

Sola Scriptura

By Tim Warner

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The concept of sola scriptura (Scripture alone) is held by the majority of non-Catholic Christian denominations. At PFRS, we also believe that the Bible (66 books) is the only infallible source of truth. However, the basis for our belief and the means of proving it are quite different from the standard Reformed approach.

The Roman Catholic Church taught that tradition is as valuable as Scripture. This thinking is based on the concept of "Apostolic Succession" which extends the office of "Apostle" beyond the original 12 to a long line of successors. Each of these alleged successors is believed to speak for God by the power of the Spirit as did the original Apostles. The Reformers rejected this concept, leaving us with the doctrine of "sola Scriptura." The problem is, neither "Apostolic succession" nor "sola scriptura" can it be demonstrated by the Scriptures or even early Christian tradition!

The Protestant Approach to Sola Scriptura

The question that should be asked of all Protestants and Evangelical Christians is this: **How do you KNOW that all the books of the Bible are inspired, and are the sole authority for Christians?** The answer to this question seems easy at first glance. But, it is not. Most informed Christians would immediately cite 2 Tim. 3:16-17 as their proof text. ***All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*** However, this argument works ONLY if we understand the term "all Scripture" to refer to the 66 books of the Protestant Bible. "All Scripture" in this context does NOT refer to the whole "Bible" as we know it today. In this passage, Paul wrote that Timothy had known the "Scriptures" from his youth, long before ANY New Testament books were written (v. 15). Paul was referring to the Old Testament (Jewish canon) exclusively. He simply COULD NOT have meant the 66 books of the Protestant canon that did not exist in Timothy's youth.

There is no indication that the early Christians were aware of a "New Testament canon" while Paul was still alive. But, even IF the early Church did understand all the New Testament books that had been written thus far were "inspired," and even IF Paul meant to include his own Epistles and other New Testament books already written, none of John's five books had been written when Paul wrote this

passage to Timothy! If we claim Paul meant "ALL SCRIPTURE" thus far written is sufficient so that believers can be fully equipped, what about John's books? They cannot be included in Paul's statement no matter how inclusive we want to be regarding the word "scripture" in this passage! If the canon was not yet closed, and would not be closed for decades after Paul wrote this to Timothy, how can an incomplete canon be **fully sufficient** to equip the man of God? IF Paul was teaching "sola scriptura" here, then he necessarily closed the canon of inspired Scripture before his death, and John's books should NOT be considered canonical by Christians. Of course, the context settles the question decisively. Paul referred only to the Old Testament Jewish canon in this passage. This verse is simply being misused to support "sola scriptura" because Paul did not intend it to indicate "sola scriptura" according to the context. Nor did he mean to limit what was needed to fully equip the believer to "all Scripture." What about the role of the Holy Spirit? Paul did not mention Him in this passage as being necessary for the "man of God" to be fully equipped! What about Paul's own oral teaching to Timothy (oral tradition)? Paul made mention of this in the same Epistle (2:1-2). Was Paul's oral tradition not beneficial so that Timothy might be "fully equipped?" Or was Timothy's earlier reading of the Old Testament in his youth sufficient?

What did Paul mean by saying that "all Scripture" is inspired, and beneficial to equip the man of God? "All Scripture" is NOT intended to LIMIT "Scripture" to a specific canon. It merely means that ALL of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, (the entire Old Testament) was "inspired," and each and every book was given by God towards equipping the man of God to live as God ordained. Paul's statement obviously did not exclude the New Testament books not yet written from being either "inspired" or beneficial to equip the man of God. Neither did it preclude the oral tradition of the Apostles! Paul did NOT intend to LIMIT the scope of inspired Scripture with this statement. He merely meant to identify the QUALITY and PURPOSE of the Old Testament Scriptures Timothy had learned from childhood.

Let's consider some pointed questions for Protestants and Evangelical Christians:

1. On what basis or authority can we claim that the 66 books of the Bible we now recognize are the sole source of authority? The previous answer based on 2 Tim. 3:16-17 will not satisfy because it does not address the criterion for determining what is "inspired" and what is not "inspired."
2. How do we know if we are handling the Scriptures correctly? Is there an interpretive principle that is thoroughly objective? If so, what is it?
3. What did Jude mean by this statement: "... contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." (*Jude 1:3 NKJV*) Specifically,

WHAT WAS THE MODE THE APOSTLES USED FOR TRANSMITTING "the Faith once for all delivered to the saints?" Note the past tense. Was Jude referring to the books of the New Testament here? If so, how could the Faith have already been "once for all delivered to the saints" if at least some of John's books were not yet written? Was Jude saying that they should protect their complete copy of the Bible? Or was he saying that they should defend the whole body of Apostolic teaching whether in word or writing?

4. When Paul addressed the Ephesian Elders in Acts 20, what did he mean by the statement, "For I have not shunned to declare to you **the whole counsel of God.**" Was he referring ONLY to the Epistle he wrote to the Ephesian church? Or did he mean to include all of his oral teaching to them when he spent 2 years and 3 months in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10)? If the "whole counsel of God" includes Paul's oral teaching to the Ephesians as well as his Epistle to them, on what basis can we reject whatever Apostolic oral tradition was preserved in writing by the early Church Fathers?

The Protestant "proof" for sola scriptura is not valid for two reasons: It requires wrenching one verse out of context, and giving it a meaning Paul obviously never intended. But even more importantly, Jesus Himself disavowed the Protestant methodology when He said, "**If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true.** There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true." (Jn. 5:31-32). To claim that the Bible alone is the SOLE witness of absolute truth, **and that the Bible bears witness to itself as the sole witness**, is to do precisely what Jesus said was not valid! The Bible cannot bear witness to itself without outside confirmation. Otherwise, its witness is not valid according to Jesus!

There are **two witnesses** of the "Apostles doctrine" — the written Scriptures and the oral tradition left by the Apostles. Paul made that perfectly clear. "*Therefore, brethren, stand fast and **hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.***" (2 Thess. 2:15).

Some claim that the Holy Spirit indwelling each believer is the second witness for us. But this argument is not valid because we cannot produce **objective words** that the Holy Spirit is telling us or anyone else, (unless of course you are Benny Hinn). Confirmation must be objective, not subjective.

By showing that the typical Protestant support for sola scriptura is not tenable, we are NOT assailing the Bible as the final and infallible authority. We are assailing the Protestant argument that the Bible itself establishes this fact. It does NOT establish it. Sola scriptura must be established from historical means outside of Scripture itself, **from the early Church.**

The PFRS Approach to Sola Scriptura

At PFRS, we accept the New Testament canon on **the authority of Christ Himself, and the chain of custody He established for revealed truth**. Jesus was sent by the Father to proclaim the Father's message. Jesus hand picked 12 men (the 11 + Paul) and sent them to proclaim His message to the nations. The term "Apostle" means one who is sent on a mission with the authority of the sender. The few New Testament books written by a non-Apostle were written under the supervision and with the blessing of an Apostle of Jesus Christ (Mark was the companion of Peter, and Luke was the companion of Paul). We know this because of the manner in which the first century writers handled these books as inspired Scripture, and attributed their authorship to a companion of one of the Apostles.

At PFRS, we view as equally "authoritative" ALL of the teaching of ALL the Apostles, whether written or oral. After all, Jesus COMMISSIONED them as "Apostles" with their job being to make disciples and **TEACH**. (Matt. 28:19-20). They were never commanded to write the New Testament. Nor was the Holy Spirit promised to "inspire" their pens. The Holy Spirit was promised to finish teaching them what Jesus was unable to teach them in the short time He was with them (John 16:12-13). Also, the Spirit would CONFIRM their oral WORDS of witness with "*signs following*" as proof of their Apostolic authority, speaking on Christ's behalf. "*And they [the Apostles] went out and preached everywhere, **the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs**. Amen.*" (Mark 16:20). "*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and **was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?***" (Heb 2:3-4). Notice, the activity of the Spirit in confirming the "Word" was through miraculous means **meant to validate the teaching of the Apostles themselves**. Not merely to validate the truths they were proclaiming, but to validate THEM as reliable teachers of God's Word to mankind. Therefore, the entirety of the TEACHING from the Apostle's mouths or pens was inspired by God and was confirmed to the early Church by the supernatural signs that accompanied their preaching.

The task for believers today is to discover what that teaching was through all available means. That entails "textual criticism" (comparing manuscript evidence to find the true readings of Scripture), and "patristic criticism" (comparing the testimony of the earliest witnesses of oral Apostolic tradition). The inspiration and authority of the New Testament Scriptures cannot be shown from direct statements to that effect from Scripture itself. Such a theory is untenable. However, it can be shown that inspiration and authority of the New Testament is demanded by inference from the fact that all of the Apostolic

teaching possessed God's seal of approval through the confirming testimony of the supernatural signs that accompanied their preaching (just as supernatural signs accompanied Jesus' teaching). For us, the confirmation must be established through historical investigation.

It is impossible to separate the written Word of God from the spoken Word of God.¹ We have shown that the Biblical doctrine is that *the Apostolic witness* was confirmed by God to the early Church. That supernatural confirmation accompanied the oral teaching of the Apostles themselves, and confirmed those specific twelve men as inspired teachers of the Word of God — the sole authorized conduits for revelation. This logically includes their written witness as well since it is inconceivable that their written teaching would be contrary to their oral teaching. **Therefore, the absolute authority of Scripture is a necessary inference drawn from the biblical doctrine of Apostolic authority.** Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox base the authority of the New Testament on the authority of the "Church," because they think the authority of the Apostles was passed on to successors. PFRS bases the authority of the New Testament on the authority of the twelve Apostles whom Jesus Himself chose, trained, and sent. The Church is NOT the conduit of continuous revelation. Rather, the Church is charged with proclaiming and defending the **fixed** Apostolic Faith, and refuting all heresies that challenge it.

Apostolic Oral Tradition vs. Scripture

It must be noted in closing that the PFRS position does NOT grant infallibility to the writings of the early Church. These men were not Apostles, nor were most of them companions of an Apostle. Therefore, their writings cannot be placed on a par with Scripture. However, they were the earliest recipients of "*the Faith once for all delivered to the saints.*" That is, they were the "*saints*" to whom the pristine Faith was delivered by the Apostles. Therefore, their testimony to what had been handed down to them as "Apostolic" is extremely valuable, particularly when there is a consensus of opinion.

The real difference between Scripture and the early Christian writings is simply the difference between a first hand account and a second or third hand account. If we could question John or Paul, we would get a first hand account that is completely reliable. If we could question Polycarp, disciple of John, or Clement, disciple of Paul, we would get their perception of what these Apostles taught — a second hand account. Their testimony is less than completely reliable, but still very valuable, particularly when there is unanimous agreement among the early witnesses to Apostolic tradition. We place full weight on every word spoken or written by an Apostle. We place considerable weight when the early witnesses to Apostolic teaching unanimously agree with each other. This is

precisely how the truth is established in a court of law — agreement and consistency.

Notes:

1. The term, "Word of God" appears 52 times in Scripture (KJV). Virtually every time it refers to **the spoken word** (rhema), not the written word. This term is frequently misapplied by Christians to the Bible. This fact gives new meaning to Paul's statement, "*For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*" (Heb. 4:12 NKJ). And again, "*So then faith comes by **hearing** [not reading], and hearing by **the word of God***" (Rom 10:17 NKJ). See also, 1 Thess. 2:12, Heb. 13:7.