

“Therefore by their fruits you will know them.” (Mt 7:20)

✠ Lecture V: Sola Scriptura ✠

✠ Introduction:

‘Sola Scriptura’ or ‘Scripture alone’ is the cornerstone of Protestant theology. Essentially all Protestant denominations believe that they rightly understand the Holy Bible and though they may disagree on what the Holy Bible says, they generally do agree on how one is to interpret the Holy Bible: on one’s own, apart from Church Tradition. If one came to understand this belief, why it is wrong, and how one is rightly to approach the Holy Scriptures, then one can engage any Protestant of any denomination in a discussion of Orthodox Christianity with understanding.

Even groups as different as the Baptists and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are really not as different as they outwardly appear, once you have understood this essential point. Indeed, if you ever have an opportunity to watch a Baptist and a Jehovah’s Witness argue over the Holy Bible, you will notice that in the final analysis they simply quote different Holy Scripture back and forth at each other. If they are equally matched intellectually, neither will get anywhere in the discussion, because they both essentially agree on their approach to the Holy Bible and because neither questions their common underlying assumption, neither can see that their mutually flawed approach to the Scriptures is the real problem.

Now in saying that Jehovah’s Witnesses approach the Holy Scriptures in essentially the same way as do most evangelicals or fundamentalists, are we suggesting that there is no difference between them? Not at all! In fact, that is precisely the point. There is a world of difference between the average Southern Baptist, who believes in the Holy Trinity, and a Jehovah’s Witness who does not. The point is, since Baptist and Jehovah’s Witnesses share a common approach to the Holy Scriptures and yet come to such drastically different conclusions on this essential doctrine, obviously, something is wrong with the approach.

✠ Problems with the doctrine of ‘Sola Scriptura’:

A major problem with this heresy is being based on false assumptions; an assumption is something that we take for granted from the outset, usually quite unconsciously. As long as an assumption is a true and valid one, all is well but a false assumption obviously leads to false conclusions. One would hope that even when someone has made an unconscious assumption, if his conclusions are proven faulty, he would then ask himself where his underlying error lay.

Protestants who are willing honestly to assess the current state of the Protestant world, for instance, must ask themselves, **“If Protestantism’s foundational teaching of *Sola Scriptura* is of God, why has it resulted in the formation of over 20000 differing groups that can’t agree on basic aspects of what the Holy Bible says, or even on what it means to be a Christian? If the Holy Bible is sufficient apart from Holy Tradition, why can a Baptist, a Charismatic, a Methodist, and even a Jehovah’s Witness all claim to believe what the Holy Bible says, and yet no two of them agree on what it is that the Holy Bible says?”** Unfortunately, most Protestants are willing to blame this sad state of affairs on almost anything except the true root problem.

Mind you, the problem here is not the integrity of the Holy Bible. The Holy Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and is received by the Church as the word of God; we are not arguing here the inspiration of Holy Scripture, but rather its proper use. The idea of Sola Scriptura is so foundational to Protestantism; to them it is tantamount to denying God even to question it. **But as our Lord said, “Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.” (Mt 7:17) If we judge *Sola Scriptura* by its fruit, then we are left with no other conclusion than that this tree needs to be “cut down and thrown into fire.” (Mt 7:19)**

✠ False Assumption # 1 ✠

“The Holy Bible was intended to be the final word on faith, piety, and worship.”

The most obvious assumption that underlies the doctrine of “Holy Scripture alone” is that the Holy Bible has within it **all** that is needed for the Christian life – for true faith, practice, piety, and worship. The passage that is most often cited to support this notion is:

- “From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 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 complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2Tim 3:15-17)

Those who would use these verses to advocate *Sola Scriptura* argue that this passage teaches the “all sufficiency” of Holy Scripture – because, if, indeed, the Holy Scriptures are able to make the pious man perfect ... then, indeed to attain completeness and perfection, there is no need of Holy Tradition.

+ Refutation:

To begin, we should ask what St. Paul is talking about when he speaks of the “Holy Scriptures” St. Timothy has known since he was a child? We can be sure that St. Paul is not referring to the New Testament, because the New Testament had not yet been written when St. Timothy was a child. In fact, only a few of the Holy Books of the New Testament had been written when St. Paul wrote this Holy Epistle to St. Timothy. They certainly had not been collected together into the canon of the New Testament, as we know it today. Obviously here, and in most references to the Holy Scriptures that we find in the New Testament, **St. Paul is speaking of the Old Testament.** Therefore, if this passage is going to be used to set the limits on inspired authority, not only will Holy Tradition be excluded, but this passage itself – and the entire New Testament! In the second place, if St. Paul meant here to exclude Holy Tradition as not being profitable, then we would wonder why he uses non-biblical oral Holy Tradition in this very same chapter. The names Jannes and Jambres are not found in the Old Testament, yet in (2Tim 3:8) St. Paul refers to them as opposing Moses the Prophet. (Also review other examples in Lecture I).

+ Is the Holy Bible, in practice, really “all sufficient” for Protestants?

Protestants frequently claim they “just believe the Holy Bible”, but a number of questions arise when one examines their actual use of the Holy Bible. For instance, why do Protestants write so many books on doctrine and the Christian life in general, if indeed all that is necessary is the Holy Bible? If the Holy Bible by itself were sufficient for one to understand it, then why don't Protestants simply hand out Holy Bibles and let it go at that? And if it is “all sufficient”, as they suggest, **why do Protestants not all believe the same?**

What is the purpose of Sunday school, or the many Protestant study Holy Bibles, if all that is needed is the Holy Bible itself? Why do they hand out tracts and other material? Why do they even teach or preach at all – why not just read the Holy Bible to the people? Though they usually will not admit it, they instinctively know the Holy Bible cannot be understood alone. And in fact, **every Protestant sect has its own body of traditions**, though again they will not call them by this name. It is not an accident that Presbyterians all believe the same things, and Pentecostals generally believe the same things, but Presbyterians and Pentecostals emphatically do not believe the same things. Presbyterians and Pentecostals do not each individually come up with their own ideas from an independent study of the Holy Bible. Rather, those in each group are all taught to believe in a certain way – from a common tradition.

Thus, the question is not really whether we will just believe the Holy Bible or whether we will also use Holy Tradition. **The real question is, which tradition will we use to interpret the Holy Bible? Which tradition can be trusted – the Apostolic Tradition of the Historic Church, or the modern and divergent traditions of Protestantism that have no roots deeper than the advent of the so-called Protestant Reformation?**

✠ False Assumption # 2 ✠

“The Holy Scriptures were the basis of the early Church, whereas Tradition is a human corruption that came much later.”

Especially among today’s Evangelicals and Charismatics, you will find the word “Tradition” is a derogatory term. To label something as a “tradition” is roughly equivalent to saying it is “fleshly”, “spiritually dead”, “destructive”, or “legalistic”. As Protestants read the New Testament, it seems clear to them that the Holy Bible always condemns tradition as being opposed to Holy Scripture. The assumption is that the early Christians were pretty much like today’s Evangelicals or Charismatics, but with beards and togas. That the first-century Christians would have had liturgical worship, bishops, or would have adhered to any tradition at all, is inconceivable. Only latter, “when the Church became corrupted”, is it imagined that such things entered the Church.

It comes as quite a blow to such Protestants when they actually study the early Church and the writings of the early Fathers and begin to see a distinctly different picture from that which they were led to envision. One finds, for example, the early Christians did not tote their Holy Bibles with them to Church each Sunday. It was so difficult to acquire a copy of even portions of Holy Scripture, due to the time and resources involved in making a copy, that very few individuals owned their own copies. Instead, the copies of the Holy Scriptures were kept by designated persons in the Church, or kept at the place where the Church gathered for worship (in which context the Holy Scriptures were read corporately).

Furthermore, most Churches did not have complete copies of all the Holy Books even of the Old Testament, much less the New testament – which was not completed until the end of the first century, and not in its final canonical form until the fourth century. This is not to say that the early Christians did not study the Holy Scriptures – they did, in earnest, but as a group, not as individuals. And for most of the first century, Christians were limited in their study of the Holy Scriptures to the Old Testament. So how did they know the truth of the Holy Gospel, the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, how to worship, what to believe about the person and nature of our Lord Jesus Christ? **They had the Holy Tradition handed down from the Apostles.** Sure, many in the early Church heard these things directly from the Apostles themselves, but many more did not. Later generations had access to the writings of the Apostles through the New Testament, but the early Church depended almost entirely on oral and liturgical Tradition for its knowledge of the Christian faith.

+ How can we know that the Church has preserved the Apostolic Tradition in its purity?

The short answer is that God has preserved it in the Church because He promised to do so. Our Lord Jesus Christ said that He would build His Church and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it (**Mt 16:18**), our Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the head of the Church (**Eph 4:15-16**), the Church is His body (**Eph 1:22-23**), and He has promised to be with the Church “even unto the end of the world” (**Mt 28:20**). Our Lord Jesus Christ did not promise His Church would always be prosperous, or the most numerous of religions; in fact, He promised quite the opposite (**Mt 7:13-14; 10:22; Jn 15:20**). Neither did our Lord Jesus Christ promise there would be no sinners in the Church (**Mt 13:47-50**), or that it would not have to contend with false shepherds or wolves in sheep’s clothing (**Jn 10:1,12-13**), but our Lord Jesus Christ did promise and abiding and ultimately triumphant Church, which would have His abiding presence, and would be guided into all Truth by the Holy Spirit (**Jn 16:13**). Were the Church to lose the purity of the Apostolic Tradition, then the Truth would have to cease being the Truth – for the Church is the pillar and foundation of the Truth (**1Tim 3:15**). The common Protestant conception of Church history – that the Church fell into apostasy from the time of Constantine until the Reformation – certainly makes these and many other Scriptures meaningless. **If the Church had ceased to be the pillar and ground of Truth for even one day, then the gates of Hades would have prevailed against it on that day.**

If this were the case, when the Lord Jesus Christ described the growth of the Church in His parable of the mustard seed (**Mt 13:31-32**), He should have spoken of a plant that started to grow but was squashed, and in its place a new seed sprouted later on. Instead, He used the imagery of a mustard seed that begins small, but steadily grows into the largest of garden plants.

Protestants need to study Church history – century by century, rather than leaping from Acts to the Protestant Reformation. They will find there is **only one Church**. The Nicene Creed makes the point clearly: “I believe in ... One Holy, Catholic (Universal), and Apostolic Church”. This statement, which almost every Protestant denomination still claims to accept as true, was never interpreted historically to refer to some fuzzy, pluralistic, invisible church that could not agree on anything doctrinally.

The councils that canonized the Creed as well as the Holy Scriptures, also anathematized those who were outside the Church, whether they were heretics, such as the Montanists (*heresy about the Holy Spirit*), or schismatic like the Donatists (*They argued that the Church was a body of saints, within which sinners had no place*). They did not say, “Well, we can’t agree with the Montanists doctrinally, but they are just as much a part of the Church as we are”. Rather, despite the fact that many **Monatists were sincere and generally “nice” people**, they were excluded from the Church until they returned to the Church’s doctrine. {To even join in prayer with those outside the Church was, and still is, forbidden (Canons of Holy Apostles, canons XLV, LXV; Council of Laodicea canon XXXIII). Thus it is clear that the Church has never accepted any form of doctrinal pluralism or denominationalism.}

Unlike Protestants, who make heroes of those who break away from another group and start their own, the Fathers of the Church considered schism to be among the most damnable sins. As St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the Apostle John, warned, **“Make no mistake, brethren, no one who follows another into a schism will inherit the Kingdom of God, no one who follows heretical doctrines is on the side of the passion” (Ignatius to the Philadelphians 5:3)**. The very reason there arose a Protestant movement was that the reformers were protesting papal abuses, but prior to the Roman West breaking away from the Orthodox East, these abuses did not exist!

✠ Obviously, one of three statements is true:

- There is no correct Holy Tradition, the gates of Hades did prevail against the Church, and both the Holy Gospels and the Nicene Creed are in error.
- The true faith is to be found in papism, with its ever-developing and changing dogmas defined by the infallible “Vicar of the Lord Jesus Christ”.
- The Orthodox Church is the one Church, which has faithfully preserved the Apostolic Tradition.

*** The choice for Protestants is clear: Relativism, Romanism, or Reality! ***

✠ False Assumption # 3 ✠

“Christians can interpret Holy Scriptures for themselves without the aid of the Church”

Even from the very earliest days of the Reformation, Protestants have been forced to deal with the fact that, just given the Holy Bible and the reasoning power of the individual alone, people could not agree upon the meaning of the most basic questions of Christian doctrine. Within Martin Luther’s own lifetime dozens of differing groups had already arisen, claiming to “just believe the Holy Bible”, but none agreeing with another on what the Holy Bible said. As an example, Luther himself courageously stood before the Diet of Worms with the challenge that, unless he were persuaded by Holy Scripture or by reason, he would not retract anything he had been teaching, **but later**, when the Anabaptists, who disagreed with the Lutherans on a number of points, simply asked for the same indulgence, Lutherans butchered them by the thousands (Although earlier he {Luther} had opposed the burning of Anabaptists by Lutherans, eventually he reluctantly approved the death penalty for them on the grounds that they were guilty of sedition and blasphemy. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Vol. II

Reformation to the present. NY: Harper & Row, 1975. p.730, cf.pp.779f.). So much for the rhetoric about the right of the individual to read the Scriptures for himself.

Taken from its context within Holy Tradition, the solid rock of Holy Scriptures becomes a mere ball of clay, to be molded into whatever shape its handlers wish. It is no honor to the Holy Scriptures to misuse and twist them, even if this is done in the name of exalting their authority. We must read the Holy Bible; it is God's Holy word! But to understand its message, let us **humbly** sit at the feet of the saints who have shown themselves "doers of the word and not hearers only" (**Jam 1:22**), and have been proven by their lives worthy interpreters of the Holy Scriptures. Let us go to those who knew the apostles, such as Saints Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp, if we have a question about the writings of the Apostles. Let us inquire of the Church, and not fall into self-deluded arrogance.

✠ **The doctrine of Sola Scriptura does not meet its own criteria:**

You might imagine that such a belief system, as Protestantism, which has as its cardinal doctrine that Holy Scripture alone is authoritative in matters of faith, would first seek to prove that this cardinal doctrine met its own criteria. One would probably expect Protestants to be able to brandish hundreds of proof-texts from the Holy Scriptures to support this doctrine – upon which all else they believe is based. At the very least, one would hope two or three solid text which clearly taught this doctrine could be found – since the Holy Scriptures themselves say, "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established" (**Deut 19:15; 1Cor 13:1**).

But not only is the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* not taught in the scriptures – it is, in fact **specifically contradicted by Holy Scriptures** (which we have already discussed) which teach that Holy Tradition is also binding to Christians:

- "Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and **keep the traditions** as I delivered them to you." (**1Cor 11:2**)
- "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and **hold the traditions** which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle." (**2Thess 2:15**)

*** Thus Protestantism's most basic teaching self-destructs being contrary to itself ***

* This lecture was adapted from, *Sola Scriptura*, by Fr. John Whiteford. Conciliar Press, 1996.