

have the authority to simply decide, on their own, what is true or false doctrine.

2 Peter 3:16, for example, tells us that there are some things in Scripture that are “hard to understand,” and that, because of this, the “ignorant” twist these Scriptures to “their own destruction.” Which of us could say that we are not ignorant of Scripture in at least one way or another? This means that we are at risk of twisting the Scriptures to our own destruction. This is serious business!

So, how do we get around the problem of our own ignorance? Does the Bible give us a clue? Indeed it does: Acts 8:31. Here the Ethiopian eunuch is reading Scripture and Philip comes up and asks him if he understands what he is reading. What does the eunuch say, “Of course I understand it. I don’t need any help from anyone to understand the Bible”? No, he doesn’t say that! He says, “How can I [understand the Scriptures], unless someone guides me?”

The Bible tells us that we need a guide — some authority other than ourselves — in order to be sure we don’t twist the Scriptures to our own destruction. Not that we can’t understand a lot of Scripture on our own, because we can. But, as the Bible itself tells us, there are things in the Bible that are indeed hard to understand, things that are important enough that one could lose their salvation over them. Which is why God gave us the Church.

Scripture That Supports Sola Scriptura?

There are, however, a few Scripture passages that *sola scriptura* believers use to back up their belief, the most prominent of these being 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction ... that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” “See,” someone will say, “all you need is Scripture to be complete and fully equipped. That proves *sola scriptura*!”

There are, however, a few holes in that argument. One of the largest of those holes becomes clear if you back up just one verse, to 2 Timothy 3:15. This verse tells you that the scriptures Paul is talking about here are scriptures that Timothy has known since his “childhood.” When Timothy was a child, very few, if any, of the New Testament books had been written. This means Paul is talking about the Old Testament in this passage, not the New Testament. So, if you interpret 2 Tim 3:16–17 as *sola scriptura* believers do, then it actually doesn’t prove *sola scriptura* as they imagine it does, it really “proves” *sola* Old Testament *scriptura*. But no Christian would say that is true.

The doctrine of *sola scriptura* fails the test of Scripture.

3. The Historical Perspective

The biggest problem with the doctrine of *sola scriptura* from this perspective is the existence of literally thousands, if not tens of thousands, of Christian denominations and all of the contradictory beliefs and practices that go with them. Martin Luther broke from the Catholic Church around the year 1520. It was at this time that we first see the doctrine of *sola scriptura* enter the scene. That’s right, the teaching that the Bible alone is the Christian’s sole authority, sole rule of faith, in matters of doctrine and dogma was first taught some **1500 years after** the death of Christ.

The Fruits of Sola Scriptura

And, what were the fruits of *sola scriptura*? Again, Martin Luther broke from the Catholic Church around 1520. By the year 1600, there were more than two hundred denominations. By the year 1900, almost a thousand denominations. And, now, here in our century, we have literally thousands upon thousands of denominations. Yet, each claims to be based on the Bible alone and each claims to be guided by the Holy Spirit; but none of them have exactly the same doctrines and practices as the others, while many, many of them have doctrines that completely contradict one another.

How can that be? How can we get so many contradictory interpretations from this one book? The answer, very plainly, is that we can’t, unless of course we’re doing something wrong. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* has done nothing but cause division within the Body of Christ; that is an historical fact.

The doctrine of *sola scriptura* fails the test of history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we see that the doctrine of *sola scriptura* fails the test of logic, fails the test of Scripture, and fails the test of history. Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition are both necessary to know the authentic doctrines and dogmas of the Christian faith.

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The Bible Alone?

The Doctrine of Sola Scriptura



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Introduction

Many Christians believe that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is the sole authority, or the sole rule of faith, that one needs in order to know what is and is not authentic Christian doctrine and dogma. This belief is known as *sola scriptura*, or “Scripture Alone.” Catholic Christians, however, believe that both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition are authoritative and that both are necessary when deciding what is and is not authentic Christian doctrine and dogma. Who’s right? Let’s look at this situation from three perspectives: logical, scriptural, and historical.

1. The Logical Perspective

The biggest problem with the doctrine of *sola scriptura* from this perspective is that there is no list, in the Bible, of what books should be in the Bible. The table of contents is not part of inspired Scripture! This is a very important point to realize. There is no inspired list, in the Bible, of which books should be in the Bible.

Disputes Over Scripture

You see, God didn’t just drop the Bible down out of the sky one day and say, “Hey, guys, here it is.” No. The Bible wasn’t put together as we have it today for more than 300 years after the death of Christ. 300 years! And, one of the problems in putting the Bible together was that there was a lot of disagreement, among Christians, over exactly what should be considered inspired Scripture. There were a lot of books back then that people thought were inspired yet did not end up in the Bible as we have it today — books such as the Letter of Clement to the Corinthians, the Letter of Barnabas, the Acts of Paul, the Acts of Peter, and many more.

There were also several books that did end up in our Bible that a lot of people did not think were inspired and should not be considered as part of Scripture — books such as Revelation, 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Hebrews, and others.

In other words, there was a lot of dispute over just what was and what wasn’t inspired Scripture. So, how did the early Christians settle the disputes? Well, according to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, you just look in the **Bible** to find the authoritative answer to any question regarding the Christian faith, right? So, did they consult the Bible to find out which books should be in the Bible? No! They couldn’t consult the Bible because the Bible was what the disputes were over.

So, in order to decide one of the most fundamental issues of Christianity — which books are and are not inspired Scripture — some *authority outside* of the Bible had to be relied upon. Some person, or group of persons,

outside of the Bible, had to decide which books were, and which books were not, inspired Scripture. Think about it!

Sacred Tradition

In other words, we know which books are indeed part of the Bible, not because of Sacred Scripture, but because of — Sacred Tradition! All Christians believe that their Bible contains exactly the right books — no more and no less — not because of what Sacred Scripture tells us, but because of what Sacred Tradition tells us.

Again, in order to know which books should and should not be *inside* the Bible, we have to rely on some authority *outside* of the Bible to tell us. This is a logical inconsistency if you believe in *sola scriptura*. We got our list of which books should be in the Bible — from a source other than the Bible! How, then, can we say the Bible is our sole authority on all matters of doctrine and dogma, when the Bible doesn’t even tell us something as basic as which books should be in the Bible?

Two Simple Questions

A couple of questions will prove this point: 1) Who wrote the Gospel of Mark? And, 2) How do you know? The answers to these two seemingly simple questions, demonstrate that every Christian relies on an authority outside of Scripture when it comes to some very important Christian beliefs — the beliefs about the inspiration of Scripture itself.

We do not have an original manuscript of the Gospel of Mark that has Mark’s signature on it, and nowhere does this particular book mention its author’s name. So, how do we know that Mark wrote Mark? And, which Mark wrote Mark? And, how do you know that the Mark who wrote Mark was inspired by the Holy Spirit? Does the Bible tell you? No! Is there anyone reading this who can give the verse from Scripture that tells us which Mark wrote the Gospel of Mark and also tells us that this particular Mark was inspired by the Holy Spirit?

So, since the Bible itself does not give us a list of books that should be in the Bible, we have to rely on some authority outside of the Bible in order to have the Bible in the first place. Therefore, the Bible cannot be our sole authority in matters pertaining to authentic Christian doctrine and dogma.

The doctrine of *sola scriptura* fails the test of logic.

2. The Scriptural Perspective

The biggest problem with the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, from this perspective, is that nowhere in the Bible does it say that the Bible should be used by Christians as the sole authority, the sole rule of faith, in matters of belief and practice — *nowhere!*

The Bible does, however, very clearly support the Catholic Church’s teaching that it is Sacred Scripture *and* Sacred Tradition that make up the deposit of faith; it is Sacred Scripture *and* Sacred Tradition that comprise the Christian rule of faith.

The Bible and Tradition

“So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the *traditions* which you were taught by us, either *by word of mouth* or by letter” (2 Thess 2:15). Traditions! Oral traditions and written traditions. Sacred Tradition *and* Sacred Scripture, both of which the Thessalonians are being told to “stand firm and hold to.”

And how does Paul refer to these oral traditions elsewhere? “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word *of God* which you *heard* from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). The Thessalonians received as the word of God that which they heard from Paul, not simply that which they read in his letters.

“I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the *traditions* even as I have delivered them to you” (1 Cor 11:2). Paul is commending the Corinthians because they maintain the traditions that he passed on to them. Sacred Scripture *and* Sacred Tradition.

“...and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim 2:2). What we have here in 2 Timothy is an instance, in Scripture, of Paul *commanding* the passing on of Sacred Tradition.

So we see that the Bible clearly supports the Catholic Church’s teaching that the word of God is contained in both Sacred Scripture *and* Sacred Tradition.

We Need a Guide

Another scriptural problem with the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is that it teaches that every individual has the right — the duty, in fact — to read the Bible and decide for him- or herself what is and what is not the truth in all things concerning the Christian Faith. Yet, that is decidedly unscriptural. The Bible quite plainly teaches us that individuals, reading the Bible on their own, do not

