

SOLA SCRIPTURA

The Foundation of the Protestant Reformation

The most defining doctrine for Protestantism is *Sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”), which in its most basic sense puts the Bible at the height of all authority for Christian life. In its most common sense, it means that the Bible is **exclusively** authoritative for the Christian and also that every Christian has the “right” to interpret it for himself without any reference to tradition or Church authority. Varying by which version of *Sola Scriptura* is believed, there are many problems with this teaching:

1. *Sola Scriptura* violates its own principle, since it is itself found nowhere in the Bible. *Sola Scriptura* itself is an extra-Biblical tradition. The Bible does not define itself as the “pillar and ground of truth.” Rather, it gives that title to the Church (1 Tim. 3:15).
2. The Scriptures are not systematic, exhaustive theological treatises or catechisms. They are of many genres: history, poetry, pastoral teaching, prophecy, apocalypse, etc.
3. *Sola Scriptura* is notably absent from all the writings of the Church Fathers. Thus, if the Apostles really taught it, their disciples (and those who followed them) never learned the lesson.
4. The early Church functioned for about 40 years before the New Testament was even begun, and it would not be until AD 367 before the canon was finally settled upon. That’s more than 300 years without anything one could call “the Bible” as we now know it.
5. The Bible is silent on certain major issues, such as precisely how a Christian should worship.
6. If the meaning of the Bible is clear without Tradition, why do so many who believe that differ?
7. If the clear passages interpret the unclear passages, why do so many who believe that differ? And which passages are to be ruled “clear”? By whom?
8. If the reader is illumined by the Holy Spirit, what happens when people who claim that the Spirit is guiding them disagree? How do you decide who’s right?
9. If historical-critical, academic exegesis is a reliable method, why don’t all such scholars agree? And what happens when the next archaeological find or the next Scriptural manuscript variation comes along?
10. St. Paul himself commands Christians to hold to both written and oral tradition: “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word [i.e., word of mouth], or our epistle” (2 Thess. 2:15). (In the NIV, the Greek word *paradosis* is translated “tradition” when negative, but “teaching” when positive, a clear bias. The Bible itself actually delineates between two kinds of tradition, that of God and that of man.)
11. If everyone should interpret for himself, there is no defense against heresy. (Indeed, there is no such thing as heresy!)
12. While objecting to a supposedly infallible Roman Catholic hierarchy as absolute authority in Biblical interpretation, the *Sola Scriptura* believer replaces it with the infallibility of the individual, i.e., “every man becomes his own Pope.”
13. Perhaps most telling of all is that **Protestants tend to interpret according to traditions**. That is, there is a certain consistency among most Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, etc., because they are following their own teachers in the faith. Thus, they violate their own principle every time a sermon or Bible class is taught, because in all those cases, a teacher is presuming to tell someone else how to read the Bible.
14. If *Sola Scriptura* is to be taken as a hermeneutic key, why did the Reformers remove books from the Old Testament that had been considered canonical for centuries (e.g., the *Maccabees*, *Tobit*, etc.)? What good is *Sola Scriptura* when you can change what constitutes Scripture? (And where in the canon is the canon itself defined?)