

The Authority of Scripture (5)

By Jay Rogers

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Sola Scriptura: The Authority of Scripture "alone"

It is the authority of Scripture alone, known as the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, that tells us who God is, and what is the true path to salvation. In addition, the Bible is central to all other knowledge. The Word of God gives all other disciplines their truth and credibility, not vice versa.

"When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, 'Who do men say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven'" (Matthew 16:13-19).

In this passage, Peter confesses plainly and clearly that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus declares Peter to be blessed. He adds that he had named him Peter (in the Greek: *Petros*). The word translated "rock" (*petra*) in this passage is similar. By this Jesus Christ indicates that someone who truly believes that He is the Messiah and God is solid and cannot be swayed in his obedience to the Lord's commandments or doctrines.

The Roman Catholic Church has interpreted this verse to mean that Peter is the Rock, and have derived their doctrine of infallibility of the pope from this scripture. Yet it is clear from the Greek grammatical structure of the passage that *this* in "this rock" refers to the prior sentence: "flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you." Although it is clear that Jesus was using a play on words to drive home His point, it is also clear that "this rock," *petra*, is not Peter *per se*, but namely the revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus declares the authority He would invest in Peter and all His disciples who make up the Church. His disciples were liable to mistakes and sins in their own conduct, but they were kept from error in stating the nature of God, the way of salvation, the rule of obedience, the believer's character and experience, and the final doom of unbelievers and hypocrites. In such matters, their decision would be correct, and would be confirmed in heaven. No one can forgive sins, but God only. But the Church is given the mandate to declare God's judgment on sin ahead of time. The "binding and loosing" signified "forbidding and allowing," or to teach what is lawful or unlawful according to the Word of God.

The Scriptures declare the authority of Jesus Christ over all things and the authority He has given the Church to declare the Truth:

"Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open" (Isaiah 22:22).

¹ The original article by Jay Rogers is not divided in five separate files, but is presented as one essay. No changes were made to the text of the article. We acknowledge the authorship of Jay Rogers and refer readers to other insightful articles he wrote: <http://www.forerunner.com>

"I am the First and the Last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades" (Revelation 1:17,18).

"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this" (Revelation 3:7).

There is no doubt that the 20th century evangelical Church has cut itself off from the roots of the Christian faith by throwing out the past 2000 years of Church history. What we will find when we begin to rediscover Church history may surprise us. For instance, we need to understand that the Gospel advanced for close to 200 years (33 A.D. to 200 A.D.), with no assembled New Testament canon in the hands of any local church. There was a consensus as to what writings were apostolic and thus scriptural in origin, but the idea of having a "New Testament" came later.

What the Church Fathers had in common was something called the "Rule of Faith" which was essentially the Apostles Creed and a catechism (a body of apostolic teachings) which was memorized and passed on orally by the bishops (pastoral overseers) ordained by the Apostles. The stewards of Truth during this period were known as the Church Fathers. They were those who had had some contact with one of the Apostles, or some men (such as Papias and Polycarp) who were close to one of the Apostles. We look to the Church Fathers in determining the succession of the true faith between the time of the Apostles and the time when the canon of the New Testament was finally determined.

The canon was determined after a controversy arose around 150 A.D. (during the time of the Montanist movement) over whether there were any "new" revelations which were to be considered equal to Scripture. Some enterprising scribes (perhaps encouraged by their elders and overseers) began to collect and copy all of the apostolic writings which the Church Fathers had agreed were Scripture. The New Testament canon was still in dispute by some, but we must have faith in the authority in the Church Council which determined that the canon was closed. A later Council decreed with finality which books belonged in the Bible.

Protestants believe that final authority comes from Scripture *alone*. Yet we cannot ignore the role of the Church in deciding what was Scripture. Christ gave His disciples this authority, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19), so this authority is derived from the Word made flesh. But somewhere during the time of the early Church, Scripture had to be written, judged, and included in what we now know as the New Testament canon. This is why we need to recognize that strong authority was invested in the Church from the beginning in deciding what was correct doctrine.

If we believe *sola scriptura*, then who decided what books belong in the Bible? Jesus did not write the Bible, and since the Bible could not have written itself, this obviously implies an authority separate from Scripture. The fact is, the Church preceded the Bible; the Bible did not precede the Church. The Church defined the Word of Truth and the Church decided which books were canonical and which books were not.

Sola scriptura does *not* mean that every believer with a Bible is a pope unto himself. *Sola scriptura* does not mean the Bible alone is true without reference to the authority of the creeds and councils of the Church.

Sola scriptura means that only the Bible is infallible, and that Scripture *alone* tells us all the Truth we need to know about saving faith. It does not mean (in fact, it *cannot* mean) that there is no infallible authority outside of Scripture. Men may make mistakes and they may sin; but Jesus' Apostles, those they ordained, and the Church councils who were invested with the authority of the Holy Spirit, were infallible in maintaining orthodoxy during the interim when the Canon was being determined. They were infallible in their teaching on the way of salvation and the basic doctrines summarized in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. They were also infallible in determining which books were Scripture.

Jesus gave His Apostles infallibility through the Holy Spirit in being able to determine and expound on Truth. He also gave the Church infallibility in being able to determine what writings of the early Church were genuinely apostolic, divinely inspired, and infallible.

The individualistic "Christianity" of the 20th century would never have stood the test of time throughout the early Church period. Today's Christians are inclined to believe that one cannot read any of the Church Fathers uncritically -- since they believe that Scripture alone is infallible. Evangelical Christianity has taught that the "Rule of Faith" taught by the Church Fathers must first have a biblical reference to validate it and to filter out the imperfections in their thinking. But this is a contradiction, since the "Rule of Faith" is what was used to measure what was perfect.

God's Word alone is perfect, but we need to include in our idea of Scriptural infallibility that God used imperfect men to write Scripture and later determine which books belonged in the Canon.

We must have faith that what the historic Church said *about* Scripture is true. We must assign the Church Fathers this authority because we must have faith that all the right books wound up in the New Testament canon. By accepting this point, we can also believe that what the Church Fathers said *about* Scripture is also true.

Rather than seek to conform the doctrines of the Church Fathers to our own understanding of Scripture, we must look at my understanding of Scripture and ask: "Does our understanding of Scripture conform to the understanding of the historic Church?"

***Editor's note:** I have made use of the writings of Josh McDowell whose material has been edited and paraphrased in the sections following: "Principles for Discovering Canonicity."