[why i'm catholic: Sola Scriptura isn't historical, Part I](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-i)

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[**https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-i**](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-i)

History is not a creed or a catechism, it gives lessons rather than rules; still no one can mistake its general teaching in this matter, whether he accept it or stumble at it.  Bold outlines and broad masses of color rise out of the records of the past. They may be dim, they may be incomplete; but they are definite.  And this one thing at least is certain; whatever history teaches, whatever it omits, whatever it exaggerates or extenuates, whatever it says and unsays, at least the Christianity of history is not Protestantism.  If ever there were a safe truth, it is this.

Quite an assertion. The man who made it was the great 19th century Oxford scholar and convert to the Catholic Faith, John Henry Newman.

He was also one of the most important influences in my own conversion. He’s the one who got me thinking about history — especially the history of the Church in its earliest centuries.

Here I was, just beginning to delve into these things. I was reading along in his masterful *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*,  when I came to this sentence: “To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant.”

*What?  To be deep in history is to cease to be Protestant?!*

I read on and came to this even more pointed statement: “It is *easy* to show that the early Church was not Protestant.”

*What???  Easy* *to show that the early Church was not Protestant?!*

And then, no doubt the most colorful of his statements along these lines:

This utter incongruity between Protestantism and historical Christianity is a plain fact, whether…regarded in its early or in its later centuries…. So much must the Protestant grant that, if such a system of doctrine as he would now introduce ever existed in early times, it has been clean swept away as if by a deluge, suddenly, silently, and without memorial….

I had graduated from a Protestant college and then a Protestant seminary. I had been ordained into the Protestant ministry and was about eight years into my career as a Protestant pastor. I was the senior pastor of an evangelical Protestant Church, and here was one of the most brilliant minds of the 19th century telling me that if the kind of church I was leading, in terms of its view of correct Christian doctrine, ever existed in the late-first century, the second century, the third, fourth and fifth centuries, it has disappeared from the historical record, leaving no trace.

Newman was throwing down the gauntlet with such claims. He was calling me out. I simply *had* to investigate.

**The Question of History**

Now, as a Protestant, *sola scriptura* was the foundation of my worldview.
I took inspired scripture *alone* to be 'Authoritative.' The opinions of Bible scholars and theologians and Christian authors, even the solemn formulations of Church Councils, creeds and denominational statements of faith -- these functioned for me as guides and counselors.

I respected them. But none of them possessed 'Authority' in the sense that I would accept their ruling as true and bow to it *even if* I thought the evidence of Scripture was pointing another direction.

No. When it came to *what I should believe and hold as true* -- about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, the church, sin and salvation, faith and obedience, the various moral issues -- for me the quest for truth in Christian doctrine amounted to the quest to rightly interpret inspired scripture and organize its teaching into a coherent and consistent biblical worldview.

And with this essential view of things, I wasn't all that terribly interested in what the Church of the second, third, fourth and fifth centuries believed.

Men like Clement of Rome, Polycarp, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus -- I knew they were heroes of the faith. Many of them martyrs. But what they *believed?*I didn't think of it as something that would necessarily cast much light on the issues of New Testament interpretation.

After all, if they agreed with what I took to be the most accurate reading of scripture, I would say they were wise faithful interpreters of God's Word. If they disagreed with me, I would say they had drifted from the truth. I knew for sure that by the time of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century Christianity had pretty much twisted itself into the strange shape we call the Catholic Church.

So why would I trust *anything* said between the time of the apostles and then?

My working assumption was that the teachings of the apostles had become corrupted almost immediately and that the beliefs and practices of Christians in the early centuries didn't necessarily tell us what the apostles actually taught, or what the earliest Christians actually believed.

Newman challenged that assumption. It's more natural, he argued, to think that...

the society of Christians which the apostles left on earth were of that religion to which the apostles converted them… that as Christianity began by manifesting itself as of a certain shape and bearing to all mankind, therefore it went on so to manifest itself…

Sure, individual believers might drift off in any and all directions. Sure, the church at large might wander from the apostolic teaching with respect to this detail or that. But if we look at the Christianity of the late-

first, second and third centuries, and we can see the shape of a basic shared theology; if, as Newman said, "bold outlines and broad masses of color rise out of the records of the past" to paint a picture that is "definite," however dim and incomplete. Wouldn't that mean *something*?

At minimum, what Newman was saying is that the burden of proof should be on the one says the Christian religion we see in the second, third and fourth centuries is ***not*** the Christian religion taught by the apostles, that the Church we see functioning during that time is ***not*** the Church founded by Christ and his apostles, but some deformed version of the 'original.'

I believed Newman had a point -- at least enough of a point that I should read the Church Fathers and see what I could see. And this is what I set out to do. I began to read the documents. I wanted to hear what those closest to the apostles had to say - particularly, what they had to say about the issue of authority. I wanted to know: **was *sola scriptura* the faith and practice of the early Church?**

**Argument Number One**

In our next two lessons I'm going to present the results of my reading of the Church Fathers. What I want to do in the remainder of this lesson is tie things back into what we've already seen in our thinking through the witness of the New Testament (see previous four posts).

**You see, the first argument I would make that *sola scriptura*was not in the minds of the early Christians living immediately after the time of the apostles is the simple fact that not one of the New Testament writers gives us any hint that it would be.**
When you think about it, what Protestantism essentially holds is that the Church Christ established, the Church we see functioning in the New Testament, is in a fundamental way *not* the Church our Lord *intended* to exist through the ages and until his return.

Let me explain. Within the Church we see 'in action' in the New Testament, authority resided (a) in scripture, (b) in the oral teaching of the Apostles and (c) in the ability of the Church to meet in council as it did in Acts 15, to settle theological disputes and issue 'Authoritative' decrees.

What Protestants believe is that with the death of the apostles, everything changed. After that, 'Authority' resided in scripture alone.

In other words, what Protestantism is essentially saying is that on the most foundational level, dealing with the most fundamental issue of all, the issue of where Authority lies in the Church, a massive change occurred with the death of the apostles.

And yet ([as we've already seen](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-scriptural-part-ii)) there is not a hint in the writings of the New Testament that such a profound change would be coming.

We don't find the apostles talking about it. We don't find them preparing the Church for it.

Nowhere, for instance, are the churches told that once the apostles die it's going to be scripture alone. Nowhere are they informed that the Church will no longer have the ability by the Spirit to do what it did in Acts 15, that there will be no more decrees for Christians to receive with joy.

Nowhere is it said that the writings of the apostles will become the sole infallible rule of faith and practice for the Church and for *each individual believer* and that, as Luther said, every Christian will become "for himself pope and church." That, for all practical purposes, every believer will believe what *he sees* to be the teaching of scripture.

Everything I've said here is assumed by the Protestant position. And yet we see none of it in the New Testament documents themselves.

On the contrary, we see St. Paul commanding the believers to "stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). We see him instructing Timothy, his spiritual son and successor in the ministry, to take the things he has "heard" him teach and "guard" them "by the Holy Spirit" so that he can "entrust" them to other faithful men who will do what Timothy has done (2 Timothy 1:13,14; 2:1). **The emphasis in the New Testament is on the faith being preserved by the Holy Spirit through something akin to apostolic succession.**

This is one reason I came to believe that sola scriptura was not in the minds of Christians living in the decades after the death of the apostles. Sola Scriptura was not a foundation of the historic faith of the Church.

[why i'm catholic: sola scriptura isn't historical, part II](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-ii)

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In this section of our series on *sola scriptura*, we've been looking at what the earliest Christians living in the decades and centuries after the apostles can teach us.

How did those closest to the apostolic age think about the relationship between Scripture, tradition and the authority of the Church? How did they think important disputes would be settled?

My goal here is to present four basic arguments or lines of thought that I think taken together demonstrate conclusively that *sola scriptura* was not the faith of the Early Church.

The first was our subject last week. It goes like this.

**1. Evidence that *sola scriptura* was not in the minds of Christians living in the post-apostolic period is that there isn't a hint in the writings of the apostles, who established and taught the earliest Christians, that it *would be*.**

There's no mention of the idea that once the apostles died *what they had written* would serve as the sola and sufficient infallible rule of faith and practice for the Church.

There's no indication that the apostles were preparing the churches this.

In short, there's no evidence in the writings of those who *actually authored* the New Testament that they thought like Protestants think about the question of how their teaching would be faithfully preserved and passed down within the Church. For the evidence, see [last weeks lesson](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-i).

In this lesson we're going to hit arguments two and three.

**2. Another evidence that *sola scriptura* was not the faith of the early Church is the simple fact that the Church took so long to formally define the canon of Scripture.**

Take a moment and think carefully about the situation of the earliest Christians. During the time in which the apostles were still living, believers had Scripture, Tradition and an authoritative Magisterium.

They had everything the apostles wrote (Scripture). They had a basic knowledge of the apostolic doctrine preserved in the churches the apostles founded and instructed (Tradition). And then, when needed, the Church's leadership could meet in council to authoritatively settle disputes and issue decrees on matters of Christian teaching (Magisterium).

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28).

And then -- at least according to the Protestant view of history -- the day comes when the apostles are all gone and the early Christians begin to realize that *everything has changed.* Tradition can no longer be trusted. It's losing its authority by the hour. What Timothy "heard" from Paul and guarded by the Holy Spirit and passed on to other faithful men who would be able to teach others?  This has become essentially worthless. Because, after all, it's not infallible.

Church leaders can continue to meet in council but their decisions are no longer binding. After all, they're not infallible either. Only Scripture is infallible and therefore only Scripture is binding.

From now on, it's scripture and scripture *alone*.

Question: what would *you do* if you were a bishop in this post-apostolic Church?  What would you do? I'll tell you exactly what you would do: You would move *immediately*, if not much sooner, to assemble the leadership of the Church in every city, launch a massive inquiry into which apostles wrote what and to whom, gather the apostolic documents and formally define the canon of New Testament. The identification of the inspired writings would become your *number one priority*.

So is this what happened? Surely this is what the bishops did. No?

Nope. Instead, the Church went for years and decades and even *centuries* without taking up in a serious way the issue of the canon of Scripture ("canon" from a Greek word meaning "rule," or "measuring stick"). In fact, it wasn't until *the latter part of the fourth century* that councils were convened to clearly delineate and formally define which books the Church accepted as apostolic, inspired and authoritative: the councils of Hippo and Carthage and Rome.

And even then it was in response to heresies that had arisen in the Church!

There was Marcionites who attacked the integrity of the New Testament by cutting out a number of books he decided were too Jewish and not written for Christians. There were the Gnostics who attacked the *meaning* of the New Testament with their New Age interpretations (New Age "Christians" are essentially modern day Gnostics.)  And then there were the Montanists who claimed to be receiving new revelation from God that could, at least theoretically, be added to the New Testament.

In *response* to this, the Church moved to settle the issue of which books exactly were to be regarded by Christians as inspired and canonical and provide a formal list.

In other words, if it had not been for this situation, the Church would have waited even longer. It might have gone on forever without feeling an intense need to settle the question definitively.

Now, this is at least *understandable* on the Catholic premise that the Church didn't view Scripture as the end-all and be-all for its ability to know and preserve the apostolic teaching.

But it makes no sense *whatsoever* on the Protestant premise that the Church viewed Scripture as the 'sole and sufficient infallible rule of faith and practice.'

In his book *Answers to Catholic Claims*, Protestant apologist James White talks about this bit of church history without without realizing the implications it has for his view that the Church at that time was a Church that believed in and was practicing *sola scriptura*.

In the early history of the church there were events and people that gave impetus and rise to the formalization of the canon list. These things could be viewed as being used of God to prompt his people, the Church to give serious consideration to providing to all concerned a listing of the books which the Church, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, received as authoritative.

Now, if you don't stop to think about what James White is saying here, sounds reasonable enough. But if and when you *do stop* to think about it, what he's saying is almost hilarious.

How so? Well, he's casually talking about how a Church that, according to *him*, based its entire teaching on Scripture alone, waiting *four hundred years* to decide for sure which books belong in Scripture!

And even then, he's proposing that the Church needed to be "prompted" by God to give "serious consideration" to providing "*to all concerned*" this list of the inspired books. In other words, not everyone was concerned to have such a list. But some were. And to those who were, the Holy Spirit used the crisis created by these heresies to essentially put a cattle prod to the Church's rear end and get it to provide all Christians, and all the churches, with a New Testament!

All I can tell you is that if *I* were a bishop in the time of Peter and Paul, and *I* believed that after their death what the apostles had *written* would become the sole rule of faith and practice for the Church, I would have been “concerned” from the day the first apostle showed up with a runny nose and cough.

By the time I was attending my first apostolic funeral, the burning concern of my life would have been the work of identifying and collecting the inspired writings of every apostle!

When you really think of it, it verges on the incredible to conceive of a Church, committed to *sola scriptura*, waiting nearly four centuries to formally define its list of inspired and infallible writings. And only doing it then because it was prompted to do so by circumstances.

It would be like someone building a skyscraper and then sixty years later thinking, "I wonder if we shouldn't give serious consideration to putting a foundation under this thing. At least for those who may be concerned!"

The Church's actions in this regard don't fit a people holding the Protestant view of *sola scriptura*.

On the other hand, its actions fit quite well a people who believed that the basic doctrinal content of their Christian faith was preserved and handed down within the Church, and that while it was of course reflected in the inspired writings of the apostles, it wasn't based solely on those writings.

In other words, the Church's actions fit a people holding the Catholic view.

**3.  A third evidence that *sola scriptura* was not the faith of the early Church is the simple fact that the earliest Christian Creeds say nothing at all about Scripture.**
When you look at the Creeds and Confessions that came out of the Reformation, you notice something right away: They all begin with a strong statement on the inspiration, authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Essentially, they all begin by asserting their belief in *sola scriptura.*

For instance, both the Westminster Confession of Faith of the Presbyterian Church (written in 1646), and the Baptist Confession of 1689 -- begin with chapters titled “Of the Holy Scriptures”.  I'll quote from the Westminster, but the Baptist Confession is nearly identical.

The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures.

You find this same pattern in all of the major creeds of the Reformation.

And of course this makes perfect sense. After all, the Reformation was all about rejecting the authority of the Church and standing on the principle of *sola scriptura*. Obviously, when drawing up a Creed to describe in clear and systematic terms what their particular Church believed, it would make sense for them to begin with the foundational issue of Scripture's inspiration, authority and *sufficiency*.

Now, it seems to me more than interesting to compare and contrast this with what we find when we look at the Creeds of the early Church. For instance, if we look at the earliest of all Christian creeds, the Apostles Creed. we find that while it contains an article on the Church ("I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting") there is no mention of the Bible. There's not a word about its inspiration, or its authority, or its sufficiency as the sole basis for Christian belief and practice.

And then, if we look at the Nicene Creed, which came out of the first Ecumenical Council of the Christian Church, the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), we find the same thing. While it contains, this time an expanded article on the Church ("I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church...”), again there isn't a word about the inspiration and authority of sacred Scripture.

Now, assuming the early Church was Protestant, this is hard to understand.

Again, it fits the Catholic view of things, where the emphasis is on the deposit of faith being preserved by the Holy Spirit and passed down within the Church. But it doesn't fit the Protestant view of things.

**Conclusion**
These two arguments, lines of thought, bits of evidence -- whatever you want to call them -- they don't constitute a *proof* of the Catholic position. What they do, however, is provide evidence of a *mindset* that I think clearly fits much better the Catholic worldview than it does the Protestant.

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The question we're asking in this series is the most fundamental of questions. How does an individual Christian know that what he or she has come to accept as the "teaching of Christianity" is true?

There's the Roman Catholic Church. There's the Coptic Church that split off in the 5th century. There are the Eastern Orthodox churches that split off in the 11th century. There are the Protestant churches that split off in the 16th century and have since fragmented into a whole host of denominations and sects and independent movements. Between them, nearly every doctrinal issue is in dispute. There are brilliant and holy pastors and teachers in each of these churches. How does a believer know?

**The Pattern of Authority in the New Testament and Beyond**

When we looked into the New Testament we saw that Christians living during the time of the apostles had (1) Scripture, (2) tradition and (3) an authoritative Church.

In other words, (1) they had what the apostles had written. (2) They had the teaching of the apostles as it was preserved within the churches -- as when Paul instructed the Thessalonian believers to hold fast to the "traditions" they had received "whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thess. 2:15) or when Paul instructed Timothy to "guard by the Holy Spirit" everything Timothy had "heard" him teach so that he could entrust it to faithful men who would be able to teach others (2 Timothy  1:14, 2:2).

And then (3) when there were important issues that needed to be settled, individual believers had a Church that could meet in council, decide the issue and send out a decree informing them of what the Holy Spirit had led them to decide (Acts 15).

If you will, "authority" was conceived as a kind of three-legged stool where Scripture, tradition and the authority of the Church combined to provide a secure knowledge of what was to be believed.

OK, so now we're looking at Christianity after the time of the apostles and asking the same questions: How did an individual believer living during the second, third, fourth and fifth centuries of Christianity know that what he or she had come to accept as the "teaching of Christianity" was true? How did Christians imagine important disputes within the Church should and would be settled? Did they switch from thinking in terms of the three-legged stool to thinking in terms of Scripture alone?

In our last two lessons ([here](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-i) and [here](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-ii)) I presented three lines of evidence that I think make it hard to believe that the early Church "switched" from thinking in terms of this pattern of Scripture, tradition and an authoritative Church to thinking in terms of sola scriptura.

But the strongest evidence of this (and here's my fourth argument) is that we do not see the early Church teaching or practicing sola scriptura. Instead, what we see in the writings of the early centuries is a continuation of the basic pattern we saw in our study of the New Testament.

**Sacred Scripture**

Of course Protestant apologists will insist that this is not the case.

They will insist that the fathers of the Church did in fact hold to sola scriptura, and to demonstrate this they will quote passages from early Church writings that speak of the authority of Scripture and how all true teaching must conform to Scripture and be supported by Scripture.

For instance, from the Catechetical Lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem:

For concerning the divine and Holy mysteries of the faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me who tell you these things, give not absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures

This is a good passage because it gives me a chance to emphasize something that Protestants reading this may not know. Catholicism teaches that there is a "primacy" that pertains to Scripture as the inspired revelation of God. Vatican II described Scripture as "the speech of God as it was put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit." There is nothing like Scripture, and because of this Christian teaching must conform to Scripture and be supported by Scripture.

The problem is that the inspired Scripture has to be interpreted.

Scripture doesn't, for example, leap up and say, "By the way, all those passages in the New Testament about justification and faith and obedience and whether salvation is something that can be lost? This is how you put them all together and make sense of them!" No. Someone has to read the Bible and interpret everything being said and draw out from it the teachings of Christianity.

And because of this, while we find the Church fathers speaking eloquently of the inspiration and authority and, as in the quotation from Cyril, even the primacy of Scripture, we also find them speaking of the authority of Tradition as the lens through which Scripture must be read and interpreted.

**Sacred Tradition**
When I first read the fathers of the Church and began to run into passages like the following from Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons and the greatest biblical theologian of the second century, I recognized right away that I was being exposed to a mindset that was very different than mine as an evangelical.

When, therefore, we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek among others the truth which is easily obtained from the Church. For the Apostles, like a rich man in a bank, deposited with her most copiously everything which pertains to the truth; and everyone whoever wishes draws from her the drink of life...

What, then?  If there should be a dispute over some kind of question, ought we not have recourse to the most ancient Churches in which the Apostles were familiar, and draw from them what is clear and certain in regard to that question?  What if the Apostles had not in fact left writings to us?  Would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom them entrusted the Churches?

When I was a evangelical Protestant minister, I can assure you that if I had preached a million sermons over the course of a million Sundays I would never have thought to describe the truth as something the apostles deposited in the Church like a rich man deposits his money in a bank.

I would have said they deposited the truth in the writings of the New Testament. Period.

I would never had said that "everything which pertains to the truth" can be found in the Church and drawn from the Church. I would never ever have implied that even if the apostles had left us no writings Christians could know the truth in "the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom [the apostles] entrusted the churches." No way!

And finally, my congregation would never have heard me utter words like these: "If there should be a dispute over some kind of question, ought we not have recourse to the most ancient Churches in which the Apostles were familiar, and draw from them what is clear and certain in regard to that question?"

And yet, this is what Irenaeus says. In fact, this is the way all of the Church fathers speak. And the way they speak reveals a mindset that just doesn't sound like Protestantism.

On the other hand, it does sound an awful lot like the mindset expressed in the Constitution on Divine Revelation from Vatican II:

Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God, which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit.  It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching.

**Bristling with Plausible Quotations**

But why the need to look to Scripture and Tradition? Since Scripture is the only "inspired" record we have of what the Apostles taught, why not look to Scripture alone?

Well, I'm sure Irenaeus believed that this is what the apostles actually taught the Church to do. But there was also a very practical reason. Christians don't always agree on what exactly Scripture is teaching. And in the early Church there were heretical teachers. Orthodox Christians could argue passages of Scripture, but the heretics could argue passages of Scripture as well. And unless the Church wanted to simply divide and fragment to where there was a church for every sincerely held viewpoint, there had to be some method of testing whose interpretation was right and whose was wrong.

Saint Vincent of Lerins discusses this exact problem in his Commonitoria, written in the early fifth century. The quotation here is a little lengthy, but it needs to be read in full.

He begins by saying, essentially, "Imagine you ask one of the heretics..."

What ground have you for saying that I ought to cast away the universal and ancient faith of the Catholic Church?  He has the ready answer: “For it is written.”  And forthwith he produces a thousand examples, a thousand authorities from the Law, from the Psalms, from the apostles, from the prophets, by means of which, interpreted on a new and wrong principle, the unhappy soul may be precipitated from the height of Catholic truth to the lowest abyss of heresy… Do heretics appeal to Scripture?  They do indeed, and with a vengeance.  For you may see them scamper through every single book of Holy Scripture… Whether among their own people or among strangers, in private or in public, in speaking or in writing, at convivial meetings or in the streets, hardly ever do they bring forward anything of their own which they do not endeavor to shelter under the words of Scripture… You will see an infinite heap of instances, hardly a single page, which does not bristle with plausible quotations from the New Testament or the Old.

Now, I read this and I had to admit that it reminded me of my experience as a Protestant -- especially with those believers most committed to the Reformation doctrine of sola scriptura.

The evangelical Protestant world is filled with Christians and Christian communities, churches and denominations who have cast overboard what St. Vincent refers to as "the universal and ancient faith of the Catholic Church.” And on what basis? Because, each of them would say, “it is written!”

There are Christian churches led by 28 year-old men who will admit -- even make it their supreme boast -- that they aren't theologians, have never read the early Church and have no idea what someone like Irenaeus or Vincent or Augustine or Aquinas might have believed and taught. And yet there they are week after week casting away the universal and ancient faith of the Catholic Church, and leading others to do the same, on the basis of their "opinion" of what this or that passage of Scripture is saying.

And of course it's easy to bring forth "plausible" quotations from the New Testament to support any number of contradictory positions. This is precisely why there are within Protestantism so many denominations and sects and independent churches -- each claiming to stand on Scripture alone.

In sharp contrast to all of this, when we read the writings of the early Church, we discover a mindset, a way of thinking, that is simply not how Protestants think. We find the writers of the early Church saying things you would never hear someone say who was committed to sola scriptura.

Here's Origen, writing around 220 A.D.

The teaching of the Church has indeed been handed down through an order of succession from the Apostles, and remains in the Churches even to the present time. That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.

Here's Tertullian, again writing around the same time as Origen in the early third century:

Moreover, if there be any (heresies) bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, so that they might seem to have been handed down by the Apostles because they were from the time of the Apostles, we can say to them: let them show the origins of their Churches, let them unroll the order of their bishops, running down in succession from the beginning, so that their first bishop shall have for author and predecessor some one of the Apostles or of the apostolic men who continued steadfast with the Apostles…. Then let all the heresies….offer their proof of how they deem themselves to be apostolic.

And then, here's another quotation from Saint Irenaeus, writing around A.D. 180.

As I said before, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it, as if she occupied but one house.  She likewise believes these things just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart; and harmoniously she proclaims them and teaches them and hands them down, as if she possessed but one mouth.  For, while the languages of the world are diverse, nevertheless, the authority of the Tradition is one and the same.

**An Authoritative Church**

As I read the fathers it was just apparent that they did not think as I thought. As an evangelical Protestant I talked about Scripture. The writers of the early Church talked about Scripture. But they also talked about Tradition. Finally, I found them talking about the authority of the Church.

Now, because I'll be coming back later to deal with this issue in some detail, I leave you here with one last interesting, troubling, thought-provoking quotation from St. Irenaeus.

In his work Against Heresies, he's talking about the Church and the Tradition, how the apostles deposited the truth in the Church and how in matters of dispute we must look to the Tradition, and so forth. In this context he begins to talk about apostolic succession. And this is what he says:

But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the succession of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the succession of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, that church that has the tradition and the faith that comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. With that church, because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world, and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic Tradition

[why i'm catholic: Sola scriptura isn't historical, part IV](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-historical-part-iii) 5/24/2015

<http://www.catholic.com/blog/kenneth-hensley/why-i-m-catholic-sola-scriptura-isn-t-historical-part-iv>

 In three posts ([here](http://www.catholic.com/blog/kenneth-hensley/why-i-m-catholic-sola-scriptura-isn-t-historical-part-i), [here](http://www.catholic.com/blog/kenneth-hensley/why-i-m-catholic-sola-scriptura-isn-t-historical-part-ii), and [here](http://www.catholic.com/blog/kenneth-hensley/why-i-m-catholic-sola-scriptura-isn-t-historical-part-iii)) I’ve presented three lines of argument, three pieces of evidence, that I think make it hard to believe that Christians living in the decades and centuries following the death of the apostles thought in terms of *sola scriptura*. I don’t present these as logical “proofs” but as evidences of a mindset that simply doesn’t fit the mindset of the Bible Christian.

In this installment, I want to add one final argument that *sola scriptura* is not historical: it’s simply that we do not find the early Church Fathers practicing it.

**Sacred Scripture**

Of course, Protestant apologists will insist that the Fathers of the Church did in fact believe in *sola scriptura*, and to demonstrate this they will quote passages that speak of the authority of Scripture and how all true teaching must conform to Scripture and be supported by Scripture.

For instance, from the *Catechetical Lectures*of Cyril of Jerusalem:

For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me who tell you these things, give not absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things, which I announce from the divine Scriptures. For this salvation, which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the holy Scriptures.

Here’s the problem: as much as Catholics and Protestants *agree* that the inspired Scripture holds a place of primacy in the Church’s structure of authority, inspired Scripture still has to be *interpreted*.

Does the New Testament teach that in baptism the Holy Spirit is given? What does Paul mean when he says we are not justified by the “works of the law”? The Bible doesn’t leap up and tell us: “Here’s the true interpretation!” Someone has to draw the correct *teaching* from what Scripture says.

Because of this, while we find the Church Fathers speaking eloquently of the inspiration and authority and, as in the quotation from Cyril, even the primacy of Scripture, we also find them speaking of the authority of Tradition as the lens through which Scripture must be read and interpreted.

**Sacred Tradition**
When I first read the Fathers of the Church and began to encounter passages like the following, I recognized immediately that I was being exposed to a mindset that was very different from what I knew as an evangelical.

This is from St. Irenaeus, the greatest biblical theologian of the second century.

When, therefore, we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek among others the truth which is easily obtained from the Church. For the apostles, like a rich man in a bank, deposited with her most copiously everything which pertains to the truth; and everyone whoever wishes draws from her the drink of life. . . . What, then?  If there should be a dispute over some kind of question, ought we not have recourse to the most ancient churches in which the Apostles were familiar, and draw from them what is clear and certain in regard to that question?  What if the apostles had not in fact left writings to us?  Would it not be necessary to follow the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom they entrusted the churches? (*Against Heresies*)

When I was a evangelical Protestant minister, I can assure you that if I had preached a million sermons over the course of a million Sundays, I would never have thought to describe the truth as something the apostles deposited in the Church like a rich man deposits his money in a bank. I would have said they deposited the truth in the writings of the New Testament. Period.

I would *never* have said that "everything which pertains to the truth" can be found in the Church and drawn from the Church.

I would never *ever* have implied that even if the apostles had left us no writings, Christians could know the truth in "the order of tradition, which was handed down to those to whom [the apostles] entrusted the churches." No way!

Least of all would my congregation have ever heard me utter words such as these: "If there should be a dispute over some kind of question, ought we not have recourse to the most ancient churches in which the apostles were familiar, and draw from them what is clear and certain in regard to that question?"

And yet, this is what Irenaeus says.

In fact, this is the sort of thing *all* the Church Fathers say. And the things they say reveal a mindset very different from the mindset of Protestantism.

On the other hand, the things the Fathers say fit beautifully with the mindset expressed in the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*from Vatican II:

Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And [Holy] Tradition transmits in its entirety the word of God, which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching.

**Why Scripture *and* Tradition?**

Since Scripture is the only "inspired" record we have of what the apostles taught, why not look to Scripture alone and argue from Scripture alone?

Fine, if what you want is fifty-seven varieties of Christianity, each contradicting the other on what exactly the true teachings of Christianity are supposed to be. Isn’t it perfectly obvious that even the brightest and holiest and most well-meaning students of Scripture cannot agree on what exactly Scripture is teaching? Even questions as fundamental as what one must do to be saved, and whether salvation once had can be lost are in dispute.

Add to this the fact that in the early Church there were heretical teachers, appealing to the Bible to “prove” the truth of their positions. Orthodox Christians could argue passages of Scripture, but the heretics could argue passages of Scripture as well. And unless the Church wanted to simply divide and fragment such that there could be a church for every sincerely held viewpoint, there *had* to be some method of testing whose interpretation was right and whose was wrong.

In his *Commonitoria*, written in the fifth century, St. Vincent of Lerins highlights this exact dilemma. Imagine, he says, you ask a heretic,

What ground have you for saying that I ought to cast away the universal and ancient faith of the Catholic Church? [The heretic] has the ready answer: “For it is written.” And forthwith he produces a thousand examples, a thousand authorities from the Law, from the Psalms, from the apostles, from the prophets, by means of which, interpreted on a new and wrong principle, the unhappy soul may be precipitated from the height of Catholic truth to the lowest abyss of heresy. . . . Do heretics appeal to Scripture? They do indeed, and with a vengeance. For you may see them scamper through every single book of Holy Scripture. . . . Whether among their own people or among strangers, in private or in public, in speaking or in writing, at convivial meetings or in the streets, hardly ever do they bring forward anything of their own which they do not endeavor to shelter under the words of Scripture. . . . You will see an infinite heap of instances, hardly a single page, which does not bristle with plausible quotations from the New Testament or the Old.

When I read this, I had to admit that it reminded me of my experience as a Protestant. The Protestant world comprises Christians and Christian communities, churches and denominations, who have cast overboard what St. Vincent refers to as "the universal and ancient faith of the Catholic Church.” And on what grounds? Because—each of them would say—“It is written!”

There are churches led by 28-year-old men who will admit (even make it their supreme boast!) that they aren't “theologians,” have never read the early Fathers and haven’t the merest clue what Irenaeus or Vincent or Augustine or Aquinas might have believed and taught. And yet there they are in the pulpit, week after week, casting away the universal and ancient Faith of the Catholic Church and leading others to do the same, on the basis of their "opinion" of what this or that passage of Scripture is teaching.

And of course it's easy to bring forth "plausible" quotations from the New Testament to support any number of contradictory positions. This is precisely why there are within Protestantism so many denominations and sects and independent churches, each claiming to stand on Scripture alone.

In sharp contrast to all of this, when we read the writings of the early Church, we encounter a mindset, a way of thinking and speaking, that is simply not how Protestants think and speak. We find the early Church Fathers regularly saying things you would never hear someone say who was committed to *sola scriptura.*

Here's Origen, writing around A.D. 220.

The teaching of the Church has indeed been handed down through an order of succession from the Apostles, and remains in the churches even to the present time. That alone is to be believed as the truth which is in no way at variance with ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.

Here's Tertullian, writing around the same time.

Moreover, if there be any (heresies) bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, so that they might seem to have been handed down by the apostles because they were from the time of the apostles, we can say to them: let them show the origins of their churches, let them unroll the order of their bishops, running down in succession from the beginning, so that their first bishop shall have for author and predecessor some one of the apostles or of the apostolic men who continued steadfast with the apostles. . . . Then let all the heresies . . . offer their proof of how they deem themselves to be apostolic.

Finally, here’s St. Irenaeus, writing around A.D. 180.

As I said before, the Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although she is disseminated throughout the whole world, yet guarded it, as if she occupied but one house. She likewise believes these things just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart; and harmoniously she proclaims them and teaches them and hands them down, as if she possessed but one mouth. For, while the languages of the world are diverse, nevertheless, the authority of the Tradition is one and the same.

**An authoritative Church**

As I read the Fathers, it was just apparent that they did not think as I thought. As an evangelical Protestant, I talked about Scripture. The fathers talked about Scripture as well. But they also talked about Tradition and how one should look to Tradition when there was a dispute about the meaning of Scripture.

Finally, I found them talking about the authority of the Church.

This is an issue we will come back to later. For now, I leave you with one last quotation from St. Irenaeus—another series of words and sentences no one on Earth committed to *sola scriptura* would think to utter:

But since it would be too long to enumerate in such a volume as this the succession of all the churches, we shall confound all those who, in whatever manner, whether through self-satisfaction or vainglory, or through blindness and wicked opinion, assemble other than where it is proper, by pointing out here the succession of the bishops of the greatest and most ancient church known to all, founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul, that church that has the tradition and the faith that comes down to us after having been announced to men by the apostles. With that church, because of its superior origin, all the churches must agree, that is, all the faithful in the whole world, and it is in her that the faithful everywhere have maintained the apostolic Tradition.