# 1. Scripture alone (sola scriptura)

**Often heard:** "Show me that in the Bible." / "Scripture is our only authority; tradition is man-made."
**Also heard:** "Where does the Bible say Scripture alone is the only authority? And who told you which books belong in it?"

## Scripture is the only infallible rule

**HELD BY** Lutheran · Reformed · Anglican · Methodist Scripture primary · Baptist

Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith. Church teaching and tradition can be useful but are fallible and must be tested by Scripture. Jesus condemned traditions that override God's word. The essentials of salvation are clear enough for any believer to grasp with the Spirit's help (the "perspicuity" of Scripture).

**VERSES CITED**

2 Tim 3:15–17; Acts 17:11; Mark 7:8–13 (Matt 15:3–9); Isa 8:20; 1 Cor 4:6; Gal 1:8–9; Col 2:8; Prov 30:5–6; Rev 22:18–19; Ps 119:105; John 20:31; 1 John 2:27.

**WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM**

Medieval reformers John Wycliffe (1370s–80s) and Jan Hus (d. 1415) set Scripture over church authority. Luther made it decisive at the Leipzig Debate (1519) and the Diet of Worms (1521). It was written into the Reformed confessions and, for Baptists, the Second London Confession (1677/1689) ch. 1 and the Baptist Faith and Message (1925/1963/2000) art. I. The Latin slogan *sola scriptura* is mostly later shorthand.

## One deposit: Scripture and apostolic Tradition

**HELD BY** Catholic · Orthodox Holy Tradition, no pope

God's revelation is one deposit handed on in two ways, written Scripture and apostolic Tradition, and authentically interpreted by the Magisterium (the bishops in communion with the pope), which is not above the word of God but serves it. Scripture never says it is the only authority. The apostles taught orally and in writing and told Christians to hold both; the list of inspired books is itself known through the Church; and when Christians disagreed about doctrine, the apostles settled it in council. 2 Tim 3:16 says Scripture is profitable and equips, not that it alone suffices, and when Paul wrote it "Scripture" meant mainly the Old Testament.

**VERSES CITED**

2 Thess 2:15; 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2; 2 Tim 1:13–14; 2:2; 1 Tim 3:15; Matt 18:17; Luke 10:16; John 16:12–13; 21:25; Acts 8:30–31; 15:1–29; 16:4; 2 Pet 1:20–21; 3:15–16.

**EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY**

Clement of Rome (c. 96) and Ignatius (c. 110) urge obedience to the ministers the apostles appointed. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3–3.4 (c. 180), answers the Gnostics by pointing to apostolic succession and the tradition kept by the churches, noting that some peoples held the faith without written Scripture. Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* (c. 200): heretics have no right to use Scripture, since it belongs to the apostolic churches. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 27.66 (c. 375), lists practices received by unwritten tradition (sign of the cross, facing east to pray, triple immersion). Vincent of Lérins (434): hold what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all. Augustine would not believe the Gospel unless moved by the authority of the Catholic Church (*Against the Fundamental Epistle* 5). In the rebaptism dispute he wrote that observances kept by the whole Church, though not in the apostles' writings, are "fairly held to have been enjoined by the apostles" (*On Baptism* 5.23.31); Protestant writers answer that this is a probable inference from custom ("may be supposed"), not a second source of revelation, and note his statement that only the canonical books are free from error (Letter 82.3). See Augustine of Hippo and question 6.

**CATECHISM AND COUNCILS**

CCC 74–100 (esp. 80–83 Scripture and Tradition, 85–87 Magisterium, 95), 113; Vatican II, *Dei Verbum* 9–10 (1965); Council of Trent, Session 4 (1546).

## Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

### Catholic

One deposit of revelation is handed on in Scripture and apostolic Tradition, and the Magisterium interprets it authentically, serving the word of God rather than standing above it. The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 80–86, 95; *Dei Verbum* 9–10.

### Orthodox

Revelation is handed on through Holy Tradition and Holy Scripture, which are not rival sources: Scripture is the supreme expression of Tradition, read within the Church through the Fathers, the liturgy and the seven Ecumenical Councils. The Church as a whole keeps the true interpretation; no single living office, including the pope, is held to be infallible.

Sources: Confession of Dositheus (1672), Decrees 2 and 12; Longer Catechism of St. Philaret (1830), Q. 16–24; Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs (1848), §17.

### Lutheran

The prophetic and apostolic Scriptures alone are the rule and norm by which all teachers and

### Reformed

Scripture's authority rests on God, its author, not on the testimony of the Church. It contains

teachings are judged. The creeds, the Fathers and the Lutheran confessions are honored as witnesses to how that teaching was kept, but they stand under Scripture; Lutherans present this as continuity with the catholic Church, not a break from it.

Sources: Formula of Concord, Epitome, "Rule and Norm" 1–2, 7; Smalcald Articles II.ii.15; Augsburg Confession, conclusion of Part I.

everything needed for faith and life, nothing may be added to it, and Scripture is its own interpreter. The Fathers and councils are respected but subordinate: the final judge of controversies is the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.

Sources: Westminster Confession 1.4, 1.6, 1.9–10; Belgic Confession, arts. 5 and 7; Second Helvetic Confession, chs. 1–2.

### Anglican

Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation, and nothing that cannot be proved from it may be required as an article of faith. The Church is the "witness and keeper of holy Writ" with authority in controversies of faith, but it may not ordain anything contrary to Scripture, and general councils may err.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles VI, XX, XXI; Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888).

### Methodist

Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation, in words taken almost unchanged from the Anglican Article VI. Wesley called himself "a man of one book" while drawing freely on the Fathers and the Church of England. The United Methodist Church treats Scripture as primary and reads it with tradition, experience and reason, a pattern the 20th-century scholar Albert Outler named the "Wesleyan quadrilateral."

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion (1784), V; Wesley, preface to *Sermons on Several Occasions*; United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, "Theological Guidelines: Scripture."

### Baptist

Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith. Church teaching and tradition can help but are fallible and must be tested by Scripture, which is clear on what is needed for salvation. The full case is set out above.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message (2000), art. I; Second London Confession (1689), ch. 1.

**Where it gets contested:** Many who hold Scripture alone (Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans and Baptists; Methodists treat it as primary) distinguish *sola* (Scripture is the only infallible rule) from "*solo*"

(no teachers or creeds at all), and quote Fathers who make Scripture the final test, such as Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lectures* 4.17: don't believe even me unless I prove it from Scripture). Catholics reply that those same Fathers read Scripture within the Church's rule of faith and under the bishops; the Orthodox likewise read Scripture within the Church through the Fathers. The real dispute is who decides when sincere Bible readers disagree.

See also: Classic arguments 23–38, 39–48

More: Chapter 3: weighing the Church Fathers

**Deeper study: the Catholic case against Scripture alone in eight points, and the Protestant replies**

The Catholic arguments against Scripture alone, the Protestant reply to each, and how each side reads the other's texts. It does not decide between them.

## The two positions

**Catholic:** one deposit of revelation is handed on in Scripture and apostolic Tradition, and authentically interpreted by the Magisterium, which "is not above the word of God, but serves it" (*Dei Verbum* 9–10; CCC 80–86, 95). The Church therefore does not draw "her certainty about everything which has been revealed" from Scripture alone (*Dei Verbum* 9).

**Protestant:** Scripture is "the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience" (Second London Confession 1.1). The Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577) calls the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures "the sole rule and standard" by which all teachings and teachers are judged (Epitome, Rule and Norm 1). Protestants do not reject creeds, councils or the Fathers, but rank them below Scripture: councils "may err; and many have erred," and are "to be used as a help" rather than as the rule of faith (Westminster Confession 31.4).

## The arguments, point by point

1. **No verse teaches it.** *Catholic:* no verse teaches that Scripture alone is the rule of faith, so the principle defeats itself.
   *Protestant reply:* the principle does not require every doctrine to be stated in one verse; what is needed is "either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (Westminster Confession 1.6). Protestants argue that it follows from Scripture being the only revelation now available that is "given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16), from the warnings against adding to God's words (Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18), and from Jesus' testing of the traditions of his day by the written word (Mark 7:8–13).

2. **The canon.** *Catholic:* Scripture does not list its own books; the canon is known through the Church's judgment. Augustine would not have believed the Gospel unless moved by the authority of the Catholic Church (*Against the Fundamental Epistle* 5).
   *Protestant reply:* the authority of Scripture "dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God" (Westminster Confession 1.4); the Church recognizes the inspired books rather than giving them their authority. Calvin reads Augustine's saying as describing what first draws an unbeliever to the gospel, not the ground on which a believer's faith rests (*Institutes* 1.7.3).
3. **Apostolic command.** *Catholic:* Paul says "hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle" (2 Thess 2:15; 1 Cor 11:2; 2 Tim 2:2).
   *Protestant reply:* Calvin takes "traditions" here to mean "the whole of that doctrine in which they had been instructed" by Paul himself (*Commentary* on 2 Thess 2:15). Protestants accept all that the apostles taught by word or letter, but hold that no body of unwritten apostolic teaching can now be identified with certainty apart from Scripture, since "those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people" have "now ceased" (Westminster Confession 1.1).
4. **The Church as pillar.** *Catholic:* the Church, not the Bible, is called "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).
   *Protestant reply:* Calvin explains that the Church is called the pillar of truth because "she defends and spreads it by her agency" through the ministry of the word (*Commentary* on 1 Tim 3:15). The Church holds up a truth it has received; Protestants deny that the verse makes it unable to err.
5. **Councils.** *Catholic:* the Jerusalem council settled doctrine with authority (Acts 15:28; 16:4).
   *Protestant reply:* Protestants grant councils a real but subordinate authority (Westminster Confession 31.4). They note that the Jerusalem council itself argued from Scripture ("to this agree the words of the prophets," Acts 15:15), and that it included apostles, whose authority later councils do not share.
6. **Interpretation needs a judge.** *Catholic:* Scripture contains "things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest" (2 Pet 3:16), and Bible-only Christians have divided into many denominations.
   *Protestant reply:* Protestants grant that not everything in Scripture is equally plain, but hold that what is necessary for salvation is clear enough that "not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means" may understand it (Westminster Confession 1.7), and that "the infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself" (1.9). They add that an authoritative interpreter must itself be interpreted, and that Catholics also disagree about what their Church's documents mean.
7. **2 Tim 3:16–17.** *Catholic:* the passage says Scripture is "profitable," not that it alone suffices, and when written it referred mainly to the Old Testament; if it proved Scripture alone, it would prove the Old Testament alone sufficient (Catholic Answers, "Scripture and Tradition,"

following Newman).
*Protestant reply:* Paul says Scripture makes the man of God "perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim 3:17), which Protestants read as sufficiency for faith and life. If the Old Testament was already "able to make thee wise unto salvation" (3:15), they argue, the completed canon is no less so; and Peter already counts Paul's letters among "the other scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16).

8. **The Church came first.** *Catholic:* the Church preached, baptized and worshiped for decades before the New Testament was written or collected.
*Protestant reply:* the apostolic word came before the Church, which is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph 2:20). While the apostles lived, their spoken teaching was itself the rule; Protestants hold that Scripture is now the only form in which that teaching reaches us with certainty (Westminster Confession 1.1).

### How Catholics read the texts Protestants cite

- **2 Tim 3:15–17:** to say that all inspired writing is profitable is not to say that only inspired writing must be followed, and Paul elsewhere requires the traditions as well (2 Thess 2:15) (Catholic Answers, "Scripture and Tradition").
- **Mark 7:8–13 (Matt 15:3–9):** Jesus condemns "the tradition of men" that sets aside the commandment of God, not the apostolic Tradition, which the Church distinguishes from human and changeable traditions (CCC 83).
- **Acts 17:11:** the Bereans received Paul's spoken preaching and searched the Old Testament to test it; Catholics read this as Scripture and living apostolic preaching working together, not as Scripture alone.
- **Prov 30:6; Rev 22:18–19:** Catholics hold that Tradition adds nothing to God's word but hands on the same deposit, since Scripture and Tradition flow "from the same divine wellspring" (*Dei Verbum* 9); Rev 22:18 speaks of "the words of the prophecy of this book."
- **Gal 1:8–9:** the curse falls on any gospel other than "that which we have preached unto you," which Catholics note was first a preached, oral gospel.

The Protestant readings of the Catholic texts are given in the replies above.

### Nuances on both sides

Catholics agree with Jesus' condemnation of human traditions that nullify God's word (Mark 7:8–13) and distinguish apostolic Tradition from changeable customs (CCC 83). Some Catholic theologians (Congar, Geiselmann) hold that Scripture materially contains all doctrine but needs Tradition and the Church to interpret it, a view Trent's wording ("in written books *and* unwritten traditions") left open. On the Protestant side, the confessions describe councils and the Fathers as a "help" in faith

and practice (Westminster Confession 31.4), and the Reformers appealed to them often; what they deny is that any of these stands on a level with Scripture.

### What is actually in dispute

Both sides hold that Scripture is inspired and that what the apostles taught binds the Church. The questions are whether any apostolic teaching has come down outside Scripture with equal authority, and whether the Church's teaching office can interpret revelation without error, or whether every later authority, councils included, remains answerable to Scripture alone.

---

Last reviewed November 10, 2026