

Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone)

Key Issue / Question

In Christianity, who or what has the **authority to tell you what is sin or not sin, what is right or wrong, what you can do or cannot do?**

In other words, who or what has the **authority to bind your conscience?**

Point of Contention

Teaching of Rome	Teaching of the Reformation
<p>Authority= Scripture + Church Tradition (Tradition = the 'Magisterium' of the Catholic Church. Eg. Pope speaking ex cathedra; Decisions of church councils etc.)</p>	<p>Authority = Scripture Alone (Sola Scriptura)</p>
<p>Tradition interprets Scripture. ("No one ... shall... presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church... hath held and doth hold...", Council of Trent 4th Session)</p>	<p>Scripture interprets Scripture (What is known as 'The analogy of faith', WCF 1.9)</p>
<p>The individual is not allowed to interpret the Word of God, but accept the interpretation determined by Church Tradition.</p>	<p>Tradition is subject to Scripture</p> <p>The individual is to study the Word of God with the Holy Spirit's illumination (Acts 17:11). The Holy Spirit teaches the believer through the Scriptures.</p>
<p>The implication is that the Church Tradition is a higher authority than the Scripture, since it determines authoritatively what Scripture means.</p>	<p>It is God who, through his Word and Spirit, teaches the believer. The Church, as a body of believers, is thus in subjection to the Word of God.</p>

Comment:

The dispute is **NOT** about the inspiration of the Scriptures (that Scriptures are God-breathed, hence the very Word of God). Neither is it about the authority of the Scriptures per se. It is whether the authority is through Scriptures **ALONE**. This then leads to a related issue of the interpretation of the Scriptures: “Who determines the right interpretation of Scripture if it is not Church tradition?” Well, it is the Holy Spirit who teaches every believer who studies the Scripture, comparing Scripture with Scripture. “So how am I to study it, if I can’t read it in a language that I can understand?” Do you now see why God raised up men who hazard their lives to translate the Word of God?

Note: ‘Sola Scriptura’ does **NOT** mean that we cannot be taught by our creeds, confessions and catechisms. What it means is that what is taught is **only binding upon us in so far as they accurately represent the truth of Scripture**. Our creeds, confessions and catechisms are “Subordinate Standards”. “Subordinate” means lower in rank, under authority. They are subordinate to the Word of God. They are summaries of what the Bible says and so it is still ultimately what the Bible says that binds our consciences. Yet “Subordinate” does **NOT** mean that we should have a low regard of them. On the contrary, we have a **high regard** of them, because we believe that **they accurately represent the truth of Scripture**.

Westminster Standards

- **WSC 2:** What rule hath God given to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him?
A. The **WORD OF GOD**, which is contained in the **SCRIPTURES** of the Old and New Testaments, is the **ONLY rule** to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him
- **WCF 1.10: The Supreme Judge**, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, **can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture**.
- **WCF 20.2:** **God alone is Lord of the conscience**, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary

to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith on worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

- **WCF 1.9: The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself;** and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

Scriptural Proofs

- **[2 Tim 3:16-17]** All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.
- **[Acts 17:11]** These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.
- **[John 15:26-27]** But when the **Comforter** is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even **the Spirit of truth**, which proceedeth from the Father, **he shall testify of me**: And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.
- **[John 16:13]** Howbeit when he, the **Spirit of truth**, is come, **he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come**.
- **[1 Cor 2:10-16]** But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so **the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God**. Now **we have received**, not the spirit of the world, but **the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God**. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which

the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

Other Quotations

- *Martin Luther at the Leipzig Disputation 1519:*
"I assert that a council has sometimes erred and may sometimes err. Nor has a council authority to establish new articles of faith. **A council cannot make divine right out of that which by nature is not divine right.** Councils have contradicted each other, for the recent Lateran Council has reversed the claim of the councils of Constance and Basel that a council is above a pope. **A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it.** As for the pope's decretal on indulgences **I say that neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and councils.**"
- *Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, 1521:*
"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), **I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.** I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."
[When Luther says 'by clear reason', he means by clear reason **from the Scriptures**]
- *John Calvin:*
"The difference between us and the papists is that they do not think that the church can be 'the pillar of the truth' unless she presides over the word of God. We, on the other hand, assert that it is because she reverently subjects herself to the word of God that the truth is preserved by her and passed on to others by her hands."