

EQTH105 Basic Bible Doctrine

Unit 6 Reading 2 — Who Speaks for God?

Presented by the



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Don Stewart :: Who Speaks for God? Is It the Bible or the Bible and Something Else? (*Sola Scriptura*)

QUESTION 1

Who Speaks for God? Is It the Bible or the Bible and Something Else? (*Sola Scriptura*)

This is probably the most important question that we as human beings need an answer to. Who *does* speak for God? Are God's words to humanity found in the Bible alone or is there another source of authority which we must also look to for answers to our ultimate questions? Where do we find God's words?

From an examination of the Scripture we find that it claims to be God's Word to humanity. Many people would agree that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. However, they would not agree that the Bible alone is the final authority. It is the Bible plus something else. This may be additional revelation from God, in the form of other written works, or it may be sacred tradition. Whatever the case may be, the Bible is not viewed to be sufficient in and of itself.

Is the fullness of God's truth contained in the Scripture alone, or are we to look elsewhere? Does the Bible itself have anything to say on the matter?

The Doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* (the Scripture Alone)

The term commonly used to describe the Protestant position on the authority of the Bible is the Latin phrase *Sola Scriptura* (the Scripture alone). Basically, *Sola Scriptura* says there is only one special or particular revelation from God to the human race. This special revelation is found in the written Scriptures, or the Bible. The common division of Holy Scripture is thirty-nine books in the Old Testament and twenty-seven books in the New Testament. These writings are divinely inspired by God and they are God's only special revelation of Himself which we have today. Nothing else is needed. Thus, we speak of the Scripture as being materially sufficient for all matters of belief and practice. The doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is derived from the Bible itself.

Sola Scriptura Explained

The following points need to be made about the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. It is essential that we understand what it is and what it is not.

1. Authority to Speak for God Was Limited to Certain Individuals

It is important that we realize that God gave only a few select people the right to speak for Him. This occurred during a limited time in history. In the Old Testament era, this happened over a period of about one thousand years. It began in the time of Moses, about 1400 B.C. and ended with the writings of the last of the Old Testament prophets, about 420 B.C.

In the New Testament era, the ability to speak for God was limited to those people who saw and heard Jesus. These individuals alone were granted special authority to teach His truth and explain His ministry. The only exception to this was the Apostle Paul who was specially chosen by the Lord to bring His word to the Gentiles. However, he too was living at the same time as Jesus' apostles. After the death of the last of these people, no one had the right to speak authoritatively from God.

From Scripture we find that Jesus made a number of special promises to His handpicked disciples regarding the proclamation of His message. For one thing, He promised that the Holy Spirit would supernaturally bring back to their remembrance all things which He said and did. We read the following words of Jesus to His disciples:

I have spoken these things while staying with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will cause you to remember everything I said to you. (John 14:25-26 NET)

Here we have the promise of Jesus that His specially designated disciples would remember everything that He said and did. This would come about through the work of the Holy Spirit. Obviously, this promise was limited to those individuals who had been with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry. They were the only ones who could testify to what Jesus actually said and did.

Jesus also promised that after He left this world the Holy Spirit would guide these individuals into all truth. He said:

I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. (John 16:12-13 NET)

According to Jesus, the Holy Spirit would teach them things they were not able to receive at that particular time.

Jesus also said that these disciples would testify about Him. Again, the reason that the disciples of Jesus are able to authoritatively do this is because they had been with Him from the beginning. He said:

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send you from the Father-the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father-he will testify about me, and you also will testify, because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:26-27 NET)

When we put these passages together we discover a number of important truths. The disciples of Jesus, those who had been with Him from the beginning of His ministry, would themselves have a unique ministry. They would proclaim His truth to the world. In doing so, the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth as well as bring back to their remembrance all things which Jesus said and did. However, this promise, of necessity, was limited to this select group of men who had been with Jesus from the beginning. By definition, nobody else could claim this promise. Therefore, once the last of these handpicked men died the unique authority which they possessed died with them.

2. These Select Individuals Composed Holy Scripture

The select individuals whom Jesus chose were the only ones who had the capacity, as well as the authority, to compose Holy Scripture or to approve of others writing Holy Scripture. This is crucial to understand. They would have been the only people in a position to write authoritatively about Jesus or approve other writings done during their lifetime. After these men died, there was nobody who could testify with any type of authority as to what Jesus did or did not say, or did or did not do. This is why written Scripture must end with them!

Consequently, Protestantism says that the Scriptures alone must be the final authority on all matters of belief and practice. This is true because the Scriptures alone are a product of this select group of disciples who had been with Jesus from the beginning, or in the case of Paul, one who had been given a unique calling by Him.

3. The Result: the Scriptures Are Sufficient, Nothing Else Is Needed

Since God has spoken to humanity during a limited period in history, and only through certain handpicked individuals, the result is a set of documents which contain everything necessary for humanity. These writings, now grouped as one Book, the Bible, are the only rule of faith and belief that God has given; nothing else is necessary for the church to properly function. Indeed, from these documents we know who God is, who we are, how we can be saved from our sin, and the way in which He now expects us to live. Consequently, in these writings, He has given us everything necessary.

When he spoke to the elders at the church of Ephesus, the Apostle Paul explained the content of God's message in this manner:

For I did not shrink back from declaring to you the whole plan of God. (Acts 20:27 HCSB)

The entire plan of God had been taught to them; nothing was lacking. This plan is now recorded in Holy Scripture. This being the case, we can conclude that all other so-called infallible sources outside of Holy Scripture must be rejected. This includes other holy books as well as holy tradition. Every source outside of Scripture must be placed under the authority of Scripture.

Thus, the Scripture is where we find ultimate answers; there is no higher court of appeal. Why is this so? It is because the origin of Scripture is God Himself. Paul wrote:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16 NIV)

Thus, the reason Scripture is sufficient is because it is God Himself who is the ultimate Author of the books of the Bible. No other source, either written or oral, can claim this sort of authority.

Summing up *Sola Scriptura*

Therefore, from the evidence at hand, we find that God's written Word was restricted to certain time periods in history when He spoke through His specially designated spokesmen. During these limited time periods, God's words were put into writing by individuals whom He chose. Apart from these limited periods of time, we have no authoritative written documents which have God's divine authority behind them.

This, of course, does not mean that God was not working during these other time periods or that He said and did other things during these time periods which are not recorded in the Bible. Neither does it mean that God did not reveal Himself to certain individuals during other periods where we have no written Scripture. However, since we have no way of knowing to whom He spoke, or what He said and did apart from that which is written in Scripture, God's truth for all humanity must be limited to the writings which we now possess.

Consequently, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* recognizes that God's authoritative word to humanity is limited to the sacred writings which were composed during these unique times. Thus, we conclude that there are no other sources of sacred truth apart from these divinely inspired writings which were given at divinely appointed times. The Scripture, and it alone, contains the entire plan of God. It is sufficient to meet all of our spiritual needs.

Clearing up Some Misconceptions about *Sola Scriptura*

It is not only important to properly understand the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, it is also essential that we clear up a number of common misconceptions about this vital truth. They can be listed as follows:

1. *Sola Scriptura* Is a Biblical Doctrine, Though the Bible Does Not Use These Words to Describe Itself

The primary objection to the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* is that the Bible does not use this expression to describe itself. Often the objection is put in the form of a question, "Show me the verse where the Bible teaches that it alone is the sole infallible source of truth?" Where does it say that the Scriptures are sufficient? The answer? There is none. No verse states this truth. Since there is no one single verse of Scripture which says that the Bible alone is the sole sufficient source of divine truth, then many people assume that the doctrine is not biblical, and therefore, it is not true.

However, this logic does not follow. For example, the doctrine of the Trinity is taught throughout Scripture, yet the word, "Trinity" is never once used. Consequently, merely because the term "the sufficiency of Scripture" or something like it is not found in the Bible does not mean that the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is not there. It is not the specific terminology that is the issue.

The issue is this: Does the Bible teach that it is the sole sufficient source of God's truth to the human race, the final authority on all matters of belief and practice?

To discover the answer to this question we must look at the entirety of the Word of God. When this occurs, we do find that the Scripture itself teaches that the final authority on all spiritual matters is that which has been committed to writing in the sacred books.

2. *Sola Scriptura* Means That the Bible Tells Us Everything We Need to Know: Not Everything Which We Could Know

The doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* says the Scriptures are sufficient; we need nothing else. However, while the Scriptures tell us everything we need to know about God and His plan for humanity, He certainly does not tell us everything which we could possibly know. In other words, the Bible gives us sufficient truth, but not exhaustive truth.

Indeed, the Scripture itself says that it is selective in the things it records. John wrote:

Jesus worked many other miracles for his disciples, and not all of them are written in this book. But these are written so that you will put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. If you have faith in him, you will have true life. (John 20:30-31 CEV)

In another place, John said:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:25 NIV)

According to John, Jesus did many other things than what John recorded in his gospel. However, what has been recorded is sufficient for us. The fact that many things were left unrecorded does not mean that the Bible is somehow lacking or insufficient. Indeed, Peter taught that believers have been given all things which pertain to life and godliness. He wrote:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence. (2 Peter 1:3 ESV)

God has provided everything which we need. These provisions of God have been recorded in the written Scriptures, and in them alone.

Paul told Timothy that the Scriptures contained all that is necessary to instruct us about the salvation provided through Jesus Christ. He wrote:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing those from whom you learned, and that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 3:14 HCSB)

The Scriptures contain everything that is necessary. It is a sufficient source of authority for humanity.

3. *Sola Scriptura* Recognizes That the Understanding of Doctrine Develops Throughout History

This is a very important point. While the Scriptures contain everything that is necessary for the beliefs and practices of Christians, the understanding of these truths has developed over time. As time goes by, we get a clearer picture about the truths of the faith. It is not that the Scriptures have changed; what has changed is our understanding of the Scriptures. Indeed, as more and more information continues to be discovered which throws light on the background of the biblical world, we are in a better position to understand the truths taught in Scripture.

Thus, when we speak of the development of Christian doctrine, we are not saying that new things have been added to the sacred Scripture, what we are saying is that through further study and reflection, as well as the result of new discoveries in fields related to Scripture, we have a better picture of the truths contained in the Bible.

4. *Sola Scriptura* Does Not Mean the Rejection of All Tradition

The Scriptures are the only divine rule of faith and practice. However, this is not to say that everything that has to do with tradition is rejected. Indeed, there is evidence that Jesus observed some of the Jewish traditions and customs that were popular in His day. Most likely, He wore the same type of clothing as other Jewish men and He observed many of the Jewish customs; such as going to the synagogue on the Sabbath day.

What He spoke out against were the traditions which were contrary to the written Word of God. The mere fact that something had been handed down through time, or that it was the customary practice of the people, was not the issue. The issue was this: How did these beliefs and practices compare to what God has commanded in His written Word? Therefore, from observing Jesus' view about traditions, we find that traditions are not necessarily good or bad in and of themselves. It depends on how the traditions compare to what God has commanded in His Holy Word.

One final thing should be mentioned. Even though certain traditions and customs were practiced by Jesus and the apostles, they were never elevated to the same authority as what the Lord has said in His written Word.

5. ***Sola Scriptura* Does Not Mean the Oral Reports of Jesus by His Disciples Lacked His Authority**

Before the New Testament was committed to writing, the message of Jesus was transmitted orally. Nobody denies this. The oral reporting by Jesus' disciples carried His absolute authority. Therefore, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* understands and appreciates that there was a time when the message of Jesus circulated orally. However, today the only access we have to Jesus' words and deeds are from the writings of His immediate followers; the New Testament. We have no way of accessing any of the oral teachings of the apostles which circulated at that time. Therefore, the written Scripture alone must be our guide. No portion of divine revelation has been preserved solely through oral tradition.

6. ***Sola Scriptura* Does Not Mean All Christians Will Agree on Every Point of Doctrine**

The fact that the Scriptures are sufficient does not necessarily mean that every believer in Jesus Christ will hold to the exact same viewpoint on every doctrinal issue. On the key issues, there is agreement among Bible-believers. However, there are many matters in which the Bible does not give us sufficient information to come to a definite conclusion. This does not mean that the Scriptures are somehow deficient. In some cases, it simply means that God did not believe that it was necessary for us to know about these things. In these cases, humans should not attempt to fill in the areas which God has left blank. In other cases, it is not that God hasn't revealed His truth on the subject; the problem is that certain individuals have not studied the subject carefully enough. Whatever the case may be, the problem does not lie in the insufficiency of Scripture.

Protestant denominations do have conflicting beliefs on certain subjects. However, this does not mean that we need some other source apart from the Bible to settle these conflicts.

7. ***Sola Scriptura* Does Not Remove the Role of the Church in Its Mission to the World**

While the Scriptures are the final authority on all matters of belief and practice, the church does indeed have a role in fulfilling the mission which God has given to it. Paul wrote to Timothy:

If I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15 NIV)

The church is called the pillar and foundation of truth; it is in possession of the truth of God, the Holy Scriptures. However, the role of the church is to proclaim the message of the Scripture and to encourage believers to live according to what the Bible teaches. The role of the church is not to lord over Scripture. The church has the authority to proclaim God's Word, but the church does not have any authority to tamper with His Holy Word. The church has a role, but it is the role of a "servant" to the Bible; it is not the "Master" over it.

8. ***Sola Scriptura* Does Not Deny the Role of the Holy Spirit in Understanding the Message of Scripture**

This brings us to our final misconception about *Sola Scriptura*. When we say that the Scriptures alone contain everything necessary for believers, we are not denying the unique role of the Holy Spirit in the proper interpretation of the Scripture. Indeed, the One who gives humanity the proper understanding and interpretation of the message of Scripture is the Holy Spirit; it is not the church. It is the ministry of the Spirit of God to teach believers and to lead us into the truth of God.

The Bible teaches that every believer has the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul wrote:

But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them are not Christians at all). (Romans 8:9 NLT)

By definition, a Christian is someone with whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

In addition, Paul said that the Holy Spirit will remain with believers during our entire lives. Paul also wrote:

In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation—in Him when you believed—were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit. He is the down payment of our inheritance, for the redemption of the possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14 CSB)

The Apostle Paul told Timothy that the Lord will give us the understanding of His truth:

Think about what I am saying. The Lord will give you understanding in all these things. (2 Timothy 2:7 NLT)

This understanding comes from the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we need both the infallible source of truth, the Bible, as well as the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God to properly understand the things contained in Scripture.

Thus, while the Scriptures contain everything necessary, they cannot be properly understood apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Therefore, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* recognizes the need for the Holy Spirit to guide and teach those who have trusted Christ as their Savior.

With this brief description of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, we find that it is consistent with what God has said about Himself in His Word. By definition, we are limited to the written Scripture in order to know who God is, who we are, and what He wants from us. Consequently, the Bible alone must be the final source of authority on all matters of belief and practice.

Summary - Question 1

Who Speaks for God? Is It the Bible or the Bible and Something Else? (*Sola Scriptura*)

The most important question today is who speaks for God? Is it the Bible alone or the Bible and something else? The Protestant view, which is the biblical view, is that the Bible, and it alone, is the final authority on all matters of belief and practice.

The idea that the Bible alone is the final authority on all matters of belief and practice is called *Sola Scriptura* (the Scriptures alone). The idea of *Sola Scriptura* is derived from what the Bible has to say about itself. As we study the Scripture, we find that God's truth, as far as modern day humanity is concerned, is limited to what was written down during specific time periods in history. Consequently, the only certainty we can have about God and His plan for us can be found in these writings alone. No other source has any divine authority. Therefore, we are limited to the written Scripture, and to it alone, to determine what we should believe about God and how we are to behave toward Him.

Because of its importance, the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* must be properly understood. Therefore, a number of misconceptions must be cleared up. For one thing, while the terms *Sola Scriptura*, or the sufficiency of Scripture, are not found in the Bible, this is what the Scripture teaches about itself. *Sola Scriptura* sums up what the Bible has to say about its own nature.

We must also recognize the fact that the Bible does not give us exhaustive truth about God; it merely provides us with sufficient truth. It tells us all we need to know about who God is, who we are, and how we can personally know Him.

Sola Scriptura also recognizes that the understanding of doctrines has developed throughout history. While the truths of Scripture have never changed, our understanding has developed as our knowledge grows.

In addition, those who believe in *Sola Scriptura* are not against all tradition; it is only those traditions which contradict the Word of God. Traditions must always be examined in light of the teachings of the Word of God.

Furthermore, those who hold to *Sola Scriptura* recognize that there was a time when the teachings of Jesus were transmitted orally. Yet, today the only access we have to Jesus' words and deeds is from

what was written down by His handpicked disciples.

Sola Scriptura does not mean that believers in Jesus Christ will agree on all points of doctrine. There will be areas which Bible-believing Christians will disagree. However, on these essentials of the faith there is no disagreement among those who recognize that Jesus was the One whom He claimed to be.

Sola Scriptura does not remove the role of the church in proclaiming and teaching the message of Christ. Yet it understands that the role of the church is one of a servant to the Scriptures, not the lord and master over it.

Finally, *Sola Scriptura* recognizes that the Scriptures can only be properly understood by the work of the Holy Spirit. He indwells all believers and guides them into the truth of God's Word. While the Scriptures are indeed sufficient, they can only be properly understood through the teaching work of the Spirit of God. This sums up the biblical doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*.