

Introduction: The Blessing and Difficulty of Interpreting and Applying the Bible

There are many ways to describe the beauty and power of the Bible. Countless people have found God's Word to be "a lamp" and "a light" for their walk of life (Psalm 119: 105). Paul reminded Timothy that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Learning God's words can even "give understanding unto the simple," which suggests that learning from the Bible does not demand extensive education or high intelligence (Psalm 119:130).

Church history confirms the clarity of the Bible in matters of core doctrine. This basic doctrine that we hold true and precious has unified the Church since its beginning. It includes, but is not limited to, there is one God, in the three persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit; that He is our Creator to whom we are responsible; that all have sinned and fallen short of His glory, requiring us to find forgiveness and redemption; that Jesus was the God-Man who came to live perfectly and die and shed His perfect and atoning blood to free us from sin; that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven for our justification and victory over death; that He calls His children to live overcoming and sanctified lives, growing in grace and knowledge of Him; and that He is coming again to judge the world and receive His own for eternity. The Bible is also clear about the basic moral code by which we ought to live. The Ten Commandments and the Fruit of the Spirit are not highly disputed. Thus, contrary to skeptics of Christianity, we can be thankful and confident that the Bible is sufficiently clear and powerful enough for us to know God, live well, and gain eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Yet that does not mean that the Bible is in all ways simple to understand, or that we can arrive at good doctrine and application through any quick and easy process. God told Joshua to study the Word "day and night" so that he could obey it (Joshua 1:7-8). The Psalmist prayed that God would "hide not thy commandments from me" (119: 19) while he "sought" God's precepts (94), something which seemed to occupy much of his time. "Open thou mine eyes," he prayed to God, "that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (18). Jesus spent three years training his disciples. Paul spent time alone in the wilderness learning from Jesus (Galatians 1:17-18). In the book of Acts we see Paul working through Scripture carefully and systematically as he taught Christian doctrine (Acts 17:2-3; 17:11; 17:17; 18:4; 19:8-10; 28:23). The Apostles spent many hours poring over Scripture to see the Truth. Their sermons and letters quote Old Testament Scripture often, demonstrating the time and effort they put into prayerful study.

Perhaps the difficulty and effort required of Bible study is one reason why interpreting and applying the Bible has always been something intended for the people of God collectively. The Bible was given to the community, not individuals (think of Moses delivering the law to the people and Jesus commissioning twelve Apostles—and godly men after them—to teach His Word). When difficult decisions had to be made, the Apostles and elders conferred together around the Word, as in Acts 15, to give just one example from the Book of Acts where the Apostles, to whom Jesus had given great authority, repeatedly reached decisions in conversation. Over time, the Apostles developed a "tradition," or body of teaching, to which the Church was

responsible (2 Timothy 3:6). At least some of this teaching is contained in the New Testament, which was given not to a single person, but to the Church. For instance, Paul wrote to churches, and sometimes asked that his letters be read to other audiences. Scholars believe that the Apostolic letters were rapidly and repeatedly copied and distributed all over the Mediterranean world.

All of this took considerable time, effort, counsel, and prayer, and still the way forward was not always clear. The Apostle Peter gave the same authority to Paul's writings as he did to "other Scripture" while admitting that his colleague's theology was "hard to be understood" (2 Peter 3:16). Already in New Testament times people distorted the teachings of the Church. Paul warned of those who would "pervert the Gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7) and John wrote his letters against heresies he saw (3 John), problems that remain with us today.

From these Scriptures (and there are plenty more like these) we can distill several principles of accurate Biblical interpretation and application:

- The guidance of the Holy Spirit is crucial for proper reading of the Bible.
- Studying the Bible well demands considerable time and effort because some parts of it are difficult to understand.
- The Bible does not belong to any one of us individually, but to all of us in community. The process of arriving at sound doctrine and application is a process that involves that community.

These principles proved important for centuries. The Apostles had trained men in good doctrine, who in turn trained the next generation, and so on. When heresies multiplied, drawing off Christians in various directions, Church fathers vigorously defended orthodox interpretation and application of Scripture. At times they referred to what came to be known as the *regula fidei*, or regulation of faith, essentially the common practice and belief of the Church. When heretics and Church fathers deadlocked in the interpretation of Scripture, Church fathers relied on the *regula fidei*: this is simply the way the Church has always interpreted and applied these verses, so enough dispute! In a sense, this is a continuation of Paul's warning against "another Gospel" in Galatians 1 and the rejection of "wholesome words" in 1 Timothy 6:3.

To these same fathers we owe some of our most precious doctrine, such as the Trinity, the language for which was hammered out in council. We may not agree with every decision made in councils over the centuries, but certainly they are evidence of the acknowledgement of the wisdom of "a multitude of counselors" (Proverbs 15:22).

Of course, they recognized that some things would never be satisfactorily understood, and that good, Bible-believing Christians could differ in their conclusions. Irenaeus (c. 125-202) warned against "rash conclusions" when interpreting Revelation because some of its teachings are difficult to discern, "reasons for this point being reserved by the Holy Spirit," he said. While early Church fathers could be extremely particular when explaining core doctrine, their works reveal that they were willing to leave many issues in the hands of God and agree to disagree. One senses that they recognized the benefit of searching out Scripture together, and that disagreement can work to the advantage of our spiritual growth by demanding and developing humility and a willingness to learn and forbear.

At first glance, these truths seem to invalidate the principle of *sola Scriptura*, translated simply as “Scripture alone,” that many Protestants have held precious for five centuries. *Sola Scriptura* has become for many Protestants, and probably to many Apostolic Christians in particular, a core faith commitment. But in fact, what we have just discussed confirms a healthy, historical understanding of this principle.

Perspectives on *Sola Scriptura*

Sola Scriptura Traditions I, II, and 0

What is *sola scriptura*? This simple phrase is translated “scripture alone,” but there are several perspectives on the meaning of these two words. Each perspective speaks of the authority of Scripture, but in different ways. Some scholars place these views into three broad categories, Tradition I, Tradition II, and Tradition 0, which are usually listed in that order since that is the chronological order in which they developed. Tradition I, which prevailed during the Early Church and then again in the Reformation era, teaches that Scripture is the ultimate authority, but the Church has been tasked to interpret it. Tradition II, common in the Middle Ages in western Europe and still maintained by some denominations today, states that the Church has as much authority as the Scripture, so the official declarations of the Church are as authoritative as the Bible, even if the two contradict. Tradition 0, a more recent understanding, believes that Scripture is the ultimate authority; however, the responsibility of interpreting Scripture rests with the individual rather than the Church. These categories are broad labels for a multitude of viewpoints, each of which have nuances of their own.

Historical Development of Traditions I

When the Church was first formed, access to the Old Testament was limited and the New Testament was nonexistent. The Word of God was passed primarily through spoken word. Because of this cultural context, learning apart from community was inconceivable— even after the New Testament was written and the canon closed. Those who could not read for themselves, whether because of illiteracy or lack of access to the Scriptures, would trust those gifted in the areas of knowledge and teaching to faithfully instruct them. In this way, Tradition I existed in the early Church. Scripture reigned supreme, but the Church taught and interpreted it.

Two examples among many in Scripture that bring a greater understanding of the relationship between the authority of Scripture and the Church are the list of giftings in Romans, Corinthians and Ephesians, and the Church’s decision-making process in Acts 15.

Among the spiritual gifts listed by Paul are knowledge, prophecy, and teaching; these are directly related to understanding and sharing the Word of God. Romans 12 reveals that these gifts are neither to be used for the individual profit only nor lorded above others but used within the body for its betterment. In 1 Corinthians 12, the analogy of the body is given again. Before listing the gifts, Paul states (vs 7), “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal” (or, “for the common good”). After the gifting list in Ephesians 4, Paul explains that the purpose of those gifts is for “the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the

edifying of the body of Christ” (12). God has equipped some with gifts in understanding, interpreting, and sharing His authoritative Word to be done within the context of the Church.

In Acts 15, the Church was faced with the difficult decision of how to incorporate Gentiles into the Church. There was significant disagreement in the Church on the issue of circumcision because it had not been formally addressed until this time. When the leaders came together, they interpreted the Scriptures and listened to the Spirit. This is evident from both Peter’s sermon and the subsequent letter written to the Church. Even the Apostle Paul waited his turn and accepted the wisdom of the council. This is an example of the Church interpreting the Word of God.

These two passages reveal how the authoritative Word of God is interpreted in the context of the community of the Church by utilizing the gifts of believers. Throughout the Bible, Old and New Testament, those entrusted with the Word of God were to share it in community, listening to the wisdom and gifting of others as directed by the Holy Spirit. This is not an easy process; think of the decisions and disagreements that had to be hammered out in the book of Acts, for instance (Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-6; 9:26-27; 11:1-18; 11:22-23; 15:1-35; 15:36-40; 18:24-27; 19:1-6; 19:30-31; and 21:20-26).

Interpreting and applying Scripture as a community process continued after the Biblical canon closed. From at least the AD 100s, bishops and elders met together to define orthodox doctrine and practice. This led to Church councils, such as that of Nicea and Chalcedon. Though fallible, these councils are responsible for some of the basic doctrine that we take for granted today. During these meetings, leaders read Scripture and considered the “tradition,” or teaching, that had been handed down to them. They understood that their purpose was to be faithful to the Scripture as taught by the Apostles and not to create something new and innovative. As the original letters of the Apostles and Gospel writers were replaced by copies, textual criticism arose, helping later generations understand what the originals contained. Eventually, reference to history, past theological treatises, and other materials aided the study of Scripture.

Our own Samuel Froehlich adopted this pattern of study and community. It is clear from his letters and sermon notes that he spent much time in systematic study of the Bible, was familiar with the original Biblical languages, and availed himself of the writings of the early Church fathers, the Reformers, and others. Today, we are blessed with access to experts on the Biblical languages, concordances, history books, and other aids that are important to understanding and correctly applying the Word of God. We appreciate older brothers and sisters who continue to pass down from generation to generation the faith and how to apply faith to current issues.

Historical Development of Tradition II

In the 4th century hints of Tradition II began to appear in the writings of some Church fathers. It became almost unquestionable by the late Middle Ages. Supporters of Tradition II viewed the Church as not only the interpreter of Scripture, but as authoritative as Scripture itself. Extra-biblical teachings (claiming to be consistent with Scripture if not fully contained within Scripture) developed, especially in the Roman Catholic Church. Examples include the use of indulgences and belief in purgatory. The Church claimed that it had the authority to teach this doctrine even though it was not evident in Scripture. The goal of Tradition II was to guard against heresy by making the decisions of the church hierarchy final. Jesus himself emphasized

unity in John 17, and unity is implied in the New Testament descriptions of Christians as the singular “body of Christ” (or is “Christ divided?” Paul asked in 1 Cor. 1:13). Sometimes, claimed the Medieval Church, this requires the Church to explain Biblical truths in details that go beyond Scripture. Furthermore, Jesus promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would “guide you into all truth,” (John 16:13), by which, said some in the Catholic Church, Jesus authorized the Church to fill out doctrinal truths that may not be fully explained in the canon. For these and other reasons Tradition II prevailed during the Middle Ages.

During the 1500s Reformation, the differences between Tradition I and Tradition II were brought to the forefront. Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin reasserted the understanding that Scripture had higher authority than the church. To them, as in the first few centuries, the Church did have authority to interpret and apply Scripture, but it could not go beyond Scripture by teaching doctrine and practices that rested mostly on the Church’s authority and not the text of the Bible. Many of the problems experienced in the Medieval Church arose from the Church taking on undue authority to assert truths with questionable Biblical basis. The Reformers operated under an understanding of *sola Scriptura* much closer to Tradition I. Tradition II had led to deviant doctrine and practice, so a return to Tradition I would be the cure. Anabaptist leaders largely agreed, although they were quick to remind themselves of the need for the Holy Spirit to guide one’s reading of the Scriptures.

Historical Development of Tradition 0

The Reformation and the invention of the printing press made Scriptures increasingly available to Christians. William Tyndale and others translated and distributed inexpensive, printed copies of Scripture to the masses. Reformers encouraged reading of the Bible as a means of keeping the Church accountable. Christians of any social status were to model themselves after the Bereans and search the Scriptures to ensure what they were taught matched Holy Scripture.

The move to popularize the reading of the Scripture had its benefits and problems. Finally, after centuries of the Word of God being shrouded by inaccessibility of language and expense, anyone could avail themselves of the truths, comfort, correction, and sanctifying power of Scripture. Surely this is something for which each of us can be deeply grateful. However, the communal nature of studying the Scriptures became optional. One no longer needed anyone’s help to read the Bible, or at least so it was perceived. Tradition 0 was born. Protestants believed that declaring the Church to be the interpreter of Scripture undervalued the authority of Scripture. Rather, each individual believer had the ability and authority to interpret and apply Scripture rightly. Eventually, especially among radical reformers, the idea grew that each individual was beholden only to the Bible and not to any other authority, including the Church. Any faithful believer could understand the Bible. In future centuries, a combination of Enlightenment rationalism and increased individualism in the West resulted in the prevalence of Tradition 0 among American Fundamentalists. Today, some scholars call this the “me and my Bible” tradition of Biblical interpretation: All I need to understand Truth is me and my Bible. One of the main pitfalls of Tradition 0 is its tendency to lead to division; the tens of thousands of denominations and independent churches testify to the problem of reading the Bible by oneself and for oneself only. We turn to these unfortunate consequences of Tradition 0 next.

Why We Need a Healthy Understanding of *Sola Scriptura*

Many Protestant and Anabaptist-type Christians, inheritors of *sola Scriptura* Tradition I, claim to go “back to the Bible.” It is commonplace for a Christian to say, “let’s just do what the Bible says.” This is commendable. The idea that the Bible is our highest, unquestionable authority comes from the Bible itself. It is a precious belief that recognizes the beauty and value of allowing the Word of God to anchor our souls and direct our paths. Unfortunately, some believers are wandering perilously close to Tradition 0. There are several dangers in doing this.

First, heresies and fringe groups most often emerge from Tradition 0. From Gnosticism and Arianism in the Early Church to Mormonism and the Branch Davidians in recent times, false teaching breeds where the authority of the Church and Church tradition is too easily dismissed.

Tradition 0 can also foster an unwillingness to put forth the effort necessary to understand the Bible well enough to lead a church in good doctrine and practice. As noted earlier, the Bible itself teaches us that it takes time to study Scripture enough to bring it responsibly into conversation. Tradition 0 can mislead us into thinking the Bible is so simple and easily understood that serious study is unnecessary.

There may be other problems arising from Tradition 0, but one final pitfall to be pointed out here is the danger of division. Often claims that “I am just going back to the Bible” are cast about during moments of serious disagreement among brothers and sisters in the faith. The assumption is that going “back to the Bible” is a simple process. All a person needs to do to understand truth is simply look at the pages of the Bible. There is no room for honest disagreement. The claim to “go back to the Bible” becomes a way of shutting down those with whom a person disagrees: “since I am going back to the Bible and (presumably) you are not, I win.” If I assume that when you open the Bible you must see exactly what I see, and in conversation it turns out you do not see exactly what I see, I may conclude that you are either being dishonest and disingenuous while reading the Bible or not reading it at all. Legitimate, respectful disagreement among faithful readers of the Bible becomes impossible.

The consequence of such assumptions can be fatal to a church. Disagreements attributed to ill will, dishonesty, carnality, or selfish gain--anything but reasonable faith—can lead to a conviction that one’s church leadership is unworthy of respect. If the Christian believes church leadership is not taking the Scripture seriously enough by not committing enough time and effort to understanding it well, resentment and mistrust can develop. Perhaps the problem is real. Or perhaps leadership is studying and praying hard to read the Bible well, but assumptions about the clarity of Scripture lead the believer to assume that, since leadership disagrees with him or her about the proper interpretation and application of Scripture, and the Scripture is easily understood in all points, leadership must be delinquent. In either case, the believer may decide that he or she can be better taught the Word by other leaders elsewhere, and that this is sufficient justification for departure.

The assumption of clarity inherent in Tradition 0 can also lead to a turning away from Protestantism, orthodox Christian faith, or even belief in God Himself. What if an observer concludes that disagreements owe not to some fault in character or intent, but to difficulty in interpreting and applying the Bible? If the believer has been told that faith depends on clear, unquestionable readings of Scripture (beyond core doctrine), and it turns out that such clarity is unattainable, he or she may conclude that Scripture is at fault. Such a conclusion can bring about at least three outcomes. The observer, dismayed at the inability to read the Bible with enough clarity to satisfy his need for certainty, might turn away from faith altogether. Another observer, committed to faith in God but disturbed by the cacophony of angry Christian voices, may turn to a faith tradition that offers the comfort of greater unity and unanimity, such as Islam or the Mormon church.

Less worrisomely, if the commitment to orthodoxy is strong enough, she or he may leave Protestantism and join Catholicism or Orthodoxy. These two churches offer to the confused Protestant a place of comforting stability and clarity. They claim an authority beyond individualistic (and simplistic) “back to the Bible” ways of reading the Bible. Simply put, they reject Protestant misconceptions of *sola Scriptura*. Apparently, not a few Protestants are making this transition. Unfortunately, they are then susceptible to the pitfalls of Tradition II.

Thus, understanding *sola Scriptura* well can assist us in avoiding division, misunderstandings of Scripture, and dangerous levels of doubt. A healthy concept of *sola Scriptura* can assist us in accurate and fruitful interpretations and applications of the Bible that breed unity.

Conclusion

Tradition II can fall short because it confesses Scripture to be one of two authorities, not the only authority, and can result in teachings that stray far from Scripture. The views contained in Tradition 0 can be dangerous because they may devalue the community of believers, their giftings, and Church authority. Tradition I esteems Scripture alone as authority but values the gifts given to individuals when exercised in community. It allows for individuals to use their giftings in studying the Scripture using its original languages, the historical context, and Church history so that the church can be fully equipped. It also recognizes that while there are core doctrinal commitments that bind all true believers to our Lord, there are more obscure Bible passages of Scripture and teachings that faithful believers can read differently.

Church history tell us that a sturdy orthodoxy has united Christians since the inception of the Church. This orthodoxy is contained in the early creeds of the Church, the witness of the Holy Spirit over time, and a high level of agreement on the foundations of salvation and key moral commitments. Beyond this, disagreements do occur, but they do not necessarily arise from a lack of commitment to reading and obeying the Bible. Some disagreements come from well-intentioned but ill-informed interpretation. Others arise when people of equal allegiance to the Bible simply disagree with one another over what the Bible says and how to apply it. Accessing study aids and testing our views by sharing them with wise brothers and sisters of diverse expertise, experience, and giftings can help us read the Bible well. Biblical interpretation and application are not simple matters left to “me and my Bible.” A healthy view still recognizes that God can speak clearly and beautifully to us as we sit down and read our Bible. The Holy Spirit

remains the single most important factor in good Bible interpretation and application. However, the Holy Spirit works through the Church as well, which does its work with great humility and recognition that the Word of God reigns supreme. All glory be to God that He has given us His authoritative Word and a community to interpret it!

Annotated Bibliography

The Shape of Sola Scriptura, Keith A. Mathison. Book, 6-9 hrs.

This book provides an excellent introduction to *sola Scriptura*. It has a two-fold purpose. First, it seeks to clarify some of the confusion surrounding *sola Scriptura*, especially in the areas of history and theology. Second, it outlines a consistent explanation of the authority of Scripture. To complete this task, the book is divided into four parts. First, the historical context of *sola Scriptura* from the early Church until now is given. Second, biblical texts are examined. Third, the theological necessity of *sola Scriptura* is explained. Finally, some commonly raised objections are answered.

[Sola Scripture? Three Views in Church History on the Relationship between Tradition and Scripture.](#) Article, 8 min.

This article explains three different viewpoints on the relationship between tradition and Scripture. The first of these viewpoints is tradition I which was the normative view for the first three or four centuries. Then came tradition II which is still prevalent today in the Roman Catholic Church. After the reformation came both a return to tradition I and the invention of tradition 0. By understanding these three traditions, one can gain a broad understanding of the differing perspectives on the relationship between the Scripture's authority and the Church.

[The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#) Article, 15 min.

This statement was written and signed by many evangelical leaders in 1978. It begins with 5 short statements concerning the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. Then, it provides 19 articles which first affirm truths about the authority of Scripture and then deny myths. Although it never uses the phrase, *sola Scriptura*, it explains what it means quite well by confessing the authority of Scripture.

<https://www.crossway.org/articles/what-sola-scriptura-really-means/> Article, 11 min.

This article primarily focuses on Martin Luther. It explains *sola Scriptura* through various statements that he made. It emphasizes that Scripture being the final authority does not negate other authorities, but rather places them under the authority of Scripture.

[Sola Scriptura: Original Intent, Historical Development, and Current Issues - John Woodbridge](#) Video, 45 min.

John Woodbridge explains the idea of *sola Scriptura* through arguments given by Martin Luther with the hope of encouraging his listeners to embrace it afresh. He includes insight from other prominent people in Church history such as Augustine, Erasmus, Eck, and Whitacker. Although rushed, he concludes with four statements. "The Bible is trustworthy. Scripture is a completely sufficient rule. The Holy Spirit inspired the authentic Scripture; its christocentric emphasis we need. And, scripture is clear about its teachings of faith and practice and things of that sort."