

# Protestants, Catholics, and the Question of Authority

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People used to think that unbiased human reasoning was actually possible. In recent decades, the rules have changed – for the better. Philosophers have begun to acknowledge that no human being comes to a debate with total objectivity; there are no “brute facts.” Rather, human reason is guided by *presuppositions*, or assumptions we make about reality. We cannot remove these presuppositions; we can only try to identify them and think in light of them. This fact becomes tremendously important in conversations between Catholics and Protestants.

These two groups come to the table with two different presuppositions about authority. The Protestant is rooted in the Reformation heritage of *sola Scriptura* – the Bible alone is the highest authority. The Catholic, on the other hand, comes with an assumption that Scripture and tradition speak together: “*The Roman Pontiff and the bishops, as authentic teachers, preach to the People of God the faith which is to be believed and applied in moral life... The infallibility of the Magisterium of the Pastors extends to all the elements of doctrine, including moral doctrine, without which the saving truths of the faith cannot be preserved, expounded, or observed*” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2050 and 2051*). All other conclusions on matters of faith and practice are based on these foundational assumptions. The Protestant will not accept any doctrine which is not clearly supported in Scripture. The Roman Catholic will not abandon any doctrine which the church has affirmed as sacred. In many doctrinal disputes among lay people, the conversation amounts to two ships passing in the night – each party trying to convince the other of some theological matter without recognizing these vastly different starting points.

One way around this problem is to assume an opponent’s worldview “for the sake of argument,” and then show a conclusion to be invalid from that worldview’s own starting point. This is the tack which is taken by many thoughtful Roman Catholics around the issue of *sola Scriptura*. As the question was phrased to me recently by a Catholic friend: “If Scripture is the only source of ultimate authority, as the general Protestant view states, can you specifically support from the Bible why that view is absolutely (as it would have to be) correct?” In other words, if *sola Scriptura* is true, Scripture itself surely ought to say so; if this principle cannot be shown to be clearly taught in Scripture, it must be rejected as false.

The problem, of course, is that *sola Scriptura* isn’t in the Bible – not in so many words, anyway. The problem is in the word *sola* (alone). My Roman Catholic friends fully agree with the truth of 2 Timothy 3:16: “*All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.*” Then they usually say, “Does that verse say anywhere that Scripture *alone* is inspired by God?” The argument is in the semantics: the Bible says all sorts of things about the primacy and value and inspiration of Scripture, but because it never uses the word “alone,” *sola Scriptura* cannot be established.

This is certainly a thoughtful apologetic. But we must ask: is the premise behind this argument true? Can a biblical truth be established only if the actual words we’re looking for are used in Scripture? Certainly not. By this standard of proof, we would throw out the doctrine of the Trinity, for the word “Trinity” never appears in Scripture. But no Christian of any stripe, Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, would deny the truth of the Trinitarian position!

A brief excursus is necessary at this point, because most Roman Catholics would suggest that the Trinity is further proof for the authority of tradition. They would say that the Church, not the Bible, declared Trinitarian theology to be orthodox. But this is nothing less than a historical oversimplification. Rome was far from being the primary seat of authority in the 4<sup>th</sup> century; the title “Pope” had not even begun to

be used yet for the bishop of Rome; and the writings of the early church fathers appeal to Scripture, not Rome, to establish the Trinity doctrine.<sup>1</sup> The whole debate surrounding Trinitarianism was a biblical one. The essential question, which is informative for the current discussion, was this: can a *biblical concept* be expressed using *non-biblical words*? Though the word “Trinity” was not used in the text, was the *concept* of three persons in one essence still there? One cannot read far in the writings of the fathers without recognizing this to be the essential question.

The same question is at the root of the sola Scriptura debate. The issue is not whether or not the Bible uses the word “alone” in combination with the word “Scripture.” Rather, the question is: which view of authority does Scripture teach? Does the biblical text elevate Scripture alone as the final authority for the believer? Or does it support a combination of Scripture and tradition? Once we stop wrangling over semantics and begin to deal with this essential question, the pieces fall clearly into place.

From the beginning of God’s dealings with his people, he has governed them through his word. Consider the teaching of the Old Testament:

*“...be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success” (Joshua 1:7-8).*

*The sum of Your word is truth,  
And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting. (Psalm 119:160)*

*The grass withers, the flower fades,  
But the word of our God stands forever. (Isaiah 40:8)*

*“Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool.  
Where then is a house you could build for Me?  
And where is a place that I may rest?  
For My hand made all these things,  
Thus all these things came into being,” declares the LORD.  
“But to this one I will look,  
To him who is humble and contrite of spirit,  
and who trembles at My word” (Isaiah 66:1-2)*

Moving into the New Testament, we see the same dynamic at work. It is the written word of God which Christ and the apostles refer to again and again as the authoritative revelation of God:

*And the devil said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” And Jesus answered him, “It is written, ‘MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE’” (Luke 4:3-4).*

*“But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped*

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<sup>1</sup> For example, consider the following from the introduction to Augustine’s famous work *On The Trinity*: “...our Lord God helping, we will undertake to render, as far as we are able, that very account which they so importunately demand: viz., that the Trinity is the one and only and true God, and also how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are rightly said, believed, understood, to be of one and the same substance or essence... First, however, we must demonstrate, *according to the authority of the Holy Scriptures*, whether the faith be so” (*On The Trinity* 1.2.4).

*away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3:18-21).*

*But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim 3:13-17)*

*...regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 3:15-18)*

In contrast to these clear biblical statements of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, we find quite a different picture regarding the authority of tradition:

*Jesus said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’ Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition” (Mark 7:6-9).*

*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision (Galatians 2:11-12).*

*As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Galatians 1:9)*

These examples only scratch the surface; a truly systematic treatment of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture would be quite lengthy. But even from these brief examples, one can see two different Scriptural trajectories regarding authority. On the one hand, the written word of God is *always* regarded as authoritative, even by Jesus himself (who, as the Word of God incarnate, could certainly have rebuked Satan in his own words instead of reverting to “It is written”). On the other hand, human authority and tradition is consistently treated in Scripture as fallible, with even Peter himself suffering rebuke.

So the Protestant view of authority does not depend on whether the words “Scripture” and “alone” appear side-by-side in the biblical text. Rather, it depends on the clear trajectory set by Scripture regarding authority.

The Protestant view is also the only one which allows for adequate Christian humility and repentance. Because Scripture is the only standard, Protestants can call each other to repentance based on the sole

authority of Scripture. No person, no matter their office or position, stands outside the authority of the Bible. But when the Catholic magisterium makes mistakes, there is no external authority by which to call them to repentance. The conflict this creates in Catholic thinking is evident.

For instance, in an interview by the editors of *Modern Reformation* magazine<sup>2</sup>, Richard John Neuhaus, a leading Catholic theologian, was asked about the Council of Trent, which anathematized the view of justification held by Protestants. The Council asserted: “*If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, ...let him be anathema.*” On the one hand, Neuhaus maintained: “Catholics believe that through the magisterium of the church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit there is a constant and reliable further unfolding of the truth.” But when pressed as to whether this “unfolding of truth” meant that Trent was wrong and should be recanted, he replied, “...There will never be a recantation of a council statement... You don’t go and say, okay, now we’re going to repudiate this part of our tradition, and change our anathemas and turn them around in the other direction. No, because that would be against the unity of the church.” The logical inconsistencies in Neuhaus’ position are obvious, but they are required under a Catholic view of authority. On the one hand, Neuhaus must maintain that the magisterium of the church is infallible; on the other, he must affirm that the Council of Trent was not the last word on justification. It is unclear to the current reader how the magisterium can be “infallible” (as stated in the Roman Catholic Catechism) and yet subject to “a constant further unfolding of the truth.”

The Roman Catholic and the Protestant have different foundational assumptions regarding the issue of authority. The purpose of this essay has been to show that the Protestant presupposition is more in line with Scripture on this issue, and to defend the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* against one argument often posed against it by thoughtful Catholics. It is the author’s hope that this brief treatment will spur further dialogue and will move readers toward a reverence for Scripture as the supreme revelation of God’s truth. “*Your word, O Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens... Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path*” (Psalm 119:89, 105).

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<sup>2</sup> “Clarity Before Unity,” in *Modern Reformation*, vol. 13, no 6, November/December 2004, 6.