

# PT135

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## **Dr. Bahnsen Debates Sola Scriptura**

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

On February 19, radio station KKLA broadcast on the John Stewart show a live three-hour, hard-hitting dialogue between Dr. Bahnsen and two Roman Catholic instructors - a dialogue which went to the heart of the Protestant Reformation and illustrated its importance.

The topics for discussion and call-in were both lively: the Protestant principle of sola Scriptura (versus Scripture-plus-tradition) and the Roman Catholic practice of venerating Mary (praying to her as a co-mediatrix with Christ).

Matatics After All

Readers will recall that in our last issue of Penpoint we reported that the debate over sola Scriptura between Dr. Bahnsen and Gerry Matatics, which had been scheduled for February 14 in Nashville, was postponed while a suitable site was sought. But God's providence works in surprising ways sometimes!

On February 12 the program director for the John Stewart radio show, "Live from LA," called to request that Dr. Bahnsen appear on that show with another Protestant teacher, there to pursue a dialogue with two Roman Catholics on sola

Scriptura and varying attitudes toward Mary. This program was planned for February 19 and would be aired from the Disneyland Hotel.

The Roman Catholic participants were originally going to be Father Michael Manning (who teaches on a regular television program in southern California) and Pat Madrid from the educational organization which calls itself "Catholic Answers" (with its headquarters in San Diego). However, after KKLA informed Catholic Answers that Dr. Bahnsen would represent the Protestant position, they decided at the last minute to fly in Gerry Matatics from Nashville to defend Romanism.

Mr. Matatics had graduated from Gordon-Conwell Seminary and became an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America. He later entered a program of doctoral studies at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia). However, he had become dissatisfied with Protestantism and, in association with his friend Scott Hahn, changed over to Roman Catholicism. Matatics and Hahn have put out literature and tapes which attempt to defend Roman Catholic distinctives (tradition, the mass, the pope, etc.) and encourage Protestants to

return to Romanism. Matatics once worked for Catholic Answers, but now teaches at Aquinas College in Nashville, Tennessee.

So then, an encounter between Matatics and Dr. Bahnsen took place in February after all! Better than that, there ended up being two Roman Catholics to debate: Matatics plus Father Manning, who had become well known for promoting devotion to Mary.

KKLA told Dr. Bahnsen five minutes before air-time [!] that it had decided a second Protestant apologist would not be necessary. Host John Stewart would be coming from that position anyway.

Is Sola Scriptura Scriptural?

During the dialogue Dr. Bahnsen explained why Protestants are committed to Scripture alone as their standard of doctrine and living for believers. Pointing to Christ as the pinnacle of God's revelation (Heb. 1:1-2), Dr. Bahnsen observed that Christ no longer ministers in person on earth, but that He appointed the apostles as His representatives (Matt. 10:40) and inspired them with His word (Matt. 16:17; John 14:26; Gal. 1:11-12). Apostolic revelation is thus the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20 ; cf. Matt. 16:18).

But, he was asked, was there not also oral instruction from the apostles, in addition to written? Should this oral teaching not also be followed (2 Thess. 3:6)?

Dr. Bahnsen pointed out that the apostles personally do not give oral instruction to the church today (obviously). Their "pattern of sound words" (2 Tim. 1:13-14) has been recorded for us in writing, which stands alongside the Old Testament as scripture (cf. 2 Peter 3:16). Anybody who claims to have a teaching which, although not found in the Bible, allegedly traces back through oral instruction to the apostles will need some evidence or warrant for such a remarkable claim - or else we are dealing with subjectivism and wishful thinking.

Moreover, in the former days when (everyone grants) there was inspired revelation from God in both writing and oral teaching - even then - the views offered orally were tested against the standard of what had been written (Deut. 13:1-5; Isa. 8:20). This is conspicuous in the case of the Apostle Paul himself, who commended the Bereans for "examining the scriptures daily" to find out if Paul's teaching was true or not (Acts 17:11)-and Paul could claim apostolic prerogative!

Naturally, Mr. Matatics claimed that Dr. Bahnsen was misinterpreting Scripture. He wanted to see sola Scriptura taught in Scripture alone. So Dr. Bahnsen obliged him by citing 1 Cor. 4:6, where Paul indicates that his readers should learn the saying "not to go beyond the things which are written." Leon Morris (in the Tyndale commentary on the text) claims this was "a catch-cry familiar to Paul and his readers." Sounds very much like the cry of the Protestant Reformation, doesn't it?

Mary a Mediator?

Mr. Matatics and Father Manning contended that it is acceptable to "venerate" Mary above other human beings, though not to worship her as though divine. (This distinction has always seemed to Protestants to be bogus or impractically unclear.)

Dr. Bahnsen countered that Jesus discounted any attempt to venerate his biological mother (Lk 11:27-28), and that although Mary was a member of the early church (Acts 1:14), there is no further attention given to her in the New Testament-much less veneration.

As one would expect, Father Manning was willing to rest on the alleged tradition of the church as authorizing his view of Mary. In addition, he appealed to his subjective feeling that Mary had improved his devotion to Jesus (somehow). At a commercial break Father Manning asked Dr. Bahnsen if he could not understand that Mary had improved his spirituality. Dr. Bahnsen answered in a kindly way that he could not, especially since Father Manning had never actually spoken with Mary. The priest simply shook his head.

Mr. Matatics attempted to defend prayer to Mary as no more than what Protestants do when they ask friends at church to pray for their needs. Dr. Bahnsen observed the obvious disanalogy - that Mary is dead, while our friends at church are not! Scripture forbids contact with the dead (Deut. 18:11), and departed saints are not of continuing ministerial value to the church on earth (as we see from Paul's words in Phil. 1:23-24).

Dr. Bahnsen further charged that Matatics was not owning up to the full Romanist view of Mary as "co-mediatrix" with Christ. He was not really a Roman Catholic then, but something of a hybrid "presbyterian-Roman-catholic" instead.

The debate featured a number of other interesting moments (such as Matatics' odd interpretation of Mary as the "ark of the New Covenant") and a good hour of call-in questions, especially from converted Roman Catholics. Tapes of the whole program (two and a half hours, after news and commercials are edited out) are available