

# The Five *Solas* of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura*

OPENING TEXT: 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-4:5

## INTRODUCTION

1. *Sola Scriptura* is *not* a new doctrine invented during the sixteenth century Reformation or thereafter.
2. Either *sola scriptura* is revealed in principle in the Bible, or it is untrue. We seek to have a biblical faith.
3. Interestingly, that affirmation itself is central to *sola scriptura*, as we will endeavor to demonstrate below.

## I. THE DEFINITION OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

### A. A Simple Definition

1. *Sola Scriptura* is a Latin phrase, coined during the sixteenth century Reformation Movement.
2. It means that Scripture is the ultimate and only infallible authority for faith and practice.

### B. Historical Context and Exposition

1. **Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms (1521)**
2. **The Belgic Confession (1619) – Article 7: The Sufficiency of Scripture**
3. **The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) – Chapter 1, Section 6: Of the Holy Scripture**

### C. A Modern Definition and Affirmation

#### The Cambridge Declaration (1996)

### D. Summarizing the Central Presuppositions and Affirmations

1. Scripture is of Divine Origin
2. Scripture is Infallible and Trustworthy in Everything It Teaches
3. Scripture is Authoritative and Binding for Faith and Practice
4. Scripture is the Ultimate Authority with which All Other Standards Must Agree
5. Scripture is Sufficient and Teaches Everything that Must Be Known for Salvation

## II. THE AFFIRMATIONS OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

### A. *Sola Scriptura* Affirms the Divine Source of Scripture

1. Scripture is θεόπνευστος (*theopneustos*), God-breathed. **2Tim. 3:16**
2. The writers were led to write its words and content by the Holy Spirit. **2Pet. 1:21; Zec. 7:12**
3. This does not mean God dictated the words, but it does mean He ensured their accuracy.
4. The revelation given to these men was written down for posterity. **De. 31:9-11; 4:2; 1Co. 14:37**

### B. *Sola Scriptura* Affirms the Total Integrity of Scripture

1. If Scripture is God-breathed, then its teaching and testimony must be reliable, because God is.
2. Do we think we Holy Spirit “carried men along” to write things that were untrue? **Jn. 10:35b**
3. There are untrue things in Scripture, certainly. It accurately records the lies of liars.
4. But Scripture is trusted because it is primarily God’s word to man, not man’s word about God.

### C. *Sola Scriptura* Affirms the Complete Authority of Scripture

1. The Lord gave us Scripture to teach, reprove, correct, and instruct His people. **2Tim. 3:16-17**
2. Scripture is divinely empowered to sit in judgment of our teaching and lives. **Luke 10:25-26**
3. A prophet’s authenticity was measured partly by his consistency with revelation. **De. 13:1-4**
4. Teachers and teaching are judged by the Scriptures. **Ac. 17:11; 1Co. 14:29; 1Th. 5:21; 1Jn. 4:1, 6**

### D. *Sola Scriptura* Affirms the Ultimate Priority of Scripture

1. Scripture is not the only authority in life. We yield to parents, employers, and the government.
2. Even in our religious lives, parents and pastors are to be honored and obeyed. **Heb. 13:17**
3. But Scripture is the ultimate authority; it has the final word and judges all other standards.
4. It is the “norming norm,” i.e. the standard of authority which judges all other standards.

### E. *Sola Scriptura* Affirms the Full Sufficiency of Scripture

1. The sufficiency of Scripture is implicit in the passages previously noted. **2Tim. 3:14-4:2; 2Pe. 1:3**
2. Others books, teachers, sermons, and confessions may and can be helpful to us.
3. But these resources are only reliable insofar as they comport with and submit to Scripture.

### III. THE CLARIFICATION OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

- A. *Sola Scriptura Does NOT Mean Only the Bible Contains Truth or Contains Everything That is True*
  - 1. You can learn sound theology in the Bible, many good books, and in many churches.
  - 2. You will look in vain for instruction on changing a tire or cooking a ham in the Bible.
  - 3. *Sola Scriptura* is not a claim that the Bible is the only source of truth or the only helpful one.
  - 4. *Sola Scriptura* says the Bible is the ultimate, unerring truth source and the only necessary one.
- B. *Sola Scriptura Does NOT Mean Only the Bible Should Be Read and Studied*
  - 1. Some misunderstand or misinterpret *sola scriptura* to reject all creeds and commentaries.
  - 2. But the Reformers all affirmed ancient and reformation confessions and helped create many!
  - 3. *Sola Scriptura* is not “me and my Bible, don’t bother me with anything else.” That is arrogance.
  - 4. *Sola Scriptura* is about relying on the Bible to know God’s will and judging everything else by it.
- C. *Sola Scriptura Does NOT Mean Individuals are Free to Interpret the Bible as They Please*
  - 1. Scripture has a definite meaning, and individuals are not at liberty to make it what they please.
  - 2. The church upholds the truth contained in Scripture; it is to be read in the church. **2Tim. 3:15**
  - 3. This does not mean the church is infallible (cf. RCC). Each person must search the Scriptures.
  - 4. But interpretation happens in the context of communion and teaching in the church. **Neh. 8:8**
- D. *Sola Scriptura Does NOT Mean the History and Tradition of the Church is Meaningless and Useless*
  - 1. You are not the first to read the Bible, and neither am I. We stand on the shoulders of giants.
  - 2. Theology should be informed by, conversant with, and represented throughout Church history.
  - 3. Others may (and probably have) understood many things better than we do. Listen to them.
  - 4. *Sola Scriptura* is not a license to read the Bible in isolation or formulate practice uncritically.

### IV. THE APPLICATION OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

- A. *How Sola Scriptura Will Affect Our Church’s Life and Ministry*
  - 1. If we believe about the Bible what this doctrine affirms, Scripture will be at the center of all.
    - i. Our understanding and practice of worship, edification, fellowship, the sacraments, etc....
    - ii. We must turn to Scripture to formulate and apply our doctrine of them all.
  - 2. We should not refer to ourselves as a *Bible church* unless we are serious about Scripture.
  - 3. *Sola Scriptura* must also affect our understanding of and attitude toward preaching.
    - i. Many people want preaching they find entertaining, emotionally satisfying, or relevant.
    - ii. Unfortunately, relevance in these cases is rarely defined in a biblical or eternal way.
    - iii. If Scripture is the God-breathed, ultimate, and sufficient authority, it determines preaching.  
“A sermon should always be expository. In a sermon the theme or doctrine is something that arises out of the text and its context. So a sermon should not start with the subject as such; it should start with the Scripture which has in it a doctrine or theme. That doctrine should then be dealt with in terms of this particular setting.” –Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “Preaching and Preachers,” 71-72
    - iv. This is the very command of Paul to Timothy for the post-apostolic age: *Preach the word!* **2Tim. 4:2**
- B. *How Sola Scriptura Will Affect Our Understanding of Revelation*
  - 1. Recently I am studying with LDS missionaries; experience is the ultimate basis for their faith.
  - 2. Sadly it is hard to distinguish their view of experience and revelation from many Christians.
  - 3. If *SS* is true, then the Bible is sufficient. We cannot and should not depend on anything else.
  - 4. Unfortunately, many Christians rely more on claimed experiences or a “word” than the Bible.
- C. *How Sola Scriptura Will Affect Our Daily Lives*
  - 1. How can we affirm *sola scriptura* but fail to take God’s word seriously in our daily lives?
  - 2. If this Scripture is God-breathed, authoritative, and sufficient, shouldn’t we be reading it?
  - 3. *SS* is about confidence in God’s word, but trust is known by the obedience it produces.

### CONCLUSION

- 1. *Sola Scriptura* is known as “the formal principle of ultimate authority” in the Reformation.
- 2. May God help us to make Scripture in its beauty, power, and completeness our true basis of authority.

## EXTENDED QUOTATIONS

### I. THE DEFINITION OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

#### B. *Historical Context and Exposition*

##### **Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms (1521)**

*"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."*

##### **The Belgic Confession (1619) – Article 7: The Sufficiency of Scripture**

*We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it. For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length, no one-- even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says—(Gal. 1:8) ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us. For since it is forbidden to add to or subtract from the Word of God, (Deut. 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19) this plainly demonstrates that the teaching is perfect and complete in all respects.*

*Therefore we must not consider human writings-- no matter how holy their authors may have been-- equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.*

*For all human beings are liars by nature and more vain than vanity itself.*

*Therefore we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule, as we are taught to do by the apostles when they say, "Test the spirits to see if they are of God," (1Jn 4:1) and also, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house." (2Jn. 10)*

##### **The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) – Chapter 1, Section 6: Of the Holy Scripture**

*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: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.*

#### C. *A Modern Definition and Affirmation*

##### **The Cambridge Declaration (1996)**

*We reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured. We deny that any creed, council or individual may bind a Christian's conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation.*

### II. THE AFFIRMATIONS OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

#### D. *Sola Scriptura Affirms the Ultimate Priority of Scripture*

##### **Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* Volume I, 1.3**

*In the Protestant system, the authority of symbols, as of all human compositions, is relative and limited. It is not co-ordinate with, but always subordinate to, the Bible, as the only infallible rule of the Christian faith and practice. The value of creeds depends upon the measure of their agreement with the Scriptures. In the best case a human creed is only an approximate and relatively correct exposition of revealed truth, and may be improved by the progressive knowledge of the Church, while the Bible remains perfect and infallible. The Bible is of God; the Confession is man's answer to God's word. The Bible is the norma normans; the Confession the norma normata. The Bible is the rule of faith (regula fidei); the Confession the rule of doctrine (regula doctrinae). The Bible has, therefore, a divine and absolute, the Confession only an ecclesiastical and relative authority.*