more durable, but also more expensive material—had replaced papyrus. Parchment was made out of sheep or goat skin. A more expensive variant of this material, vellum, was made out of tender calf skin. Many New Testament manuscripts were written on vellum, which explains the fact that many more vellum than papyrus manuscripts have survived; but there was a downside to vellum, too. Because it was so expensive, a scribe would often wash the ink off an old vellum manuscript in order to use the sheet over and avoid buying a new one. These recycled manuscripts, called palimpsests, often covered valuable Scriptures with writings of lesser importance. In the nineteenth century a method was discovered for revealing the earlier writing on a palimpsest, but not all of those manuscripts have been recovered. The ink used also caused problems: it often faded, or peeled off, or ate through parchment over time. Thus, although the Church tried to preserve as many copies of the Bible as she could, a large amount were destroyed by circumstances beyond her control.

The Catholic Church, then, preserved the Bible through the Dark Ages, and continued to do so in the Middle Ages. That era, however, is also controversial. Even after evidence that the Church kept the Bible alive by copying it, Protestants still claim that she tried to keep the Scriptures out of people's hands by refusing to translate them out of their inaccessible Latin. This charge must be thoroughly refuted, because it forms a partial basis for a justification of the Reformation.

To begin with, the Bible was not always in Latin. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, and the New in Greek. In the fourth century, St. Jerome translated both testaments into Latin, which was the language of the people at the time. When Rome fell and individual nations began to come into power, other languages became more common, but Latin was still universal; those who could read, read Latin. But when a demand for vernacular scriptures finally arose, the Church responded; as she had translated her Bible from Hebrew and Greek to Latin, so she now translated the Latin into English, Spanish, French, German, Italian, and many other languages. Long before John Wycliffe and Martin Luther—who supposedly made the very first English and German translations of the Scriptures, against the Church's will—there were many opportunities for Christians to read the Bible in their own languages. English translations of scripture, in fact, had been available since the seventh century. Even those who could not read were still acquainted with the Bible. They were taught by lessons in school and by sermons in church; by sacred dramas, like today's Passion Play at Oberammergau; by sacred art; and by hymns and poetry. The proof of this is in the writings surviving from those days, which are filled not only with direct quotations from scripture, but with unconscious usage of scriptural phrases and ideas. The Bible was so much a part of people's lives that it influenced everything from personal letters to legal documents.

Another common charge against the Catholic Church is that, in her perpetual crusade to keep the Bible out of her people's hands, she tried to prevent it from being printed. The truth is that the Church not only condoned the printing of the Bible, but actively brought it about by making sure that, once the printing press had been invented, it was the first book printed. The Catholic Church, then, by the time of the Reformation, had written, authenticated, passed down, taught, translated, and printed the Bible; and yet Protestants today are taught that men like Wycliffe and Tyndale lived at a time when the Bible was practically unknown. Since this belief is often defended using the stories of Wycliffe and Tyndale, the history of the Bible in England must be especially examined in order to correct the misconception.

The Protestant version of history says that Wycliffe and Tyndale merely tried to provide their countrymen with an English translation of the Bible, and for this reason were persecuted by the Bible-hating Catholic Church. This story has two historical problems. First, after the evidence has been examined, the charge of Bible-hating loses its credibility. Second, it over-simplifies the matter by ignoring the circumstances that persuaded the Church to oppose the translations. It was not that she was against *any* English translation, but that she was against translations by these two men, because they were unfit for the job.

John Wycliffe—far from being the courageous whistle-blower that his followers have claimed—was a heretic. He publicly denounced religious orders, the Pope, and the doctrine of transubstantiation. The Church could not trust that his translation would be orthodox; and even if it had, it would have been filled with heretical commentaries, like other Protestant translations of the day. The Church was not opposed to an English translation of the Bible; but since she already had several—as shown above—a translation by Wycliffe would be not only heretical, but also superfluous.

William Tyndale, too, was unqualified for the job of translating the Bible. He lived 100 years after Wycliffe, and thus his ambition was to provide, not an English Bible, but a *printed* English Bible—although, like Wycliffe, he wanted to promote his own translation. But he was only a mediocre scholar, and—like Wycliffe—a heretic. The proof of Tyndale’s unfitness for the job was made evident when he carried out his plans and had his Bible published in Germany, in disobedience to the Church. This new translation contained Luther’s heretical commentaries, as well as Tyndale’s own prologue and notes, which attacked the Church’s rites and religious orders. It was even too radical for the Protestants, who omitted Tyndale’s notes in subsequent editions of the Bible. Even Henry VIII declared the translation to be “corrupted” and banned it in English. Thus the Church was proved correct in her estimation of Tyndale’s abilities.

It is true that Rome had banned all English printed versions at the time; but the example of Tyndale only serves to justify that action as well. Seeing the potential of English translations like Tyndale’s and Wycliffe’s to be harmful, and the confused state England was already in, the Church judged it unwise to complicate the situation by flooding the country with printed English translations. Her decision was further justified by the fact that there was no great need for a printed English Bible at the time. When contraband copies came onto the market, there was so little demand for them that royal acts had to be passed to force people to buy them, and printers had a glut of unsold Bibles on their hands.

Wycliffe and Tyndale, then, were unqualified to translate the Bible because of their heretical views and—in the case of Tyndale—inadequate scholarship; but there is a second reason that they were condemned by the Church: the fact that they were not authorized.

The Church wanted to make sure that only orthodox versions of the Bible would be put into her people’s hands, so she required all new translations to have her approval. This caution was proved well-taken when serious corruptions in unauthorized translations came to light. Luther’s translation, for example, added the word “only” to St. Paul’s teaching that “we are justified by faith;” a version called “Whittingham’s Bible” contained an “Epistle of Calvin;” and all Protestant Bibles to this day are missing the seven Deutero-Canonical books, as well as pieces of the books of Daniel and Esther. Because corruptions like these occurred so frequently—there were hundreds of erroneous editions in England alone, including many with blatant mistranslations or typographical errors—the Church refused to approve any translation not made under her supervision. Even if one disagrees with the Church’s doctrine, or with her decision to delay an official English translation, it is easy to understand how the circumstances convinced her to act the way she did. In any case, she did not delay long: by 1609, she had completed the official Douai-Rheims translation.

This Bible, although an English version, was published in France, because many Catholic Englishmen had been forced to flee there to escape persecution. It was carefully translated from the Latin Vulgate, a 382 A.D. version by St. Jerome which had been commissioned by the Pope and translated from the earliest Greek and Hebrew manuscripts available. This Bible had been adopted by the Council of Trent (1546) as the official Catholic translation. The Douai-Rheims, then, was the only complete and authentic English version of the Bible, and the only one with the Church’s infallible approval. It does not claim to be composed in the most beautiful prose style, or accompanied by the most profound notes; but it is completely orthodox, and it has stood the test of time. The Catholic Church has never been forced to recall it, or change anything essential about it. Once again her caution was proven to arise, not from contempt of the Bible, but from respect for it. The historical charge of Catholic Bible-hating is thus refuted by historical facts, all of which are attested to even by Protestant scholars; but the Church’s actions regarding the Bible cannot be fully understood until her

view on the Bible's role has been set forth. This context further establishes the appropriateness of the Church's actions.

The Role of Scripture

The Protestant view of scripture says that the Bible is the only thing necessary for salvation. This *sola scriptura* doctrine leads to the encouragement of individual interpretation; for if the Bible stands alone, then there is no authority needed to guide its interpretation, and anyone who reads the Bible will understand it properly on his own. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, teaches that the Bible is a sacred authority, but that it was not meant to be taken by itself. She sees herself as a divinely-appointed authority, who uses sacred tradition and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to give her people what the Bible has to offer, as well as what is outside the realm of Scripture altogether. This position is supported by arguments drawn from history and from the Bible itself.

First of all, the Bible did not always exist. This in itself is a powerful argument against *sola scriptura*, because it implies that, if the Bible is absolutely necessary for salvation, then all those who lived before it was written—or, for that matter, had no access to it once it was—could not be saved. It would surely be inconsistent with God's justice to damn a man simply because he was unlucky enough to live before the Bible.

Even the manner in which the Bible was written shows that it is not absolutely necessary. If Christ had meant to leave His Church with a Bible which was sufficient for their salvation, it is reasonable to assume that He would have instructed His apostles to write a complete account of His teachings, or write one Himself, as other founders of religions have done. But Christ did not write a word, and He told His apostles to preach, not to write.

The books of the New Testament arose out of special circumstances. St. Luke, for example, says at the beginning of his Gospel that he is writing to correct certain false stories about Christ which were then circulating, and St. Paul's epistles—though relevant for all—were obviously written to address specific problems in the churches he had founded. Even if the evangelists' intentions *had* been to tell the entire story of Jesus, it would have been impossible; St. John says that “the whole world would not have contained the books that would be written.” This does not mean that we do not need to know the other things Christ said; for surely all His words are profitable. Instead, this is the point at which tradition takes over. Tradition has a dual role: it is the heir to apostolic teaching and the deposit of scriptural interpretation. In its first role, it is the collection of teachings not recorded in the Bible which were received by men close to Christ and the apostles and handed down through the ages. In its second role, it is the explication of Scripture by Church Fathers. Tradition can thus enable Christians to reap the full benefit of Christ's and His apostles' teachings; but it can only do so if they accept it and understand why it is necessary.

The necessity of extra-scriptural authority before the Bible was written and while its books were being collected and verified has already been discussed; but authority was needed even after these periods. Since the Bible had to be copied by hand for centuries, errors in the text were very common. Monks left out words, copied words wrongly, or mistook commentators' notes for part of the sacred text itself, and copied them accordingly.

These variations in the text challenge the doctrine of *sola scriptura* because they make it hard to know which copy of the Bible is correct. This does not contradict the Church's belief that the Bible is free from error. The authors of the Bible were inspired; but this does not mean that every subsequent scribe who copied the Bible was likewise protected from error. Unless there is some legitimate authority to declare which Bible is authentic and which is not, there can be no firm ground for the belief that the Bible stands on its own.

The Church's role does not end with determining which Bible is correct; for even if men have the right Bible, they are unable to interpret it infallibly. The Bible is not given to indisputable interpretations; it is full, according to St. Peter, of "many things hard to be understood." The attempt to grasp these things without the aid of a divinely-appointed authority has led to the tragic fragmentation of the Christian church. Knowing the confusion that would follow if men did not have such an authority, Christ would not have left His followers with nothing but the Bible. Instead, He founded a Church which He endowed with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the promise of infallibility. The Church's direct link to Christ and His apostles through sacred tradition makes her the only reliable authority for determining which writings a Christian should accept as inspired, and for interpreting them properly. Without the Catholic Church, there would be no Bible.

Since the Bible is thus "the Church's offspring," the Church has the right to direct her people in regard to it. Actions like delaying an official English translation appear perfectly reasonable to a Catholic, because he understands that, since the Bible is not absolutely necessary, it is foolish to rush to disseminate copies of it without first assuring that it is an authentic version. To a Protestant who believes in *sola scriptura* salvation, the Church's caution appears to be the product of enmity towards the Bible; but that is because Protestants have expanded the Bible's role out of proportion. Since the Catholic Church always has the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the counsel of sacred tradition to rely on, she is free to regulate the translation and dissemination of the Bible as she sees fit, without fear of endangering her people's salvation.

Conclusion

Rome's work is not over; she must always be on guard to protect the Bible from corruption or false interpretation. To carry out this responsibility, she has appointed a standing Biblical Commission. Without the Church's unceasing work, neither Protestants nor Catholics would have a Bible, and without her steadying influence, the regrettable splintering of churches would have continued *ad absurdum*.

As it is, she remains the only church with the complete and authentic Bible, and the only one whose doctrines follow it faithfully. Christ's promise to the apostles—"[h]e that heareth you heareth me"—is fulfilled in Catholicism's apostolic tradition. The only ones who can be assured of possessing the fullness of His truth are those who submit to the prudent authority of His Church.