

Sola Scriptura

The Case Against

Sola scriptura, meaning by scripture alone, is a Protestant view of the Bible, the Scriptures, stating that the Bible is the sole infallible source of authority for Christian faith and practice. Many Protestants would go on to say that Scripture is self-authenticating, clear (perspicuous) to the rational reader, its own interpreter ("Scripture interprets Scripture"), and sufficient of itself to be the final authority of Christian doctrine.

Sola Scriptura is not itself well defined by the alleged sufficiency of the Scripture for salvation nor by its alleged supreme authority for the Christian faith and life. Scripture could be both sufficient and supreme without requiring it to be the *only* source of doctrine or practice in the churches if those doctrines and practices were harmonious with those to be found in Scripture. For example, the word "Trinity" does not appear in the New Testament but for the most part even committed adherents to Sola Scriptura have some form of Trinitarian belief in their confession of faith.

Another example of extra-biblical practice that might still be claimed as acceptable by *some* Protestants under Sola Scriptura would be the threefold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon. Although these ministries do exist in the New Testament, they are arguably not in their final stage of development, as seen in the early second century in the writings of St Ignatius of Antioch. Among many other references and on the way to his martyrdom, he writes in his epistle to the Magnesians, chapter 2 (circa 110 AD):

Since, then, I have had the privilege of seeing you, through Damas your most worthy bishop, and through your worthy presbyters Bassus and Apollonius, and through my fellow-servant the deacon Sotio, whose friendship may I ever enjoy, inasmuch as he is subject to the bishop as to the grace of God, and to the presbytery as to the law of Jesus Christ, I now write to you.

Under a strict and exclusive understanding of Sola Scriptura, however, even the desirability if not the necessity of this threefold ministry would not be allowed since its Scriptural references are arguably incomplete. The stricter definition of Sola Scriptura as which only allows what is clearly prescribed seems to be necessary, for the meaning of the word "sola" for "alone" admits of absolutely no qualification. However, the application of strict Sola Scriptura to many questions that would otherwise be allowed under the Spirit's guidance to generate new solutions, these being consistent with developments in the New Testament itself,¹ would place Church life and witness in an unjustifiable and limiting straight jacket.

¹ An example would be the apostolic institution of the diaconate in Acts 6:1-6, based perhaps on a Levitical model, but a novel albeit practical development, nonetheless.

As Graham Cole² has made clear, Sola Scriptura does indeed necessitate the “exclusion of rivals”; that is *all* rivals in any arena of Christian faith and life. Those who would defend Sola Scriptura in its strictest sense often consider the Bible to be the authority which governs not only Christian faith and practice, but also all human arts and sciences, admitting no other sources of truth. This extreme view is derived from the alleged perfection and universality of the biblical text in its exclusive application to all issues and questions, ancient and modern. Thus, when science appears to be in conflict with Scripture, for example in the Genesis account of creation, strict Sola Scriptura adherents insist that Scripture, as it is understood, must prevail. But, one has to ask, for whom must Scripture prevail - for scientists irrespective of their beliefs and allegiances or just for Christians? Are there then to be two sciences or maybe science must always be constrained by a particular religious viewpoint? It must be admitted that neither Sola Scriptura nor science can withstand each other in this all-inclusive and at the same time exclusive model of biblical authority. One must fail in this phoney war, the other emerge triumphant ... and the victor will certainly not be Sola Scriptura theology if its sclerotic fundamentalist doctrines conflict with the outcomes of the application of the scientific method to all observed phenomena.

There are other fatal weaknesses in the Sola Scriptura position and these concern the witness of the role of the Church in history, to which I shall now turn.

The Witness of History

The compilation of Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments, is a work of centuries and involves prophets, disciples of prophets, teachers, law makers, historians and scribes all of whom, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, passed down to subsequent generations oral accounts and traditions, later in written form and then codified into an authorised collection or canon of texts. The authorising body, again under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has always been the elect and covenanted community of faith, the Church, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

To suppose that the Scriptures were dictated by God and handed down as an entire, complete, sufficient, and infallible package to those who merely passively received them is an absurd and unhistorical understanding of revelation, closer to Islam than Christianity. Respect for the historical process in the formation of the biblical canon is central to the claims of the Apostolic Tradition in the Church. (See the Appendix on page 6 for the timeline of the agreement of the New Testament canon by the Church). Those who first challenged this approach were the Protestant Reformers in the 16th century. For these, Holy Tradition was excluded, the Scriptures speaking plainly to one and all, without any churchly role. Sola Scriptura for these reformers was primarily a weapon in the resistance of the role and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, rather than something that actually worked in practice. Bereft of Apostolic Tradition, strong disagreements immediately broke out among Protestants as to how the Scriptures were to be interpreted. This in turn generated countless heresies and schisms and has continued to do so to this day. In practice,

² https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/104-01_020.pdf “Sola Scriptura: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives”, Graham Cole, page 24f - Cole is an evangelical Anglican, a critical supporter of Sola Scriptura.

therefore, Sola Scriptura in the Protestant world soon gave way to denominational confessions of faith and eventually, as these were challenged, to the mere collective opinions of academic theologians.

In a cruel but predictable way, therefore, Protestantism has continued to undermine itself in its discordant approaches to the Scriptures . Particularly from the 19th century onwards, its scholars have, through rigorous if sometimes flawed exegesis, revealed the truth that oral tradition existed *before* any text which in turn has always been established authoritatively by the community of faith, that is the Church. Yet, this truth is still resisted. The 16th and 17th Reformation teaching was that the Bible alone grew the Church. Since then, its own theological discovery has been rather that the Church grew the Bible as *its own* library of books, divinely inspired for sure, but not divinely dictated and certainly not excluding truths beyond the reach of the canon. These fruits of so called higher biblical criticism have only served to endorse the Orthodox Catholic position on the role of Holy Tradition and its relationship to the canon of Scripture. Nonetheless, these revelations have still not daunted support for the increasingly untenable Sola Scriptura doctrine within Protestant biblical scholarship both conservative *and* liberal.

As the scepticism of Enlightenment has continued to erode confidence in the truths of Scripture as a whole, liberal Protestant scholarship has resorted to the notion that there is a ‘canon within the canon’. With so many of Christ’s words and deeds being called into question, the search for this core of truth under layer upon layer of scepticism has manifestly failed to discover the “real Jesus.”. This failed project of a ‘canon within the canon’ can arguably be traced back to Martin Luther himself, who famously doubted the canonicity of the Epistle of St James, which he called “an epistle of straw.” In its modern and advanced form this distinction between the “Christ of Faith” and the (ever shrinking) “Jesus of History” is reminiscent of the teaching of the heresiarch Nestorius who also supposed two Christs, one human Jesus the other divine the Word or Logos. So, Protestantism now finds itself bitterly divided theologically between conservative and liberal iterations of Sola Scriptura, each exclusive of the other and radically opposed and yet both firmly committed to Sola principles. Not only, therefore, is Sola Scriptura unhistorical, it is also self-undermining and ultimately destructive of its own version of Christianity, arising as it does from its own internal foundations and contradictions. Let us now consider more detailed evidence for this analysis.³

Evidence Base Against Sola Scriptura

1. The Bible is full of prophetic utterances when God speaks to His people through the prophets. The Gospels in the New Testament are also packed with examples of Christ (the Word made flesh) speaking what has been revealed to Him by the Father, through the Spirit - but not only Christ, the Apostles also. All these Gospel texts were originally spoken words, remembered, passed down and later written down. The Epistles are letters, written by the

³ The evidence base for this analysis in its conclusion integrates a very useful summary of the shared Orthodox and Roman Catholic objections to Sola Scriptura here:-

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=7185>

Apostles to communities they had founded. It took a long time to assemble all this material into an approved canon of writings that everyone accepted. However, alongside this canon there were other texts that would not be included in Scripture but which the Church regarded as useful for the purposes of teaching. Examples include: 1 and 2 Corinthians from Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians, the Proto Evangelium of St James and the Seven Epistles of Ignatius (among others). Later writings of the Church Fathers (critically assessed) and the decisions of both the Ecumenical Councils and some local Synods also find their place in Holy Tradition, as being either consistent with Scripture or reliable guides to its interpretation. What is certainly not present in this history and in these texts is any subscription to the teaching of Sola Scriptura.

2. The Scripture itself references writings not included in any biblical canon. Dave Armstrong⁴ gives 6 prominent examples from the New Testament of these extra-biblical references:
 - a. The reference to "He shall be called a Nazarene" cannot be found in the Old Testament, yet it was "spoken by the prophets" (Matthew 2:23). This prophecy, which is considered to be "God's Word", was passed down orally rather than through Scripture.
 - b. In Matthew 23:2–3, Jesus teaches that the scribes and Pharisees have a legitimate, binding authority based "on Moses' seat", but this phrase or idea cannot be found anywhere in the Old Testament. It is found in the (originally oral) Mishnah, which teaches a sort of "teaching succession" from Moses.
 - c. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul the Apostle refers to a rock that "followed" the Jews through the Sinai wilderness. The Old Testament says nothing about such miraculous movement, but rabbinic tradition does reference this.
 - d. "As Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses" (2 Timothy 3:8). These two men cannot be found in the related Old Testament passage (cf. Exodus 7:8ff.) or anywhere else in the Old Testament.
 - e. In the Epistle of Jude 9, a dispute is mentioned between the Archangel Michael and Satan over Moses' body, which is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, and is drawn from oral Jewish tradition.
 - f. In the Epistle of James 5:17, when recounting the prayers of Elijah described in 1 Kings 17, a lack of rain for three years is mentioned, which is absent from the passage in 1 Kings.
3. In the light of the above references in (2), Scripture itself acknowledges Holy Tradition, for example: in the Apostles' teachings, fellowship, prayers and the Eucharist (Acts 2:42); in St Paul's delivery of the apostolic traditions to the local churches (Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:14, 2 Timothy 1:13-14 and 2:2) ... and in the Church's teaching ministry as a whole where the Church is referred to as "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Formal agreement on contested issues was always decided by

⁴ Armstrong, Dave (2004). *The Catholic Verses: 95 Bible Passages That Confound Protestants*. Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press. ISBN 978-1-928832-73-7, pp 43-44

the Apostles together in prayer, notably as to the issue of Gentile converts at the Council of Jerusalem. (Acts 15: 6-30). There is also the witness of the Church's liturgical component in Holy Tradition, "lex orandi, lex credendi."⁵

4. Jewish tradition, the foundation on which Christianity is built, never believed or practised Sola Scriptura. It was the Sadducees who veered towards that position in denying the resurrection, (Mark 12:18-27), a teaching that was gradually accepted in Judaism as canonical, but arguably only hinted at in the earliest Mosaic traditions. Tradition in Judaism is also built upon authoritative interpretations of texts by rabbis. In Nehemiah 8:3, Ezra reads the law of Moses to the people in Jerusalem. In verse 7 we find thirteen Levites who assisted Ezra and helped the people to understand the law. Much earlier, we find Levites exercising the same function (cf. 2 Chronicles 17:8-9). Thus, in the New Testament, we have the Apostle Philip explaining the Apostolic meaning of the Scriptures to the convert Ethiopian civil servant (Acts 8:26-40). Scripture without the Church can give conflicting and even confusing readings. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 ("all Scripture is inspired by God") is a much loved text of those who support Sola Scriptura, but this does not teach that Scripture is sufficient unto salvation without interpretation from within the Apostolic Tradition.
5. Finally, Sola Scriptura presents a circular argument. Protestants try to defend their Sola Scriptura position by invoking a scattering of biblical texts, none of which actually teach this. This is like parents telling their children that they should obey them because "we say so." This is so well argued by Dave Armstrong that I will quote from his article below.

"Protestantism appeals to a logically self-defeating principle and a book that must be interpreted by human beings. Obviously, given the divisions in Protestantism, simply "going to the Bible" hasn't worked. In the end, a person has no assurance or certainty in the Protestant system. They can only "go to the Bible" themselves and perhaps come up with another doctrinal version of some disputed doctrine to add to the list. One either believes there is one truth in any given theological dispute (whatever it is) or adopts a relativist or indifferentist position, where contradictions are fine or the doctrine is so "minor" that differences "don't matter." [But] the Bible does not teach that whole categories of doctrines are "minor", and that Christians freely and joyfully can disagree in such a fashion. Denominationalism and divisions are vigorously condemned. The only conclusion we can reach from the Bible is what we call the "three-legged stool": Bible, Church, and Tradition are all necessary to arrive at truth. If you knock out any leg of a three-legged stool, it collapses."

Conclusion

Sola Scriptura is the default position of the Protestant tradition and therefore the unexamined cultural assumptions of most societies that have been formed by that tradition since the Reformation. Although the Orthodox have significant disagreements with the Roman Catholic

⁵ "Lex orandi, lex credendi" is usually associated with the fifth-century theologian Prosper of Aquitaine, and it basically means "the law (or rule) of worship determines the law of belief."

Church as to both the content and process of Holy Tradition in the Church, we share the same perspective in our analysis of the incoherences and serious unhistorical distortions inherent in the Sola Scriptura approach to the Bible and its authority.

Archpriest Gregory Hallam, 26th October 2022

Appendix

NT Canon Timeline

Date	Event
90-120	Closing date range for the writing of what would much later be accepted as all 27 books of the New Testament.
2 nd Century 170-180 (MC)	Roman Muratorian Canon (MC) omitted Hebrews and in many eastern churches, the Revelation of St John was not included. The lists are still fluid at this time and sometimes included books that were perfectly Orthodox but not eventually accepted as apostolic. The 4 Gospels were exclusively affirmed by St Irenaeus c. 185 (also St Justin Martyr and others)
367	39 th Festal Letter of St Athanasius ... lists definitively all 27 books.
7 th Century	Syriac canon falls into line with the Greco Latin decision of the 4 th century