

*Scripture and tradition are both necessary,
and they exist
as the two eyes and heart chambers of the full gospel.*

Full Gospel

By Jeffrey Kirby

■ It's a familiar pastoral scene. A priest is called to the hospital to anoint and console the sick. A certain priest, a seasoned pastor in the southeast, was called for such a visit. As he approached the hospital, a large woman, seeing his Roman collar, stopped him at the door and assertively asked him, "Are you a true Bible-believing minister?" The priest, well acquainted with the Protestant, religious terminology of his area, simply smiled and responded, "Yes, ma'am, full Gospel!" The woman was relieved, and asked for his prayers. The priest and woman had an expression in common, but was their understanding of the term the same?

In the popular religious environment of the American southeast, the famed "Bible Belt," certain expressions are fairly common. Among them we find the term "full Gospel." While it is common in speech throughout the southeast, the arguments behind this expression are not unique to Dixie. The term frequently underlies an expansive theology of dogma and the Church. These contemporary, sporadic views of the Gospel and of the Church are not

restricted to the American southeast. They can be found in Christian circles throughout the United States and in heavily Protestant areas throughout the world. They have become a popular view of Revelation and of the Church in our time. But what do they mean or symbolize? Unfortunately, the buzz word, "full Gospel" is itself difficult to define, especially since those who rally around it have such diverse understandings of its meaning, or no pronounced understanding of it at all.

Where can a discussion begin on this expression? In trying to begin an exploration into the meaning of the term, it would seem best to begin with the Protestant understanding and then move into a Catholic summary of the concept.

Protestant understanding of the Full Gospel

All Christian believers would agree that the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom the entire revelation of the Most High God is summed up (2 Cor. 1:20; 3:16-4:6), commanded his disciples

to preach the Gospel and communicate the gifts of God to all humanity, and that this Gospel was to be the source of all saving truth and moral discipline.¹ The word “gospel” simply means “good news,” and its basic message for preaching and teaching is known as the kerygma. The elementary points of the kerygma are grounded on the Person of Jesus as Christ and Lord (Acts 8:5; 19:13; 1 Cor. 1:23), and they can be summarized as: the time of fulfillment has come through the life, passion, death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus; and, salvation is given through faith in Jesus Christ and through baptism, which forgives sins and bestows the Holy Spirit.²

The argument for the full Gospel is certainly grounded in the actual four gospel books of the New Testament and in the kerygma, but in some sense the Protestant understanding of the full Gospel broadens them by concentrating on certain fundamentals within them.

The use and history of these protected fundamentals is essential to comprehending the concept of the “full Gospel.” In the nineteenth century, the Social Gospel, which was heavily influenced by Darwinism, began a secularizing trend in mainstream Protestantism. The movement seemed to call into question the reliability of Scripture.³ In response to this liberalizing current, certain religious leaders assembled and wrote the twelve volume set of books entitled, *The Fundamentals*. This set of books not only gave the reactionary group its name, but also identified the principal points of the response. The adherents of this group, now known as the “fundamentalists,” would seem to hold to these five assertions: 1) the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture; 2) the deity of Christ, including his Virgin Birth; 3) the substitutionary atonement of his death; 4) his literal resurrection from the dead; and 5) his literal return in the Second Coming. This list of points is debated by some, and others would add a literal heaven and hell, soul win-

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ning, and a personal Satan, but these five points are the most accepted summary of the movement.⁴ When asked if someone is a “true Bible-believing minister” or if they have “full Gospel,” these fundamentals seem to be a large portion of the question. Of course, there are some more expansive additions. For example, in some Pentecostal assemblies, the term might also include whether the minister has received certain gifts, such as healing, prophecy, or “speaking in tongues.”

Do these understandings truly summarize a claim to “full Gospel”? Could the full Gospel include something qualitatively more reliable and helpful to the Christian believer?

Catholic understanding of the Full Gospel

In Catholic theology, the use of the term “gospel” also goes beyond the actual four gospel books. While the gospel books certainly hold a “central place” in theological studies, the word “gospel” is defined more holistically.⁵ The “full Gospel” would be seen as synonymous with the “single, sacred deposit of the Word of God.”⁶ The gospel, or to use the term “full gospel,” would be explained as the whole truth of salvation and rule of conduct which are contained “in written books and in unwritten traditions which were received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or else have come down to us, handed on as it were from the apostles themselves at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”⁷



In this context, the full Gospel would contain both the written books, the Sacred Scriptures, and the unwritten traditions, known as Sacred Tradition. Both are seen as coming from the same divine well-spring, being bound closely together, communicating one with the other, forming one thing, and moving towards the same goal.⁸

How would Catholic theology understand the relationship between Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition? Can tradition be considered a valid portion of the full Gospel and the Word of God? Isn't it offensive to place Tradition on the same level of the Scriptures?

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture

In the early Church, in addition to the experience of the original Apostles, God added another, "one untimely born" (1 Cor. 15:8). When St. Paul was called by the Lord Jesus as an apostle, he wanted to faithfully receive and hand on what the Lord Jesus had given to the Twelve: the means for God to encounter and communicate with his people, and his people

with him (1 Cor. 15:3). St. Paul did not want to invent a new, so-to-speak, "Pauline" Christianity. He desired only to pass on the truth and gifts of the Lord which had been given to the Church through the Apostles. This transmission, or "passing on," is understood by the word Tradition.

Tradition is often approached with suspicion. It is mistakenly associated with the human traditions and customs dismissed in parts of the New Testament (Matt. 15:3), especially by St. Paul (cf. Col. 2:8). Sacred Tradition, however, is much more universal, and inherent to the Christian message. It is not mere practices or customs. As we see in St. Paul's own doctrinal and ecclesial practices, Sacred Tradition can be seen as the permanent actualization of the active presence of the Lord Jesus in his People, brought about by the Holy Spirit, and expressed in the Church through the apostolic ministry and fraternal communion (cf. Acts 2:42; Matt. 28:20).

Tradition is not merely a transmission of things and words, a collection of dead things, but a giving of the effective presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord. Jesus continues to accompany the community he has brought together. Tradition assures the connection between the apostolic faith lived in the early Church and the actual experience of Christ in his Church today. Guaranteed by the ministry of the Apostles and their successors, Sacred Tradition allows the water of life, which flowed from Christ's side, and his saving Blood to reach the people of all times and allowing them to become members of the household of faith (Eph. 2:19-22).⁹

Process of transmission

The transmission of the full Gospel occurred as a process. The freely chosen, public revelation of God to humanity, which was given in its fullness in Jesus Christ, concluded upon the death of the last apostle. The life and teachings of the Lord Jesus, known as the de-

"The old rite should be granted much more generously..."—Benedict XVI

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Joseph Ratzinger, From *Salt of the Earth*

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posit of faith, were initially passed on through oral teaching. In time, some authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit to put into writing certain selections of the many elements which had been handed on, in view of the situations in the churches to which they were writing.¹⁰ The writing down of elements contained in Sacred Tradition was marked by the Holy Spirit with the unique gifts of inspiration and inerrancy. These gifts, which assured the accuracy and validity of the Scriptures, singled out these written parts of the Tradition as their own distinct source. Therefore, the written portion of God's Word, the Sacred Scriptures, are seen as their own tributary coming from the same divine well-spring as the unwritten Word of God. Both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence by the People of God because each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Jesus Christ.¹¹

Doesn't this view diminish the Sacred Scriptures? Can Tradition have any real place in the understanding of the Bible?

**Dynamics Between
Scripture and Tradition**

The seventy-three books of the Bible, the forty-six which were inherited from the Old Testament and the twenty-seven which were established by the Church as the New Testament, make up the canon of the Sacred Scriptures. Rather than diminishing the Scriptures, Tradition gives the inspired books their foundation and fullest meaning. The Scriptures

cannot be validly isolated from it. Without running the risk of grave misinterpretation, the Scriptures cannot stand alone. Guided by the same Holy Spirit, the Sacred Scriptures and Sacred Tradition must accompany one another. The relationship between Scripture and Tradition is not one of tension, but of dynamics. The full Gospel breathes in harmony with itself. The Scriptures themselves come from and call for communion with Sacred Tradition, and Sacred Tradition itself turns to the Scriptures for assistance in confirming and giving expression to the truths of Faith.¹² They collaborate and mutually give witness to Jesus Christ.

If I can see and read the seventy-three books of the Bible, how can I see and know Sacred Tradition? How has it demonstrated itself in the history of the Church?

Sacred Tradition continues to discern and explore the depths of the Scriptures and the mysteries of Faith. In these labors, certain monuments are distinguished. Since Tradition is fluid and continues to search and interpret the deposit of faith in an overall unwritten way, these things are called monuments because they are not Tradition of themselves, but only a portion of it and a fruit of its exercise in time. Some of the monuments of Sacred Tradition that we can see are the sacred liturgy, creeds, decrees of the ecumenical councils and *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the popes, the teachings of the ordinary magisterium, the writings and lived testimony of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, ancient customs and practices, the speculation of faithful theologians, and the sense of the Faith felt and practiced by devout believers.¹³ These monuments show the continuous introspection and wrestling of the Church with the truths of Faith, and their consistent resolution in time.

The expressions "full Gospel." and a "truly Bible-believing minister" demand some attention and reflection. Can a person's claim to

the full Gospel merely include the basic kerygma, or a list of fundamentals, or even the practice of a few charismatic gifts?

The Gospel would seem to have more substance and universality than these simple things, and an assertion to the "full Gospel" should demonstrate this reality. The life and teachings of the Lord Jesus, the sacred deposit of faith, is lived in both Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture. Sacred Tradition was the birthplace for God's inspiration of the Sacred Scriptures, and is the actualization of God's enduring presence with his people. The Sacred Scriptures stand as a witness in their own right, and contribute to the reflection and work of Sacred Tradition through the generations. The Gospel would not be full, but incomplete, without Sacred Tradition.

Scripture and Tradition are both necessary, and they exist as the two eyes and heart chambers of the full Gospel. When a person is open to the workings of both in their lives and in the life of the Church, then similar to the experience of the priest at the hospital, when they are asked if they are a "true Bible-believer," they too can smile and respond, "Oh yes, full Gospel!" ■

End notes

¹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), #7.

² Rene Latourelle, "Kerygma, Catechesis, and Parenesis." in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, Ed. Rene Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), pg. 585.

³ Karl Keating. *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, #139.

⁶ *Dei Verbum*. #10.

⁷ Council of Trent, Session 4, First Decree: acceptance of the sacred books and apostolic traditions.

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, #83.

⁹ This section is indebted to Pope Benedict XVI's Wednesday Audiences of 26 April and 3 May, 2006.

¹⁰ *Dei Verbum*, 19; Catechism of the Catholic Church, #83.

¹¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church. # 80. 82.

¹² Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, Trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (San Diego: Basilica Press, 1966), pgs 293-295.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pgs. 425-458.



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