

What is Sola Scriptura?¹ A Theological Commentary

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“So what if **everything** in the Bible isn’t true and **reliable** or from God? That **doesn’t really matter**, does it? The Bible still remains an **authority** in my life.” Though it has been **years** now, I remember **hearing these words** as if it were **yesterday**. I had no idea what to say in response.

I was shocked because I was **hearing these words** from a **churchgoing, Bible-carrying, evangelical Christian**. This person saw no **relation between the truthfulness** of Scripture and the authority of Scripture, as if one had nothing to do with the **other**.

In that moment I **realized** that the **Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*** is just as **important today** as it was in the **sixteenth century**. Sadly, many **Christians in the church today** have no idea what ***sola Scriptura*** is or entails.

Legitimate cause for alarm

In the **sixteenth century** the **Reformers** faced off against Rome because the Roman church had **elevated tradition** and its **magisterium** to the **level** of Scripture. **Nevertheless**, Rome still **believed** Scripture itself was **inspired by God** and therefore **inerrant**, that is, **trustworthy, true, and without error**.

Since the **sixteenth century**, **Protestantism** (and its view of the Bible) has **undergone an evolution** in its identity. **Movements** such as the **Enlightenment, Liberalism, and, more recently, postmodernism** have **elevated other voices** to the **level** of Scripture or **even above** Scripture, and the **inspiration and inerrancy** of Scripture have been **abandoned**,

¹ This article is taken with permission from Zondervan as an adapted excerpt from *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture*, by Matthew Barrett.

something Rome never would have done in the sixteenth century. Today, many people reject that the Bible is God-breathed and truthful in all it asserts.

As Carl Henry pointed out in his magnum opus, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, the church throughout history has faced repeated attacks on the Bible from skeptics, but only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God's Word been questioned, criticized, and abandoned by those within the body of Christ. To the Reformers, this would have been unthinkable, yet this is the day we live in. Not only do Bible critics pervade the culture but now they have mounted the pulpit and sit comfortably in the pews.

If Carl Henry is right, then there is legitimate cause for alarm. Repeated attacks on Scripture's own character reveal the enmity and hostility toward the God of the Bible within our own souls. One of the most significant needs in the twenty-first century is a call back to the Bible to a posture that encourages reverence, acceptance, and adherence to its authority and message.

Along with the realization that *sola Scriptura* is just as applicable today as it was in the sixteenth century, I also saw that many Christians in the church have no idea what *sola Scriptura* is or what it entails. What is the relationship of the authority of the Bible to attributes such as inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and sufficiency? Even if we accept that the Bible alone is our final authority, we may have no idea why this is true. Is it because the Bible is the best guidebook we can find?

These questions led me to carefully study the massive shifts in authority that have taken place since the Reformation in my recent book *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture*. I wanted to better understand the relationship between biblical authority and the nature of Scripture, namely, its own inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and sufficiency.

What is *Sola Scriptura*?

What is *sola Scriptura* exactly? *Sola Scriptura* means that only Scripture, because it is God's inspired Word, is our inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church.

First, *sola Scriptura* means that Scripture alone is our final authority. Authority is a bad word in our day of rugged individualism. But the Bible is all about authority. In fact, *sola Scriptura* means that the Bible is our

chief, supreme, and ultimate authority. Notice, however, that I didn't say the Bible is our *only* authority. *Sola Scriptura* is too easily confused today with *nuda Scriptura*, the view that we should have "no creed but the Bible!" Those who sing this mantra believe that creeds, confessions, the voices of tradition, and those who hold ecclesiastical offices carry no authority in the church. But this was not the Reformers' position, nor should it be equated with *sola Scriptura*.

Sola Scriptura acknowledges that there are other important authorities for the Christian, authorities who should be listened to and followed, but Scripture alone is our *final* authority. It is the authority that rules over and governs all other authorities. It is the authority that has the final say. We could say that while church tradition and church officials play a *ministerial* role, Scripture alone plays a *magisterial* role. This means that all other authorities are to be followed only inasmuch as they align with Scripture, submit to Scripture, and are seen as subservient to Scripture, which alone is our supreme authority.

Second, *sola Scriptura* also means that Scripture alone is our *sufficient* authority. Not only is the Bible our supreme authority, but it is the authority that provides believers with all the truth they need for salvation and for following after Christ. The Bible, therefore, is sufficient for faith and practice. This notion of the Bible's sufficiency has been powerfully articulated by Reformation and Reformed confessions. The Belgic Confession (1561) states: "We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein." And the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) says: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men [Gal 1:8–9; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Tim 3:15–17]." In short, the Bible is enough for us.

Third, *sola Scriptura* means that only Scripture, because it is God's *inspired* Word, is our *inerrant* authority. Notice that the basis of biblical authority—the very reason why Scripture is authoritative—is that God is its divine author. The ground for biblical authority is divine inspiration. As the Westminster Confession of Faith says, "The *authority* of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed,

dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God [1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19, 21; 1 John 5:9].” Scripture and Scripture alone (not Scripture and Tradition) is God-breathed and, on this basis, stands unshakable as the church’s final, flawless authority. What Scripture says, God says.

To get a full picture of *sola Scriptura*, we need to go beyond saying that the Bible is inspired or God-breathed. Inspiration should lead to an understanding that the Bible is perfect, flawless, and inerrant. In other words, inerrancy is the necessary corollary of inspiration. They are two sides of the same coin, and it is impossible to divorce one from the other. Because it is God speaking—and he is a God of truth, not error—his Word must be true and trustworthy in all that it addresses.

It is precisely because inerrancy is a biblical corollary and consequence of divine inspiration—inseparably connected and intertwined—that it is a necessary component to *sola Scriptura*. The God of truth has breathed out his Word of truth, and the result is nothing less than a *flawless* authority for the church. Were we to divorce the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture from its authority, disconnecting the two as if one was unrelated to the other, then we would be left with no doctrine of *sola Scriptura* at all. Should Scripture contain errors, it is unclear why we should trust Scripture as our supreme and final authority. And should we limit, modify, or abandon the total inerrancy of Scripture, we set in motion tremendous doubt and uncertainty regarding the Bible’s competence as our final authority. The ground for the believer’s confidence that all of Scripture is the Word of God is shaken.

The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy makes this point as well: “The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded.” In other words, to reject inerrancy is to undermine confidence in the Bible’s authority, and what could have more relevance to *sola Scriptura* than biblical authority? As Roger Nicole once exclaimed, “What is supremely at stake in this whole discussion [of inerrancy] is the recognition of the authority of God in the sacred oracles.” It should not surprise us to find that in the recent history of evangelicalism, leaders have rallied around statements such as the Cambridge Declaration (1996), affirming inerrancy’s inseparability from *sola Scriptura* in stating, “Scripture alone is the inerrant rule of the

church's life," and they "reaffirm the *inerrant* Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can *bind* the conscience."

Luther's dividing line

What is often missed in retellings of Luther's progress to the Diet of Worms is the question of *why* Luther's stance on Scripture was so detested by Rome. After all, Rome *also* affirmed Scripture's authority and inspiration. So what made Luther's stance on biblical authority so different and so offensive to the Roman church? The answer is that Luther had the audacity to say that *only* Scripture is the *inerrant* authority. While popes and councils *err*, Scripture alone does not! For Rome, Scripture *and* Tradition were *inerrant* authorities. For Luther, Scripture *alone* is our *inerrant* authority.

What distinguished Luther and the rest of the Reformers from church leaders in Rome was their claim that as important as tradition is (and they thought it was extremely important), tradition is not without error. That honor goes to Scripture *alone*. In fact, it is because Scripture alone is inspired by God and consequently *inerrant* that the Reformers believed Scripture alone is the church's *final* authority, sufficient for faith and practice.