

Scripture Alone

by Sebastian R. Fama

One of the pillars of the Protestant Reformation is the doctrine of "Sola Scriptura," or "Scripture alone." The reformers taught that the Bible was the sole rule of faith, and that there was no need for an authoritative church. Now if this were a true teaching, as some still contend, we would expect to find it in the Bible, but we do not. The verse usually used to justify Sola Scriptura is 2 Timothy 3:16: "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 complete, equipped for every good work."

Note that this passage nowhere says that Scripture is the sole rule of faith. It says that it is profitable, and that is true. But that doesn't make it the sole rule of faith. It says that it can make you complete, and that is also true. However, in order for Scripture to make us complete, we must accept all that it teaches. And Scripture teaches that Christ established an authoritative church. That is why Paul tells Titus, who headed the church at Crete, to **"Exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you"** (Titus 2:15). Indeed, an authoritative church is necessary in light of 2 Peter 1:20: "You must understand this, that **no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation.**" That is also why the Bible tells us that **the Church** and not the Bible **is the pillar and foundation of truth** (1 Timothy 3:15). So, Scripture makes us complete by providing us with all we need to know to be saved and by also providing us with a Church that can ensure that we receive that message accurately.

Cardinal Newman noted some years ago that 2 Timothy could not support the doctrine of Sola Scriptura because Paul's statement to Timothy would have to apply to him at that time. At that time there was only an Old Testament. Thus, the "Sola Scriptura" interpretation would rule out the New Testament.

Some claim they have no need of an authoritative church. They point to 1 John 2:26-27, which says, "I write this to you about those who would deceive you, but the anointing which you received from Him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you, as His anointing teaches you about everything."

Note that John begins by saying, **"I write this to you about those who would deceive you."** These are the teachers that John tells us we have no need of. Read verses 21-25, and the context becomes even clearer. "I write to you, not because you do not know **the truth**, but because **you know it...Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.**" They do not need new teachers because they have been already taught by the Church. Two chapters later he underscores the point when he says: "We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us" (1 John 4:6). Or as Jesus said it when speaking to His apostles: "He who hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16).

A verse of Scripture should not only be read within its immediate context, but in the wider context of Scripture as a whole. And 2 Peter 1:20 clearly states: "There is no prophecy of Scripture that is a matter of one's own interpretation." And if you cannot interpret for yourself, you need a teacher.

While it is true that the Holy Spirit can and oftentimes does guide us personally, it is equally true that we are not always listening. Sometimes our own thoughts or the deceptions of others can be mistaken for the Holy Spirit. That is why Jesus established His Church. After all, if we are to make a choice for Christ, we must **know** and not **imagine** what that choice entails.

The book of Ephesians expands on 2 Timothy and 1 John beautifully, "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors **and teachers, for the equipment of the saints...so** that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (4:11-12, 14). Remember earlier in 2 Timothy, we found the phrase, (concerning Scripture) "that the man of God may be complete, **equipped** for every good work."

First Paul tells us that we need Scripture to be equipped, then he tells us that we need teachers to be equipped. Is there a contradiction here? Not at all as Scripture without the proper interpretation is of no value. That is why the Ethiopian Eunuch, despite his genuine desire for God, needed Philip to explain the Scriptures to him (Acts 8:26-40). Note that it was God who sent Philip to the eunuch. The last thing Jesus said to His apostles, and by derivation, their successors was: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). He never said: "Just give them a Bible and I will fill in the details later."

The claim that we do not need teachers fails not only on the theological level, but in its practical application as well. If John believes that we do not need any teachers, why is he sending a letter that teaches? In fact, why were any of the epistles written and preserved? Are they not the authoritative teachings of Church leaders? It is also interesting to note that most Protestant pastors attended seminary where they were **taught the Bible**. On Sundays, they give sermons in which they **teach the Bible**. They have Bible studies where again they **teach the Bible**. If we really do not need teachers why is all of this going on?

The printing press wasn't invented until around 1440. Before that time Bibles were handwritten and a copy would have cost the modern-day equivalent of about \$8000.00. Even if they had access to Bibles, it would not have been much better as 99% of the people were illiterate. So, the type of Christianity that most Protestants say Jesus established wasn't even possible for fourteen centuries after he supposedly established it. Even today many countries have a low literacy rate. Didn't Jesus die for everyone? How are those who cannot read to know the Gospel? An authoritative church is the only logical and Biblical answer. Also, worthy of note is the fact that the doctrine of Sola Scriptura is not found in any of the creeds from the early Church.

There are thousands of Protestant denominations that claim authority from the Bible. And they don't all agree on what the Bible teaches. Is it really possible that God created a Church comprised of thousands of disagreeing sects? To say as much is to say that the Holy Spirit contradicts Himself. And that simply is not a possibility. Obviously, much of what is taught is the product of human understanding. And as the book of Proverbs warns: "Lean not on your own understanding" (3:5). If human beings are flawed creatures it stands to reason that their reasoning can be flawed. Obviously, another standard is needed.

Oftentimes those who reject Church authority do so in the name of freedom. But their concept of freedom is seriously flawed. Freedom is accompanied by responsibilities. As someone once said, "Freedom is not just about making choices but about making right choices. To place one's hand in an open fire is to exercise human freedom irresponsibly." In other words, freedom is not achieved by doing what you want; it is the result of doing what is right.

Sola Scriptura and the accompanying idea of private interpretation bear a striking resemblance to New Age thought. The New Ager says, "I am God." A belief in Sola Scriptura says in effect, "I speak for God." A major tenet of the New Age Movement is that there is no ultimate reality. Everyone must decide for himself what reality is. Thus, "every man does what is right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). With the private interpretation of Scripture everyone decides for himself what Christian reality is. This is a far cry from the Biblical view of, "One Lord, **one faith**, one Baptism" (Ephesians 4:5). We would do well to heed the warning of Proverbs 14:12, "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."

Some may see that as harsh. After all, we are told, Protestants only disagree on non-essential issues. But is that really the case? One of the areas of contention is the subject of salvation. We are told by some that once you accept Christ as your Lord and Savior you are saved. At that point some say that you can lose it and some say that you cannot. And then there are those who believe in a strict predestination. The idea that God arbitrarily chooses who will go to heaven and who will go to hell. The individual can do nothing to affect this decision. Thus, you can even have a baby who dies in the womb burning in hell for all eternity because God says so.

All these views are accepted under the umbrella of Protestant orthodoxy. And yet they are contradictory. Are they non-essential? The whole point of Christianity is salvation. Get that wrong and you labor in vain. Such contradictions are a scandal to the world. A stumbling block that keeps people from taking Christ seriously. And if every soul is precious, how can we write off millions of them in the name of freedom?