

Sola Scriptura

by Jim Seghers

Catholics and Protestants share many common beliefs. Among these doctrines is faith in the Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, the indispensability and efficacy of his atoning death on the cross, the necessity of grace, and the inspiration of Sacred Scripture.

However, there are other important issues over which there is a continuing debate. Indeed, even within Protestantism, there are important doctrines that are disputed. For example, there is general disagreement regarding baptismal regeneration, the necessity for infant baptism, the relationship of grace to free will, the meaning of the Lord's supper and the Eucharist, and the possibility of one losing one's salvation by personal sin.

Fundamental to the debates between Catholics and Protestants, as well as basic to the lack of doctrinal unity among Protestants is the principle of ***Sola Scriptura***. *Sola scriptura* is Latin for "by the Bible alone." It is an affirmation that the **only** source of knowledge regarding divine revelation is the Bible, and that there is no church authority established by Christ to correctly interpret it. Even within Protestantism the definition of *sola scriptura* is disputed, although it is accepted as a general principle. One expression of *sola scriptura*, for example, is found in the Westminster Confession cited below.

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is ether expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture... All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them..."

This essay will examine *sola scriptura* as a viable principle of Christianity. However, it is important to understand that the issue is *sola not scriptura*. The Catholic Church continually affirms the importance of the Bible as an **indispensable source** of discovering God's revelation. "In Sacred Scripture, the Church constantly finds her nourishment and her strength, for she welcomes it not as a human word, 'but as what it really is, the word of God'."¹

Historical Difficulties

1. While the Father's of the Church show great respect for Sacred Scripture and stress its importance, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* cannot be found in any of their writings. Nor does the idea of *sola scriptura* make any appearance in Christianity until the 14th century. John Wycliffe first formulated the concept. It was rejected by his colleagues at Oxford and found no general

¹ [Catechism of the Catholic Church, #104.](#)

support. The idea of *sola scriptura* does not reappear until the 16th century when promoted by Martin Luther as one of the two principles of the Reformation.

This creates an enormous difficulty. Is one to believe that a principle so vital to Christianity was unknown until the 14th century? How is this possible? Additionally, is one to believe that Martin Luther received a revelation in the 16th century that was unknown to the Fathers of the Church, many of whom were taught by the Apostles or by men who knew and were instructed by the apostles?

2. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* underscores a view of Christianity as a religion of the book - the Bible. The Bible is seen as the only source given to Christians to know what Jesus authentically taught. *Sola scriptura* contains two important facets. The first is the claim that the Bible is the only source of God's revelation. Secondly, it affirms that there is no church authority empowered to infallible interpret its meaning. There are insurmountable difficulties with these positions.

First, it ignores the superabundance of historical evidence that the early Church relied on Apostolic or Sacred Tradition in resolving doctrinal disputes, not *sola scriptura*. This view also ignores the instruction of Scripture, itself, which affirms the importance of Sacred Tradition, a subject that will be discussed in another essay.

Second, this viewpoint ignores the evidence that the Bible, as we now have it, did not exist for over three hundred years. The Bible was not compiled into one book until the end of the 4th century. If Sacred Scripture is the only source by which a person can know what Christ taught, how was the faith transmitted from the death of the last Apostle until the canon of the Bible was formulated at the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) and approved by Pope Damasus I? There are additional difficulties.

According to the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* there is no authority outside of the Bible. That principle jeopardizes the Bible itself! Prior to the Councils of Hippo and Carthage there were disagreements among local churches regarding which books belonged in the New Testament. Questions were raised regarding the inspiration of the Epistles of James, Jude, 2nd Peter, 2nd & 3rd John, Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation. Luther threw out 7 books of the Old Testament: Tobias, Baruch, Judith, Wisdom, Ecclesiastics, I & II Maccabees, and parts of Esther and Daniel.² Yet, it should be noted that all Christians accepted these books as being divinely inspired until the 16th century. Perhaps other books should also be discarded. Luther dishonored the Epistles of James, Jude, Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation. Should they be rejected too? Clearly, if one who accepts *sola scriptura* is to be consistent, he should reject any book that the Bible itself does not affirm to be divinely inspired. The result would be a very thin Bible!

² The Canon of Scripture is discussed in a [separate essay](#).

A Principle of Anarchy, not Unity

Sola scriptura is clearly unworkable. Individual interpretation of the Bible has led to the uncontrollable fragmentation within Protestantism. At the time of this essay, the total number of Protestant denominations is rapidly approaching 30,000. This scandalous disunity embraces both doctrinal and moral issues. Nor is there any possibility within the framework of *sola scriptura* to mend this fracturing. Even Luther, who introduced this virus of chaos into Christianity, came to see the excesses to which it was headed.

After he broke from Rome Luther wrote that the Bible could be interpreted by anyone “even the humble miller’s maid, nay, a child of nine.” However, later in his career he called the Bible the “heresy book.” In 1525 he wrote: “There are as many sects and beliefs as there are heads. This fellow will have nothing to do with baptism; another denies the sacraments; a third believes that there is another world between this and the Last Day. Some teach that Christ is not God; some say this, some say that. There is no rustic so rude but that, if he dreams or fancies anything it must be the whisper of the Holy Spirit and he himself is a prophet.”

The vital issue with *sola scriptura* is, of course, interpretation. *Sola scriptura* asserts that the Holy Spirit guides the Bible believing Christian in correctly interpreting the word of God in matters essential to the faith. Since Protestants reject the reality of an infallible interpretative authority within the Church, how does one reconcile differences? Forget for a moment the disagreements between Catholics and Protestants. For illustration purposes let’s consider an issue debated within Protestant groups — baptismal regeneration. One group teaches that baptism is essential. A second group teaches that baptism is desirable, but not essential. A third group rejects baptism altogether. Each group cites the Bible as its source. Which is the correct interpretation? Are we to believe that the Holy Spirit is responsible for this confusion? Did God give his people an infallible book without giving his children any way of correctly interpreting it?

In adhering to *sola scriptura* infallibility is in effect attributed the individual. In other words, the Holy Spirit guides the believing Christian to an accurate understanding of the meaning of essential text. Indeed, when one listens to the scriptural interpretations that flood the Christian airwaves, one rarely hears qualifying statements like, “In my opinion.” Rather the audience is told “this is what the word of God means” with an air of absolute certitude. In rejecting an infallible magisterium (teaching authority of the Church) *sola scriptura* attributes infallibility to each believer!

***Sola Scriptura* is not Biblical**

The most damaging criticism of *sola scriptura* is the reality that the Bible does not teach it.³ This leads to an absurdity. The adherents of *sola scriptura* claim that everything that is essential for a Christian to know is clearly taught in the Bible, and only in the Bible. However, the Bible does

³ The very best analysis of *sola scriptura* is *Not by Scripture Alone*, by Robert A. Sungenis, Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing Company, c. 1997.

not teach that everything that is essential for a Christian to know is clearly taught in the Bible, and only in the Bible.

The passage that is most often cited as a proof text by those who support *sola scriptura* is **2 Timothy 3:15-17**. Let's examine that passage beginning with its immediate context. Paul is clearly instructing Timothy and the church in Ephesus to be a faithful witness during difficult times. There is no indication anywhere in this Epistle that he is contrasting Sacred Scripture with other sources of revelation, or even discussing the subject.

In addition, the "sacred writings" with which Timothy has been acquainted "from childhood" (verse 15) refers to the Old Testament. Are we to believe that St. Paul is teaching that the Old Testament constitutes the only source needed to know what Jesus taught?

Lastly, Paul has many important things to say about the scriptures. They "are able to instruct you for salvation in Christ Jesus" (v. 15). However, he doesn't claim that *only* the scriptures can instruct one for salvation in Christ Jesus. "All scripture is inspired by God" (v. 16), but Paul does not claim that **only** scripture is inspired by God. Paul also affirms that scripture is "profitable for teaching for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (v. 17), but he never asserts that **only** scripture is so useful.

Some Protestant apologists cite **John 20:31** to buttress *sola scriptura*. This passage informs us that John's Gospel, and by inference the other books of the Bible, were written that we "may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and... have life in his name." However, one finds no affirmation in this passage that **only** scripture serves this purpose.

John 5:39 is also used in the vain attempt to support *sola scriptura*. This interpretation distorts the entire meaning of the passage. In the first place the "scriptures" Jesus refers to is the Old Testament. Secondly, Jesus is rebuking the disbelieving Jews who refused to see in him the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies. Why? They rejected Jesus because they relied on their interpretation of the scriptures.

Several Protestant apologists have argued that in **Acts 17:11** one finds clear support that the Bible is the sole and final authority. This is ironic, because the passage in question proves exactly the opposite.

In Acts 17:2 we learn that in Thessalonica Paul not only read from scripture, but he also "reasoned", that is, debated with the Jews from the scriptures. He attempted to convince them that the Christ had to suffer. In other words Paul was interpreting the Old Testament in an effort to show that the messiah of their scriptures is Jesus of the New Covenant (Acts 17:5-9). Regrettably, only "some" were persuaded by Paul's explanation.

What did the Jews in Thessalonica reject? They did not reject the veracity or usefulness of scripture. Nor did they reject messianic prophecies. They rejected Paul's interpretation of scripture, which supported his claim that Jesus was the messiah. In short, like the Jews Jesus

admonished in Jn 5:39, they were *sola scriptura* men, who rejected the Word who is God based on their individual interpretation of the word of God!

The Jews of Berea, on the other hand, “received the message [Paul’s preaching] with great eagerness” (Acts 17:11). They “examined the scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11) with an openness to accept a new revelation. That new revelation was not the Bible, but Paul’s oral teaching for his preaching was “the word of God” (Acts 17:13). The faith of the “many” (Acts 17:12) who accepted Christ in Berea wasn’t based on *sola scriptura*, but on their acceptance of Paul’s interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the fullness of God’s revelation, Jesus Christ.

Summary

One passage that is never cited as a proof text for *sola scriptura* is **2 Peter 1:20-2:1**. That’s hardly surprising. In this passage Peter rejects the idea of private or individual interpretation: “**No prophecy** of scripture is a matter of **one’s own interpretation**.” Then Peter warns: “But false prophets also arose among the [Jewish] people, just as there **will be** false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in **destructive heresies**, even denying the Master who brought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction” (2 Pet 2:1). Note that under divine inspiration Peter connects individual interpretation with heresies!

The Greek word that is translated as “heresies” comes from the verb *haireomai*, which means “to take or to choose for oneself.” In the first century it had the negative meaning of going off on one’s own in rebellion to the established teaching. Thus, in Acts 24:14 some translations render it as “sect”.

The statement in 2 Peter 1:20 is so strong in its opposition to idea of *sola scriptura* that one Protestant translation attempts to subvert its meaning by inserting words that are not in the original. Thus the NIV intentionally mistranslates “one’s own interpretation” with “by the prophet’s own interpretation.” However, *tou prophetou* is not found in the Greek text.

This highlights another problem with *sola scriptura*. Not only does it impose ones individual interpretations on the text of the Bible, but individual interpretation becomes the basis of replacing the inspired text!

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