

BIBLIOLOGY

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY – A STUDY OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

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LESSON ELEVEN

Systematic Theology



What is the doctrine *Sola Scriptura*?

The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is the belief that the Scriptures alone are the highest and only *infallible* authority in the faith and practice of the church. All that we need to know for salvation and godliness is found within the Scriptures and nothing outside of it is binding upon the Christian conscience.

Sola Scriptura is not a statement that the church does not have the authority to teach the Bible nor does it mean that there are no other authorities in the church such as creeds, councils, confessions and the magisterium or clergy. What *sola Scriptura* does mean is that all those traditions and other sources of authority are in subjection to the Scriptures. The Scriptures are the highest and only infallible, inerrant and inspired authority but that does not negate the need for creeds, confessions and church history that help summarize the doctrines found in Scripture.

Does the Bible teach *Sola Scriptura*?

2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 3:15-16; I Timothy 5:18.

All other tools such as creeds, and confessions are only sufficient in so far as they agree with Scripture and hold their proper place beneath the authority of Scripture.

The Early Church View of the Bible

The early church held that the Scriptures were perfect in everything and inspired by God. When you read the early church fathers and what they have to say about Scripture it becomes abundantly clear that the early church held to inerrancy, infallibility and inspiration. They had a very high view of Scripture. Although they did not use the terms inerrancy, infallibility and inspiration, the concepts are clearly there.

How was the Bible interpreted in the Early Church?

1. Most Christians were illiterate, they did not have their own Bibles.
2. Most churches in the early church did not have a full Bible and would share their copies of the New Testament with each other.
3. The early church had a very high view of Scripture. They believed in inerrancy, and inspiration.
4. The early church started to use tradition in their defense of interpretation against the heretics.
5. And there were couple schools of thought when it came to how to interpret the Bible. One was highly allegorical and the other was highly literal.

The Medieval Church

While the early church services were not all that different from what we do now the medieval church was very different.

The entire service would be conducted in Latin. Essentially the laity knew nothing about Scripture. They could not read it and they could not even understand the teaching they were hearing in church. All they knew was tradition and ritual.

The Medieval View of Biblical Interpretation

In the medieval church you have the Bible alongside the official interpretation or doctrine of the church. In other words, the Bible and tradition are equals. All the laity would have known was tradition since they could not read or understand Latin. The gap between the clergy and the laity was widened. The laity had no access to Scripture and there was a resistance to the Bible being translated in the common languages.

The Protestant Reformation

The biggest developments we will look at as it relates to the doctrine of Scripture are the question of authority, the sufficiency of Scripture, the clarity of Scripture, and the recovery of a better hermeneutic.

In theory tradition and Scripture were side by side but in practice it was tradition that had ultimate authority because the church defined what Scripture was actually saying and developed the tradition based off of that. The reformers pushed back on that idea and said it is the Scriptures that are primary and advocate for *sola scriptura*.

But is it possible that somewhere this great doctrine of *sola Scriptura* went wrong? That it was distorted to mean something that it was never originally supposed to mean?

Sola v. Solo

Sola Scriptura does leave room for other sources of authority such as church teaching, creeds, confessions and church history as long as those sources are recognized as being in subjection to the Scriptures and are not infallible, inerrant or inspired.

Solo Scriptura advocates a radical individualism that rejects church teaching, creeds, confessions and tradition as any authority while embracing private judgement and interpretation above all else. This is where pirates and cowboys come in. There is nothing to keep people in check as far as interpretation of Scripture.

The church of every generation needs a renewal in the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. History teaches us that when the church forgets that the Scriptures alone are necessary and sufficient, it loses its foundation and begins to crumble. In many ways the tradition of the church reminds us of this truth. In fact, elements of tradition such as creeds and confessions seek to promote Biblical truth. So let us confess and employ them, but recognize that they will only benefit insofar as they promote the teachings of Scripture. Scripture sits in judgement over our traditions – never the other way around.