

What Sola Scriptura Does NOT Mean

What do evangelicals mean by the term ‘sola Scriptura’ – by Scripture alone?

An evangelical may answer, ‘As a Christian I do not need anything else besides the Bible – there is no need for tradition, creeds, councils or even a statement of faith. I can interpret the Bible for myself apart from the church, ministers, teachers or fallible human books.’

Unfortunately many evangelicals would agree with that description of sola scriptura. But that popular concept is NOT what the Reformation principle of ‘sola Scriptura’ stands for.

1. Sola Scriptura asserts that the Bible is the complete Word of God to the church, and thus it is sufficient as a rule of faith and practice for God’s people. The Bible is God’s full message to us and there is nothing missing that we must discover through tradition or further divine revelation.

Nonetheless there is a legitimate place for tradition. ‘Tradition’ is not a dirty word; it simply means the handling down of beliefs and practices from one generation to another. Now of course what is handed down may be good or bad – and indeed the word ‘tradition’ is used in the Bible both in the negative as well as positive sense (compare Mark 7:9; Colossians 2:8; 1 Peter 1:18 with 2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6). Therefore we must carefully examine our traditions and hold fast to what is good and in accordance with the Scriptures. Christianity did not begin with us. We have inherited a precious spiritual heritage – the gospel and the cardinal truths of the Christian faith - to guard, cherish and to pass on to the next generation.

2. Sola Scriptura asserts that the Bible, being the Word of God, is the final and infallible authority in all spiritual matters. There could not be a higher court of appeal than the Word of God, for God is above all and He cannot be mistaken. To His holy Word the entire church must submit in humble obedience.

Even so, the Bible does not exclude lesser authorities. On the contrary the Bible asserts the authority of church minister (1 Cor 16:15-18 ; 1 Thes 5:12, 13; Titus 2:15; Heb. 13:7, 17). The Lord calls pastors and teachers to shepherd the flock. They have a God-given authority and duty to teach and lead the church. The rest of us are called to submit to them. Ministers can’t just teach anything they fancy, but to faithfully expound and proclaim the Word of God. That is their sacred calling, and through them God ordinarily speaks to his people.

3. Sola Scriptura asserts the Bible’s perspicuity or clarity; God communicates with us in ordinary human language which Christians can understand.

While we assert that the Bible can be understood, we must also caution that it can be just as easily misunderstood! Even by Spirit-indwelt, born-again believers. We must recognize our human limitations and our sinful reluctance to accept the Word of God as it is. To say, ‘I have the Bible and I don’t need anyone’s help’ is the height of pride and arrogance. The correct interpretation of the Bible is the most difficult and dangerous task in the world. Faithful pastors and teachers spend their lives in the study and teaching of the Scriptures. They are God’s precious gifts to his people (Eph 4:11). Therefore we should approach the Bible with utmost reverence, and recognizing our own limitations and God’s gifts to his church, we should gladly avail ourselves of all means – teachers, sermons, books, creeds and confessions - to rightly comprehend God’s message to us.

The ‘alone’ of ‘sola Scriptura’ is the glad affirmation of the uniqueness of the Bible, not a licence for individualism. ‘Bible alone’ certainly does not mean ‘Me alone’! If we really uphold Sola Scriptura we must cherish the holy tradition we have received from our forefathers, and submit ourselves to church authorities and learn from them, even as the infallible Bible itself clearly commands us.