

Q: Do Christians follow the Bible Alone when trying to determine all that Jesus and the Apostles taught?

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

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 had a Bible at all! But even then, most could not read. There was no printing press until the 1400’s, and all copies of the Scriptures prior to this were written by hand and were prohibitively expensive. Few if any had their own personal copy of Sacred Scripture to read. 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”. The Bible does not actually tell us which books belong in it! There is no inspired table of contents in the Bible that lists which books are truly inspired by God and belong in Scripture. It was the Catholic Church, meeting in councils near the end of the 4th century and guided by the Holy Spirit [like the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:28], that discerned the list of which books were truly inspired by God and belonged in the Bible – and even Martin Luther concedes this! This difficulty is ultimately insurmountable.

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.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, St. Paul is very clear on this when he says, “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by *word of mouth or by letter*”. Similarly, in 2 Timothy 1:13-14, 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!

Some have offered 2 Timothy 3:16 as evidence for Sola Scripture, but even a casual reading reveals that it teaches nothing of the sort. It says that, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching...”, which Catholics would completely agree with. But it does **not say ONLY Scripture!** Further, the context of this verse 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! Let me explain. If there is one Holy Spirit, one Bible, and one set of unchanging, universal truths that Jesus left us, how is it that we now have thousands of separate Protestant denominations, each with significantly different, and often contradictory, interpretations of the VERY same Bible? And many of these contradictory teachings involve critical doctrines, For example, is baptism necessary for salvation or not? Can we lose our salvation, or not? Do we believe in "the rapture [Protestant-style]"? Do we baptize babies? Is divorce and remarriage permissible? Is Jesus truly present in the Eucharist or not? The list goes on.

If Sola Scriptura truly worked, then the Holy Spirit would be revealing the same meanings of Sacred Scripture to everyone, or at least not contradictory meanings. But instead, denominations split off from each other at a stunning rate, leaving a fractured Christianity that is all profoundly saddening. Even Martin Luther himself would eventually lament that, "there are as many beliefs as there are heads"! The fruit of Sola Scriptura has been utter disunity. No other "Christian" teaching has caused more division than this one, working in complete opposition to Jesus' prayer for "perfect" unity in John 17:17-23.

So what is the answer? How can we know all that Jesus and the Apostles taught with certainty? Jesus didn't first write a Book, He built a Church! 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 to 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 doctrine, preserved by the Holy Spirit in the Church that Jesus founded, the Catholic Church, that Christian unity will be preserved and protected.

Sola Scriptura remains today, as it has always been, simply a doctrine that Jesus and the Apostles *never* taught. 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 final testimony from the Early Church – a profound quote from St. Ignatius, the martyred third bishop of Antioch and disciple of St. John. In 110 AD, he wrote:

“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.”

“Know this first of all, that there is no prophecy of Scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation” (2 Peter 1:20).

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