

Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone): The Biggest Deception of All Time

This transcript was taken from the Orthodox *Our Life in Christ* Program (OLIC).

From Hank Hanegraaff's (The Bible Answer Man) *Christian Research Institute* (CRI) Series:

What Think Ye of Rome (Part 3)

CRI – All Apostolic Traditions are in the Bible

OLIC: We agree! It's just that most people haven't underlined all of them yet.



CRI – It is true that the New Testament speaks of following the “traditions” (=teachings) of the apostles, whether oral or written. This is because they were living authorities set up by Christ (Matt. 18:18; Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20). When they died, however, there was no longer a living apostolic authority since only those who were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ could have apostolic authority (Acts 1:22; 1 Cor. 9:1).

OLIC: Even apostles, by themselves can be wrong. Witness in Acts the dissention between Peter and Paul, or Paul and Barnabas. It is within the context of the Church under Christ the Head that apostolic ministry and authority are effectual. When the apostles had conflicts about doctrine it was the Church in gathered in council that corrected them (Acts 15). Apostles are in the Church, not above it. Paul tells Timothy to teach faithful men who will be able to teach others also. CRI assumes that the Church added to the apostolic deposit of doctrine and dogma, but this is not the practice or understanding of Church hierarch's authority in the Eastern Orthodox Church. They do not add to the apostolic faith, but guard it. Apostolic “authority” has nothing to do with faithful keeping of the Apostolic Tradition and handing it on faithfully to the next generation. One does not need to be an apostle to pass on apostolic doctrine and teachings, one only needs to be faithful to what was taught to you.

CRI – Because the New Testament is the only inspired (infallible) record of what the apostles taught, it follows that since the death of the apostles the only apostolic authority we have is the inspired record of their teaching in the New Testament. That is, all apostolic tradition (teaching) on faith and practice is in the New Testament. This does not necessarily mean that everything the apostles ever taught is in the New Testament, any more than everything Jesus said is there (cf. John 20:30; 21:25). What it does mean is that all apostolic teaching that God deemed necessary for the faith and practice (morals) of the church was preserved (2 Tim. 3:15-17). It is only reasonable to infer that God would preserve what He inspired.

OLIC: This sets scripture over and against the Church. THAT is an assumption that is not biblical. What is “the pillar and foundation of the Truth”?

I Tim. 3:15 says it is the CHURCH, not the Bible! The Church was established before the New Testament, the New Testament flowed out of the life of the Church.

The problem is not that the Orthodox Church has a low view of scripture and the Protestants have a high view of it. The Orthodox Church has always held a high view of Scripture, the problem is that most Protestants have

a low view of the Church. The problem with the modern Protestant is that they see the scriptures preserved in spite of the Church not THROUGH the Church.

In fact, many writings from the first few centuries of the Church were “preserved”, in the sense that they were available, circulated and perhaps even used by believing Christians. Not all of them made it into the Canon of Scripture. So, mere preservation does not at all infer inspiration. But if we grant CRI’s argument here, we MUST also then say that God used the Church to preserve the Scriptures, made the Church the steward of parchments and/or scrolls that contained the Gospels and apostolic writings, and the agency of discernment as to what constitutes authenticity regarding divine inspiration. In other words, if the Holy Spirit working through the Church had thrown out any of the writings that were available (it is historical fact that the Church did just that), they would not be and are not considered Scripture today. God has made His Church the agent of preservation, and not some extraordinary providence in spite of the Church.

The Church is both guard and guarantor of the Scriptures. If the Church of the second, third and fourth centuries was corrupted, then so was the canon, for the books they chose stemmed directly from their faith. The two are inseparable. If we cannot trust the Church, then we cannot trust the Bible, which was written, delivered, and preserved by the Church. If the early Church developed so many “unbiblical beliefs and practices” then it would only stand to reason that that same Church would have excised from the Scriptures everything that allegedly contradicts its early falsehoods. But in fact we have the Bible today that they used then. How is it that a Church steeped in “man made traditions” condemned by the Bible, gave us the Bible we use today to condemn them with?

AUTHORITY OF CHURCH: The earliest Church believed and acted under the assumption that they had the authority to decide matters of faith, doctrine, and practice. This is why the Apostles felt they had the right to cast lots for Judas’ successor (Acts 1), introduce the diaconate (Acts 6), and allow Gentiles to come into the Church without circumcision (Acts 15). Under this same paradigm and sense of authority, the Church of the fourth and fifth century firmly established the canon of Scripture.

APOSTATE CHURCH THEORY: This is the belief that “True Christianity” was put down by the apostate Church, or went underground. Without digressing into a long discourse on Church history, this is a complete myth. It is the same argument used by Muslims, Mormons, and Jehovah’s Witnesses to support their own case. All these groups, including ourselves, believe there were true Christians that taught their beliefs in the second century and onward. But no group which claims to be a descendant of an early underground Church can offer a single name of an early Christian as an example. Most groups will claim early writers or movements who were either led by heretics or taught grossly false doctrines. Who were these “true believers” that believed and taught the same doctrines as modern evangelicals? What were their names? Why don’t we publish and circulate their writings today? Where were they when the canon of Scripture was being decided by the early Fathers and Councils of the Church?

CRI –The fact that apostles sometimes referred to “traditions” they gave orally as authoritative in no way diminishes the Protestant argument for sola Scriptura. First, it is not necessary to claim that these oral teachings were inspired or infallible, only that they were authoritative. The believers were asked to “maintain” them (1 Cor. 11:2) and “stand fast in them” (2 Thess. 2:15). But oral teachings of the apostles were not called “inspired” or “unbreakable” or the equivalent, unless they were recorded as Scripture.

OLIC: And where is the Bible verse that proves this? 2 Thess. 2:15 speaks of “tradition” as being both oral and written, Paul makes no distinction between the authority or inspiration of the two. He doesn’t call his oral teaching “uninspired authoritative tradition” and his writings “inspired infallible teachings”. St Basil (4th Cent.) does say Scripture and Tradition have equal authority!

“Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us “in a mystery” by the

tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force. And these no one will gainsay;-no one, at all events, who is even moderately versed in the institutions of the Church. For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground that the importance they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel in its very vitals; or, rather, should make our public definition a mere phrase and nothing more.” (On the Holy Spirit, 66)

St. John Chrysostom:

“Therefore brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word or by our letter.” From this it is clear that they did not hand down everything by letter, but there was much also that was not written. Like that which was written, the unwritten too is worthy of belief. Let us regard the Tradition of the Church also as worthy of belief. Is it Tradition? Seek no further”

[Homilies on the second epistle to the Thessalonians 4:2].

CRI – The apostles were living authorities, but not everything they said was infallible. Catholics understand the difference between authoritative and infallible, since they make the same distinction with regard to noninfallible statements made by the Pope and infallible ex cathedra (“from the seat” of Peter) ones.

OLIC: The authority of Christ is the claim of the apostles regarding both oral and written authority. And the Church under Christ is the discerning agency for both as well. We could infer from this statement that all of Christ’s unrecorded words were not inspired or infallible, but merely authoritative – which is a semantic rabbit trail to begin with. Protestants are predisposed to argue that written words are “more” authoritative than oral tradition because they start from the assumption of Sola Scriptura. That said, however, the Orthodox Church does indeed hold that Scripture is the authoritative reference. But using Paul’s own words to Timothy regarding the profitability of Scripture (and here Paul spoke of the Old Testament), there is no historical or factual evidence whatsoever that the Church viewed orally, and therefore, practically transmitted apostolic tradition as something LESS than the written word, or that the two ever contradict each other.

St. Basil the Great, 365-75 AD “Of the dogmas and preaching preserved in the Church, some we possess from written teaching and others we receive from the tradition of the Apostles, handed on to us in mystery. In respect to piety, both are of the same force.”

And to claim that all of the apostolic tradition in all of its detail is found in the New Testament is silly. It is a denial of the facts revealed in New Testament Scripture itself and comes from a mindset that views anything not found explicitly written therein as suspect.

CRI – Second, the traditions (teachings) of the apostles that were revelations were written down and are inspired and infallible. They comprise the New Testament. What the Catholic must prove, and cannot, is that the God who deemed it so important for the faith and morals of the faithful to inspire the inscripturation of 27 books of apostolic teaching would have left out some important revelation in these books. Indeed, it is not plausible that He would have allowed succeeding generations to struggle and even fight over precisely where this alleged extrabiblical revelation is to be found. So, however authoritative the apostles were by their office, only their inscripturated words are inspired and infallible (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. John 10:35).

OLIC: The fact is that the next generations of the Church did not struggle over it. It was not until the Reformation that the struggle for infallibility within the context of the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church in the West that this became an issue. In the East it has never been an issue. Extra-biblical revelation must align with Scripture and Scripture is understood within the life of the Church that has preserved the apostolic framework for understanding the Scripture. Anyone who listens to the radio show regularly will know that we ALWAYS give scriptural teachings and verses for what we believe and practice. It may not be an

interpretation that anyone likes or is familiar with, but nothing we do or teach contradicts “plain teaching of the Bible”.

St. Cyril: “No doctrine concerning the divine and saving mysteries of the faith, however trivial, may be taught without the backing of the holy Scriptures. We must not let ourselves be drawn aside by mere persuasion and cleverness of speech. Do not even give absolute belief to me, the one who tells you these things, unless you receive proof from the divine Scriptures of what I teach. For the faith that brings us salvation acquires its force, not from fallible reasonings, but from what can be proved out of the holy Scriptures.” Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures 4:17 (Schaff NAPNF 2nd Series vol.7, p.23)

CRI – There is not a shred of evidence that any of the revelation God gave them to express was not inscripturated by them in the only books — the inspired books of the New Testament — that they left for the church.

OLIC: What the Protestant must try to prove, and cannot, is that God somehow bypassed the Church with respect to preserving the New Testament Scripture, and that the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church was somehow NOT involved in deciding the books to include in the Canon. And regarding the idea of struggle, how has adopting Sola Scriptura lessened the amount of struggle Protestants engage in to discern the correct interpretation? The Church does not struggle over any extra-biblical revelation, the Church discerns the voice of the Holy Spirit and renders its judgments based on the Spirit referencing authoritative Scripture. As St. Cyril says: Tradition is Scripture rightly interpreted. And apostolic oral tradition is not in contradiction to this.

CRI – This leads to another important point. The Bible makes it clear that God, from the very beginning, desired that His normative revelations be written down and preserved for succeeding generations.

“Moses then wrote down all the words of the Lord” (Exod. 24:4),

and his book was preserved in the Ark (Deut. 31:26). ...Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders it was not because they did not follow the traditions but because they did not “understand the Scriptures” (Matt. 22:29). All of this makes it clear that God intended from the very beginning that His revelation be preserved in Scripture, not in extrabiblical tradition. To claim that the apostles did not write down all God’s revelation to them is to claim that they were not obedient to their prophetic commission not to subtract a word from what God revealed to them.

OLIC: In the view of the Orthodox Church, this is a red herring. The Orthodox Church has never confused the role of Scripture and Tradition. The issue is not about what is written, it is about how someone interprets what is written. The Orthodox Church does not set aside Scripture, but relies on Scripture as the standard by which all doctrines are measured. Anything within the life of the Church that is understood as extra-biblical tradition is either consistent with what we find in the Scriptures, or does not contradict Scripture in any way, period.

CRI – The Bible Does Not State a Preference for Oral Tradition: The Catholic use of 3 John ...(3 John 13). Who would not prefer a face-to-face talk with a living apostle over a letter from him? But that is not what oral tradition gives. Rather, it provides an unreliable oral tradition as opposed to an infallible written one. Sola Scriptura contends the latter is preferable.

OLIC: The issue is not “what is preferable” but what is biblical and what is true within the life of the Church. This statement assumes oral tradition is unreliable when the Scriptures make it plain that it is indeed reliable and apostolically commanded to be obeyed and passed on faithfully. It also assumes only a written record is “infallible” which is not biblical either. Paul makes no such distinction in his letters to the Thessalonians or Corinthians. The modern Protestant may PREFER sola scriptura, but the Apostles and the early Church did not.

CRI – The Bible Is Clear Apart from Tradition: The Bible has perspicuity apart from any traditions to help us understand it. As stated above, and contrary to a rather wide misunderstanding by Catholics, perspicuity does

not mean that everything in the Bible is absolutely clear but that the main message is clear. That is, all doctrines essential for salvation and living according to the will of God are sufficiently clear.

OLIC: Indeed the Scriptures self-testify to their illuminating qualities, but they also self-testify to their ability to be misinterpreted by the ungodly and unlearned into heresy to destruction (II Peter 3:14-16) So we have the same scriptures that indeed are capable of leading one into truth or heresy. What then is the difference? It seems that there is more to the picture than the notion that the scriptures establish their own self-validating and correcting “tradition” of interpretive method outside of the Church. EVERYONE interprets scripture from within a “tradition”. If your tradition is non-sacramental then that determines how you interpret Scripture. The “tradition” of the Orthodox Church is the Apostolic mind that produced the Scriptures. We know the “main message” because it is contained both within our ancient worship, liturgy, prayers and hymns that all affirm what is in Scripture. The fact of the matter is that everything that is “plain” in the Bible has been challenged by someone through the centuries using the Bible as a defense.

How can proper interpretation of the Scripture be separated from the ultimate authority of those Scriptures? Clearly improperly interpreted Scriptures do not give us the authoritative meaning of Scripture. This dichotomy is the problem with the whole Protestant approach to the Scriptures.

St. Hilary of Potiers:

“Scripture is not in the reading, but in the understanding”,

which is repeated by Jerome. Hermeneutics was THE issue in the Arian controversy. Arius trotted out Scripture to prove his heresy, Athanasius appealed to the “rule of faith”, the deposit of the apostolic tradition, the faith of the Church handed down through the apostles to faithful men by which the Church is able to apprehend the true pattern or interpretation of the Scripture. ST. Basil used the liturgical tradition of the Church to combat the heretics who believed the Bible taught the Holy Spirit is not God. THEY appealed to “sola scriptura”, Basil appealed to the

“proper interpretation of the scripture as it has been expressed within the prayers and worship of the universal Church”.

The rule of faith was the key to unlocking the true meaning of the Scriptures, hence the reliance upon the inner life of the Church as the guide to the right interpretation of the scripture. The Church was not an EXTERNAL authority over and above the scriptures, but the keeper and guardian of the truth deposited in the scriptures. Athanasius does not appeal to “Tradition ‘s’” but “Tradition”, the truth of the Scripture AND the apostolic deposit within the life of the Church seen as one body of truth, not one over the other.

St. Irenaeus uses the illustration of a man who has a mosaic of the king, then someone comes along and takes all the pieces out and rearranges them into another image. He still has used all the same pieces but now has a different image of a dog or a fox. Such is the heretic who uses the scriptures without the picture of the king that the Church knows. The heretic does not know the order and connection of the parts in order to reproduce the true image. St. Irenaeus appeals to the catechism and baptismal professions which were committed to believers as the rule of faith that would guide the believer into a right understanding of the scriptures within the Church. Tradition was the living breath of life by the Holy Spirit within the Church that preserved the rule of faith in the life of the Church through its sacraments, worship and prayer. Tradition was not just the handing down of inherited doctrines or a fixed core of propositions, but rather the continuous “life in truth” within the Church. Scripture without interpretation is not scripture at all, the moment it is used and interpreted it becomes alive, but it must be interpreted according to its own purposes.

CRI – Indeed, to assume that oral traditions of the apostles, not written in the Bible, are necessary to interpret what is written in the Bible under inspiration is to argue that the uninspired is more clear than the inspired. But

it is utterly presumptuous to assert that what fallible human beings pronounce is clearer than what the infallible Word of God declares. Further, it is unreasonable to insist that words of the apostles that were not written down are more clear than the ones they did write. We all know from experience that this is not so.

OLIC: This harkens back to the assumption that we dealt with already, that the “oral tradition” is less inspired than the written. It is utterly ridiculous to assert that the apostles are both “fallible human beings” in their oral pronouncements but that their written words are the “infallible Word of God”. Why is it unreasonable to insist that the words that came out of the mouth of the apostles are less clear than the ones that came off their pens? “We” do NOT all know that oral tradition is unclear or unreliable. That is a cultural and philosophical bias, NOT something that “everyone knows”. Those who argue against the process of Holy Tradition often do so because of an ignorant bias held by so many modern, technologically-based people against the ‘dumb’, ‘benighted’, ‘backward’ ignoramuses of centuries past. People having this bias *start* with an assumption that the only way to preserve a message is by preserving it in written form. Mere technology is no guarantee that “traditions” will get passed on purely. This whole assumption is based on the philosophical school of romanticism that believes the human race is evolving to higher and higher levels of morality, intellect, spirituality etc etc. OF COURSE we are more evolved and smarter than those technologically handicapped hicks 2,000 years ago who couldn’t keep a story straight to save their souls.... heck, at least they believed they had souls that needed saving, and in order to do that they’d better keep the story straight.....

But even so, IN PRACTICE every Christian bookstore has the writings of YOUR church fathers in them. HOW DO YOU KNOW WHICH IS RIGHT? What vehicle do you have to discern which of the hundreds of authors who claim to be rightly dividing the word of Truth is actually doing that? EVERY radio preacher says “*I* am preaching the truth....” How do they know? They studied the Bible? Like, no one else has?

Are the Scriptures a MAP or BLUEPRINT? What is the purpose of the Scriptures? They were CORRECTIVE. Some people think of the Bible as a “blueprint for the Church”, if you follow it you can reconstruct the first century Church in its “purity”. The “blueprint” was taught by the apostles (by word of mouth AND epistle, II Thess. 2:15), the Bible was written to correct what people were doing/believing wrongly. As a builder one cannot build a house from the addendums to a blueprint. Addendums are corrections to the original plans that clarify what was missing or unclear. This view also assumes that the life of the Church is static and never changed or developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If one wishes to reconstruct the “Church in Acts” you would have to decide WHICH decade you wanted to imitate. Acts shows us a picture of the Church as it changed and developed. A MAP gives you the high points, the lay of the land, but you have to talk to the PEOPLE WHO LIVE THERE to know the town.

CRI – Tradition and Scripture Are Not Inseparable: Kreeft’s claim that Scripture and apostolic tradition are inseparable is unconvincing. Even his illustration of the horse (Scripture) and the rider (tradition) would suggest that Scripture and apostolic tradition are separable. Further, even if it is granted that tradition is necessary, the Catholic inference that it has to be infallible tradition — indeed, the infallible tradition of the church of Rome — is unfounded. Protestants, who believe in sola Scriptura, accept genuine tradition; they simply do not believe it is infallible.

OLIC: This begs the question: What good is an infallible document if there is no infallible interpreter of the document? Vincent of Lerins famous quote about “all places, by all, at all times” was an invocation of the “ecclesial mind” of the Church, which was not an independent witness FROM the scriptures, but the

“Scriptures rightly understood in the Church”.

Scripture was the only, primary and ultimate canon of truth (Commonitorium Ch. 2) St. Vincent of Lerins and Tertullian’s notion of organic development was later echoed by the fifth century monk, Vincent of Lerins (see Commonitory, 2-3, 20, 23, 27-29). His Canon, which has received wide recognition throughout church history, pertains to the interpretation of Scripture in fundamental matters of doctrine and praxis:

(1) Is the belief or interpretation in question taught by the whole (i.e., catholic) church throughout the world (universality)?

(2) While universality is preferable to sectarianism or schism it is not decisive since the church as a whole may err (cf. Arianism). Therefore, a belief or interpretation must be tested by its antiquity, i.e., Has it, in a rudimentary form at least, always been taught by the church?

(3) If so, does it have the express approval of an ecumenical council, or if the matter in question is not specifically addressed by such a council the majority of clergy and teachers worldwide throughout history (unanimity)? If not, then it should be rejected.

The other statement that is flapping in the breeze is “what is GENUINE TRADITION” that the Protestants claim to accept? How do they discern that? Basically by what they THINK is genuine based on what they THINK the Bible teaches not by a study of the early centuries of the Church and its Fathers, martyrs, confessors and defenders.

CRI – The Principle of Causality Is Not Violated: Kreeft’s argument that sola Scriptura violates the principle of causality is invalid for one fundamental reason: it is based on a false assumption. He wrongly assumes, unwittingly in contrast to what Vatican II and even Vatican I say about the canon,¹³ that the church determined the canon. In fact, God determined the canon by inspiring these books and no others. The church merely discovered which books God had determined (inspired) to be in the canon. This being the case, Kreeft’s argument that the cause must be equal to its effect (or greater) fails.

OLIC: This assumes that the Bible is something that stands above our outside the Church and the Church “discovers it”. The Church MANIFESTS the canon from within its life and understanding of the Gospel. Gal 1:7

“If any man preaches a different gospel”...

WHAT gospel? The one they had “received” or heard from Paul and his appointed teachers, not “read in a book”. That which was written by the apostles aligns with what was received in the Church from the Apostles and preserved as the “rule of faith”. The books produced within the life of the Church, canonical and not, were discerned according to that which the Church knew to be true within its life, not by some “self-evidence” within the scriptures themselves.

CRI – First Century Christians Had Scripture and Living Apostles: Kreeft’s argument that the first generation of Christians did not have the New Testament, only the church to teach them, overlooks several basic facts. First, the essential Bible of the early first century Christians was the Old Testament, as the New Testament itself declares (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15-17; Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:6). Second, early New Testament believers did not need further revelation through the apostles in written form for one very simple reason: they still had the living apostles to teach them. As soon as the apostles died, however, it became imperative for the written record of their infallible teaching to be available.

OLIC: By the average Protestant’s take on Church history the fact that there was an “infallible written record of the apostle’s teachings” did not keep the Church from going “south” into apostasy right after the last apostle died. The fact of the matter is that even DURING the apostle’s lives people fell into error. Living infallible teachers, dead infallible teachers, or their written records do not alone keep people from heresy. And the fact of the matter is that for the first 5 centuries of the Church there was not unanimous agreement on what constituted the canon of infallible apostolic writings. And in spite of that historical fact, the Church was still able to condemn heretics, keep and die for the faith, teach the truth and preserve the apostolic gospel.