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

By Ken Hensley 5/31/2015

 In September of 1996 I resigned my ministry as a Protestant pastor to enter the Catholic Church.

It was a decision that was easy for me to make in that I was convinced that Catholicism was true and that the Catholic Church was my spiritual home. It was a decision that was nearly impossible to make in that I understood the implications of that decision. I knew what it would entail in practical terms.

This was beautifully manifest, shall we say, when three months after leaving the ministry I was waiting tables at a restaurant in Encino. I was standing in the kitchen folding napkins and thinking about Martin Luther when I suddenly heard someone screaming. I looked to my right and saw my manager standing in the doorway literally screaming at me to fold the napkins faster.

I remember apologizing, cranking up the speed and thinking to myself, *What the hell have I done?*

But then, there were *reasons* for doing what I did. I didn't leave Protestantism, the Protestant ministry, my career and only source of income because I like the smell of incense. There were reasons, and one of the most important had to do with the topic we've been on for some weeks now: *sola scriptura.*

*Sola scriptura*had been the very foundation of my worldview as an evangelical. It was the very atmosphere breathed in the Bible College I attending, in seminary, in every church I'd been a part of or pastored. And then the time came when I was challenged with the questions: is *sola scriptura* really the teaching of Scripture? Was it the belief and practice of the early Church?  Over time I came to believe it wasn't.

But Scripture and history were not the only shoes to fall. I also came to believe that *sola scriptura* is completely unworkable as a mode of operation for the Church. And I don't mean simply that it doesn't work well and that we need to pray harder for the guidance of the Spirit and work harder to accurately interpret the Bible in order to make *sola scriptura work* better.

What I mean is that *even in principle* it does not and indeed *cannot* work. Since the time of the Reformation, the practice of Scripture alone has served as a perfect blueprint for theological anarchy. I don't believe it can be what Jesus intended for his Church.

**The Catholic Position**At the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, the Church’s position on the issue of authority was essentially the same as it had been since the time of Augustine and Irenaeus and, I would argue, the time of the apostles themselves. Authority was seen as residing in the inner-working of Sacred Scripture, Apostolic Tradition and an Authoritative Church.

To borrow an analogy from Catholic apologist Mark Shea:

(1)  Think of inspired Scripture as the "light," the pure light of God’s revelation to us.
(2)  Now think of Apostolic Tradition as the "lens" through which the light comes into focus. In other words, the doctrinal and moral teaching of the apostles not as it was written down but as it was known, preserved and handed down within the Church -- this can help us to understand what the apostles *mean* by what they say in their New Testament writings.
(3)  Finally, think of the teaching office of the Church -- ultimately, all the bishops in the world in union with the bishop of Rome -- as the "eye" that has been ordained to look through the lens of Tradition to see the light of Scripture and to have the final word when a final word is required.

One Christian may say this and another that. Debates may rage between various theologians and schools of thought. Great doctors of the Church may wrangle and dispute. But when the time comes that a decision must be made and the Church examines the light of Sacred Scripture through the lens of Sacred Tradition, and through its ordained leadership formally defines a matter of faith or practice, what Catholics believe is that the Holy Spirit *leads* the Church so that the conclusion it comes to can be trusted as true and is binding on the people of God.

Once this decision is made, the Church can say what it said at the conclusion of its first Council in Jerusalem: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28).

The Catholic position on how Scripture, Tradition and the Church work together to provide a basis of authority for the Christian is beautifully summarized in the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum.* I've quoted it in early lessons, but take a moment to listen to it once more.

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.

**The Origin of *Sola Scriptura***
Now, the problem at the time of the Reformation was that Luther and the other Protestants were teaching doctrines that contradicted what the Church’s Magisterium had previously established as true.

Luther said, in essence, “The Church is wrong on this issue." (The key dispute at the time was the doctrine of justification, but that doesn't matter at this point.) The Church said, in essence, “No, you’re wrong."  Luther said, “No, you're wrong.”  The Church said, “What you're teaching contradicts the Tradition and formal teaching of the Church on this issue.”

With this the *foundational* issue of authority was touched.

The question of authority was raised and Luther faced a watershed: what did he believe about *who has authority to decide* what the true teachings of Christianity are? Did the Church have authority, when having examined the light of Scripture through the lens of Tradition, it made formal ruling on an issue of doctrine or morals?  Or was it up to each Christian ultimately to decide?

Luther really only had two options: He could stand with the authority of the Church and say, "You know, it sure *seems* to me that St Paul is teaching what I've been saying he's teaching about justification, but I must be missing something. I must be wrong." Or he could abandon the authority of the Church and stand on what *he believed* Scripture to be teaching, whatever the cost.

We all know what Luther did. He stood before the Diet of Worms and said:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scripture or by evident reason… I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, *which is my basis.*  My conscience is captive to the word of God...

It's impossible -- at least extremely difficult -- to exaggerate the profound meaning of this moment in the history of Christianity. At the moment Luther spoke those words, the *foundation* of the Catholic worldview, its very basis of authority – the light of Sacred Scripture, seen through the lens of Sacred Tradition, interpreted by the Teaching Office of the Church – was rejected, abandoned, set aside. And the foundation of the Protestant worldview was laid.

Scripture is the Christian's *sole and sufficient infallible rule* of faith and practice.

**Practical Implications**

Now, think with me. What is the primary practical implication of *sola scriptura?*
When I say that Scripture will function as my "sole and sufficient infallible rule of faith and practice," what does this *mean* for the way I think through what I believe as a Christian, what doctrines I hold to be true, and how I live my life?  What is the inescapable *practical implication* of taking this position*?*

Well, it means that whatever the fathers of the Church may say, whatever Church Councils may say, whatever theologians and pastors and teachers may say, whatever various Christian authors may say, in the end I am going to feel bound **only by what *I determine* the Bible to be teaching.**
The primary and inescapable practical implication of *sola scriptura* is what is called the "right of private judgment," or the "right of private interpretation." It's the right of each Christian to read, study and decide *for himself* what he believes the true teachings of Christianity to be.

Now, it might be new to Protestant readers to learn that Catholics also believe in the right of private interpretation. We do. It's just that we hold this to be a *limited* right, a right practiced within the limits of what the Church has already formally defined to be true.

On issues where the Church has taken no dogmatic position, I'm free to speculate. When it comes to the exegesis of Scripture, nearly the entire Bible is open to exploration. I can dig as deeply as I like into what St Paul is arguing in Romans and Galatians and 1 Corinthians, or the interpretation of the visions of Daniel or St John in the Apocalypse. It's just that if I come to the conclusion in my study of the Bible that the doctrine of the Trinity isn't really true, or that Jesus was merely the highest created being (as the Arians argued in the fourth century and Jehovah's Witnesses argue to this day) or that baptism and the Eucharist aren't really life-giving sacraments but instead simple signs -- as a Catholic I can know that *I have made an error* somewhere, that I have crossed over into heresy.

As Catholics we're like children in the playground. We're free to swing and slide and sit in the sandbox of Scripture throwing biblical texts in one another's eyes. But there's a fence around the playground that keeps us from wandering out into the street and getting hit by every passing theological fad.

What Luther did was take this "limited right" and make it an "absolute right."

"Unless*I*am convinced." In other words, in the final analysis, I don’t care what popes have said!  I don’t care what the councils have said! I don't care what the Tradition of the Church has been.  Unless I am convinced from Scripture and evident reason…  Unless*I am convinced...*

And (we've been around this block a couple of times already) in the absence of the kind of Church we see functioning in the New Testament, a Church with the Spirit-given ability to pronounce authoritatively on the true teachings of Christianity -- the kind of Church the Catholic Church claims to be -- *what is left* but to say that each Christian has to right to decide for himself?

This is what Luther had done with respect to the doctrine of justification. By implication, this is what all Christians had the right to do, and not merely with respect to one doctrine, but every doctrine!

Luther put it like this: “In these matters of faith, to be sure, each Christian is for himself pope and church.” John Calvin stated the same belief in these words:

We hold that the Word of God *alone* lies beyond the sphere of our judgment… Fathers and Councils are of authority *only in so far* as they accord with the rule of the Word

Sounds good, but of course there's a hitch. The Word of God has to be read and interpreted. All of the material of revelation may be there in the pages of Scripture, either stated or implied by other things that are stated. But *someone* has to pull together the many strands of Scriptural evidence, draw out those implications, and come to conclusions about *what is being taught*. Someone.

So when Calvin says that "Fathers and Councils are of authority only in so far as they accord with the rule of the Word," what he's really saying is, "Fathers and Councils are of authority only in so far as what they say accords with what *I think* the Bible is saying."

And so the history of Protestantism begins.

Following the examples of Luther and Calvin and the other Reformation leaders, individual Christians increasingly came to view themselves as having the right to decide for themselves which doctrines were true -- without being *bound* by Church or council or pope or pastor or any authority on earth.

Just like evangelical Protestants today. Some of the more intellectually inclined may look at the decisions of Church Councils or the great theologians of history. Some may read and take into account the arguments of various modern Scripture scholars. Most are willing to listen to and take seriously the opinion of their pastor and teachers. But ultimately -- ultimately -- they decide *for themselves* whether Baptist teaching is closer to what *they see* in Scripture, or Presbyterian, or Lutheran, or Methodist, or the teaching of the pastor at the independent Christian community on the corner.

**The Unraveling of the Church**
Well, forget brain surgeons. It doesn't even take a decent gardener to perceive what would come of this. As soon as Luther and Calvin and the others began preaching *sola scriptura* and the right of private interpretation, immediately there was an *explosion* of interpretations of Scripture and with this an explosion of divisions within Protestantism. The immediate result was *doctrinal chaos*.

Listen to what one prominent Protestant theologian and professor was saying a mere two years -- two years! -- of the Reformation being launched:

Noblemen, townsmen, peasants, all classes understand the Gospel better than I or St. Paul; they are now wise and think themselves more learned than all the ministers.... There is no smearer but when he has heard a sermon or can read a chapter in German, makes a doctor of himself and…convinces himself that he knows everything better than all who teach him.

And in another place:

There are as many sects and beliefs as there are heads. This fellow will have nothing to do with baptism; another denies the Sacrament; a third believes that there is another world between this and the Last Day.  Some teach that Christ is not God; some say this, some say that.  There is no rustic so rude but that, if he dreams or fancies anything, it must be the whisper of the Holy Spirit, and he himself a prophet.

I find this topic fascinating and I have a lot more to say about it.

But we'll have to pick up here next week. Oh, and by the way, the professor and theologian who wrote those words quoted above?  His name was Martin Luther.

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

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As you may recall, when we left Martin Luther [last week](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-isnt-workable-part-i), he was bewailing and bemoaning the theological chaos that came about early on in the Reformation.

There are as many sects and beliefs as there are heads. This fellow will have nothing to do with baptism; another denies the Sacrament; a third believes that there is another world between this and the Last Day. Some teach that Christ is not God; some say this, some say that. There is no rustic so rude but that, if he dreams or fancies anything, it must be the whisper of the Holy Spirit, and he himself a prophet.

Apparently, even some of Luther's own students followed his courageous example of standing on "Scripture alone" against all human authority -- and rejected *his teaching* in favor of their own interpretations of the Bible.

How many doctors have I made through preaching and writing! Now they say, “Be off with you! Go off with you! Go to the devil!” Thus it must be. When we preach they laugh…. When we get angry and threaten them, they mock us, snap their fingers at us and laugh in their sleeves (Facts, p. 207).

Now Luther blamed the devil for the theological anarchy erupting all around him.

But this seems to me a bit convenient. After all, when he announced his own "bottom line" before the Diet of Worms -- "I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Scripture, which is my basis. My conscience is captive to the word of God" -- did he not expect that those who followed in his steps might also consider *themselves* convicted by the testimony of Scripture as *their* basis? Did he not think that their consciences might *also* be captive to the word of God?

The logic of *sola scriptura* seems inescapable. Once one rejects the idea of there exists on earth any unified spiritual authority and proclaims the right of every Christian to follow what he or she sees as being the teaching of Holy Scripture, one should not be overly surprised when the result is individualism, subjectivism and ultimately as many views as there are interpreters. How could it be otherwise?

So how did Luther and the other Reformers *respond* to the chaos unleashed at least to a significant degree by their own preaching of the right of private judgment? What did they *do*?

Well, to promote the truth as they saw it, and to maintain some minimal unity in the Reformation churches, they did what they had to do: they began to prohibit their followers from exercising the private judgment they continued to insist on for themselves.

**Sola Scriptura: Theory or Practice**
When I was struggling as a Protestant minister and learning the case for Catholicism, one of my chief mentors was Jimmy Akin, senior apologist with Catholic Answers. Back in the 90's he wrote a wonderful little article titled *Sola Scripture: Theory or Practice?* in which he discusses this exact issue.

In that piece Jimmy quotes at length from historians Will and Ariel Durant on the response of Luther and the other reformers to the confusion resulting from their own example and teaching.

I don't think I can do better at this point than to ask ask you to carefully read this powerful passage from the Durants. I'll even include Jimmy's comments, as he made the point so beautifully.

It's instructive to observe how Luther moved from tolerance to dogma as his power and certainty grew.... In the Open Letter to the Christian Nobility (1520) Luther ordained “every man a priest,” with the right to interpret the Bible according to his private judgment and individual light....  Luther should have never grown old.  Already in 1522 he was out-papaling the popes. “I do not admit,” he wrote, “that my doctrine can be judged by anyone, even the angels. He who does not receive my doctrine cannot be saved.” Luther now agreed with the Catholic Church that “Christians require certainty, definite dogmas, and a sure Word of God which they can trust to live and die by.” As the Church in the early centuries of Christianity, divided and weakened by a growing multiplicity of ferocious sects, had felt compelled to define her creed and expel all dissidents, so now Luther, dismayed by the variety of quarrelsome sects that had sprouted from the seed of private judgment, passed step by step from toleration to dogmatism.  “All men now presume to criticize the Gospel,” he complained, “almost every old doting fool or prating sophist must, forsooth, be a doctor of divinity.”  Stung by Catholic taunts that he had let loose a dissovent anarchy of creeds and morals, he concluded, with the Church, that social order required some closure to debate, some recognized authority to serve as “an anchor of faith"... Sebastian Franck thought there was more freedom of speech and belief among the Turks than in the Lutheran states.

At this point Jimmy comments in mock incredulity, "But everyone knows that Luther was a man of fierce temper. Surely this was responsible for his attitude and made him unique among the Reformers in his inconsistency with regard to private judgment. Right?"

Other reformers rivaled or surpassed Luther in hounding heresy. Bucer of Strasbourg urged the civil authorities in Protestant states to extirpate all who professed a 'false' religion; such men, he said, are worse than murderers; even their wives and children and cattle should be destroyed. The comparatively gentle Melanchthon accepted the chairmanship of the secular inquisition that suppressed the Anabaptists in Germany with imprisonment and death…. He recommended that the rejection of infant baptism, or of original sin, or of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, should be punished as capital crimes.  He insisted on the death penalty for a sectarian who thought that heathens might be saved, or for another who doubted that belief in Christ the Redeemer could change a naturally sinful man into a righteous man…. He demanded the suppression of all books that opposed or hindered Lutheran teachings; so the writings of Zwingli and his followers were formally placed on the index of forbidden books in Wittenberg.

Again, Jimmy exclaims, "Yes, but we are still talking about the Lutheran thread of the Reformation. Surely the detached, intellectual Calvinists were better."

No one [In Geneva, where Calvin ruled as pastor] was to be excused from Protestant services on the plea of having a different or private religious creed; Calvin was as thorough as any pope in rejecting individualism of belief; this greatest legislator of Protestantism completely repudiated the principle of private judgment with which the new religion had begun. He had seen the fragmentation of the Reformation into a hundred sects, and foresaw more; in Geneva he would have none of them. There a body of learned divines would formulate an authoritative creed; those Genevans who could not accept it would have to seek other habitats.

If you know Jimmy Akin, you know that he has a particularly wry sense of humor. Pondering the inconsistency shown by the reformers on this whole issue, he concludes that apparently...

All that “Here I stand, the Word of God compels me, I can do no other” stuff had to be interpreted narrowly.  “I can do no other”, meant, “*I* can do no other.”  It did not mean you could do something other if you felt the Word of God compelling you.  You had to do what I said because I was the one the Word of God had compelled.

**The Protestant Pastor's Dilemma**
Looking back I can see that as a evangelical pastor I was caught in the same dilemma that Luther, Calvin and the other were caught in. As a child of the Reformation, of course I taught that the Bible *alone* was authoritative in the lives of my congregation. I reminded them that I was "a mere fallible interpreter of God's Word," that I could be wrong in anything I said and that it was their “right” and in fact their “duty” to search the Scriptures and decide for themselves whether what I was saying was, to borrow Calvin’s words, in accord with “the rule of the Word.”

This is what I said to them. Pastors of Protestant churches say this sort of thing all the time. "Search the Scripture and make up your own mind!"  This is standard evangelical teaching.

But what do these pastors *do* when someone in their church takes them up on this, accepts their right and duty, searches the Scripture and decides that on some important issue what the pastor is teaching is not in “accord with the Word”? What if that person is a respected teacher in the church and wants the freedom to teach his point of view -- even as the pastor is free to teach *his*own point of view?

What would I have done in such a situation? Would I have responded, "Oh, well, I'm teaching the conclusions of my private interpretation of Scripture and he's teaching the conclusions of his. So be it”?

Here's what I would have done --- what I would have *had* to do to maintain unity in the church. I would have first tried to convince him that he was wrong and I was right. And if this failed, I would have explained to him (kindly) that he would either have to quit teaching his point of view in the church or take his private interpretation down the road to a church that agrees with him.

I would have essentially shown him the door. Sounds reasonable enough. After all, you can’t have someone dividing the church by teaching in contradiction to the pastor.

But image this gentleman says to me, “Pastor Ken, I love these people and I want them to know the truth of God's Word. My conscience is captive to Scripture. Also, I was married in this church and my children have been raised here. I've been here 50 years. You've only been here three. How is it that you get to practice *your right* of private interpretation and teach the results of your own study of Scripture, but if I practice that same right and come to different conclusions -- why is that *I* have to shut up or get out?  Since only Scripture is authoritative, why don't *you* leave?”

What would I say? What *could* I say?

In the end there’s nothing a Protestant pastor can do, nothing a Protestant denomination can do, but what Luther and Bucer and Melanchthon and Calvin did.

**Churning Up the Wind and Waves**
At some point in my thinking about this whole situation, Ephesians 4:11-16 reached out and grabbed me by the throat. In this passage St Paul is talking about the need for unity in the Church, and says that God gave to His Church apostles and prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers *specifically in order* to ensure this unity. Pastors and teachers exist, Paul says,

...so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith an in the knowledge of the Son of God… so that we would no longer be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the cunning and craftiness of men.

So God wants his people unified. He doesn't want his children "tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the cunning and craftiness of men.”

And *to this end*, he gave His Church pastors and teachers.

But -- and this is the thought that grabbed me -- this could only work if there were *some authoritative teaching* to which individual pastors and teachers were bound. Some standard of teaching to which their teaching must conform. If, on the other hand, each is his own pope and council and free to read his Bible and draw his own conclusions, then pastors and teachers will disagree with one another and split off to form their own churches and denominations and those specifically called to unite the people of God will become the very ones stirring up the wind and the waves of doctrine and tossing the children of God to and fro. And this is precisely what we see within Protestantism.

Protestant historian and Luther scholar Heiko Oberman writes,

Application of the Reformation principle of sola scriptura, the Scriptures alone, has not brought the certainty [Luther] anticipated.  It has in fact been responsible for a multiplicity of explanations and interpretations that seem to render absurd any dependence on the clarity of the Scriptures.

It's true.*Sola scriptura* and the right of private judgment have led to a multiplicity of explanations and interpretations which have in turn led to thousands of Protestant sects, denominations and independent churches coming into existence. This teaching -- I remind you the very *foundational* teaching of Protestantism -- has served as a perfect blueprint for division.

*Sola scriptura* does not and cannot work. Because of this, I asked myself, *how could it be* the foundation Christ would have established for His One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church?

No. If Jesus desired that His Church be one, and gave His Church pastors and teachers to ensure that oneness, he *must* have established that Church with some principle of authority. He *had* to have.