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

4/13/2015

When I began to look at the idea of *sola scriptura,* the most important question in the mind of this evangelical Protestant and Bible Christian was: What does scripture say about this?

Does the Bible *teach* *sola scriptura*? Does the New Testament *actually teach us* that the Bible is to function in our lives as our "sole" and "sufficient" infallible rule for deciding what we are to believe and how we are to live as Christians? Does the Bible teach us that "the Bible -- nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else -- is *all that is necessary* for faith and practice"?

After all, since *sola scriptura* says that a Christian should believe only what can be shown to be clearly taught in Scripture, surely the New Testament must clearly teach *sola scriptura.*

If it doesn't, then wouldn't the doctrine seem to refute itself?

**New Testament Practice**
Let's start with the *practice* of Jesus, the apostles, and the earliest believers living during the time of the apostles. What did they take to be authoritative and binding in their lives?

When we look into the New Testament, what do we see?

**1. We see firm faith in the authority of sacred scripture.**

For Jesus, the apostles and the earliest Christians scripture is the inspired and authoritative revelation of God. Three times Jesus responds to the temptations of the devil by quoting scripture as authoritative and final: "It is written, it is written, it is written!" He cites scripture constantly as binding.

The apostles do the same. For them scripture is the inspired Word of God.

Paul tells us in 2 Tim 3:16,17 that

All scripture is inspired by God ("God-breathed") 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.

But of course there's no dispute on this. Protestants and Catholics agree that Scripture is divinely inspired and authoritatively binding. So let's move on.

**2. When we look at the practice of those living during New Testament times we also see firm faith in the oral teaching of Jesus and the apostles.**

This also is taken as binding.

Now, of course this would be true of our Lord. After all, Jesus didn’t always say, “It is written." Sometimes he said, “Truly, truly, *I* say to you…” and when He did, his words carried the very authority of God speaking. As the Son of God, the spoken word of the Messiah was as binding on those who heard him as the written words of inspired Scripture.

And the same was true of the Apostles, with some clarification.

The apostles weren't "inspired" in the sense that everything they said was word-for-word special revelation from God. But when Jesus sent them out, he gave them his Spirit and his authority and said to them, “The one who listens to you listens to Me…” (Luke 10:16). And it's clear that the apostles taught with an awareness of divine authority, with an awareness that the substance of their teaching was as binding spoken as it was when written down.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter stood and addressed the crowds in Jerusalem, “Men of Israel, listen to these words…” He went on to announce to them *authoritatively* things that had never yet been written down in the pages of inspired scripture and yet were to be received as God's word to them.

Paul wrote to the believers in the Greek city of Thessalonica,

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the Word of God (1 Thess 2:13)

Again in 2 Thessalonians 2:15,

So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, *whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.*

Whether it was something Paul wrote in a letter to the Christians in Thessalonica or taught them when he was with them, it was to be received with docility as the Word of God.

When you think of it, wouldn't it be a bit absurd to think that when Paul *wrote* to the church in Thessalonica, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first," his words were authoritative and binding, but when he was teaching in Thessalonica and he *said* the same thing, his words *weren't* necessarily authoritative and binding on those who heard him?

No. The oral teaching of Christ and the Apostles is viewed in the New Testament as authoritative.

So, we see faith in scripture as authoritative. We see faith in the oral teaching of Jesus and the apostles as authoritative. But there's another aspect to this issue of authority.

**3.  We also see faith in an authoritative Church.**

In Acts 15 we read about the first serious theological dispute in the early church. I'm going to quote from this passage at some length because of how much light it sheds on our subject.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

The chapter goes on to describe the first council of the Christian Church, referred to ever since as the Council of Jerusalem. At this council, what do we see? We see the apostles and elders meeting to discuss and debate the issue. In the end we see a decree issued, a letter sent out to all the churches informing the believers of the ruling that had been reached. And (this is important!) we see this "letter" -- this "decree" -- described as the decision of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements...

And how was the letter received by the churches scattered throughout Antioch and Syria and Cilicia?  Do we see them responding, "Thank you for your guidance on this matter. Give us some time to study the issue and we'll let you know what position we take"?

The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message

Again, we're doing nothing more at this point than describing what we actually see in the practice of those believers living during the time of our Lord and his apostles. And at least at this point, we emphatically *do not* see *sola scriptura.* We *do not* see what Protestant Anthony Lane has described as being "the heart of *sola scriptura*" -- the idea that for the individual Christian "Scripture remains the final authority, to which one can appeal against all ecclesiastical authority."

Not at this point, at least.

As a matter of simple fact, in terms of *a basic pattern of practice*, what we see in the New Testament is what we see throughout church history and to this day in the Catholic Church: (1) the authority of sacred scripture, (2) the authority of apostolic tradition, and (3) the authority of the church, especially when it's leaders meet in council to settle disputes and decide important matters relating to doctrine and morals.

**Objection, Your Honor!**
At this point the thoughtful Protestant will respond:

*May I approach the bench? With all due respect to my Catholic brother, this proves absolutely nothing! Obviously Christians weren't practicing sola scriptura at that early time in the church's existence.* ***How could they*** *when the New Testament was still in the process of being written and the apostles were still in their midst, possessing the ability to speak with the authority of Christ himself?*

*The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is not, What was the practice of believers living during the time in which revelation was still being given? but rather,* ***What should the practice of believers be now that revelation is no longer being given?***

*What should the practice of believers be now that there are no longer inspired apostles and prophets possessing divine authority to author and infallibly interpret inspired scripture, now that there are no longer apostles who can meet in council and decide issues and issue letters that begin with words such as ''It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us''?*
 ***That's the question we need to ask!***

Objection sustained.

So let's ask that question. And in good sola scriptura fashion, let's examine the New Testament to see how Jesus and the apostles themselves answer it.
And as we think this through, it's important that we have clarity on what exactly is being proposed by Protestantism. What Protestantism proposes is that the rule of faith and practice for Christians fundamentally and radically changed with the death of the apostles.

While the apostles were still on earth, authority within the church was not the Bible alone. Instead it involved (1) scripture, (2) the oral teaching of the apostles, and (3) the ability of the church's leadership, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to meet in council when needed and authoritatively decide issues of faith and practice, to settle disputes and issue decrees that were binding on all believers.

After the apostles died, binding authority resided in the Bible alone.

This is what Protestantism proposes.

What Catholicism proposes (keeping it simple at this point) is that the basic pattern of practice we see while the apostles were alive didn't radically change once they died -- that Christians continued to look to (1) scripture, (2) the apostolic tradition, and (3) the ability of the church's leadership, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to meet in council when needed and authoritatively decide issues of faith and practice, to settle disputes and issue decrees binding on all believers.

(Important to remember that apostolic tradition is not conceived in Catholicism as some word-for-word transcription or recording of the apostle's oral teaching but rather as the substance of what the apostles taught as it was preserved in the belief, practice and worship of the early church.)

With this in mind: In our next lesson: from the data of the New Testament, what do Jesus and the apostles lead us to believe would be the Christian's rule of faith and practice once they were no longer on earth, after the apostolic age, once revelation was no longer being given?

Are there any direct statements to the effect that with the death of the apostles scripture will become the sole and sufficient infallible rule of faith and practice for each believer? Are there hints in the New Testament writings that the apostles understood that once they had departed the scene, authority would reside in scripture alone?  Do we see the apostles preparing the churches they established for such a fundamental change in how Christian doctrine would be determined and how disputes would be settled?

What do we actually see in the inspired writings of Paul and Peter and John and the others?

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

4/18/2015

 I've got people screaming at me from all sides.
Some want these blog posts to be shorter. Make it simple and sweet!  Others love the more detailed presentation but hate waiting so long for the completion of an idea -- and absolutely detest following an argument dished out in pieces over the course of weeks.

I feel like a man tortured in the treadmills, trapped to tasteless wines. I understand -- I really do -- but I have no solution except to press on creating enemies on both the right hand and the left.

Now, if you wish to understand precisely where we are in our line of thought, you may want to read the previous two posts before launching into this one. They can be found [here](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-part-i-foundations) and [here](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-scriptural-part-i).

Otherwise, in this lesson we're asking this question:

From the data of the New Testament, what do Jesus and the apostles lead us to believe would be the Christian's rule of faith and practice once they were no longer on earth, after the apostolic age, once revelation was no longer being given?

Are there any direct statements to the effect that with the death of the apostles Christianity will become "Bible only" Christianity? Are there? Can we discover hints in the New Testament writings that the apostles understood that once they had departed the scene, authority would reside in Scripture alone? Do we see the apostles preparing their churches for such a fundamental change in how Christian doctrine would be determined and disputes settled?

What do we actually see in the inspired writings of Paul and Peter and John and the others?

I'm going to proceed at this point (sally forth, as they say) to offer a series of thoughts and observations on the apostles and their writings. These are not proofs, but rather windows into the thinking of the apostles. They are evidences of a mindset that for the life of me does not fit with the notion that the apostles had it in their heads that when they had passed from earthly history Scripture would become for Christ's followers the sole and sufficient infallible rule of faith and practice.

Here's my first observation.

**1.  Most of the apostles didn't act like men who were preparing their disciples for sola scriptura.**
Imagine with me. Imagine that you're an apostle traveling through modern day Turkey evangelizing, teaching, establishing communities of believers, ordaining leadership in the churches. And imagine you believe that when you die what you have written as a chosen spokesman for Christ will become the sole infallible rule for the churches you've founded and the Christians you had taught.

Don't you think you'd want to write down everything they would need to know?

Well, of the twelve apostles who, after the resurrection and coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, went out to spread the Word, only three ever wrote anything: Peter, Matthew and John.

What this tells me is that essentially Andrew, James, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas the son of James and Matthias (selected to replace Judas Iscariot) were for whatever reasons happy and content to spend their entire lives establishing churches and teaching them the doctrines of their most holy faith -- without ever feeling the need to write down what they were teaching. Strange, at the very least.

But more than strange, I think. It's clear that the apostles were conscious of possessing the Spirit-given authority to speak for Christ. As St. Paul tells us, the apostles were the foundation stones upon which the New Covenant temple of God was being built. And so the question comes to mind: what were they thinking about the future preservation of their teaching?

Which leads to a second observation.

**2. Even those apostles who did write, don't write in a way that makes me think they had the eventual advent of sola scriptura in their minds.**

You look at the New Testament epistles of Paul, James, Peter, John...

They don't write like men who are thinking that the churches of the future will be Bible churches and the Christians will be Bible Christians.

For instance, in 1 Cor. 15:29, Paul refers to baptisms for the dead without explaining what he means. Apparently his readers understood what we was talking and so he didn't need to explain. Doesn't cross his mind that Christians of the future might want to know what he meant.

In 2 Thessalonians 2, Paul refers to the "man of sin" who is to be revealed. Important stuff. Multiple millions of dollars have been made by Christian authors speculating on the identity of this "man of sin."  Well, Paul begins to speak of him, but then, instead of explaining what he's talking about, he says, "I don't need to say more at this point. You remember what I told you when I was with you."

Well, gee -- thanks, Paul!

What if I don't happen to live in the city of Thessalonica in the middle decades of the 1st century?  What if instead I live in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor and I don't run into people who live hundreds of miles away in Greece?  Or what if I'm someone who is born, lives and becomes a Christian later on -- like maybe in year of our Lord 1976 in the city of Riverside, California?
Again, doesn't cross Paul's mind that future Christians might want to know what he was talking about. And of course, what the apostle is doing here is quite natural.

When Paul wrote letters to the various churches he had founded or visited, for the most part he was writing to people he had already spent a good deal of time with (three years in Ephesus, a couple years in Corinth). In other words, he knows his readers are familiar with his teaching and because of this he quite naturally doesn't feel the need to spell everything out with precision in this letters, or even to necessarily complete every thought he begins to express. He can presuppose that his readers know what he's talking about and will be able to fill in the blanks on their own.

Now, this applies to most all of the New Testament epistles. They're what we call "occasional documents" written to specific churches to address specific issues and problems. They weren't written to summarize Christian doctrine and except here and there, they don't summarize Christian doctrine.
And yet, if the apostles were thinking that Scripture alone would very soon be the sole rule of faith and practice for the Christian communities, you'd think they would have been eager to do just that.

There's no hint that they sensed the need.

In fact, we find nearly the reverse of this with the Apostle John. In the three very short letters we have from John (one five pages in length and two more each one page in length) we find him twice expressing an actual preference for speaking face to face over writing.

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink, but I hope to come to see you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete (2 John 12, 3 John 13).

Of course this is a beautiful expression of John's tender affection for his spiritual children. But it's incomprehensible -- if John was thinking that very soon his children would have as a rule of faith and practice only the instruction he'd given them in writing.

In (1) the fact that the majority of the apostles left no writings at all. In (2) the manner in which those who did write chose to write, I do not see evidence of a mindset that comes even close to:

"Hey, guys, we need to prepare our churches. As it is they have us. And when there are serious theological issues that arise we can meet in council as we did in Jerusalem. We can resolve the dispute and issue a degree saying, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...' and the churches can receive our ruling with gladness. But as soon as we're out of the picture, there's no longer going to be an authoritative living voice for the Church. When Christians disagree, they're going to have to fight it out looking to Scripture alone. We need to clearly spell out everything -- in writing!"

Not a hint of such a mindset.

**3.  In fact, in the one case in which an apostle actually talks about the preservation of his teaching beyond his death, he talks about it in a way that leads me to conclude he wasn't even in the same conceptual world as Protestantism.**
I'm thinking about St. Paul and his letters to Timothy.

Second Timothy appears to have been Paul’s farewell epistle to his spiritual son and successor in his ministry. In chapter 4 he speaks of his near departure from this world ("For I am already on the point of being sacrificed, the time of my departure has come") but before that he gives Timothy these instructions. I'm quoting here from 2 Timothy 1:13,14::

Follow the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are Christ Jesus; guard the truth that has been entrusted to you by the Holy Spirit who dwells in you.

The very issue here is the preservation of Paul's teaching. And notice not a word is spoken about "writing." Instead Paul talks about a "pattern of sound words" that Timothy has "heard" from him. Timothy is to "guard" this truth that has been entrusted to him "by the Holy Spirit" who dwells in him.

And then a few words later.

You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:1,2).

Again, the focus is on what Timothy has "heard."  He's to guard what he's heard by the Holy Spirit, as Paul just said. But he's also to "entrust" what he has heard from Paul to faithful men who presumably will do the same -- guard the truth entrusted to them, preserve it by the Holy Spirit who dwells in them, and entrust it to other faithful men who will in turn entrust it still to others.  And...

And once more the question comes to mind: Why isn't Paul acting like someone who believes that after his departure from this world Timothy and everyone else will be practicing sola scriptura? Why isn't he saying to Timothy, "Take these letters I've written, get down to Staples and have a million copies made, pronto! Or better yet, let me sit down and write a clear and systematic summary of exactly what we believe and teach about every important issue relating to faith and practice."

There's no evidence that Paul was thinking in such terms. Not a hint.

Instead, Paul seems to believe that the "substance" of his teaching will be preserved by the Holy Spirit through the apostolic succession, and this is what he's thinking about as the time of his departure nears.

Now, Paul's way of thinking here is not without context. In fact, it fits a pattern of thinking that is really at the heart of the New Covenant promise of the Spirit.

For instance, I'm sure Paul had noticed that when God the Father wanted to speak his most authoritative and eloquent Word, he spoke that Word by sending his Son, endowed with the Spirit, to teach by word and example. The Book of Hebrews begins,

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son....  who is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his being (Heb 1:1-3).

I'm sure Paul had noticed as well that when the Son of God wanted to ensure that his teaching would continue in the world after He had ascended to the Father, he didn't sit down and write a book.

Instead, He did exactly what His Father had done.

He chose men (this time twelve), taught them, gave them his authority and promised that His Spirit would indwell them. And then he sent them out saying, "He who hears you, hears me. He who's sins you forgive, they are forgiven. He who's sins you retain, they are retained" and so forth.

And this is what they did. The apostles went out and they taught and established churches and trained the believers and ordained leadership for them. And yes, when there were particular needs to be addressed, they wrote letters to address them. And we have what they wrote, and their writings are inspired. But there's no evidence that they conceived of writing as their primary work.

And so, within this context of thought, as Paul prepares to leave this world and wants to ensure that his teaching will continue after he's gone, quite naturally he doesn't think first about writing. He doesn't think as one would naturally think who had sola scriptura in mind.

Instead, what he thinks about is teaching Timothy everything he wants him to know, laying hands on Timothy, praying for Timothy, investing Timothy with his own authority and Spirit and sending Timothy forth to guard the truth and pass it on to other faithful men.

In short, in the way the apostle's acted and thought, I don't find a morsel of a tidbit of a hint that would lead me to think they were preparing their spiritual children for the onset of "Bible only" Christianity.

**Conclusion**Now, I have much more to say. And I definitely want to use pen and ink -- at least the modern equivalent. But I think this is enough to chew on for a few days and I can't take the thought of being put into the stocks

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

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Now, there's much more to say about the New Testament teaching on the Church. We haven't even mentioned Peter and the keys and the foundations of the Catholic teaching on the papacy. We've barely touched on the idea of apostolic succession. In arguing the case for the Catholic view of an authoritative Church, much more would need to be said. And we'll come back to this.

But at this point our focus is not on the Church but on whether or not the New Testament presents us with a Christianity in which the Bible functions as only real authority in the Christian's life -- all other authorities, when you get down to it, being merely advisory.

So far, I don't see a hint that the apostles had it in their minds that when they had passed from the scene Sola Scriptura would become the rule of faith and practice for the Church.

And so the question comes to mind: Why do Protestants not only embrace Sola Scriptura but embrace it as the very foundation of their worldview as Christians? Why?

As I ask this question, I think back to my own experience as an evangelical Protestant for over twenty years. How did I think about this issue of authority? How did everyone I knew think about it?

When it comes down to it, I don't think most Protestants hold to Sola Scriptura because they can point to passages in the New Testament that actually teach it. They hold to it because they don't believe the kind of authoritative Church we see functioning in the New Testament exists any longer.

They think "that Church" died with the apostles. And in the absence of such a Church, what alternative is there but to look to Scripture alone, and hope we can agree on what it's teaching?

In other words, when we read the Gospels and watch Jesus establishing his Church -- breathing his Spirit into the living foundation stones of his Church, the apostles, sending them out to heal the sick and raise the dead, announcing that those who listen to them will be listening to him, that whoever's sins they forgive will be forgiven, that whatever they bind on earth will be bound in heaven -- he surely seems to be establishing the kind of Church that will speak with his authority.

And then, when we read the Acts of the Apostles and watch this Church actually functioning in the New Testament -- meeting in council to settle disputes and define Church teaching, issuing decrees introduced with words like "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" that believers are expected to receive with joy and submit to as to the very word of God -- we see that it clearly was the kind of Church that could and did speak with Christ's authority.

We think about how most of the apostles never bothered to write anything down.

We look at the New Testament epistles and notice that even those who did write wrote primarily to deal with specific issues in specific churches and seem to have had little concern to preserve in their writing anything like a summary of Christian doctrine.

We listen to the apostle John say he'd rather not write at all.

We listen to St. Paul, preparing for his departure from the world and thinking specifically about the preservation of his teaching after he's gone. And rather than speaking a word about "writing," we hear him instruct Timothy to "guard" by the Holy Spirit what he has "heard" him teach in the presence of many witnesses and "entrust that" to others who must be "faithful."

Why faithful? Because they will also need to guard by the Holy Spirit what they've been entrusted with so that they can in turn entrust to others, and so forth.

And here's the thing: the way the apostles act and speak -- all of it makes perfect sense on the premise that they believed in the sort of Church in which the substance of their teaching could and would be preserved by the Holy Spirit, especially through their successors.

On the other hand, the way the apostles act and speak doesn't make sense at all on the premise that they were looking forward to a Church in which what they had written alone would rule.

**The Key Difference**

To put this in the simplest of terms, Catholics believe that the Church we see Jesus establishing in New Testament, the Church we see actually functioning in the New Testament, is the Church our Lord intended to continue in the world after the death of the apostles, the Church that has continued in the world, the Church that still exists in the world -- a Church filled with sinners and yet enabled by the Holy Spirit to preserve and pass down the truths of the Christian faith.

This is what Catholics believe and this is why the Catholic Church speaks as it does, in ways that seem (putting it as kindly as possible) so "strange" to Protestant ears.

For instance, in Dei Verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation from Vatican II, the Church speaks of the Magisterium's Spirit-given authority to define Christian teaching.

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.

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone….Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant.  It teaches only what has been handed on to it.  At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication, and expounds it faithfully.

Now, Protestants listen to this. They hear the Catholic Church speaking of its authority from God to preserve and expound and define and decide issues of Christian doctrine and practice, and it sounds to them like nearly inconceivable arrogance.

And yet it happens to also sound exactly like what we see when we look at the Church in the New Testament -- the kind of Church that could meet in Council in Acts 15 and decide an issue of tremendous theological importance and send out a decree saying, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" and expect believers to receive it with joy.

Catholics simply believe that this is -- not precisely but essentially -- the kind of Church Jesus intended to continue in the world after the death of the apostles.

Protestants do not. Protestants believe that with the end of the apostolic era the Church became a Church functioning under the authority of Scripture Alone. And I don't think it's because our Protestant brothers and sisters see "Bible only" Christianity as actually taught in the New Testament.

I think it's because they don't believe the sort of Church we see in the New Testament exists any longer. And in the absence of "this kind" of Church, what other option is there?

**Conclusion**
In other words, Sola Scriptura is what you come to when you've abandoned the idea that there exists on an authoritative Church that in the midst of all its failings can accomplish the work of guarding, preserving and handing down the apostolic faith.

And of course, as we've seen in an [earlier lesson](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/what-was-the-reformation), this is precisely what happened at the time of the Reformation.

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

5/1/2015

Where exactly does the New Testament teach that the Bible is to function in the Christian's life and in the life of the Church as the 'sole infallible rule of faith and practice'?

Where does it say or imply that the teaching of Scripture is so clear that no authority on earth is needed to preserve true doctrine and decide disputes -- you know, so that Christians aren't reading their Bibles and running off in all directions and starting all kinds of independent churches and sects and denominations that contradict one another even on essential issues of the faith.

Where exactly does the New Testament teach Sola Scriptura?

Now, when these questions were first put to me, it was a little disconcerting. Why? Because I recognized almost immediately that Sola Scriptura was something I had assumed as an evangelical Bible Christian. It wasn't something I had established from an inductive study of what the New Testament actually says about the issue of authority within the Church.

It was simply what every Christian I knew believed. It was a presupposition of our worldview as evangelical Protestants. And like most presuppositions, it was more or less unexamined.

**My Reasoning as an Protestant**

As a Christian who believed in the inspiration of Scripture, I'm not sure I ever felt it necessary to consciously articulate the reasoning behind my acceptance of Sola Scriptura. Like I said, it was the common assumption of every believer I knew. It was the atmosphere we breathed.

But if I had been asked, I might have answered with something like this:

Well, I've come to believe the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

And sure, if the apostles were still alive, they could function as an interpretive authority for me. They could give me authoritative answers and settle all those disagreements Christians have and because of which Christ's Church has been splintered and broken up into all sorts of churches with competing visions of what Christianity teaches.

But they're not here, and so what option is there, really, but to look to Scripture alone?

It's not that I was unaware of the seemingly intractable disagreements that exist among Christians. Is salvation by faith alone? And once saved, can salvation be lost?  Are sacraments like baptism and confirmation and confession actual means of receiving God's own divine life, or merely signs? Are there sacraments at all?  What about the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist? Catholics, Orthodox and Lutherans say it's true. Nearly everyone else says it's not true.

Christians can't even agree on what is needed to get to heaven. Some say we must strive after holiness, without which no one will see the Lord. Others say the worst thing we believers can do is strive after a holiness that has already been legally imputed to us in Christ.

I understood this. And I understood as well that there could be no unified Christian Church unless there was some authoritative voice on earth. And again, if the apostle Paul were here, we could use some of our frequent flier miles, travel to the Middle East and ask him about these things.

These issues could be settled for Christians once and for all.

But he isn't here. And neither are Peter and John and Matthew and the rest. And so, I repeat, what option was there but to hold to the authority of Scripture alone? **Circular Reasoning**
Now, in our last three lessons, [here](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-scriptural-part-i), [here](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-scriptural-part-ii) and [here](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-scriptural-part-iii), I've argued that the New Testament simply doesn't teach Sola Scriptura. It doesn't present us with a 'Bible Only' Christianity.

I've gone so far as to say I can't find in the apostle's actions or writings any hint that they thought in terms of Sola Scriptura or envisioned future churches of Bible Christians. Not a hint that would communicate to me that they believed that when they passed from the scene Sola Scriptura would become the rule of faith and practice for the churches they would leave behind. There's certainly not a whisper in their writings of them preparing their successors and spiritual children for Sola Scriptura.

Of course some reading this will respond: Are you insane? There are all kinds of passages in the New Testament that teach and/or imply Sola Scriptura.
And I would have responded in the same way.

After all (a) once the simple fact is acknowledged that there are no more living apostles to settle doctrinal issues, and (b) once it is assumed that the kind of authoritative Church we see functioning in the New Testament no longer exists -- a Church that could meet in council to settle disputes and settle them by the Holy Spirit -- well, then any passage in the New Testament that speaks of the authority of Scripture is going to appear as evidence of Sola Scriptura.

And this is precisely what we find in the Protestant literature on the subject. You read Geisler and MacKenzie or any number of other Protestant treatments of the subject, and every statement about the authority of Scripture becomes an argument for the truth of Scripture Alone.

The fact that Scripture is revelation from God -- clear evidence that Scripture is "the sole and sufficient infallible rule of faith and practice for the Church." The fact that Jesus and the apostles quote Scripture as authoritative -- another argument for Sola Scriptura. That fact that the traditions of the Pharisees are denounced by Jesus as non-authoritative -- more evidence.

But you see what's happening here?

None of these facts actually argues for Scripture 'Alone.' They certainly argue for the inspiration and authority of Scripture. They only argue for Scripture 'Alone' when one approaches them with the assumed premise in mind: "And of course we all know that no Church exists with the Spirit-given authority to settle disputes about the teaching of Scripture and define Christian doctrine."

On the other hand, once you strip away the circular reasoning -- where the Protestant is assuming precisely what needs to be demonstrated from Scripture Alone -- that an authoritative Church no longer exists. Once you separate out all the passages in the New Testament that rely upon this circular reasoning to have their effect, there's really only one passage that could in any way seem to actually teach what Protestants mean when they speak of Sola Scriptura: that "The Bible, nothing more, nothing less -- and nothing else -- is all that is needed for faith and practice."

It's 2 Tim 3:14-17, where St. Paul says to Timothy...

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. 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 perfect [or complete], thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Geisler and MacKenzie summarize the essential argument well:

Scripture states that it is 'inspired' and 'competent' for a believer to be 'equipped for every good work.' If the Bible alone is sufficient to do this, then nothing else is needed.

**1. Notice first that St. Paul speaks of the sacred writings Timothy has been acquainted with since childhood. In other words, he’s referring to the Old Testament.**
And so, if Paul is intending to teach Timothy that Scripture is “all he needs” to be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work, is he teaching Timothy that all he needs is the Old Testament?

The Protestant apologist will reply, “No, no… In this passage Paul may be referring to the Old Testament specifically, but he’s enunciating a principle here: that because Scripture is “inspired by God” (literally “God breathed”) it is all that is needed to perfect the man of God.
Which leads to a second point:

**2.  Even though both the New Testament and the Old are inspired by God,  2 Tim 3:16,17 still doesn't imply that Scripture is all that is needed to be complete.**

Paul says that because Scripture is "God-breathed" it is "profitable" for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, in order that the man of God may be "complete and equipped" for every good work. That's what he says.

Imagine I say to my son, who plays the piano: "Son, you need to practice scales because this is profitable for building independence, flexibility and strength in your hands and fingers, for developing speed, for teaching you the notes that are found in the various musical keys. You need to do this in order that you may be complete, thoroughly equipped to perform any piece of music that comes along."
Would anyone listening think I was intending to say that the only thing my son needs to become complete, thoroughly equipped to perform any piece of music, is to practice scales? That he doesn't need to practice arpeggios, for instance? That he doesn't need to learn chords or know anything about musical theory or harmony? That all he needs is to practice scales?  Anyone think this?

When we speak of something as being "profitable" for the accomplishment of a particular task ("in order that you may be complete, lacking in nothing"), we don't normally mean to imply that there aren't other things that might also be "profitable" for accomplishing the same task.

**3.  I think that a parallel passage in the Epistle of James clarifies the point I'm making with my piano practice illustration and shows that the Protestant apologist is simply wanting to squeeze more out of 2 Timothy 3:16,17 than is intended by St.Paul.**

In James 1:2-4, we read:

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness [or patience]. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

Now, the Greek words James uses here are not exactly the same Greek words Paul uses in 2 Timothy 3:16,17, but I think you can see that the structure of thought, the pattern of thought, is the same.

And so I ask you: is James teaching us in this passage that in order to be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing,” all a Christian needs is steadfastness, patience? That he doesn't need Scripture to be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing? That he doesn't need prayer, or the work of the Spirit within him, or the grace of the sacraments, or anything else? Just patience?

Obviously, what James 'intends' in this passage is to emphasize how important it is to our spiritual growth that we exercise steadfastness in the face of trials. He's not 'intending' to teach us that patience is 'all one needs' to be perfected in the Christian life.
And neither is Paul 'intending' to teach Timothy that all he needs to be perfected is Scripture.
**Conclusion**As an evangelical Protestant, I would have said in discussion with a Catholic:

"Listen, we should only accept as true what can be shown to be clearly taught in the pages of Scripture. That idea you have about Peter and the keys? There are other possible and, I think, better interpretations of Matthew 16. The idea that in this passage Jesus is setting up Peter as some kind of Chief Steward of the Household of God? It's just not something that is clearly taught.

And the same with your doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. And the same with apostolic succession and baptismal regeneration and the communion of saints and..."

Well, then, assuming the Protestant standard that "We should only accept as true what can be shown to be clearly taught in the pages of Scripture," what are we to say about Sola Scriptura itself? I don't see the New Testament as teaching it -- much less as çlearly teaching it.
But if this is the case, then Sola Scriptura would seem to refute itself.

Well, this is one of the reasons I came over time to abandon my belief in what had been the very foundation of my worldview as a Protestant. But there were more.

For instance, I also came over time to see that Sola Scriptura had not been the faith and practice of the Church in the early centuries of its existence. As well as not being scriptural, I found that Sola Scriptura wasn't historical either. It wasn't what the Church believed.