

Reformation Theology: Sola Scriptura

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Background

The primary issue (or material principle) of the Reformation was how a person is saved (Justification by faith alone or Sola Fide). But the main issue could not be answered without addressing the question of final authority. Who gets to say what the true gospel really is?

Sola Scriptura is known as the formal principle of the Reformation. It determines how we answer all other questions.

Definition: The Bible alone is the Word of God and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. **Includes the core affirmation that the Bible is the Word of God (Inspiration). Intensification- the Bible Alone is the Word of God (sufficiency). Implication- the only infallible rule of faith and practice. If it alone is the Word of God it is our sole authority (Authority of Scripture)**

Sola Scriptura in the Westminster Confession of Faith

See *Westminster Confession of Faith: Chapter 1, points 2, 4, 6, 9, 10*

(Physical copies may be obtained in the church lobby or by request from Brian. Digital copies are available at lansdalepres.org under the "Resources" tab.)

1. "Under the name of Holy Scripture, or the Word of God written, are now contained all the books of the Old and New Testaments, which are these...[list of 66 books]...all which are given by inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life." (1.2) **Closed canon, inspired by God so that we have God's own words contained in the Scriptures.**
2. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."(1.4)- **self authentication or self attesting**
3. The **whole** counsel of God concerning **all things necessary** for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at anytime is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men." (1.6) **sufficiency of Scripture.**
4. "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and

known by other places that speak more clearly." (1.9) **self interpretation**

5. "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." (1.10) **rejects the idea of appealing to church tradition or creeds or confessions to solve doctrinal disagreements as though they were on a level field with Scripture. All these must be judged by Scripture.**
6. **Why isn't it inconsistent to cite the WCF in defense of *Sola Scriptura*? Only defining the doctrine by the WCF, not proving it. Definition is not a demonstration or defense. Definitions do not do the work of an argument.**

Implications

1. The Bible alone is divinely inspired.
 - a. The Bible alone is inerrant and infallible. **The Bible CANNOT contain errors. Infallible- If it is God's word this must be the case. It also can not fail in its purpose.**
 - b. The Bible alone is the supreme authority in matters of doctrine and practice. **It could have no authority than to be God's own words on what we are to believe and how we relate to him.**
 - c. The Bible alone is the supreme authority on its own interpretation. **If you want to know how to interpret the Bible the Bible itself is the only infallible guide. Especially in the OT, the NT is in many ways a commentary on the OT. Unfolding the fullest meaning. It is like a divinely inspired commentary.**
 - d. The Bible is self-authenticating (it testifies to its own authority) **It testifies to its own authority. We don't believe that the Bible is God's Word because some other authority tells us the Bible is God's word. If this were the case then that authority would be higher than the Bible. WCF 1.5- may be moved by the testimony of the church... yet not withstanding our full assurance is by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.**
2. The Bible alone is sufficient to teach us how to be saved and to live a life pleasing to God. **If you have the Bible you have all you need to be saved and live a godly life. If you follow the teaching of the Bible you will be saved and live a godly life. No other morally binding authority on par with Scripture.**

3. The authority of the Church depends on the Bible, not the reverse. **Any authority the church has comes from the Bible.**
4. Church tradition is not necessary for the proper interpretation of the Bible. **It is possible to understand the basic story line of the Bible and the gospel of Jesus Christ without appealing to Church tradition. It may be very useful and is important, but not necessary.**
5. Christians have the right to "private interpretation of the Bible. **Doesn't mean anyone can decide for themselves what it says (subjectivism). No church authority can bind you to accept their interpretation, You have the right to study the Scriptures for yourself and decide for yourself what it objectively teaches.**
6. The Bible can be interpreted using ordinary principles of textual interpretation. **Reading a written text and understanding it. If all Christians should be able to read and understand the Bible then the method for interpretation must be available to them. There aren't any hidden, mysterious, secret methods necessary.**
7. The Bible *as a whole* is necessary and sufficient for right doctrine (Tota Scriptura)) Sola Scriptura indicates that the Bible is no more than the Bible. Tota Scriptura indicates that the Bible is no less than the Bible. You can't just pay attention to some parts (such as the NT or the gospels) at the expense of the rest. Evangelicals will often accuse others of adding to the Bible, yet we are often guilty of subtracting from the Bible.

Misunderstandings:

"Only the Bible contains truth." **This clearly is not the case and is not what this doctrine teaches. Our school textbooks contain truth, so does the newspaper, even Wikipedia. The difference is that all of these sources are fallible while the Bible is infallible. The Bible is also the only source of truth on how man can be saved and how to live in order to please God. Romans 1 teaches that there is truth outside scripture in natural revelation.**

"All special revelation is contained in the Bible." **This doctrine doesn't claim this either. We certainly don't have all the words Jesus did and spoke, John 21:25- "Now there are also many other things that Jesus did, Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Neither do we have all the authoritative letters that the apostles wrote to various churches or all of the prophecies that came to Moses or the other prophets. What this doctrine says is that we have all the divine words necessary to know how to be saved and to live in a way that pleases God.**

"The Bible tells us everything we need to know." For instance, there is no Biblical teaching on the kind of fertilizer I should use on my lawn or how to trim my hedges. Sola Scriptura does state the Bible is the only source of truth needed for faith and contains all the divine words

needed to live a life that pleases God. Therefore we can say that in Scripture I will find all the divine words I need to care for my property in a way that glorifies God.

"The Bible is the only authority in the life of a Christian." **This doctrine says that the Bible is the only infallible and ultimate authority in the Christian life.** I live in Hatfield, PA, USA so I am therefore under the authority of those local, state, and federal gov'ts. I am also a member of this church and have placed myself under its authority, as an elder I have taken additional vows placing myself under the authority of the church. None of these are infallible or ultimate. If one of these other authorities attempts to force me to violate Scripture or places unscriptural regulations on me I am ultimately bound by Scripture.

"An individual Christian can understand the Bible all on his own." **We need the Holy Spirit to understand Scripture at all. Also, God never intended for us to read and interact with the Bible all on our own. We do it in community.** Ephesians 4:11-14 shows that we are to do it in community. The point is that an individual Christian is not bound to another authority. No institution has the divine right to tell you what you must do to be saved and glorify God.

"We should accept only what the Bible teaches, not church creeds or confessions." **Some are against creeds and confessions and say "No creed but Christ or the Bible".** In reality, their creed is that they have no creed. These things are never substitutes for the Bible and any authority they have must come from the Bible but in so far as they expound Scripture they are authoritative. They are fallible, but important for the church. If they really want to be consistent with this they would also have to reject hymns and sermons.

"The Bible should be interpreted without any reference to church traditions." **Again, these are fallible, but helpful. They contain the collective wisdom of those who have gone before us. We are not subject to the tradition but do well to listen to it. Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it.**

Scriptural Support:

Deuteronomy 4:2 **Do not add or take from the commands of God. Everything he commands (tota scriptura)**

Psalm 19:7-11 **law of the Lord is Perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true. No other source of Guidance is spoken of this way. If Perfect it is by implication sufficient.**

Psalm 119:9,11,105,130 **v. 9 if you guard it by the law of the Lord your life will be pure (sufficient to live a life for God), 11, storing it up is sufficient to keep us from sin. 105, if we have the Scripture it is sufficient to guide us in the way we ought to go. 130 sufficient and clear to give understanding to the simple, does not need additional light from the church to give this light.**

Matthew 4:1-11 **It is significant that Jesus, the Son of God, when facing temptation, appeals to the written word of God. We see the necessity as necessary as bread. Sufficient spiritual nourishment. Sufficient for Spiritual warfare. In many ways this was a theological dispute and the written word was sufficient.**

Matthew 15:1-9 **Jesus places God's word above human tradition, these traditions must submit to and be altered if needed by the word of God.**

Acts 17:10-11 **Even the teaching of the apostles is to be judged by the Scriptures.**

2 Timothy 3:14-17 **Scripture is the only thing he points him to. Scripture sufficient to make him wise to salvation and to live the Christian life.**

Hebrews 6:13 **Only God himself can testify to the authority and veracity of his word. There is no higher authority to appeal to. God's word must be self authenticating because there is no higher authority to which it could appeal**

2 Peter 1:20-21 **Divine authorship of Scripture. It is the Word of God. There is no hint anywhere in the NT of any other authority on par with Scripture.**

Summary Argument:

- Premise 1: The Bible is the Word of God.
- Premise 2: The Bible Affirms that it is the Word of God.
- Premise 3: The Bible doesn't recognize any other source of teaching as the Word of God.
- Premise 4: The Bible condemns attempts to place human traditions over the Word of God or adding to the Word of God in any way.
- Conclusion 1: Therefore, the Bible alone is the Word of God.
- Conclusion 2: Therefore, the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice.

Objections:

Objection 1: "The Bible doesn't tell us everything Jesus and the apostles taught."

Sola Scriptura doesn't tell us everything that Jesus and the apostles said but that Scripture is sufficient, has all the divine revelation needed for today

Objection 2: "Sola Scriptura makes an idol out of the Bible. It's bibliolatry"

Heard from RC, EO, and liberals. Puts the Bible in the place of God. We don't worship the Bible (a book of pages and ink) we do honor it precisely because we honor God. We honor him by honoring his word. Everyone has a final court of appeals, or epistemic authority- this doesn't mean that they necessarily make it an idol.

Objection 3: "The Bible doesn't tell us some things we need to know."

Some RC's raise this issue, What forms of contraception can be used or what methods of penance can be used. This objection begs the question by assuming that we do need to know these things. Why should we even think that what Scripture tells us isn't enough, why not assume it does and what the Bible doesn't speak to we don't need to know. Also if the Bible didn't tell us everything, how would we know except by some outside source telling us so?

If Scripture doesn't speak on some mater, our conclusion is that it isn't a matter on which we need a direct command and that what we do need can be derived from Scripture. If Scripture doesn't require some practice it isn't required by God and When it isn't prohibited God doesn't prohibit it. (be sure to take the whole of the Bible's teaching here, just because the Bible doesn't mention cocaine, doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say on this.

Objection 4: "*Sola Scriptura* has led to thousands of different Protestant denominations."

Heard from RC. It fragments the church while RC doesn't hold to Sola Scriptura and as a result they have a unified church.

- 1. Numerical claims are often inflated. The fact that there are a number of different denominations isn't necessarily a bad thing. In a fallen world people will not always get along and often having different denominations allows for greater peace across the church. Note also that protestant denominations don't often anathematize other denominations, they assume them to be apart of the universal church. Compared to the RC who until recently (relatively speaking) didn't recognize protestants as Christians at all (Vatican 2). From a protestant view the RC is at best just one more denomination. RC's assume**

they are the yardstick and everyone else is a schismatic. While the reformers argued that the RC leadership were the schismatic ones because the reformers desire was to reform within and they were thrown out.

What kind of unity really counts? Unity in the truth and the gospel is more important than institutional unity. Among Bible believing Protestant churches there is a basic unity on the essentials.

RC actually has a good deal of debate on theology- creation accounts, evolution, how to understand providence and predestination, freedom of the will, inerrancy, how Mary should be venerated, whether Mary is the mediatrix of all graces or only some, should Mary be viewed as a redeemer alongside Christ, whether or not Vatican 2 should be viewed as infallible, how to view those outside the RC, can church tradition add to Scripture or do they just repeat, should church councils be deemed infallible (which ones) which Greek manuscripts are acceptable, capital punishment, etc.

Unified institution doesn't guarantee a uniform theology.

In many cases the differences of Protestant denominations are not a result of adhering to Sola Scriptura but failing to consistently apply it. Other things such as tradition or cultural norms are held up.

RC tend to exaggerate the problems in Protestantism and falsely attribute them to this doctrine and turn a blind eye to their own problems

Objection 5: "1 Timothy 3:15 says the church is 'the pillar and the foundation of the truth'."

ESV "a" pillar and buttress of the truth. Doesn't say that the church gets to define the truth or is the source or can set traditions that are as authoritative. Pillars and buttresses aren't the thing themselves, they support the real thing.

Objection 6: "The Bible doesn't define the canon (i.e., what books are in the Bible)." **The Bible doesn't define what books are in the Bible. RC says the church has the authority to tell you what is included in the Bible.**

1st, Protestants don't claim or shouldn't claim to have an infallible knowledge of the canon. The Canon is the extant divinely inspired writings. Our knowledge of the canon is fallible but the content of the canon is infallible. The canon of Scripture is known not by some external authority but by the word of God revealing itself and attesting to itself in the Word of God. **The people of God,**

through the indwelling of the Spirit of God recognize the voice of God speaking through the Scripture (my sheep recognize my voice).

RC has the problem of saying that the true church tells you what is in the true Bible, the question they must answer is how do you know they are the true church and they must answer that the church tells us so. So they have a self-authenticating church. SO why not a self-authenticating Scripture?

Objection 7: "The teaching of the Bible isn't clear on some important points of doctrine."

Begs the question by assuming what is and isn't an important point of doctrine.

Given Sola Scriptura, the clearest points are the most important points.

Objection 8: "The New Testament church preceded the New Testament scriptures. Wouldn't that give the church priority?"

Idea is since the Scriptures were written by the NT church, the church must have some sort of priority since they came out of it. Answer: they weren't written by the church functioning as such, they were written by individual Christians inspired with apostolic authority. The Scriptures are infallible but the NT church isn't. Peter is shown to be rebuked.

The truth we want to affirm is that God's word always precedes God's people. It is by his word that he calls them out. The people are defined by the Word of God and are always under its authority.

Importance in the Christian Life

1. *Sola Scriptura* means that we can have full confidence in the *sufficiency* of Scripture.

Scripture is sufficient for salvation it tells you all you need to know to be saved and have eternal life, to live a godly life, for spiritual growth, for evangelism, for faithful and effective church ministry. God has given us all the divine words we need.

2. *Sola Scriptura* means that we can have full confidence in the *clarity* of Scripture.

If Scripture is sufficient it follows that it must be clear, if it wasn't clear we would need something else and it wouldn't be sufficient. Not a mystery book, no secret code, don't need elite scholars to tell us the basic meaning, we don't need some other source to make it clear.

3. *Sola Scriptura* means that we can have full confidence in the *infallibility* of Scripture.

Because it is God's word it will not let us down, doesn't err, doesn't lead us into falsehood. We can trust the Bible without reservation as a divine guide for life and ministry.

4. *Sola Scriptura* means that we can have full confidence in the *power* of Scripture.

It has all the power of the very Word of God. We don't need to supplement with other sources to make it effective. It has the power to change lives, convert sinners save souls, you don't need to amp it up.

5. *Sola Scriptura* frees our consciences from bondage to any human traditions or laws.

We do not need to have our consciences held captive to other sources to let us know how to please God.

6. *Sola Scriptura* means that our hard work in biblical studies will pay dividends.

If the Bible alone is God's word, then we do well to devote our efforts to understanding the Bible and handling it well.

7. *Sola Scriptura* implies that we don't need (and shouldn't seek) "latter-day revelations."

If the Bible is sufficient and the canon is closed we don't have any need for more revelation from God and neither should we seek them. It would demine the revelation God has already given.

8. *Sola Scriptura* guards us from putting more confidence in human wisdom than in the Bible.

Do we protestants really live by *Sola Scriptura*. How much do we rely on marketing methods, business methods, the latest books, influential leaders and pastors. To what extent do we put our hope and confidence in them.