

In Defense of Sola Scriptura

by C. Michael Patton

Part One: Authority Across the Spectrum

"If it ain't in the Bible, I don't believe it." Have you ever heard said that? How about this one: "The Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it." You might have that bumper sticker. Why not? Doesn't this represent the glory of the Protestant Reformation's elevation of Scripture to a position of the sole source of authority in the Christian's life? Don't these pithy statements represent the best of what it means to adhere to the doctrine of sola Scriptura?

No, they don't. In fact they unfortunately represent a common misunderstanding of what sola Scriptura means.

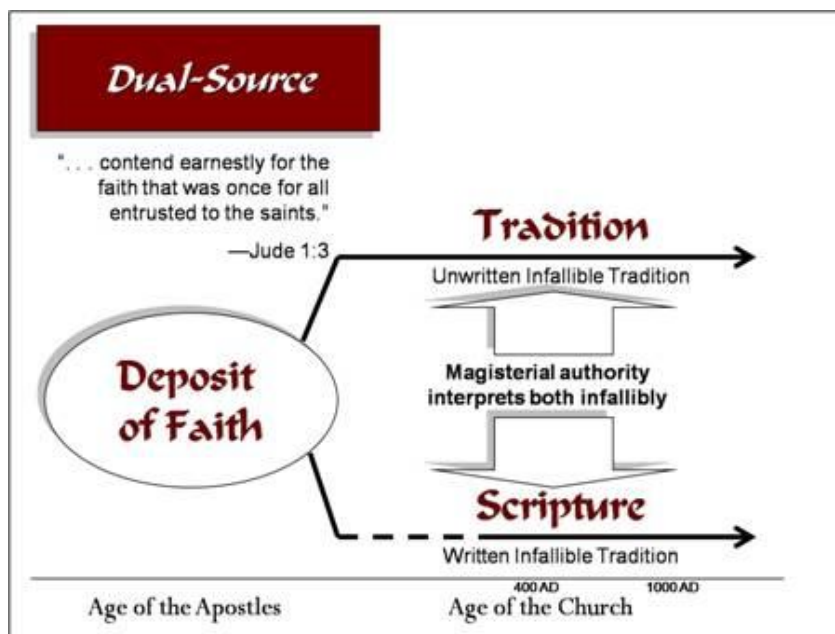
Where does one go for authority? In whom do we place our trust? The Church? Tradition? Scripture? The Pope? These represent important questions that are normally not understood outside the perspective of individual traditions.

There are essentially five views that exist in the church today concerning the important issue of authority.

1. Dual-source theory

Belief that Tradition, represented by the magisterial authority of the Roman Catholic Church, is infallible and equal to Scripture as a basis for doctrine; the Church itself is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice since it must define and interpret Scripture and Tradition.

Adherents: Roman Catholics

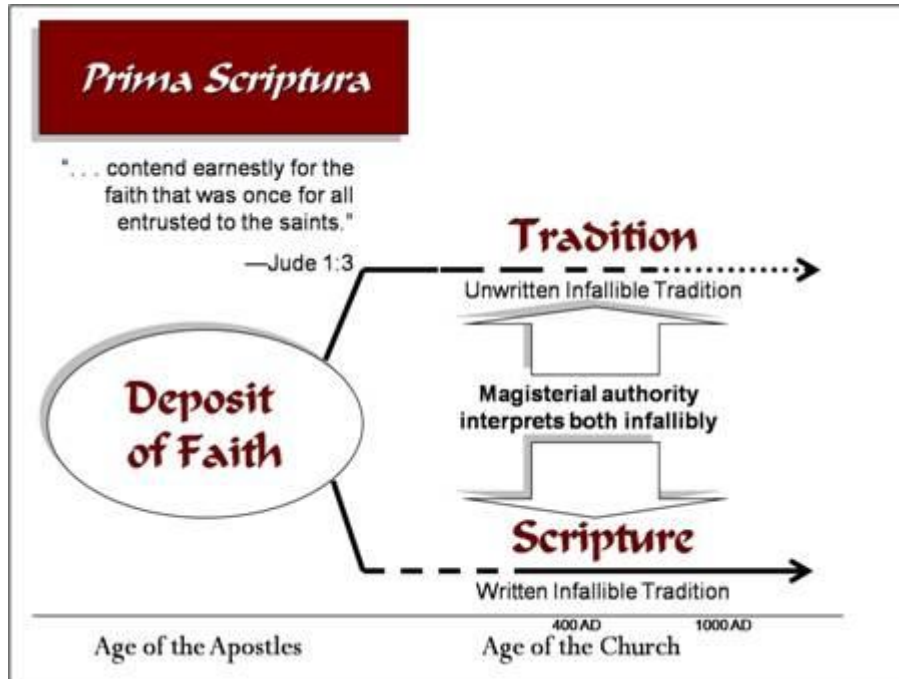


Notice that there is one complete deposit of faith, given by Christ to the Apostles. This one deposit is transmitted by two sources, written tradition (Scripture) and unwritten tradition. Notice also the dotted line as Scripture moves from the "Age of the Apostles" to the "Age of the Church." This represents that the Scriptures were not complete in canonized form (all the books were not decided upon) until the fourth century. The Roman Catholic church believes itself responsible for the interpretation of both written and unwritten tradition. Because of their belief that the Holy Spirit protects the Roman Catholic church from error, they believe that they are the ultimate and final authority for the Christian. This is why this view is often referred to as sola ecclesia ("the church alone").

2. *Prima Scriptura*

Belief that the Body of Christ has two separate sources of authority for faith and practice: 1) the Scriptures and 2) Tradition. Scripture is the primary source for authority, but by itself it is insufficient for all matters of faith and practice. Tradition also contains essential elements needed for the productive Christian life.

Adherents: Some Roman Catholics (an alternate view)

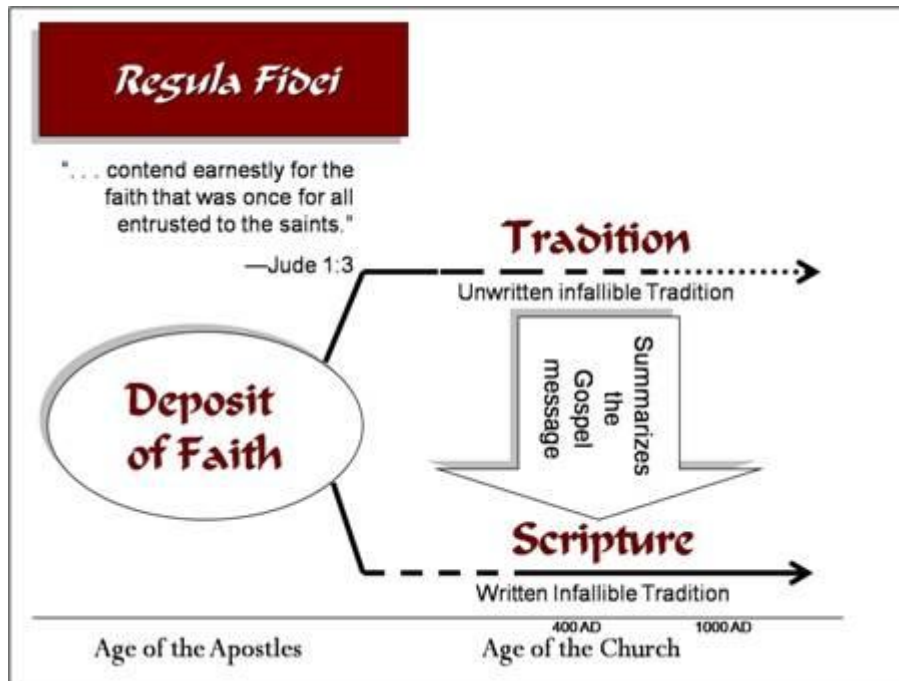


Like the previous, the prima Scriptura view has an abiding dual-source of authority. Notice how the dotted line representing Tradition continues on in this model. This is illustrative of Tradition's continued subordinate influence within the Church. For the prima Scriptura model, Tradition must be continually "kept in check" by Scripture. If there is ever a conflict between Tradition and the Scriptures, the Scriptures are to correct and interpret Tradition. Scripture, according to this model, is the primary and final authority in all matters. According to this view, the Scriptures contain all that is necessary for salvation and is, therefore, "materially sufficient." But it is not "formally sufficient," since it must have an infallible interpreter, the Church.

3. *Regula Fidei*

Lit. "Rule of faith." Belief that tradition is an infallible "summary" of Scripture passed on through apostolic succession. Ultimately, there is only one source of revelation, but two sources of authority. In other words, Tradition is Scripture.

Adherents: Eastern Orthodox, some Protestants

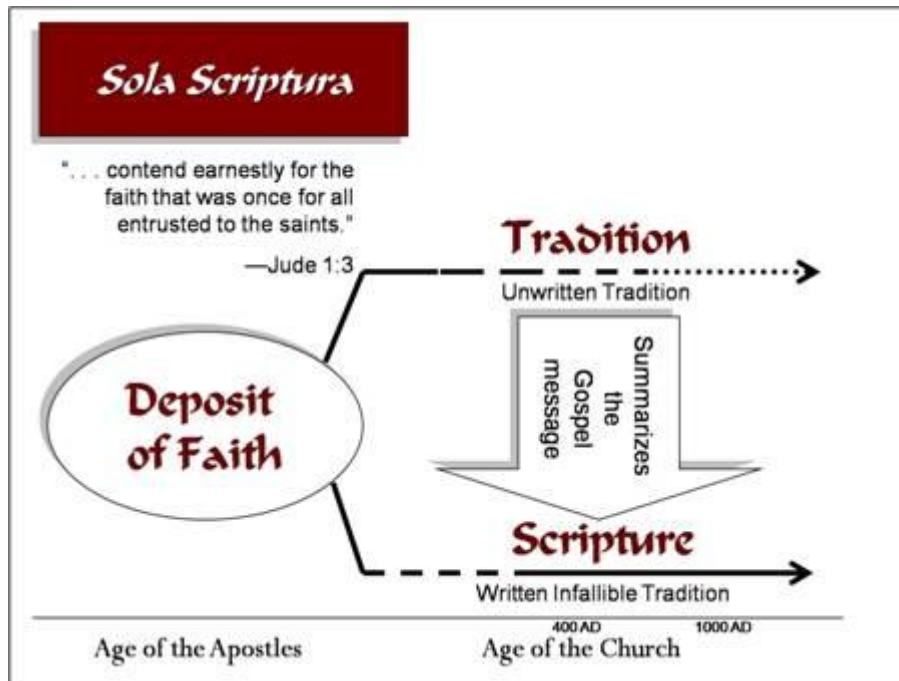


Notice how the dotted line representing Tradition continues on in this model. Like the previous, this is illustrative of Tradition's continued subordinate influence within the Church. For the regula fidei model, however, tradition equals Scripture in an infallible summary form (example: Nicene creed). The Church carries the correct interpretation of Scripture but does not add anything new to it (unlike the previous two). Therefore, all interpretation of Scripture must agree with the interpretation that has been consistently held within the Church—the regula fidei or "rule of faith."

4. *Sola Scriptura*

Belief that Scripture is the final and only infallible authority for the Christian in all matters of faith and practice. While there are other authorities, they are always fallible and the must always be tested by and submit to the Scriptures.

Adherents: Reformed Protestants/Evangelicals



Notice that the only difference between the sola Scriptura view and the regula fide view is that in the sola Scriptura view tradition is not infallible. It is very important to realize that advocates of sola Scriptura would believe that there were two sources of authority for the first 300–400 years of the Church. Like the previous view, tradition would be understood as a summary of what was written in Scripture that had always been accepted by the universal Church. Unlike the previous view, this summary is not infallible.

At this time, Scripture was in the process of being recognized (canonized) and the teachings of the apostles which had been passed on through word of mouth (tradition) was only reliable for the first 100 years (or so) of Church history. The majority of Scripture (Gospels, Acts, and Pauline corpus which makes up at least 80 percent of the NT) was accepted as authoritative by A.D. 200, if not earlier. At the same time, the teachings of the apostles that were being passed on through word of mouth was becoming increasingly obscure and unreliable. Once the New Testament had been circulated throughout the Church, and once the canon had been recognized, the Church became totally reliant upon the Scriptures (both Old and New Testaments) for ultimate authority in all matters of faith and practice. Scripture is always to be interpreted according to the accepted, albeit fallible, regula fidei of the early church as represented in the early creeds and councils.

As an important and related sidenote, there has been much recent discussion among Protestants and Orthodox concerning the similarities in the two traditions' view of authority. In fact, mutual consent has been attained and confessions of misunderstanding given from both sides. Notice here the agreed statement from The Dublin Agreed Statement 1984 involving Anglicans and Orthodox:

"Any disjunction between Scripture and Tradition such as would treat them as two separate 'sources of revelation' must be rejected. The two are correlative. We affirm (1) that Scripture is the main criterion

whereby the church tests traditions to determine whether they are truly part of the Holy Tradition or not; (2) that Holy Tradition completes Holy Scriptures in the sense that it safeguards the integrity of the biblical message" (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 50–51.

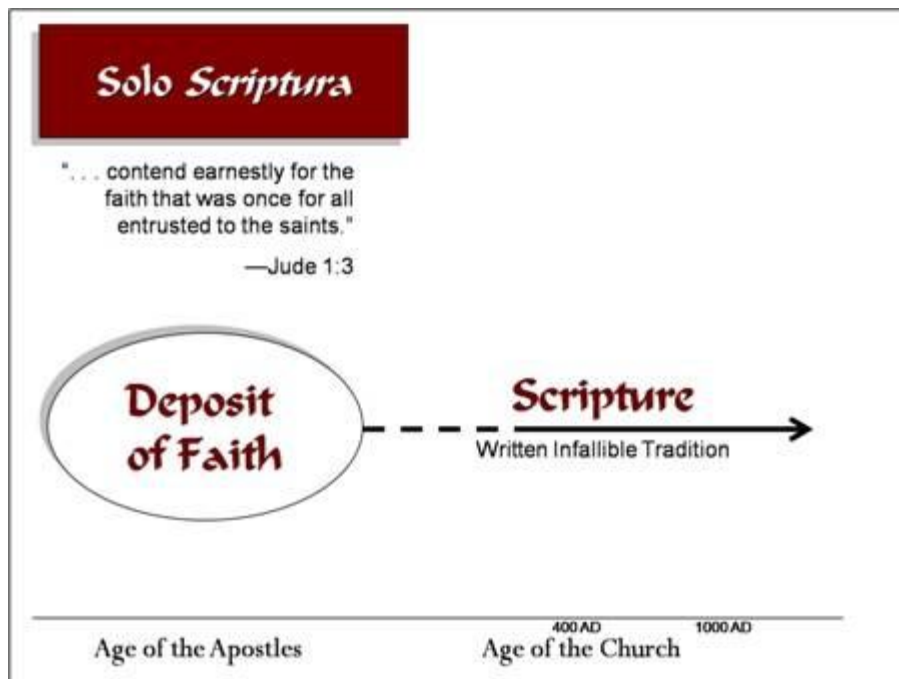
As well, notice this agreement between Lutherans and Orthodox:

"Regarding the relation of Scripture and Tradition, for centuries there seemed to have been a deep difference between Orthodox and Lutheran teaching. Orthodox hear with satisfaction the affirmation of the Lutheran theologians that the formula sola Scriptura was always intended to point to God's revelation, God's saving act through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, and therefore to the holy Tradition of the Church . . . against human traditions that darken the authentic teaching in the Church." —Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue: The Agreed Statements 1985–1989. (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1992), 11.

5. *Solo Scriptura* or *Nuda Scriptura*

Belief that Scripture is the sole basis and authority in the life of the Christian. Tradition is useless and misleading, and creeds and confessions are the result of man-made traditions.

Adherents: Radical Reformers, Fundamentalists, Restorationist Churches

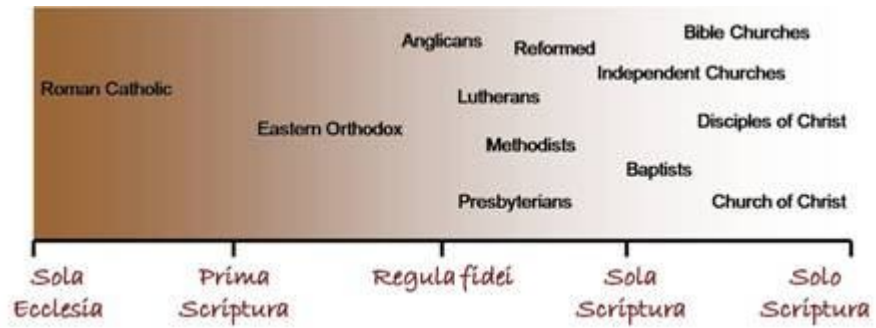


This is not a formal position but a pejorative designation of a practical one. It represents the unfortunate position of many evangelical or fundamental Protestants who misunderstand sola Scriptura believing that it means that the ideal place for believers to find authority and interpret Scripture is to do so in a historical vacuum, disregarding any tradition that might influence and bind their thinking. Not only does this undermine the Holy Spirit's role in the lives of believers of the past, but it is a position of arrogance,

elevating individual reason to the position of final authority. It also disregards the fact that it is impossible to interpret in a vacuum.

Protestants have many authorities in their lives. Whether it be parents, government, the church, or traditions. The doctrine of sola Scriptura does not mean that we don't have any other authorities or even sources of revelation, but that the Scripture alone is the final and only infallible source—it is the ultimate source.

Just for good measure so that I cannot be accused of not trying to get in trouble, here is how I would chart some traditions and denominations.



Next, I will begin to give a more formal defense of sola Scriptura.

Part 2: Luther and *Sola Scriptura*

Any attempt to defend a position is going to be met with three things: 1) reasoned rebuttal from those who are truly trying to understand yet disagree, 2) antagonistic reaction from those who see your argument as a threat to their favorite position and have an emotional reaction to it, and 3) misguided response from those who misunderstand and mis-define the position that you are attempting to defend.

In my initial defining I distanced the doctrine from those who would claim that there is more than one infallible authority for the Christian (dual-source theory or *sola ecclesia*) and those who would claim that the Scripture is the sole authority for the Christian (*sola Scriptura* or *nuda Scriptura*). The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is the belief that the Scripture is the final and only infallible authority for the Christian. In other words, it is the ultimate authority.

That *sola Scriptura* utilizes other authorities is evident even in the heat of the Reformation as Martin Luther was called to Worms to give an account of himself. When asked to recant his controversial writings, after sleeping on it, Luther uttered these famous words in response:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony from scripture or by evident reason—for I confide neither in the Pope nor in a Council alone, since it is certain they have often erred and contradicted themselves—I am held fast by the scriptures adduced by me, and my conscience is held captive by God’s Word, and I neither can nor will revoke anything, seeing it is not safe or right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.”

Notice here that the “testimony of scripture” holds his conscience “captive.” Not only this, but it was the testimony of Scripture “adduced by me.” This is not meant to advocate isolationist interpretation, but to convey the personal responsibility Luther felt to produce his own convictions. But notice that Luther did have respect for the authority of Popes and councils. He says, “I confide neither in Pope or in a Council alone” (emphasis mine). The key is the “alone.” Luther did confide in Popes and councils, but found them insufficient to have a final or independent voice in issues of faith. Why? According to Luther, it is because they can and do err. Tradition, according to Luther, has a subordinate authority to the Scripture, but is an authority nonetheless.

Notice also that “evident reason” is on Luther’s list of authority. Luther understood that reason has an important role to play in the binding of our conscience. In fact, it would seem that reason played a bigger role in Luther’s decision than tradition.

Finally, individual conscience itself plays an authoritative role in our lives. Luther believed that it is not “safe or right to act against conscience.” Whether Luther would have attributed his statements here to the movements of the Holy Spirit upon our conscience or simply define conscience is the product of the adducement of authority is hard to say. What is important is that Luther was referring to individual responsibility.

Now, this one paragraph is certainly not sufficient to pin down Luther's entire theology of authority—much less the entire reformed perspective—but it does serve to illustrate the founding balance sola Scriptura provides through the interaction of many sources of authority.

Sola Scriptura is more than just a doctrine, but a road to responsibility before man and God. Luther could not in good conscience outsource his theology to any magisterial court, council, or successor to the seat of St. Peter. If he did, his convictions would not be his own. Luther was not into the "copy-and-paste" theology—the kind that had come to be mandated by ecclesiastical authorities of his day. He renewed and fostered a legacy which requires every man to seek for, wrestle with, and discover truth on their own, knowing that we will not be judged under the umbrella of a council, pastor, parent, family, or church, but by our own integrity of heart and mind.

Our beliefs are too precious to require any less. Sola Scriptura represents the legacy of Christ's first words to two hopeful fisherman, "come and see."

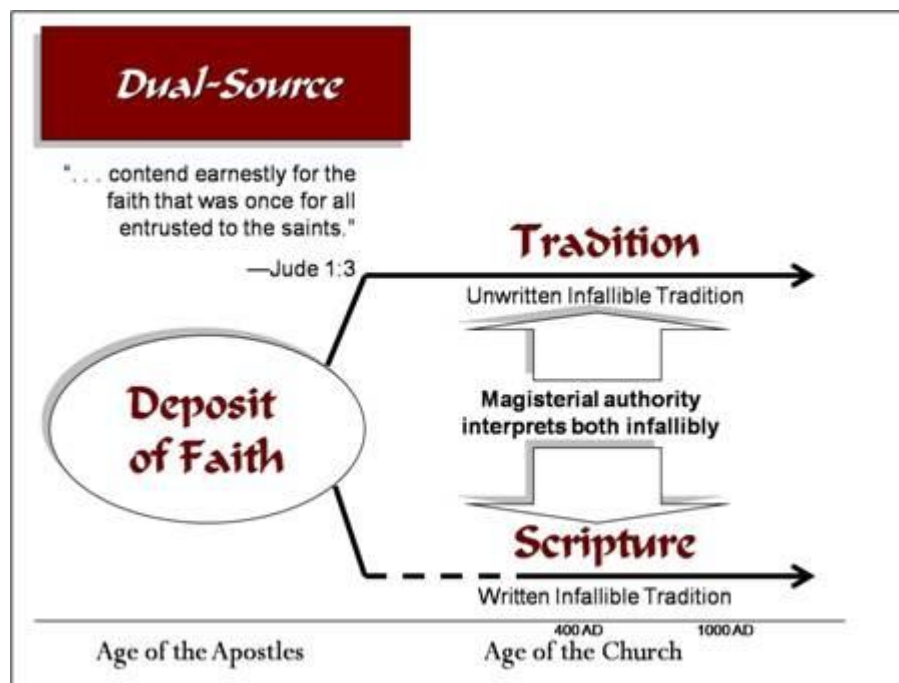
Part 3: An Argument for the Dual-Source Theory

I have tried to define the Protestant doctrine of sola Scriptura. Specifically, I have tried to distinguish it from any theory that allows for or requires two sources of ultimate authority, tradition and Scripture (dual source theory). As well (and just as important), I have attempted to disassociate sola Scriptura from the common misunderstanding that its advocates do not allow for any other authority. This extensive concentration on defining the doctrine is so that it might be properly defended. In other words, I don't want to defend a doctrine that is mis-defined in the mind of the readers.

Before I move on to a proper defense of sola Scriptura, I want to attempt to defend its primary historical rival, the dual-source theory. I do this so that one might be able to see the full balance of the positions in perspective. In addition, by giving a short defense of why people hold to some form of dual-source theory, one can see the responses that advocates of sola Scriptura would give to such.

Dual-Source Theory

Definition: The Apostle's teaching is absolutely and ultimately authoritative as a rule for Christian doctrine and practice. This teaching was handed down in two forms: written and unwritten. The written teaching was codified in the Scriptures. The unwritten Tradition—the oral or "living" Tradition—was passed on through the succession of apostles (Apostolic succession) and is equal to Scripture as an authority in the Christian life, being that it came through the same source—the Apostle's teaching. In the case of the Roman Catholic tradition, the Magisterial authority (Pope and the congregation of bishops) serve as an infallible interpreter, protected by the Holy Spirit, of both the unwritten and written tradition (the third leg of the three leg stool of authority).



Defense of the Dual-Source Theory

1. The Scriptures clearly say that there were many other things that Christ did that were not written down.

Jn. 21:25

“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.”

The idea is that the body of revelation given by Christ was not exhausted by the writings of the Apostles. This, at least, evidences that there could have been oral teachings that were passed on and just as authoritative.

2. The New Testament writers clearly speak about the importance of Tradition.

2 Thess. 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.”

Notice the dual sources of the one teaching.

1 Cor. 11:2

“I praise you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I passed them on to you.”

This illustrates that traditions (paradosis) are what is being passed on. At the very least, this should help to take the focus off the way in which a tradition is handed down. In other words, the focus is not on written tradition as sola Scriptura advocates tend to believe.

Jude 1:3

“Dear friends, although I have been eager to write to you about our common salvation, I now feel compelled instead to write to encourage you to contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.”

Notice, the faith was delivered to the “saints.” The “saints” represent a living entity of preservation, not a book, which we know as the Church.

3. Christ gave authority over the Church to the apostles and their successors (apostolic succession). Roman Catholic Only: Peter and his successors were given the ultimate authority in the Church (papacy or the Seat of Rome).

Jn. 20:23

[Christ, speaking to the apostles] “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.”

Matt. 18:18

“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.”

This represents the ultimate authority of the Church which has the authority to “bind” and “release.”

Matt. 16:17–19

“And Jesus answered him, ‘You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven! And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven.’”

For the Roman Catholic, this teaches that Peter was given a special and ultimate authority among the Apostles. Therefore, his successors (the Bishop of Rome, the Pope), would naturally carry this same authority.

4. Without the infallible declaration of the Church, there would be no way of knowing what books belong in the canon of Scripture.

In my opinion, this is perhaps the strongest objection to the doctrine of sola Scriptura. The idea here is that if the Scripture is the only infallible authority, then where does it infallibly derive its authority to be Scripture? In other words, there is no list of books that belong in the Scripture (canon) anywhere in inspired Scripture. Therefore, Tradition and/or the Church has to determine or recognize what books are indeed Scripture. If Tradition and/or the Church does not have infallible authority, then its pronouncements are fallible—even pronouncements about what books belong in the Bible. Therefore, advocates of sola Scriptura are left with a rather odd confession that they have a fallible canon of infallible books.

5. Without the infallible authority of the Church, the Church would be hopelessly divided on matters of doctrine and morals. This would not be the Church that Christ started.

Of course, as opponents of sola Scriptura would argue, this is indeed the case with the Protestant tradition. The Bible alone is not a sufficient authority to keep unity as is evidenced by the thousands of denominations and disagreements within Protestantism. On the other hand, Christian traditions that advocate some sort of dual-source theory (Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox) are united under the living tradition and its regulating force.

Next I will provide a response to this from the sola Scriptura position to these arguments. Please feel free to give any further defense of the dual-source theory if you feel I have left something out.

Part 4: What Did John Believe?

I made an argument for the “Dual-Source Theory” of authority (shared by both Catholics and many Eastern Orthodox). Naturally, since I don’t hold to this theory, I have responses to each point of argument that was made. Please understand that while I am persuaded that the doctrine of sola Scriptura, understood correctly, presents the most viable and accurate view of Christian authority, I by no means mean to dismiss any Dual-Source Theory as ignorant or completely out in left field. Let my responses be seen in light of such a perspective.

I will restate each argument for the Dual-Source Theory and then provide what I believe to be a representative response for the sola Scriptura position. I may give each one their own blog post so as not to overwhelm you with a long reading.

Dual-Source Theory argument #1

The Scriptures clearly say that there were many other things that Christ did that were not written down.

Jn. 21:25

“And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written.”

The idea is that the body of revelation given by Christ was not exhausted by the writings of the Apostles. This, at least, evidences that there could have been oral teachings that were passed on and just as important and authoritative.

Response

It is self-evident that the Bible did not record everything that Jesus said and did. John’s purpose in telling his readers this is not because he wants them to seek out “unwritten Tradition” or some second source of authority other than his letter to learn of these “other” things, but because he wants them to know that what he has recorded contains sufficient information to bring one to salvation.

Notice the rest of the passage. This provides a good argument that the Gospel of John alone, from the view of the Apostle, provides sufficient information about Christ to, if believed, bring on to salvation. This ends up providing an argument for one aspect of sola Scriptura rather than against it.

Jn. 20:30–31

“Now Jesus performed many other miraculous signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (emphasis added).

There is no reason to think that people need exhaustive knowledge of all that Christ said or did. The Bible is not exhaustive history, it is theological history. If John felt that there was another necessary

source that people needed to understand in addition to what he wrote then his assumption about the sufficiency of his record seems either misleading or erroneous.

But let me not overstate my case here. Catholics who deny sola Scriptura will respond by citing the difference between the “material sufficiency” and the “formal sufficiency” of Scripture. Catholics can—and often do—believe that the Scripture contains all the information necessary for Salvation (material sufficiency), but they also believe it lacks the ability to interpret itself. Therefore, an absolute and authoritative interpreter is necessary to understand the Scripture. In this way, the Scripture lacks “formal sufficiency.”

Protestants, such as myself, would respond, at least with regard to the current argument about the Gospel of John, that to suppose John assumed his readers, whomever they may be, would need an infallible interpreter in order to understand his letter is a bit presumptuous. There is no indication that John felt that his letter lacked either material or formal sufficiency. From my point of view, to say that the Gospel of John is formally insufficient to accomplish its proposed purpose (i.e. it cannot be understood without an infallible interpreter and, hence, people cannot have “life in his name” because of this lack), is to force a foreign notion into the mind of John that is in no sense taught, evident, or justified beyond one’s presupposed theology. In other words, most advocates of the Dual-Source Theory must see John in such a way, not because of the evidence, but because their presupposed Dual-Source paradigm demands such.

I believe that this is unjustified.

Again, this one response does not destroy the Dual-Source Theory of authority, it simply evidences, in my opinion, the weakness of this proposed argument for the theory.

Part 5: What is Tradition?

Responding to the second defense of the Dual-Source Theory, let me first repeat the argument:

2. The New Testament writers clearly speak about the importance of Tradition.

2 Thess. 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.”

Notice the dual sources of the one teaching.

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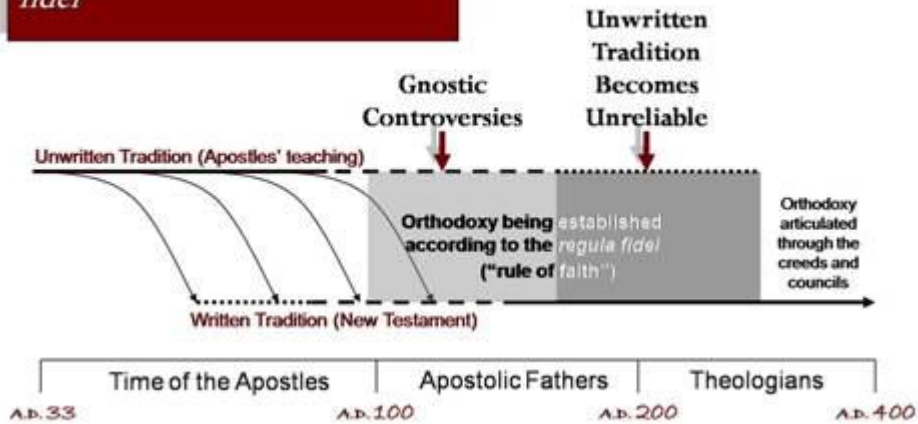
Sola Scriptura response:

The New Testament does speak of the importance of tradition, but the tradition that is referred to in these passages is the Gospel message that was eventually recorded in the New Testament (regula fidei). There is no reason to believe that the New Testament writers were speaking of some infallible “unwritten Tradition” that was separate from the message of the New Testament and that was to be passed on through an unbroken succession of bishops throughout the ages.

In this sense, “tradition” simply refers to the Gospel message. It was handed down in two forms, as it always has, written and unwritten. But these two forms are not distinct bodies of information, and there is no reason to think that they are. As time goes on, all tradition that is not codified in some form becomes increasingly unreliable (think phone tag). That is why the Gospel message was ultimately preserved in the Apostles’ writing and canonized in the New Testament.

This chart helps illustrate:

Development of the *regula fidei*



Notice here that advocates of sola Scriptura recognize the equal authority of the Apostles unwritten teaching while alive (word of mouth). We also recognize its abiding influence into the first few centuries of the church (though diminishing in reliability). This is why we believe that these teachings were codified in the New Testament canon. Eighty-percent of the New Testament canon (Gospels, Acts, Pauline corpus) were accepted as authoritative by the mid second century, possibly as early as the late first century.

Certainly, various traditions arose in the practice and liturgy of the first few centuries of the early church, but these traditions should not be seen as a prescriptive mandate on how to do church. Neither should they be understood as an equal authority to that of Scripture. There is simply no justification to do so.

Of course the message was "handed to the saints" as it is the saints (Christians) who are responsible for the passing on of the Gospel, not any institutional authority.

Next, I will response to the third argument for the Dual-Source Theory.

Part 6: Apostolic Succession?

The third argument for the Dual-Source Theory and against sola Scriptura has to do with a concept called “apostolic succession.” Most non-Anglican Protestants are not very familiar with this concept, but it has deep roots in the theological history of the church. How one defines “apostolic succession” will differ. This differing is not one with regards to purpose, but process. Before I say more, let me restate the argument that an advocate of the Dual-Source theory of authority might take:

3. Christ gave infallible authority over the Church to the Apostles and their successors (apostolic succession). Roman Catholic Only: Peter and his successors were given the ultimate and infallible authority in the Church (“papacy” or the “Seat of Rome”).

Jn. 20:23

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For the Roman Catholic, this teaches that Peter was given a special and ultimate authority among the Apostles. Therefore, his successors (the Bishop of Rome, the Pope), would naturally carries this same authority.

Response:

It is agreed that Peter and the apostles were given authority and the guidance to teach the truth. Their authority and teaching continues today. But, from a Protestant perspective, this authority and teaching is not through an unbroken lineage of succession, but through their teaching contained in the Scripture. In other words, Protestant believe in apostolic succession, but believe that this succession is a succession in teaching, not necessarily person.

However, Protestants should recognize that a succession in person is a necessary part of the succession in teaching (this is why we still practice ordination). It is not a guarantee of the proper succession and must be continually tested by a foundational source (Scripture). In fact, I think we as Protestants should

deeply consider our attitude toward the doctrine of apostolic succession. The common free Protestant mentality is fueled by those who find no connection, no accountability, indeed, no knowledge of the faith that has gone before them. This is not to our credit. We need to find a way to reassess our position here. I would be a strong advocate of any movement to re-institute the norm of apostolic succession within the Evangelical church at large. Again, this would not involve some infallible guarantee, but it does connect us to the historic Christian faith rather than our own johnny-come-lately denominational bent. (More on this someday).

Nevertheless, concerning some infallible conference being passed on through the Apostles to some successors, while this might be nice and I have nothing against it, I simply have no reason, outside of a pragmatic desire for unity, to believe such occurred. The Scriptures presented concerning the authority of the apostles concerns them alone. There is nothing, from what I can see, said either explicitly or implicitly concerning the passing on of some infallible authority through apostolic succession.

Concerning the Roman Catholic idea of ultimate infallible authority being conferred on the successors of Peter, this idea cannot be found in the Church until the late Middle Ages (unless forced into the thoughts of the Church fathers). As well, it was not declared dogma by the Catholic Church until Vatican I (1870). See here in Vatican I:

“The Apostolic See and the Roman Pontiff [Pope] hold primacy over the whole world, and that the Pontiff of Rome himself is the successor of the blessed Peter, the chief of the apostles, and is the true vicar of Christ and head of the whole Church and faith, and teacher of all Christians; and that to him was handed down in blessed Peter, by our Lord Jesus Christ, full power to feed, rule, and guide the universal Church, just as is also contained in the records of the ecumenical Councils and in the sacred canons.”

From my perspective (and I think I speak with some common sense here), if God wanted believers to see the Church as an institutional authority that houses infallibility, either through the unity of the bishops or the ex cathedra statements of the Pope, then it goes without saying that this would be a primary doctrine that the Bible should address.

While the Scriptures contain many opportunities to teach this type of apostolic succession, either through example in the book of Acts or through explicit instruction in the Pastoral epistles, there is no such teaching. The Scriptures just don't teach that the Apostles conferred their authority—infalible authority—on anyone else.

To rely solely upon unwritten Tradition begs the question and makes one wonder why such an important doctrine is unmentioned in Scripture. All attempts to find the doctrine of infalible apostolic succession in Scripture, in my opinion, must be labeled as eisegetical theology (reading your theology into the text, rather than deriving one's theology from the text).

In the end, suffice it to say that advocates of sola Scriptura believe in apostolic succession (succession in teaching—small “a”), not Apostolic succession (succession in person—big “A”)

Part 7: What About the Canon?

Without the infallible declaration of the Church, there would be no way of knowing what books belong in the canon of Scripture. Since there is no inspired canon of Scripture, the “Scripture alone” is not even enough to establish what Scriptures are truly Scripture. Therefore, the doctrine of sola Scriptura is self-defeating.

This is true. I am looking on page 23 of my Bible and it has the list of books. The books all together number 66, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. This is often referred to as the “canon” of Scripture. “Canon” (Gk. kanon) means “rule” or “measuring rod.” The canon of Scripture is the collection or a “rule” of books that Christians believe belong in the Bible. There are some variations among Christian traditions concerning the number of books. The Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches all use different canons (as well, some eastern churches will vary still). The Catholic and Orthodox include a group of books in their Bibles referred to as the Deuterocanonical books (“second canon”) or, as Protestants would call it, the “Apocrypha” (although the Orthodox church is not quite as settled upon the status of the Apocrypha).

The question How do you know what books belong in the Bible? is a significant one indeed and presents, what I believe to be, the most persuasive argument against sola Scriptura that there is. The Catholics and Orthodox will normally refer to the establishment of these books as part of the canon by fourth century councils. Catholics would further refer to the teachings of the council of Trent (1545-1563) which dogmatically and infallibly declared the current Catholic canon (including the Apocrypha) as being authoritative.

I believe that the 66 books of the Protestant canon belong in the Bible, no more no less. I believe that all 66 books are inspired, inerrant, and infallible. Yet the list on page 23 of my Bible is not part of the canon. In other words, the list itself is not part of the inspired word of God. I am using the New American Standard Bible, but it is the same in any version of any language. Even the NET Bible does not have an inspired list—even in the footnotes! There is no early Greek or Hebrew manuscript that solves the problem either. Therefore I have a potential difficulty. Since do not believe in an infallible human authority that has determined what books belong in the Bible, how can I be certain what books belong in the Bible and still profess sola Scriptura?

It would seem that the Scripture alone is not sufficient to establish the Scripture alone!! Do we have an fallible canon of infallible books?

It was R.C. Sproul who first made the claim that Protestants have a fallible canon of infallible books. A fallible canon of infallible books? What good is that? Catholics often jest about the seemingly ironic situation in which advocates of sola Scriptura find themselves. Catholics claim that they, due to their belief in a living infallible authority, have an infallible collection of infallible books, and that we are just borrowing from them!

Not only this (as an aside), but what about interpretation? Not only do Protestants not believe in an infallible authority to dogmatize which books belong in the Bible, but they don't believe in an infallible authority to interpret the Bible. Therefore, we can take this to the next level. Protestants have a fallible interpretation of an fallible canon of infallible books. Ouch! Sounds like it is time to convert to Catholicism, eh?

Not so fast. In the end, this is an issue of epistemology. Epistemology deals with the question "How do you know?" How do we know the canon is correct? How do we know we have the right interpretation? Assumed within these questions is the idea of certainty. How do you know with certainty? Not only this, but how do you know with absolute certainty?

The question that I would ask is this: Do we need absolute infallible certainty about something to 1) be justified in our belief about that something, 2) to be held responsible for a belief in that something. I would answer "no" for two primary reasons:

1. This supposed need for absolute certainty is primarily the product of the enlightenment and a Cartesian epistemology. To say that we have to be infallibly certain about something before it can be believed and acted upon is setting the standard so high that only God Himself could attain to it. Outside of mathematics and analytical statements (e.g. a triangle had three sides), there is no absolute certainty, only relative certainty. This does not, however, give anyone an excuse or alleviate responsibility for belief in something.

For example, I believe that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. I prepare each day with this belief in mind. Each night, I set my alarm clock and review my appointments for the following day, having a certain expectation that the next day will truly come. While I have certainty about the sun rising the next day, I don't have infallible certainty that it will. There could be some astronomical anomaly that causes the earth to stop its rotation. There could be an asteroid that comes and destroys the earth. Christ could come in the middle of the night. In short, I don't have absolute infallible certainty about the coming of the next day. This, however, does not give me an excuse before men or God for not believing that it will come. What if I missed an early appointment the next day and told the person "I am sorry, I did not set my alarm clock because I did not have infallible certainty that this day would come."



Would that be a valid excuse? It would neither be a valid excuse to the person who I was supposed to meet or to God.

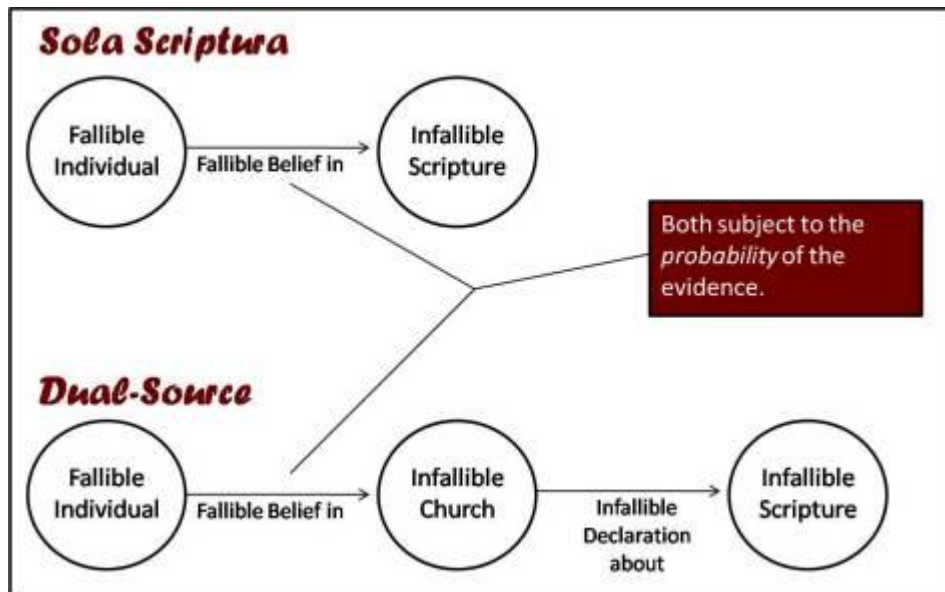
We have a term that we use for people who require infallible certainty about everything: "mentally ill." Remember What About Bob? He was mentally ill because he made decisions based on the improbability factor. Because it was a possibility that something bad could happen to him if he stepped outside his house, he assumed it would happen. There are degrees of probability. We act according to

degrees of probability. Simply because it is a possibility that the sun will not rise tomorrow does not mean that it is a probability that it won't.

The same can be said about the canon and interpretation of Scripture. Just because there is a possibility that we are wrong (being fallible), does not mean that it is a probability. Therefore, we look to the evidence for the degree of probability concerning Scripture.

2. The smoke screen of epistemological certainty that seems to be provided by having a living infallible authority (Magisterium) disappears when we realize that we all start with fallibility. No one would claim personal infallibility. Therefore it is possible for all of us to be wrong. We all have to start with personal fallible engagement in any issue. Therefore, any belief in an infallible living authority could be wrong. As Geisler and MacKenzie put it, "The supposed need for an infallible magisterium is an epistemically insufficient basis for rising above the level of probable knowledge. Catholic scholars admit, as they must, that they do not have infallible evidence that there is an infallible teaching magisterium. They have merely what even they believe to be only probable arguments. But if this is the case, then epistemically or apologetically there is no more than a probable basis for Catholics to believe that a supposedly infallible pronouncement [either about the canon or interpretation of the canon] of their church is true" (Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences, p. 216).

Here is a graph to illustrate what I mean:



This means that we are all floating in the same river, just different boats. Catholics (Dual-Source Theory) have a fallible belief about an infallible authority; Advocates of sola Scriptura have a fallible belief about an infallible authority. Both authorities must be substantiated by the evidence and both authorities must be interpreted by fallible people. In the end, what is the difference? Advocates of sola Scriptura just cut out the infallible middle man.

Do advocates of sola Scriptura have a fallible collection of infallible books? Yes. We concede such. When all is said and done, all of our beliefs are fallible and therefore subject to error. But remember, [the possibility of error does not necessitate the probability of error](#). We have to appeal to the evidence to decide. God would [probably] accept nothing less.

Part 8: What about All the Divisions?

The fifth argument against sola Scriptura:

Without the infallible authority of the Church, the Church would be hopelessly divided on matters of doctrine and morals. This would not be the Church that Christ started.

The idea here is that when doctrine is left to the “private interpretation” of the individual, this leads to doctrinal anarchy. Catholics and Orthodox alike often appeal to the thousands of Protestant denominations as a witness against the doctrine sola Scriptura.

Answer:

There are a few problems that I see with this argument. I will deal with the first to in brief and spend more time on the last one in the post that follows.

Problem 1: We don't advocate “private interpretation”

This argument often assumes that sola Scriptura promotes an unbridled “private interpretation” that gives no authority to tradition. This is not the confession of sola Scriptura, but of nuda Scriptura, which I have spoken about previously. Advocates of sola Scriptura do not believe in this sort of private interpretation. We must interpret the Scriptures along with those who have gone before us, even if we might have warrant to question or disagree with their theology from time to time. Those who read the Scripture, as Alexander Campbell once advocated, “As if no one has read them before” are not following in the tradition of the Reformed view of sola Scriptura. Those must be judged on their own merit without association to the doctrine of sola Scriptura.

Problem 2: Everyone has divisions.

Protestants disagree about what the Scriptures say, Catholics disagree about what the Church says, and (as the saying goes) the Orthodox don't say enough to disagree! Simply because one is put under a more definite designative umbrella does not make true unity. I, for example, have witnessed just as many disagreements among Catholics about what the Church means by “outside the Church there is no salvation” as I have among Protestants about any issue. All one has to do is to go spend some time on the [Catholic Answers forum](#) and see that they don't function with much more unity than a Protestant forum. There would seem to be just as many disagreements, differing interpretations, and needless anathmatizing among Catholics as among Protestants. The point is that simply because one functions under a unified name or confession does not mean that you have a unified belief.

It is agreed, however, that Protestants tend to have more divisions, but I would not say that this is the case with Evangelicals to the same degree as other Protestant traditions.

See [this article](#) for more on the overstatement of Protestant divisions.

3. Division is not always a bad thing

I am a Calvinist, others are Arminian. I believe in a premillennial eschatology, others are amillennial. I am a traducianist with regards to the creation of the soul, others are creationists. I believe in inerrancy, others believe that this is an archaic naive doctrine. There are many points of doctrinal division that I am going to have with people, some of which are much more important than others.

Why doesn't everyone agree with me? Who is causing this disunity in the body of Christ, them or me? Do these divisions demonstrate the doctrinal bankruptcy of sola Scriptura? Should we elect a Pope of Protestantism?

There are a few different ways that I could answer this.

Others don't agree with me because they have not studied deep enough (lack of scholarship).

Others don't agree with me because they have not studied broad enough (lack of perspective).

Others don't agree with me because they have not studied long enough (lack of wisdom).

Others don't agree with me because their traditional prejudices have created a learning disability that keeps them from the truth (lack of freedom of thought).

Others don't agree with me because they have sin in their life that is blinding them to the truth (lack of holiness).

Others don't agree with me because we don't have an infallible authoritative interpreter of Scripture that would bring doctrinal unity?

Others don't agree with me because they are not Christian. If they were, well . . . they would agree with me! (lack of salvation).

Generally speaking, I do not default to these possibilities. Don't get me wrong, these are all possibilities. It could be that people deny the truth (assuming that my position is such) due to ignorance, lack of perspective or wisdom, traditional bindings, sin, lack of authority, or a presupposition of godlessness. But I think we need to be careful about any negative prejudgments about people motives and the ultimate reasons for disagreements.

Here are the considerations that I would aspire to make before I draw upon the former possibilities.

Others don't agree with me because they are right and I am wrong.

Granted, I am convicted I am right. If this were not the case I would simply change my position. But the possibility always exists that I am the one who is in error, being misinformed, motivated by false pre-understandings, traditionally bound, or lacking perspective. I must consider this with great humility, as hard as it is to do.

There are some things that I am more sure of than others. For example, I am less likely to be wrong about the existence of God than I am about the doctrine of inerrancy. It is much more plausible that there is an error in the Scriptures than it is that God does not exist. As well, I am humbled by the fact

that there are many things that I used to believe that I no longer believe. I held to these former beliefs with (what seems to be) just as much conviction as many of the beliefs that I hold to now. What do I do with that? In most of those cases, the evidence, or lack there-of, militated against my previous doctrinal commitments forcing me to make hard adjustments. For example, I used to believe that if someone did not accept the doctrine of inerrancy, they were not Christian. This was due to my fundamentalist presuppositions no doubt, but when faced with the evidence that there are many people out there who do not hold to inerrancy, yet loved and trusted the same Christ as me, my position had to either change or slumber in the bedroom of naivety. I still have those decisions to make. It is called learning.

What I must realize is this: there is not one belief that I hold to which is protected by infallibility. Infallibility is the other side of the coin of absolute certainty. Absolute certainty can only be held by those who have all the information and are interpreting it correctly. To be infallible means that you cannot fail. Since I am not infallible, by definition, I can fail. All of my beliefs are subject to my attribute of fallibility. There is no one who possesses infallibility. Even Roman Catholics, as we have said, who try to alleviate themselves of this reality by trusting in the dictates of an infallible magisterial authority such as the Pope inevitably face the same problem since their own trust in the infallible authority of the Pope is fallible. The same holds true for Evangelicals and our infallible Bible. Our belief in the Bible is fallible, even if the Bible itself is not. No one can escape their own fallibility. Therefore we all could be wrong. We are left to rely on a process of examining and weighting the evidence and following it wherever it leads. This will often cause us to change our beliefs.

Therefore, serious consideration must always be made of the proposition that people don't agree with me because I am the one who is wrong.

Others don't agree with me because God does not want us to agree, irrespective of who is right.

This may sound odd, but we must consider it. I said earlier that I was a Calvinist. While this does not give me exclusive right to the doctrine of God's sovereignty, it does require me to consider what part it might play in the question Why doesn't everyone agree with me? What I am really asking is this: Why isn't everyone unified around the truth?

I believe that it is a real possibility—even likely—that God does not want absolute doctrinal unity. In fact, practically speaking, I think it would do more harm than good. I believe that doctrinal disagreements are healthy for the church. When there is conflict between opposing options, the issue at hand is understood at a more profound level than is possible in the absence of the conflict. Conflict, in the end, can bring about a deeper conviction of the truth. When there is no conflict, there is no iron sharpening iron.

I am not in any sense trying to relativize the truth, but to help us to understand that wrong beliefs, even our own, could be serving the purpose of God and bringing Him more honor than we recognize. It is often said that heresy is God's gift to the church. Why? Because when a false option is presented the truth becomes much clearer. In contrast there is clarity. In clarity there is conviction.

It is for this reason that we must be continually engaged with alternative options. As hard as it is to engage in beliefs that go against our present convictions, we need to recognize the value of the struggle. Herein lies what I believe to be one of the greatest strengths of the Protestant doctrine of sola Scriptura—it presents the opportunity to wrestle with the issues at a level that is not allowed for in magisterial based traditions.

What I am saying is this: it may actually be God's sovereignty that brings about division over the doctrine of God's sovereignty! This does not mean that wrong belief is always justified. Neither does it mean that we need to be content with agnosticism or lessen our conviction about any doctrinal issue. To the contrary. It means that we engage in it more vigorously than we did before, being confident that God has a dignifying reason for conflict resulting from diversity.

We have learned to celebrate diversity in every area of life. We celebrate the diversity of the sexes. Men: We know that we are always right, but can you imagine a world where women did not contribute to a balanced perspective? That is horrifying. Women, can you imagine the opposite (don't answer that!). Think of the diversity among personalities, nations, political parties, age groups, and cultures. While we may believe that our opinion is correct (and it may be), from a certain perspective we can appreciate the allowance for a dissension in values, beliefs, and practices. Understanding diversity can often cause us to see that the answer to many issues is going to be more of a both/and rather than an either/or. We could both be right and we could both be wrong.

In the end, if God is in control then the answer to my question is relatively simple. Why doesn't everyone agree with me? Because it is not God's will for them to. It is to His glory. Why? His will is better accomplished through diversity. In this I think we can learn to celebrate diversity without yielding to the postmodern matrix of relativism or apathy.

Advocates of sola Scriptura appreciate disagreements, but we also need to be careful about making the division created by such too wide.

Part 9: A Biblical Defense of *Sola Scriptura*

Now I will start to give a brief positive defense of the Protestant doctrine of sola Scriptura.

The Scripture implicitly and explicitly speaks of its unique authority and sufficiency.

2 Tim. 3:14–17

“You, however, must continue in the things you have learned and are confident about. You know who taught you and how from infancy you have known the holy writings, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work.”

Notice here that the Scriptures are sufficient to give Timothy “wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” So they are sufficient for salvation. Notice as well that the Scriptures are to be used for “training in righteousness” so that the person dedicated to God may be capable of “every [pan]good work” (emphasis added). If Paul truly believes that Scripture is sufficient for every good work, then this gives much credence to the basic foundational principles of the doctrine of sola Scriptura. This says that the Scriptures are sufficient for sanctification as well as salvation. The Scriptures are sufficient and, therefore, lacking in nothing.

Three things this passage teaches us:

- Scriptures are sufficient for salvation.
- Scriptures are sufficient for sanctification.
- Scriptures are uniquely God-breathed (theopneustos). Please note: Tradition is never given this designation or any similar designation.

Ps. 119

This Psalm is an acclamation of the Scriptures, made up of 176 verses (longest chapter in the Bible) mentioning the Word of God 178 times using 10 different synonyms. The Scriptures are presented as being totally sufficient for the follower of God in all matters pertaining to instruction, training, and correction. It is significant that though Scripture is mentioned 178 times, the concept of unwritten Tradition is never mentioned once. In fact, there is no acclamation of or meditation on unwritten Tradition in such a way anywhere in Scripture. This would be problematic if one were to believe that the concept of unwritten Tradition is on equal footing as Scripture, yet the Bible never mentions it. It would be the greatest case of neglect that one could find unless one could present the case that Psalm 119 is speaking of the Law which includes both the written and unwritten form. This is possible, though difficult to maintain for many obvious reasons related to the previous posts.

Acts 17:10–11

“The brothers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea at once, during the night. When they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. These Jews were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so.”

This is a clear illustration of a commendation and example of the sola Scriptura method in practice. The Bereans were praised for testing the Apostles' teaching against the witness of Scripture. Don't miss this significance. It was not merely the theoretical magisterial authority in succession with the Apostles, it was a living authoritative Apostle they were testing—and Luke commends them! This is the very essence of sola Scriptura and perhaps the most significant example of the doctrine in practice.

What is interesting is that Roman Catholics are forbidden from testing the bishops according to Scripture, but they are required to do just the opposite—test the Scriptures according to the bishops—since they are told that they don't have the ability to responsibly interpret Scripture. It must be noted that the twentieth century saw some great and encouraging developments in the area of personal Bible study among Roman Catholics. However, they are still required to interpret Scripture in light of the Magisterium, not vice-versa as the Bereans were.

Part 10: A Historical Defense of *Sola Scriptura*

I have attempted to present a balanced look at the Protestant doctrine of sola Scriptura. This is a doctrine that I hold to very strongly and believe is a sine quo non of Protestantism. What I mean by this is that this doctrine forms an essential bedrock of Reformation orthodoxy.

In the previous posts I have step by step attempted to defend this doctrine against competing models of authority held by both Catholics and (sometimes) Eastern Orthodox. But one of the most substantial claims that those who deny sola Scriptura will make is that it does not find representation in the history of the church. In fact, Roman Catholics would argue that church history holds to a dual-source theory where unwritten tradition and Scripture are equal and the Magisterial authority of the Catholic church infallibly interprets both.

I agree that it would be a substantial argument if in the history of the church we cannot find the principles of sola Scriptura being held, but this is simply not the case. I offer two arguments here:

1. To require that one produce an articulated view of sola Scriptura in history anachronistic. An [anachronism](#) is where one enforces a contemporary articulation of an idea or use of a word on an ancient audience. This is not unlike many Christian cults do with the doctrine of the Trinity. They ask orthodox Christians to produce historical verification for the Trinity prior to 325 A.D. (the date of the Council of Nicea when the Trinity was articulated in its near current form). They are not looking for seeds of the principle beliefs, but an actual articulation. Expecting to find the doctrine of sola Scriptura commits the same type fallacy. Both suffer from the same presumption that if something is true, we will find it in its current articulated form from the beginning. This assumption is unjustified and finds no parallel in any other discipline.

The doctrine of sola Scriptura as defined in this series was explained and articulated as such precisely because of the controversies of the 16th century. Search all you will and you will not find the phrase "sola Scriptura" before the Reformation just as you won't find the word "Trinity" commonly used before Nicea. But, in both cases, I do believe you will find the doctrine in seed form. In other words, the doctrine of sola Scriptura was undeveloped before the Reformation, but it was present in its undeveloped form.

As I have argued many times, there is a development that doctrine goes through, and controversy is the adrenaline to its development. If there is no controversy, it will remain an assumed part of tradition. It's assumption does not mean it is right or wrong, it just means that the church had yet to deal with it substantially and holistically. (See my "[An Emerging Understanding of Orthodox](#)" for a more thorough breakdown of doctrinal development theory.)

2. Sola Scriptura did exist in seed form. I am going to post some quotes from the early church fathers.

Those who are opposed to what I am arguing will say that I have taken these out of context, but the truth is that we all see what we are conditioned to see. If you are dead set on rejecting sola Scriptura and highly respect the witness of history, you will simply form a theological context around these statements so that they say what your theology says they must say. But I have been a student of church

history for long enough to say that the more I read the early church fathers, the more I am convinced that they held to an unarticulated form of sola Scriptura. In other words, for most of church history, the Scriptures have been the final and only infallible source for truth.

Irenaeus (ca. 150)

Against Heresies 3.1.1

"We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith."

Notice how Irenaeus equates the traditions with the Scriptures. They proclaimed the truth at first (unwritten tradition), and "at a later period" handed it down "in the Scriptures" which is now the "ground and pillar of our faith." Sounds very Protestant.

Clement of Alexandria (d. 215)

The Stromata, 7:16

"But those who are ready to toil in the most excellent pursuits, will not desist from the search after truth, till they get the demonstration from the Scriptures themselves."

Notice the final court of appeal is the Scriptures, not the church. The "those" who are encouraged to toil in the most excellent pursuits do not refer to the church ecclesiastical authority, but to all people. All people are encouraged here to search for truth and find it finally in the Scriptures.

Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca. 395)

On the Holy Trinity NPNF, p. 327

"Let the inspired Scriptures then be our umpire, and the vote of truth will be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words."

Again, the final court of arbitration is the Scriptures, not the church. Respect is always given to the ecclesiastical authority and tradition by the early church, but Scriptures hold a unique place of authority.

Athanasius (c. 296–373)

Against the Heathen, 1:3

"The holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth."

This speaks to the vital doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture that we dealt with earlier. The Scriptures being "fully sufficient," is simply a seed form of sola Scriptura.

Basil the Great (ca. 329–379)

On the Holy Spirit, 7.16

"We are not content simply because this is the tradition of the Fathers. What is important is that the Fathers followed the meaning of the Scripture."

This sounds a lot like Martin Luther at Worms. While we respect the tradition of the Fathers, they don't bring contentment unless they followed the Scriptures.

Ambrose (A.D. 340–397)

On the Duties of the Clergy, 1:23:102

“For how can we adopt those things which we do not find in the holy Scriptures?”

This is even stronger than I would go. Ambrose sounds a little fundamentalistic. In fairness, it was the particular issues---doctrinal issues---which brought this about. The answer to Ambrose's question could not be more plain. We cannot adopt those things which we do not find in holy Scriptures because Scripture is our final and only infallible authority.

St. Augustine (A.D. 354–430)

De unitate ecclesiae, 10

“Neither dare one agree with catholic bishops if by chance they err in anything, but the result that their opinion is against the canonical Scriptures of God.”

The most important thing to notice here is the belief that the Catholic bishops can err. Agreement with them is not based upon some infallible authority which they possess, but is measured against the canonical Scriptures of God!

Again, to be sure, there is a great respect and authority given to tradition in the early church as there was among the Reformers. Protestants need to understand this when studying history. But I do not believe that the most prominent of the early church fathers would have rejected the Protestant doctrine of sola Scriptura properly defined.

While I have great respect for many who do not agree with me on this issue, I believe that I have represented a compelling case both biblically and historically that the Scriptures are the final and only infallible source in matters of faith and practice. To be sure, this does open up the problem of interpretation that we are always going to have, but, in the end, we must follow the truth as God has revealed it. Scriptures are the norma normans sed non normata---"the norm of norms which is not normed."