

The Paper Pope

The slippery slope of Sola Scriptura

Sola Scriptura is the Protestant doctrine that the Bible is the sole inerrant authority for Christian faith and practice. Its proponents incorrectly assert the concept originated in the first century.

AVAILABILITY: THE BIBLE WASN'T THERE

The Bible as we know it didn't exist until hundreds of years after the birth of the church.

CANON FORMATION

- **No inspired table of contents** – the New Testament canon selection process was fully human, disorganized, and inconsistent. Church leaders scattered across the Roman Empire accepted or rejected various writings independently (see next section).
- **Centuries-long process** – the canon was unofficially settled by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in 367, but no official decree was ever issued

SIGNIFICANT EXCLUDED WRITINGS

All of the following were considered authoritative by various Christian communities during the earliest centuries of the church.

WRITING	MANUSCRIPT PRESENCE / NOTES
Gospel of Thomas	Contains 114 sayings of Jesus, but no narrative of his life (or death or resurrection); possibly Gnostic
Gospel of Peter	Strongly anti-Jewish, and possibly Docetic
Acts of Paul	The source of the legendary physical description of Paul (small stature, bald, big nose, crooked legs)
Acts of Peter	The source of the tradition that Peter was crucified upside down in Rome
Epistle to the Laodiceans	Purportedly the letter Paul references in Col 4:16; popular in the western churches for 1,000+ years
Epistle of Barnabas	Included in Codex Sinaiticus (~350 CE), one of the earliest complete New Testament manuscripts
Apocalypse of Peter	Included in the Muratorian Canon (~180 CE) and Codex Claromontanus (~550 CE); it's a guided tour of heaven and hell with graphic imagery
Shepherd of Hermas	Included in Codex Sinaiticus; quoted as scripture by many 2nd- and 3rd-century church leaders; it seems to be heavily influenced by the Epistle of James
Didache	Quoted as scripture by two 2nd-century church leaders; it's a church manual with instructions about baptism, fasting, prayer, the Lord's Supper, and the treatment of prophets and apostles
1 & 2 Clement	Late-1st-century letters from Bishop Clement of Rome to Corinth; both are in Codex Alexandrinus (~450 CE)

NEW TESTAMENT ACCESSIBILITY TIMELINE

1st & 2nd centuries	New Testament writings circulate individually; no unified collection
~200 CE	Four gospels + Paul's letters widely accepted as the "nucleus", but other writings remain on the fringe
Late 300s	Canon informally settled
~400-1400s	Bibles confined to churches and monasteries; population largely illiterate and poor; every copy handwritten
~1440	Printing press invented; Bibles begin reaching privileged people
1517	Martin Luther pioneers Sola Scriptura, but literacy remains low for centuries afterward

BOTTOM LINE

For the first ~70% of Christian history, Sola Scriptura was impossible.

ANARCHY: THE BIBLE DIVIDES

Widespread Bible availability created a new problem: interpretive chaos with no authoritative resolution mechanism.

THE CHURCH'S STRUCTURAL PROBLEM

- **No systematic dispute resolution process** provided in the New Testament – no modern apostles, no binding councils, no courts or judges

THE CHURCH'S PRACTICAL PROBLEM

- **Human nature** – people with limited knowledge or skills in a specific discipline (such as biblical studies) are prone to greatly overestimate their own competence
- **Proof-texting** – plausible opposing verses exist for almost any position or issue (both OT and NT), which enables anyone to use scripture to create their own personal cafeteria-style doctrines and dogmas

OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLE:

DEUTERONOMY 24:1 – THE KEY WORD: "INDECENCY"

"...if she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some *indecency* in her, that he writes her a certificate of divorce..."

RABBI	SCHOOL	INTERPRETATION OF "INDECENCY"
Shammai	Conservative	Adultery only
Hillel	Liberal	Any reason the husband deems sufficient

Two of Judaism's most prominent legal scholars couldn't agree on the meaning of a single word, even within a "simple" text.

NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLE 1:

Do righteous people exist?

YES	Matt 9:13/Mark 2:17/Luke 5:32, Luke 15:1-7, Mark 6:20, Luke 1:5-6, Acts 10:22
NO	Romans 3:9-12; Rom 5:18-19

Jesus said yes; Paul said no.

NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLE 2:

Are women allowed to speak in church?

YES	1 Cor 11:4-5; 1 Cor 14:5; 1 Cor 14:26
NO	1 Cor 14:34-35; 1 Tim 2:11-12

Jesus said nothing; Paul said both yes and no (in the same letter).

BOTTOM LINE

Sola Scriptura creates a free-for-all environment in which anyone can interpret scripture without any authoritative guardrails. Consequently, Christianity has splintered into countless denominations (and sub-denominations), each claiming scriptural authority.

AUTHORSHIP: PAUL'S CREDIBILITY PROBLEM

Most of the confusion and divisiveness caused by the Bible has a single source.

STRIKE 1 – FALSE PROPHECY

1 THESS 4:15-17 – EARLIEST NEW TESTAMENT WRITING (~50-51 CE)

"For this we declare to you **by the word of the Lord**, that **we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord** will not precede those who have fallen asleep... we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds..."

- **Paul asserted he would be alive when Jesus returned**, based on receiving "the word of the Lord"
- The New Testament's earliest book thus contains a highly significant failed prediction

STRIKE 2 – PAUL VS. JAMES

WRITER	TEXT	POSITION
Paul	Rom 4:3 (citing Gen 15:6)	Believers are justified by faith alone – Paul's entire doctrine on this topic is built on a single Old Testament proof-text
James	Jas 2:20-24	"Justified by works and <u>not</u> by faith alone" – a direct rebuttal of Paul's (mis)use of Gen 15:6 in isolation

This may be the most important contradiction in the New Testament

- **James: Jesus' brother; leader of the Jerusalem church**
- **Paul: never met Jesus; unqualified to be an apostle (Acts 1:21-26)**

STRIKE 3 – PAUL VS. PETER

- **Peter: publicly appointed by Jesus and given the "keys of the kingdom" (Matt 16:13-19); present for Jesus' entire ministry**
- **Paul: claimed he was appointed in a private vision; openly rebuked Peter in Antioch – called him a "hypocrite" and accused him of "not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:11-14)**
- **Even Paul's ministry partner Barnabas sided with Peter**
- **No biblical record of reconciliation between Paul and Peter**

JERUSALEM ENDGAME (ACTS 21 – PAUL'S FINAL VISIT TO THE CITY)

- **The issue: the Jewish believers in Jerusalem have heard that Paul is anti-Torah and are upset he's in town**
- **James' plan: urge Paul to undergo a purification rite in the temple to prove he's still Torah-observant**
- **The plan "fails"; Paul is arrested after his presence in the temple sparks a mob riot**

THE AFTERMATH

- **James is silent after the arrest: no advocacy for Paul, no prison visits, no support**
- **Paul is sent to Rome all alone, and his ministry effectively ends**
- **Notable: James' silence may have spoken volumes**

BOTTOM LINE

By the Bible's own definition (Deut 18:17-22), a prophet whose prediction fails is a false prophet. Sola Scriptura is therefore compromised by the fact that a large portion of the New Testament was written by one – a man who was also in conflict with the original apostles throughout his entire ministry.