

Why We Need More Than the Bible

By Jim Penrice

“Where is that found in the Bible?” is a question Protestants often pose to Catholics, on topics such as Purgatory, Mary’s Immaculate Conception, perpetual virginity and assumption into Heaven, etc. Such questions come from the perspective of “Sola Scriptura,” or “Scripture alone, one of the central tenets that emerged from the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. It holds that the Bible contains everything we need for salvation, that we need nothing else apart from it.

Protestant denominations interpret Sola Scriptura in various ways. Many accept that there are other authorities that legitimately govern Christian life, but see them as ultimately subordinate to the Scriptures, to which there is no equal.

Evangelical Christians are more extreme. They hold the Bible to be the sole, supreme authority, exclusive of any others, that Scripture interprets itself, and that it is sufficient in itself; we need absolutely nothing more than the Bible.

Catholics hold the Bible to be one of three sources of God’s revelation, the others being sacred Tradition and the Magisterium, or teaching authority of the Church given by Jesus to Peter and the Apostles and handed down to their successors through the centuries. Catholics also hold that, as the Bride of Christ, a total physical/spiritual union with Jesus the Bridegroom through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, is essential.

This article will address the shortcomings of “Sola Scriptura,” and the strong Biblical foundation of the Church as a source of divine revelation. Other articles will address the importance of the sacramental life.

There are a number of problems with Sola Scriptura, particularly with the extreme interpretation held by Evangelicals. When we reflect upon this concept in depth it becomes clear that Sola Scriptura, ironically, contradicts

Biblical teaching. We will examine these problems one at a time, and discover what we need in addition to the Bible.

Let's begin with perhaps its most serious flaw: If you hold to Sola Scriptura, you necessarily believe that God the Father simply doesn't care about the vast majority of his children throughout human history, that he has revealed his truth to only a relative few, and thus doesn't care if the majority don't know his truth and aren't saved. This is the conclusion necessarily drawn when we put the Bible into historical context and still cling to Sola Scriptura. Here's why.

The Bible teaches that God created every human being from the very beginning of time (Genesis 2:7, 21-22; Acts 16:26), and that he made humanity in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). The Bible also teaches that the Word of God has always existed, that the Word of God is a person, not a thing, and, referring to this personal Word, says that all things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be—that the Word has been present and active from the very beginning of the human race (John 1:1-3). It tells us that God desires all people to know him, and has always made knowledge of himself available to all people of all times and places (Romans 1:20, Acts 17:27-28), and wants all people to come to a knowledge of the truth and to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4).

Even before we go any further, the Biblical truths we just listed expose a major problem with Sola Scriptura. For it limits the eternal and personal Word of God—whom the Bible says has been present and active everywhere from the creation of humanity—to words that were not printed on paper until many thousands of years later, and made available to a relative few.

Human civilization was alive and flourishing by 10,000 BC. But the books that comprise the Bible did not begin to be written until about 900 BC—at least 9000 years after God created the first people. Many thousands of people, perhaps millions, lived and died long before the first words of Scripture were ever put on paper. To gain a bit of a perspective, human civilization accomplished the following long before the writing of Scripture:

the inventions of the wheel, wine, pottery, linen, paper and glass; the development of farming with irrigation, plowing and the taming of horses; the domestication of camels and other animals; the establishment of the first libraries and zoos.

Many people of good will lived during these pre-Biblical times. The Bible itself tells stories of many of them, especially key figures in salvation history. Abraham, for example, likely lived around 2000 BC; Moses probably lived during the second millennium BC. The stories of Abraham and Moses tell us how God spoke to these men without written Scripture. Though we can now read these accounts in Scripture, the fact is these events themselves pre-date written Scripture by many centuries.

The Bible did not exist for these people. And even after the Bible began to be written, it would still be many hundreds of years before most people had access to it. What would eventually become the New Testament didn't begin to be written until about thirty years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension—during the first thirty years of Christianity there was literally no New Testament on paper. Once the Scriptures were written, and formally declared to be Scripture in the fourth century, it would not be until the invention of the printing press eleven centuries later that literacy rates and publishing technology would make the Bible available to the masses.

So if we hold Sola Scriptura to be true, we necessarily proclaim that in the broad history of the human race, God chose a relatively small slice to reveal his Word—only those who lived from roughly 900 BC onward, and most of those who lived prior to the fifteenth century were practically excluded—though the Bible itself clearly teaches that from the beginning of time all were created through God's Word and were all created to know God. (In fact, if there is one Scripture verse that soundly refutes the idea that man can only know God and His truths through Scripture, it is Romans 1:20—"For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.")

In short, if the Bible is the only way God reveals his Word, the vast majority of human beings who have ever lived on this earth have been shut out of knowing God. Did God just not care enough about these people to share his Word with them? Or has God always had other ways to speak his Word to his children (as Romans 1:20 indicates)? And if so, does he still have other ways to speak outside the pages of Scripture? The overwhelming evidence from both Scripture and reason indicate so.

Let's focus on the other key instrument Jesus established as a powerful instrument of the eternal Word: the Church, and especially its relationship with Scripture. (For while Sola Scriptura can't really be defended Biblically, a Church established by Jesus Christ as an inspired instrument through which he teaches and acts in tandem with Scripture is Biblically sound.)

All Christians hold that the Bible is inspired by God, both in its writing and how these specific texts were selected among many as sacred Scripture. But how did God declare what writings are Scripture?

For example, the second letter of Peter declares Paul's writings to be Scripture. But how did God specifically make known that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are inspired and sacred Scripture, as well as The Acts of the Apostles, the epistle of James, Peter's epistles, and John's, and the Book of Revelation? (There were other gospels and epistles being passed around at the time that were not declared to be inspired Scripture.) How did God make this known to men? The Scriptures themselves do not specifically name any of these books as Scripture.

Since he clearly didn't do it through Scripture, he had to use an inspired authority outside the pages of Scripture to declare what is Scripture. God had to inspire human instruments to declare which of the many writings of the time were inspired and which were not, because the Scriptures themselves did not reveal this.

So since Scripture isn't even the sole authority on itself, one would be hard pressed to uphold it as the sole authority on all matters of faith. Nor can one

declare that God does not use inspired human instruments outside the Scriptures to reveal his truth, because he obviously did to even reveal what works constitute Scripture. And if he has in the past, he can continue to do so now.

To put it another way: If the Bible is truly the sole authority on all matters of faith, there has to be an authoritative source for that very statement in order for it to be true; if there's no legitimate authority to cite, then it's just an opinion of men. It logically follows that if Scripture is indeed the sole authority, then Scripture itself has to be the source in order for that claim to be valid. But it isn't—there is not a single verse in the Bible that calls the Scriptures the sole, supreme authority. (Some claim there are; we'll address that shortly.) So the notion of Scripture as the sole authority is necessarily a tradition of men. So if you hold it to be true, you necessarily acknowledge Scripture is not the sole authority, in which case you contradict yourself.

James White tries to make a case for the Biblical basis of Sola Scriptura on his web site for Alpha and Omega Ministries. In answer to the question "Where is Sola Scriptura in the Bible?" he offers John 20:31, which says: "These are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name." Commenting on this verse White says: "John's statement implies that a person could pick up John's gospel, read it, believe it, and receive eternal life in that way. Moreover, John's statement at least hints at the fact that the other gospels have a similar purpose—they are written for us to read, believe and have eternal life."

His use of the terms "implies" and "at least hints" indicate that White himself is perhaps not convinced the Bible absolutely declares Sola Scriptura as irrefutably true. His argument falls apart when read in the context of the entire Gospel of John, as well as the verse that immediately precedes John 20:31.

As we've already established, John's gospel clearly proclaims that the Word of God is an eternal person, not a finite book, and there is much more to the

Word of God than what can printed in any book. John himself acknowledges this in John 20:30, when he writes: “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book,” which is followed by the verse White quotes: “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

John states that what he has written are samples of the eternal Word, not its entirety, so that through these samples one may “have life in his name,” a life that has many elements spoken of elsewhere in the Gospels, particularly the Eucharist, which John proclaims emphatically as essential to the Christian life (which will be the subject of another article).

We can in no way draw from this what White wants us to believe: that what is recorded in the written Gospels is the full extent of God’s eternal Word, all of what God wants us to know, and that only the knowledge of what is in those pages is sufficient.

In another argument White proof-texts Scripture to propose a point that just doesn’t hold up in context. He writes: “The Bereans are commended for subjecting the apostles’ own preaching to a comparison with the Scriptures: ‘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 these things were so.’ (Acts 17:11)”

Let’s fill in the context from Acts 17. In both Thessalonica and Berea Paul and Silas are preaching to Jews in their synagogues. The specific topic of their talk is that Jesus is the Messiah whom the Hebrew Scriptures prophesied would have to suffer and die. The Berean Jews, in order to evaluate whether these specific claims about Jesus fulfilling Scriptural prophecy were true, had to necessarily consult the Scriptures. To then use that specific circumstance to imply that all teaching about Jesus was cross-referenced with Scripture doesn’t hold up. (It wouldn’t help them to search the Scriptures to verify Jesus’ “You have heard it said...but I say...” teachings, without an apostolic explanation of how Jesus was fulfilling, not

contradicting Scripture with these sayings. It would not be self-evident from Scripture.)

White responds to the question “Where is ‘Scripture interprets Scripture’ in the Bible?” with this: “2 Timothy 3:16 says, ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.’ If this is true, then it follows that all Scripture has one divine author even if it has many human authors.”

White misses the point. The issue is not whether the Scriptures are inspired and profitable—it is whether the Scriptures are the only divinely inspired instrument of the eternal Word. Once again, read in context, 2 Timothy 3:16 does not declare *Sola Scriptura*.

Indeed, in 2 Timothy 3:10 Paul writes: “But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions...” Paul then adds to his own experiences which Timothy has observed the Scripture Timothy learned as a child, adding in verses 14-15: “But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” When Timothy was a child he learned only the Hebrew Scriptures, for his childhood predated the New Testament. The Scriptures Timothy knew were incomplete, and were supplemented by Paul’s example and teaching.

Let’s turn now to the Church as the other divinely inspired instrument of God’s eternal Word.

We’ll begin with Jesus’ commissioning of the Apostles in John 20:22-23. But first let’s talk about what an apostle is. An apostle is distinct from a disciple, as established in Mark 3:14. The New Testament authors borrowed the Greek “apostolos” to refer to the twelve, a military term in use at the time for a lower ranking official sent by a superior to act with the authority of the one who sent him. The lower official did not possess any authority in and of himself—he acted rather in the person of the one who sent him, merely as

an instrument of the true authority. Perhaps a good analogy is a police officer, who has authority not of his own accord, but because he has been sent by a greater authority to act as an instrument. This is what “apostle” means.

The Gospel of John says of the Apostles’ commissioning:

“And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” (John 20:22-23)

Jesus breathed on the Apostles before sending them. The word “inspired” literally means “God-breathed.” This is the same term applied to the men God chose to write the Scriptures. This puts the Apostles and the Church founded upon them on the same authoritative level as the Scriptures, for the same term—inspired, “God breathed”—is applied to both. But there’s more.

The mission of the Apostles includes forgiving and retaining sins. This is over and above the mission of preaching the Word, because the Word doesn’t want to simply be preached, he wants to live in the hearts of his people. But this is something no human being can do; only God can forgive sins.

So let’s put all of this together: By breathing on the Apostles (imparting divine inspiration, “God breath,”) and charging them with a task only God can do, Jesus established the Apostles not as mere men to work under their own power, but as inspired instruments of the Word (Jesus himself). Jesus will be the one forgiving and retaining sins, not the Apostles themselves, using them as his God-breathed instruments. Otherwise Jesus would have instructed them to tell people only to pray for the forgiveness of their sins. But he didn’t. he established the Apostles—not just prayer—as dispensers of divine forgiveness.

These two details, God-breath and the mission to forgive or retain sins, are part of the Biblical foundation for Jesus instituting divinely inspired instruments in addition to Scripture.

Mark's gospel emphasizes this point when it states:

"And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs." (Mark 16:20)

Jesus worked in and through the Apostles as they preached the Word—not with Bibles (because there weren't any, and it wouldn't be for another fifteen centuries that Bibles would be available to most people anyway), but through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit which Jesus (the Word Himself) breathed upon them. He performed accompanying signs to confirm this.

There is no Biblical basis for Scripture alone. There is for a divinely inspired Church to work together with inspired Scripture.

A dramatic example of this is Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-39. An angel sends Philip to the road where he will meet the eunuch—a supernatural occurrence that serves as the first indication that Philip is an inspired instrument of the Word (Jesus). Once Philip sees the eunuch in his chariot reading Scripture, we read:

"Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go near and overtake this chariot.'"

This is another indication that Philip is an inspired instrument of the Word, directed by the Spirit, not his own human ideas.

When Philip asks do you understand what you are reading, the eunuch replies:

"How can I, unless someone guides me?... Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him."

He began with Scripture, but then Philip the inspired instrument of the Word began to preach the Word (Jesus).

After Philip baptized the eunuch, we read:

“Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more.”

Recorded here are three supernatural signs performed by God through a man—not performed by a man, but performed by God through a man—so that someone could understand what was unclear in the Scriptures alone. If Philip was not an inspired (God-breathed) instrument of the Word (Jesus) in this instance, where Scripture alone was not enough, how else could one describe it, especially considering the supernatural elements involved? And if we accept that Philip was an inspired instrument of the Word in this episode, then we have to accept that there are inspired instruments of the Word outside Scripture. And if we acknowledge that happened then, we must acknowledge it still happens today through the successors of the Apostles—that will be covered in another article.

Jesus established the Church as a whole—not just the Scriptures—as the ultimate place where a sinner is to hear his fault. In Matthew 18:15-18 Jesus established a procedure for the correction of a sinner:

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the Church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

The instruction is not “have him read the Scriptures,” but “tell it to the Church.” It is not “if he does not heed the Scriptures...,” it is “if he refuses even to hear the Church.” And once again we hear Jesus telling the Apostles that whatever they bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever

they loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. As we've already discussed, the Apostles have no authority on their own to bind and loose; it is only as his inspired instruments that Jesus will bind and loose through them. Once again, Jesus has other inspired (God-breathed) instruments of the Word (Jesus) besides the Scriptures.

Of course the foundation for this is Matthew 16:17-20. Jesus changes Simon's name to Cephas. (Matthew uses a Greek translation, but Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, and Cephas is what He actually called Simon, as referenced in John 1:42, Galatians 1:18, 2:9-14, and 1 Corinthians 1:12, 3:22, 9:5, 15:5.) Cephas means rock, and Jesus said it is upon Cephas, this rock formerly named Simon, that he will build his Church. He also gives this pledge for the first time:

"I will give you (Cephas) the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Jesus does not declare Scripture to be the rock; he gives this title to Simon. Jesus does not declare that Scripture holds the keys to heaven; he says very plainly he is giving those keys to Cephas, a human instrument. Keys are a Biblical symbol of authority. Once again, no human being can bind and loose in heaven, only Jesus can do that. So Jesus is saying here that he has chosen Cephas as the inspired instrument through which Jesus will exercise his authority on earth. There is no mention of Scripture here—a human being is clearly established as the divinely chosen and inspired (God-breathed) instrument of the Word (Jesus).

The reason Jesus chooses Simon to be Cephas is because of what happened immediately preceding this announcement: "Simon Peter said in reply, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus said to him in reply, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Heavenly father.'" Simon Peter's proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah is not the result of human thought or opinion—it is pure divine revelation. Since Simon Peter has demonstrated he is a worthy instrument

through which divine revelation can be sent, without being muddled by human thought or opinion, Jesus makes him the foundation of the Church with the authority of God working through him as a divinely chosen instrument.

All of this does not discredit Scripture as inspired; it does negate the idea of Scripture as the sole authority. Scripture and the Tradition and the teaching authority of the Church, the three acting together, are the sources of divine revelation.