

Sola Scriptura

As we consider the issue of *sola scriptura*, we must reflect for a moment on the importance of the doctrine. As Seventh-day Adventists, we often simply assume that the Bible is the only authority available to us. Study and prayer will allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into the truth. But this position is not accepted by a vast number of people who call themselves Christian. Roman Catholics, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses reject the Bible as an authority which is accessible to the lay believer. While they believe that it is the word of God, they believe that it is so complicated that the Bible requires an infallible interpreter on earth for the rest of us.

This interpretive office is called a "magisterium". The classic example is the Pope. The Roman Catholic Church states that when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* on issues of doctrine and morals that he is infallible. This infallibility extends to the general councils of the church. Together, these are called the "extraordinary magisterium". The Mormon "general authorities", including the Prophet and Apostles (First Council of Twelve), claim a similar authority.

The appeal of such an infallible teacher is obvious. The believer has no need to search out truth for himself. It is delivered to him, complete and correct. He can rest content in the assurance of his future, since he is walking on the correct path. Unfortunately, this is pure illusion.

We are not infallible. Therefore, any choices we make are necessarily fallible. Our understanding of the "infallible teacher" will necessarily be imperfect, since all human communication is imperfect. This fact becomes apparent as we examine the understanding of Catholics and Mormons of the "infallible" teachings of their own churches. Unanimity of understanding does not exist. A vast array of variations around a theme will be found, with a few widely dissenting opinions. If this looks familiar, it ought to.

Christians of all varieties find themselves disagreeing on points of understanding when dealing with the Bible *sola scriptura*. They all admit that the Bible is the infallible word of God. Yet, because it is written in human language, it fails to convey every nuance of God's perfection to mere mortals. In fact, Paul flatly tells us that there is much we will learn after the second coming (see 1 Corinthians 13:9-12).

The interposition of a human institution between God's word and the believer is just one more layer of ambiguity and possible error separating us from the truth. That is why God tells us in 2 Timothy 2:15 to study. We are to individually search out the truth. Each one of us will be personally responsible for the outcome of our life (Romans 14:12).

It is important to properly define *sola scriptura*.

"The Bible claims to be the *sole* and *sufficient* infallible rule of faith for the Christian Church. The Scriptures are not in need of any supplement; their authority comes from their nature as God-breathed revelation; their authority is *not* dependent on upon man, church, or council. The Scriptures are self-consistent, self-interpreting, and self-authenticating. The Christian Church looks to the Scriptures as the only infallible and sufficient rule of faith, and the Church is always subject to the Word, and is constantly reformed thereby." James R. White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy*

It is also important to define what it is not.

1. It is not a claim that the Bible contains all knowledge.
2. It is not a claim that the Bible contains all religious knowledge.
3. It is not a denial of the authority of the Church to teach the gospel.
4. It is not a denial that the Word of God comes in non-written forms.
5. It does not require rejection of all traditions.
6. It is not a denial of the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the Church.

It is:

1. A statement that the Scriptures are sufficient to act as our infallible rule of faith.
2. A statement that all that we need to believe as Christians is found in Scripture.
3. A statement that the Christian is not obligated by anything not found in Scripture.

We should note the Westminster Confession of Faith.

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and

life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture... we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word...

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

In contrast, the opponents of *sola scriptura* claim that the Bible is too complicated to understand. They claim that the magisterium is the only way to prevent loss of the truth. But Paul tells us that even while he was alive, the people who heard the truth directly from the apostle, who got it directly from Jesus, still fell away from the truth. The books of Galatians and Colossians are direct results of this apostasy and syncretism, and the same problem show up in other letters. Why should we expect to have better results today than the church had in the time of the apostles?

The claim that the Bible is too complicated to understand is an affront to God. It says that God is too stupid to give us His word in a form which we can use. It also says that a human (the Pope, etc.) is smarter than God and can sort out God's errors so that man can understand His true intent.

The opposite is in fact the standard we are given. The word of God has been divinely preserved, virtually without loss, over 4,000+ years. We see many examples where Jesus, God incarnate, does not fall back on his own authority, but requires his audience to consult the scriptures already given by God. The example is repeated in the Bereans (Acts 17:11). But God is not content to simply give examples. We are instructed to study (2 Timothy 2:15). This instruction would be absurd if we were unable to understand the Bible. We then see where Timothy is told that the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) is able to give him wisdom for salvation.

This statement is one of sufficiency. If the OT is able, nothing else is required. We have a set of writings which are useful (2 Tim 3:16-17) for all Christians. Therefore they are understandable. The errors of those who distort (2 Peter 3:16) are avoidable, since they are in fact deliberate errors. If we are careful, in full knowledge of the fact that there will be distortions and false understandings, we will hold fast to the truth. By using the Bible as our anchor of knowledge, and our faith in God as our anchor in eternity, the Holy Spirit will allow us to properly understand God's Word.

Advocates of a magisterium throw up numerous arguments as a smokescreen. The first is that there are things which the Bible does not tell us. While this is obviously true, it is irrelevant. God tells us that the Bible tells us enough. We are not expected to know everything. In fact, the depths of the scriptures are such that we will never graduate from the University of the Word. All that is important is that we learn enough, and continue to grow in truth. Our initial belief on Christ and his sacrifice on the cross justifies us (declares us righteous). Our continued learning with the inward working of the Holy Spirit is sanctification, and then at the second coming we will be glorified. We have to accept the fact that the Bible is sufficient, but not exhaustive.

Additional arguments are made that Paul tells us to hold onto "traditions" which he taught (1 Corinthians 11:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:15). They then argue that these were not written down, but were kept in an unbroken chain of apostolic office-holders to be revealed at a later date, or are contained in other writings by early church fathers. While there might be logically something taught that was not in the Bible, it would not be required for salvation, as we have already seen. Paul also contradicts the idea that there were "secret" traditions which he did not write down in 1 Corinthians 15:1-3. Here he points out that what he taught verbally is the same as what he is writing.

The idea of a "secret" tradition which is required for salvation is an oxymoron. How can God hold you responsible for something which you have no possibility of knowing? In fact, Paul argues against this at length several places (see Romans 1:12). God does not keep secret knowledge for a select few. He wishes to save us all. This idea of a secret tradition is seen in Gnostic syncretism, where the idea of secret knowledge (*gnosis*) is a fundamental part of the scheme of things. Only those with the secret knowledge were able to become saved. Fortunately, this entire scheme is false.

We must briefly examine the results of allowing a magisterium to be the arbiter of truth. How do you test any proposition? The teacher declares it to be true. How do you know? You can't test it against scripture, since that denies the premise of infallibility. How do you know he is infallible? He says so! In other words, the claim of infallibility rests on the claim of infallibility. It is circular. There is no possibility to

cross-check the magisterium.

This leaves us with the fallible choice to accept a proposed, but utterly unaccountable teacher. The logical consequences of this are frightening. As we study the various churches which preach a magisterium, we will see how this allows doctrines which are not only wrong, but which are totally contrary to the Bible to be taught as "Christian truth".

Our only choice is to "test the spirits" (Deut 13:1-4; 18:21-22, Matt 7:15-20, 1 Cor 13:5, 1 John 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Rev 2:2) We MUST examine every teaching by the gold standard (Revelation 3:18), the Bible. We must study carefully (2 Timothy 2:15) so that we will not be deceived (Matthew 24:24).