

Sola Scriptura?: Not According to the Bible

by Mark P. Shea

ISSUE: What does *sola scriptura* mean? What is the Catholic response to this doctrine?

RESPONSE: *Sola scriptura* is the Protestant doctrine that Scripture alone is “the primary and absolute source of authority, the final court of appeal, for all doctrine and practice (faith and morals)” and that “the Bible—nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else—is all that is necessary for faith and practice.”¹

The Second Vatican Council summarizes the Catholic response to *sola scriptura*, teaching that the Church “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”²

DISCUSSION: Many Catholics find themselves confronted with questions from Protestant friends about this or that belief or practice of the Church. Why do you baptize babies? Why do you pray for the dead? Why do you have statues? Why do you adore the Eucharist? Where does the Bible use the word “Purgatory”?

If the hapless Catholic mumbles something about “Tradition” under his breath to explain his belief and practice, the Protestant has a ready reply:

Jesus condemned the traditions of men (Mt. 15:3). Likewise, the apostles condemn “adopting philosophy and empty deceit, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8). Instead of tradition, the true Christian should base his faith on the Bible alone since it is totally and completely sufficient for “teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). If “the Bible—nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else”—does not seem to you to clearly and unambiguously teach these Catholic doctrines, then you should not believe them.

Such arguments seem very convincing. Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, they are found to be deeply flawed.

Biblical Teaching on the Bible

- . The first Christians “were persevering in the doctrine of the apostles” (Acts 2:42; cf. 2 Tim. 1:14) long before the New Testament was written—and centuries before the New Testament canon was settled.
- . The Bible affirms that Christian teaching is “preached” (1 Pet. 1:25), that the Apostles’ successors were to teach what they have “heard” (2 Tim. 2:2), and that Christian teaching is passed on both “by word of mouth [and] by letter” (2 Thess. 2:15; cf. 1 Cor. 11:2).
- . Not everything Christ did is recorded in sacred Scripture (Jn. 21:25).
- . New Testament authors availed themselves of sacred Tradition. For example, Acts 20:35 quotes a saying of Jesus that is not recorded in the Gospels.
- . Scripture needs an authoritative interpreter (Acts 8:30-31; 2 Pet. 1:20-21, 3:15-16).
- . Christ left a Church with divine authority to teach in His name (Mt. 16:13-20, 18:18; Lk. 10:16). The Church will last until the end of time, and the Holy Spirit protects the Church’s teaching from corruption (Mt. 16:18, 28:19-20; Jn. 14:16).
- . The Church—and not the Bible alone—is the “pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).
- . The Bible does not refer to Scripture as the exclusive source of the Word of God. Jesus Himself is the Word (Jn. 1:1, 14), and in 1 Thess 2:13, St. Paul’s first epistle, he refers to “the Word of God which you heard from us.” There St. Paul is clearly referring to oral apostolic teaching: Tradition.

Sola Scriptura Is Unbiblical

If “the Bible and nothing else” is all that is necessary for faith and practice, then the Bible ought to make this doctrine clear, or at least imply this teaching at some point. The facts are otherwise: Scripture neither says nor implies that it alone is all that is necessary for faith and practice. Citations of Scripture’s “proving” *sola scriptura* read into Scripture an intention that is not there. Thus, many arguments for *sola scriptura* will quote something like Deut. 4:2—“you shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it”—to claim that Scripture alone is sufficient and that anything

outside of what is written in Scripture cannot be God's Word or revelation. Such arguments neglect to note however that, logically applied, this claim means that the biblical books written after Deuteronomy are also "additions" to God's revelation.

In fact, what this and similar texts warn against is the addition of human wisdom to the Word of God. Scripture does not claim that God can only hand down revelation in written form. If God chose to reveal Himself further after the writing of Deuteronomy, and He did, or chooses to reveal Himself through some means other than writing—and He did, notably in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ—then the prohibition of Deut. 4:2 does not apply.

Others will cite 2 Tim. 3:16 to claim that Scripture is a totally sufficient source of revelation. Here again, this neglects the question immediately raised by such a verse: Granting that "all Scripture is God-breathed," how do we know which books are inspired Scripture and which books are not? At the time 2 Timothy was composed, not all the New Testament books had even been written. By the time all the books of the New Testament were written, they were being circulated along with numerous other books and epistles of varying quality, all of which vied for the attention of the early Christians. If the "sufficiency" of Scripture of which Paul speaks is a total sufficiency, Scripture should somehow be able to answer the question, "How do you tell which books are inspired Scripture and which aren't?" But, in fact, Scripture does not do this, a fact attested by the different collections of "recognized" scriptural books which existed in the different early Christian Church communities. Similarly, even today different Christians have different canons or collections of Scripture.

The "sufficiency of Scripture" of which Paul speaks is not, in fact, "formal" or total sufficiency. On the contrary, Scripture assumes that the written portion of apostolic Tradition is only "materially" sufficient revelation, and that the Church will rely on two additional authoritative sources to fully discern God's revelation: sacred Tradition and the Magisterium or teaching office of the Church.

The difference between formal and material sufficiency is the difference between having a brick house and having a big enough pile of bricks to build a house. Drawing on this analogy, Christ the Master Builder uses the mortar of Tradition and the trowel of the Magisterium to build His brick house of revelation from a mere pile of bricks (Mt. 16:18, Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Tim. 3:15). It is these three elements together—written Tradition (that is, Scripture), unwritten Tradition, and the Magisterium—that hand down the fullness of revelation, who is Jesus Christ.

This is the biblical witness as well. When the circumcision crisis arose around 40 A.D., there was, on a *sola scriptura* basis, an enormous amount of biblical precedent for the idea that Gentiles who wished to become Christians must be circumcised. After all,

- (a) everybody from the time of Abraham, including our Lord and His apostles, had received circumcision, as God Himself had commanded (Gen. 17);
- (b) this requirement had always included Gentile converts to the Covenant People, as God Himself had also commanded (Ex. 12:48); and
- (c) Our Lord had never clearly abolished this requirement but had rather insisted that "till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Mt. 5:18).

Nonetheless, the Church concluded that circumcision was unnecessary for Gentiles to become Christians. How? By the clear recognition that the full teaching of Christ is obtained, not merely by reliance on the "Bible and nothing else," but by reading the Bible in the context of her sacred Tradition, which is the common life, common teaching, and common worship of the apostolic Church (cf. Acts 2:42).

What the Church did was hold a council—the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15)—so that the Magisterium of the Church, i.e., the Apostles, their successors, and other Christian leaders, could examine not only Scripture but the full apostolic Tradition of the Church, both written and unwritten, and render an authoritative decision. At the Council, the Church sifted the whole of the apostolic message—not just the written part—and eventually concluded that, despite what Scripture alone appeared to say, the reality was that the New Covenant of Christ did not require circumcision for Gentile converts.

In fact, Scripture is treated by the Council of Jerusalem exactly as the Catholic Church still treats it today: as the written portion, not the totality, of God's revelation. Revelation is not a one-legged stool of Scripture alone, but a three-legged stool of written Tradition, unwritten Tradition and the Magisterium. This is why St. Paul tells the Thessalonians to "hold fast to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess. 2:15). These are the first two legs of the stool. The Council of Jerusalem also illustrates why Paul appointed bishops, among them Timothy

and Titus, to “guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us” (2 Tim. 1:14), for they constitute the essential third leg. Taken together, this three-legged stool gives us a sure basis for discerning authentic apostolic teaching. “Tradition” per se is not condemned by either Jesus or the Apostles. Rather, it is only the “traditions of men” they condemned.

Sola Scriptura Is Unworkable

If we reject this basic Catholic understanding of revelation, we immediately encounter enormous difficulties. Adherents of *sola scriptura* assert that Scripture alone is “perspicuous” or clear about the important things that God desires us to know for our salvation, and that those passages which are less clear can be understood in light of passages which are more clear.

However, in practice this is plainly not so. Is the Eucharist the Body and Blood of Christ or is it a symbol? Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli believed that Jn. 6:63—“It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail”—“clearly” showed that Jesus was speaking symbolically of the Eucharist and that the “less clear” passages, such as Jesus’ declaration “This is my body” (Lk. 22:19) must be interpreted in light of Jn. 6:63. Zwingli’s conclusion: The Eucharist is just a symbol. Martin Luther, on the other hand, regarded “This is my body” as the clear passage and interpreted Jn. 6:63 in light of it. Not surprisingly, Luther and Zwingli were bitter opponents and split over this issue.

In the same way, the foundational sacrament of the Christian life—Baptism—is open to wildly divergent beliefs and practices when left to the mercies of *sola scriptura*. Is Baptism for repentant adults only or for infants as well? Does it effect regeneration or is it only a symbol? Is it to be done in the name of the Blessed Trinity or in the name of Jesus only? All of these questions and many more have been “clearly” answered in one way by one group of *sola scriptura* adherents . . . and then just as “clearly” answered the exact opposite way by other groups of *sola scriptura* adherents. Scripture alone is not always clear, so various groups and individuals, based on their respective opinions, in practice take on the role of the divinely ordained Magisterium.

Sola Scriptura Is Inconsistently Applied

Sola scriptura is often asserted to argue against aspects of Catholic Tradition unpalatable to a particular Protestant theology, and there are many of these. Thus, for instance, it is argued by most Evangelicals that the Real Presence in the Eucharist is weakly attested to by Scripture. It is argued that Jn. 6 and the words “This is my body” can be interpreted several ways. And since “the Bible and nothing else” is all that is necessary for faith and practice, the ambiguity of Scripture alone on this point means the Catholic Church has no right to “add their Tradition to Scripture” and derive a dogmatic belief in the Real Presence. The same logic is applied again and again to various displeasing features of Catholic teaching, ranging from Purgatory, to the office of Peter, to prayers for the dead.

Regarding “fundamental Christian doctrines,” however, Evangelicals unconsciously function exactly like Catholics and read their Bibles in light of Sacred Tradition, which has percolated down to them from pre-Reformation Catholic Tradition. Thus, Evangelicals do not declare monogamy to be optional, even though Scripture alone is far more ambiguous about monogamy vs. polygamy than it is about Purgatory or the Real Presence—a fact recognized by Martin Luther and his colleague Philip Melancthon.³

Likewise, belief in the sanctity of human life at conception is also very ambiguous on the basis of Scripture alone, as is the doctrine of the Trinity and, a teaching at the core of Evangelical “Bible only” belief, that public revelation closed with the death of the Apostles. Yet Evangelicals typically treat these doctrines with the same certainty that the Catholic Church treats the Real Presence. The reason for this is straightforward: Evangelicalism has unconsciously retained part of sacred Tradition in such instances and reads Scripture in light of it, whereas the Catholic Church has retained the fullness of that same Tradition.

Conclusion

Sola scriptura is, ironically, a human tradition not found in Scripture, and it is a huge source of theological chaos and a doctrine not fully lived even by its adherents. Scripture is the written portion of the Church’s sacred Tradition. It cannot be separated from the whole of that Tradition and from the Catholic Church’s magisterial authority without distorting the very message God intends us to discover in it.

1 Geisler, Norman L. and MacKenzie, Ralph E., *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

2 Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 82, quoting Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), no. 9; see generally Catechism, nos. 74-87.

3 Martin Luther, *De Wette*, II, 459: "I confess that I cannot forbid a person to marry several wives, for it does not contradict the Scripture. If a man wishes to marry more than one wife, he should be asked whether he is satisfied in his conscience that he may do so in accordance with the word of God. In such a case, the civil authority has nothing to do in such a matter."

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