

Do Christians follow the Bible Alone when trying to determine all Jesus & the Apostles taught?

By Graham Osborne

At first blush, following the “Bible Alone” (Sola Scriptura in Latin), to determine all that Jesus taught seems like a reasonable suggestion. Individuals ask the Holy Spirit to witness the truths of Scripture to them as they read –if something’s not found in Scripture, it’s not necessary to believe it. The authority of the Church is rejected, as is Sacred [Oral] Tradition.

But the problems come quickly when we start to investigate the historical and Scriptural background to this teaching.

Historically, the idea of Sola Scriptura was *unheard* of in the first 1500 years of the Church. The Church of the first century was primarily a church of oral teaching. The writings of the New Testament were not even finished until around 70 to 90 A.D., and it was not until the late 300’s that we even had a Bible at all. And it was the Catholic Church, meeting in councils similar to the one we see in Acts 15, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that discerned which of the many books being considered were truly inspired by God and belonged in Sacred Scripture.

But even then, most could not read. There were no printing presses until the 1400’s, and all copies of the Scriptures prior to this were handwritten and prohibitively expensive. The early Church simply did not operate on the “Bible Alone”. This is just an unarguable, historical fact.

And there are still more difficulties...

The irony is that this teaching is unscriptural itself! It is not found anywhere in Scripture – not even once! Being such a foundational issue, we would expect to see it everywhere, but in fact, we see it nowhere. By its own definition it has refuted itself! Not good!

Along these same “unscriptural” lines, we cannot even know which books belong in the Bible by following the “Bible Alone”. There is no inspired table of contents that lists which books actually belong in Scripture. Interestingly, in the early centuries of the Church, there were many books being proposed as inspired by God that were not included in the Bible. It was the Catholic Church, meeting in councils guided by the Holy Spirit near the end of the 4th century [similar to how the first council of the Church was guided in Jerusalem in **Acts 15:28**], that discerned which books were truly inspired by God and belonged in the Bible – and even Martin Luther concedes this point! Using the “Bible alone”, you can’t even know what should be in the Bible! This difficulty is insurmountable for anyone trying to claim Christians should follow Sola Scriptura.

This brings up yet another sticky spot. Sola Scriptura is obviously never really ‘sola’. There is always an interpreter. Protestantism would claim this authority for the individual (i.e. every individual is “pope”), while Catholics claim this authority only for the Pope and the Magisterium – the teaching office of the Church, made up of the Pope and all Bishops teaching in union with him, guarded from teaching error by the Holy Spirit [see **John 14:16-18, John 14:26, John 15:15-17, John 16:13, 2 Tim 1:13-14, 2 Tim 2:2, Mat 28:20**].

Okay, so what DOES Scripture say about all this? It teaches that we must listen to both the oral (Sacred Tradition) and written [Sacred Scripture] teachings of Jesus and His Apostles – *not* just Scripture alone – and that the Holy Spirit will protect BOTH of these sources from error.

In **2 Thessalonians 2:15**, St. Paul is very clear on this when he says, “hold to the *traditions* which you were taught by us, either *by word of mouth* or by letter.” Note the emphasis on listening to **both** the *spoken* [oral Tradition] and written [Sacred Scripture] teachings of Jesus and the Apostles.

1 Corinthians 11:1-2 echoes this same teaching: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the *traditions* even as *I have delivered them to you*.” Similarly, in **2 Timothy 1:13-14** and **2:2**, St Paul writes to the young Catholic Bishop, Timothy, exhorting him to, “Follow the pattern of the *sound words which you have heard* from me... guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells within us.” And this is just a sampling! There is unquestionably an oral component to Divine Revelation, and we are commanded to hold fast to that too.

Now some have offered **2 Timothy 3:15-16** as Scriptural evidence for Sola Scripture: “from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” But even a casual reading of this verse reveals that it teaches nothing of the sort.

First off, it says that **all** Scripture is useful for teaching. Amen, says the Catholic. But it does not say **ONLY** Scripture!

Additionally, some point out that Scripture makes us “complete”, equipped for “every good work”. But this does not mean that nothing else is needed for salvation. Scripture certainly prepares us for doing “good works”. But Scripture also attests that many other things are needed to make us “perfect” or “complete”, and that are necessary for salvation.

For example, **James 1:24** insists that perseverance is also necessary: “*you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance... let perseverance be perfect so that you may be perfect and complete lacking in nothing*”. Similarly, **1 John 2:3-6** attests that, “*if we keep his commandments... in him truly love for God is perfected*...” In John 6:47-58, Jesus teaches that, “*Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.*” And **St Peter** confirms that, “*Baptism... saves you*” [**1 Peter 3:20-21**]. Additionally, in **Romans 2:6-10**, St Paul adds that we will receive “*eternal life... immortality through perseverance in good works*”. Scripture alone certainly doesn’t make us “complete” for salvation!

Finally, the context of **2 Timothy 3:15-16** reveals that St. Paul is referring to the Old Testament here –the Scriptures of Timothy’s “youth” – and no Christian would want to argue for Sola Old Testament!

But perhaps the most compelling reason to reject Sola Scriptura is that it simply does not work! If Scripture alone was really what God had intended – individuals reading the Bible and asking the Holy Spirit to reveal the truths of Scripture to them – then everyone should be coming up with basically the same interpretations for the same passages of Scripture. At the very least, their understandings should not be contradictory. But this is absolutely **not** what we see.

What we do see is unending disagreement and division. If there is one Holy Spirit, one Bible, and one set of unchanging, universal truths, how is it that we now have thousands of different Protestant denominations [some estimate well over 30,000!], each with significantly different and often contradictory interpretations of the same Sacred Scriptures -so different and contradictory that they can no longer have fellowship together? So they separate –over and over again, leaving a deeply fractured Christian landscape that must just scandalize the world.

Now some might argue that there really is unity among Christians on the “big things”, and that their differences are minor. But this is simply not true. For example, are we saved by our “faith alone”, or are grace-inspired good works necessary too? Is Baptism necessary for salvation or just a symbolic washing? Do we baptize infants or not? Once a person is “saved” can they lose their salvation or not? Is contraception, premarital relations or divorce and remarriage, permissible or not? Is an active homosexual lifestyle a Christian option or not? Is abortion permissible or not? Is Jesus truly present in the Eucharist or not? And the list goes on. These are not minor differences. They are, in fact, foundational, doctrinal issues of eternal significance.

This is profoundly saddening, and even Martin Luther himself would eventually lament, “there are as many beliefs as there are heads”! No doctrine in the history of Christianity has been more divisive. The fruit of Sola Scriptura has been utter disunity –in complete opposition to the “*perfect*” Christian unity Jesus prayed for in **John 17:20-24**.

So what is the answer? How can we know with certainty all that Jesus and the Apostles taught? Through the Church Jesus founded! Jesus didn’t first write a Book, He built a Church! The wisest of builders, Jesus built His Church on rock and promised the gates of Hell would not prevail against it – it would never fall [cf. **Matthew 7:24-25**]. He built it on Peter and the Apostles, revealed His truths to it, both spoken and written, gave it His authority, sent the Holy Spirit to guide it and protect it from error, and made provisions to pass on His teachings and authority through it.

Even Scripture itself attests that it is the Church that is “the pillar and foundation of truth” [1 Timothy 3:15], and NOT Scripture. It is by the unity of doctrinal teaching, preserved by the Holy Spirit in the Church that Jesus founded – and it is unarguable fact of history that this church IS the Catholic Church, no other – that Christian unity will be preserved and protected.

The “Bible Alone”, Sola Scriptura, remains today, as it has always been, simply a doctrine that Jesus and the Apostles *never* taught – truly, a doctrine of men, not of God.

If you have ever been tempted to reject the authority of the Church Jesus founded, and instead, adopt the Bible Alone as your sole authority for knowing what Jesus taught, I leave you with a powerful testimony from the Early Church – a profound quote from St. Ignatius, the martyred third bishop of Antioch, and a disciple of St. John the Apostle. Writing in 110 AD, he makes the authority and primacy of the Church in the first centuries of Christianity crystal clear: “Shun schisms as the source of troubles. Let all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father, and the priests, as you would the Apostles. ...Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

St Peter, appointed by Jesus as the first Pope in **Matthew 16:16-28**, summarizes all these things perfectly for us: “*Know this first of all that there is no prophecy of Scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation*” [**2 Peter 1:20**].