

The Early Church Fathers on Scripture Alone

One of the foundational pillars of the Protestant Reformation is the doctrine of Sola Scriptura or Scripture Alone. It is the belief that all one needs is a Bible. It is reasoned that all necessary doctrines are contained therein, and no outside authority is needed to interpret it. Of course, this overlooks the fact that an outside authority (the Catholic Church) was needed to obtain the Bible in the first place. Ironically the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is not found in the Bible. So according to the Doctrine of Sola Scriptura, the Doctrine of Sola Scriptura cannot be believed. So, on a theological level it fails. On a practical level it also fails as a belief in this doctrine has resulted in thousands of churches all claiming authority from the Bible and all disagreeing with one another on what it teaches. That doesn't sound like a plan that an all-knowing God would put into place. And the early Church understood this all too well.

Irenaeus

But to apply expressions which are not clear or evident to interpretations of the parables, such as everyone discovers for himself as inclination leads him, [is absurd.] For in this way no one will possess the rule of truth; but in accordance with the number of persons who explain the parables will be found the various systems of truth, in mutual opposition to each other, and setting forth antagonistic doctrines, like the questions current among the Gentile philosophers (*Against Heresies* 2:27:1 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

Now it is no matter of surprise if arguments are captiously taken from the writings of (the apostle) himself, inasmuch as there "must needs be heresies;" but these could not be, if the Scriptures were not capable of a false interpretation (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 40 [A.D. 209-211]).

Cyprian of Carthage

Nor let any deceive themselves by a futile interpretation, in respect of the Lord having said, "Whosoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Corrupters and false interpreters of the Gospel quote the last words, and lay aside the former ones, remembering part, and craftily suppressing part: as they themselves are separated from the Church, so they cut off the substance of one section. .. He taught that we should agree firmly and faithfully. But how can he agree with anyone who does not agree with the booty of the Church itself, and with the universal brotherhood? (*On the Unity of the Church* 12 [A.D. 251]).

Council of Ganga

We wish that all things which have been delivered by the Holy Scriptures and the Apostolical traditions, may be observed in the Church (*Epilogue* [A.D. 343]).

Athanasius

But beyond these [Scriptural] sayings, let us look at the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept. (*Four Letters to Serapion of Thmuis* 1:28 [A.D. 360]).

Jerome

We ought to remain in that Church which was founded by the Apostles and continues to this day. If ever you hear of any that are called Christians taking their name not from the Lord Jesus Christ, but from some other, for instance, Marcionites, Valentinians, Men of the mountain or the plain, you may be sure that you have there not the Church of Christ, but the synagogue of Antichrist. For the fact that they took their rise after the foundation of the Church is proof that they are those whose coming the Apostle foretold. And let them not flatter themselves if they think they have Scripture authority for their assertions, since the devil himself quoted Scripture, and the essence of the Scriptures is not the letter, but the meaning (*Against the Luciferians* 28 [A.D. 382]).

Yet although he had the book in his hand and took into his mind the words of the Lord, nay even had them on his tongue and uttered them with his lips, he still knew not Him, whom – not knowing – he worshipped in the book. Then Philip came and shewed him Jesus, who was concealed beneath the letter. These instances have been just touched upon by me (the limits of a letter forbid a more discursive treatment of them) to convince you that in the holy Scriptures you can make no progress unless you have a guide to shew you the way (Letter 53:5-6 [A.D. 394]).

Gregory of Nyssa

[S]eeing, I say, that the Church teaches this in plain language, that the Only-begotten is essentially God, very God of the essence of the very God, how ought one who opposes her decisions to overthrow the preconceived opinion... And let no one interrupt me, by saying that what we confess should also be confirmed by constructive reasoning: for it is enough for proof of our statement, that the tradition has come down to us from our fathers, handed on, like some inheritance, by succession from the apostles and the saints who came after them (*Against Eunomius* 4:6 [A.D. 382]).

John Chrysostom

So then, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye were taught, whether by word, or by Epistle of ours.' Hence it is manifest, that they did not deliver all things by Epistle, but many things also unwritten, and in like manner both the one and the other are worthy of credit. Therefore, let us think the tradition of the Church also worthy of credit. It is a tradition, seek no farther (*Homily on 2nd Thessalonians* 4:2 [A.D. 404]).

Augustine

For many things lay hid in the Scriptures: and when heretics had been cut off, with questions they troubled the Church of God: then those things were opened which lay hid, and the will of God was understood ... in order that they that knew how to treat of and solve these questions (lest the weak should perish vexed with the questions of the ungodly), by their discourses and disputations should bring out unto open day the dark things of the Law (*Exposition on Psalm 55* 21 [A.D. 392-416]).

This Mediator, having spoken what He judged sufficient first by the prophets, then by His own lips, and afterwards by the apostles, has besides produced the Scripture which is called canonical, which has paramount authority, and to which we yield assent in all matters of which we ought not to be ignorant, and yet cannot know of ourselves (*City of God* 11:3 [inter A.D. 413-426]).

Vincent of Lérins

But here someone perhaps will ask, since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation? For this reason — because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. For Novatian expounds it one way, Sabellius another, Donatus another, Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, another, Photinus, Apollinaris, Priscillian, another, Iovinian, Pelagius, Celestius, another, lastly, Nestorius another. Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation (*Commonitory* 2:5 [A.D. 434]).

John of Damascene

So, then, in expectation of His coming we worship towards the East. But this tradition of the apostles is unwritten. For much that has been handed down to us by tradition is unwritten (*Exposition of the Faith* 3:12 [A.D. 712]).