

Sola Scriptura Pt. 1 - The Source and Significance of the Bible's Supreme Authority

(Mark 7:1-13)

By
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Over the course of the next three studies we will be looking at the doctrine of Scripture. Or more precisely, we will be looking at the doctrine of the authority of Scripture. For some this subject may solicit yawns of disinterest. However, I suggest that there is no more foundational question than that of the authority of the Bible. After all, everything we know about God, Christ, salvation, ourselves, as well as our future hope, comes from the Bible. This necessitates a proper understanding and belief in its authority.

In addition, the relevance of the authority of Scripture in our contemporary climate is crucial. We live within a society and culture where there is no longer a general acknowledgement of one ultimate authority, but a multitude of competing and conflicting authorities. For example, I have witnessed personally several friends I grew up with in church leave the Christian faith to embrace an evolutionary, atheistic view of the world. They did so, however, not on the basis of fact, but on the basis of an authority – in their cases, an authority figure that taught in a university. That is, they left the church because they accepted the authority of a university professor over the authority of Scripture.

Others follow the authority of popular consensus while still others, knowingly or unknowingly, look to their own reason or intuition as their ultimate authority. The latter boils down to “what I think,” or “what I feel is true” is true and therefore, authoritative.

Only a short time ago while I was perusing the Daily Republic (our local newspaper), I came to a section with a picture of Bruce Willis on the front with a large title saying, “Bruce Willis – The Cold Hard Truth. On Guns. On Religion. On Receding Hairlines.”¹ “Hmmm” I thought, “Bruce Willis on religion . . . this ought to be interesting.” His views on religion are about what I would have guessed. When it came to organized religion he commented, “. . . anyone who *thinks* at all probably doesn’t believe in fire and brimstone.” The reference to “fire and brimstone,” of course, is a reference to the Bible. Bruce’s thoughts aren’t unusual, but fairly typical of most people. Human reason or judgment is elevated to a place of ultimate authority, even authority over the veracity of Scripture.

In many respects, the establishment of the self as the supreme authority in many respects is the very spirit of our age. We make ourselves the object of our own faith saying “Believe in yourself,” or “Be master of your own destiny,” all of which ring with the exaltation of self as ultimate authority.

In the end, with no absolute or ultimate authority, we drift to and fro on every wave and whim of culture. Directionless waves that one day may threaten to beach us on rocks not too far from Auschwitz. The issue of ultimate authority is not only a crucial question for society, but it is and has been a fundamental question for the church.

The fundamental cause of the Protestant Reformation was one of authority. Historians, in describing the causes of the reformation, refer to a *material cause* and a *formal cause*. The material cause was the doctrine of justification by faith articulated by Martin Luther – a monk of the Augustinian order. But the formal cause, which underlies this doctrinal debate, was a difference in ultimate authority. Protestants and Catholics alike held (and still hold) to the infallible authority of Scripture, but while the Protestants held that the Scripture *alone* was the

¹ Daily Republic, *USA Weekend*, February 11-13, 2000. p. 7.

supreme and solely infallible authority, the Catholics included tradition (the teachings and interpretations of the church fathers), along with the teachings of the Pope, as equally infallible sources of revelation – and thus, authoritative.

In the famous trial of Martin Luther by the Roman Catholic Church, the debate boils down to an issue of authority. Martin Luther recognized the Scripture alone, whereas those trying him recognized Scripture, tradition and the infallibility of the Pope. You can hear the issue of authority ring crystal clear in Luther's remarks during his trial.

At one point during the trial Luther threw down the gauntlet, as it were, inviting them to prove his teachings erroneous. This invitation had one condition that was key. They must show him his doctrinal error from one authority – the Bible alone. He said, "... I ask by the mercy of God, may your most serene majesty, most illustrious lordships, or anyone at all who is able, either high or low, bear witness, expose my errors, overthrowing them **by the writings of the prophets and the evangelists** [referring to the Apostles]. Once I have been taught I shall be quite ready to renounce every error, and I shall be the first to cast my books into the fire."²

We hear the issue of authority again in his famous response, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the word of God."³

This commitment to Scripture alone, captured in the Latin slogan "Sola Scriptura", became the foundation stone and banner for the reformation. The effect was gargantuan. Protestants rejected those doctrines and practices which were not found and in many cases went against the teachings of Scripture. They rejected, for example, praying to the saints or to Mary, the sacrament of penance, the accumulation of meritorious indulgences and many other doctrines.⁴ What is the ultimate authority? Scripture alone – Sola Scriptura? Or is Scripture, plus tradition, plus edicts from the Pope ultimately and infallibly authoritative. For Luther and the reformers, the answer was clear.

Luther, however, was not the first person to face this controversy over the Bible's unique authority. Nor was he the first to embrace the concept of Sola Scriptura – that the Scripture **alone** is supremely and infallibly authoritative.

When we turn to the Gospel of Mark 7:1-13 we observe Jesus in a debate with the Pharisees over the authority of Rabbinic tradition. Verses 1-4 set the scene for the debate. We read, "The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were "unclean," that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your

² Mark Noll, *Turning Points – Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997. p. 153.

³ Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand – A Life of Martin Luther*. Penguin, New York, New York. 1977. p. 144

⁴ This is not to say that Protestants did not recognize any other forms of authority, such as civil and ecclesiastical, but saw them as "being derived from or subordinate to the authority of God." R.C. Sproul. *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI. 1997. p. 42.

disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?"

At issue here is not Jewish hygiene or etiquette, but one of authority. The other Jews submit to the traditions and interpretations of the Law that were handed down from the honored Rabbis of the past (not all too different than the honored church fathers of the Catholic Church). As the text and history shows, the Jews considered them authoritatively binding on Jewish people.⁵

How does Jesus view these traditions of the Rabbis? We read his reply beginning in verse 6 where he replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men. You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men." And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!"

We note a couple of things regarding Jesus' view of teachings or traditions outside the Bible. First, he says that they are not divine rules, but "rules of men." That is, their authority is not derived from God or heaven but from men – which automatically lowers them, the traditions, beneath that of Scripture. He pushes even further, however, and says that, in fact, many of the traditions go against the commandments of God. So then in holding to them, they are actually nullifying or making the authority of Scripture of no effect. Jesus obviously sees a conflict between the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and the traditions of the Rabbis (again not too different that what Luther said of the traditions of the church and Scripture).

As any great teacher would do, he goes on to give an example of how their "tradition" nullifies the word of God in verses 10-13 where he says, "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'" [Note that Jesus is quoting the Scripture]. "But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban,' (that is, a gift devoted to God), 'then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother.' Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

Here, Jesus is pointing out that those who follow the tradition are disobeying the command of God in Scripture. They have made it "legal" to keep needed money from parents, by designating it as "God's" – a loophole of sorts. It's important to note as well that declaring ones money as "a gift devoted to God" did not necessarily require the son to give up those resources.⁶

Here, without going into great interpretive detail, there is a conflict of authority – what the Scripture says and what the Rabbinic tradition says, just as there was between what church tradition taught and what the Bible taught. Yet, which does Jesus hold as the supremely authoritative? The Scripture – the word of God, *Sola Scriptura*.

And so should it be with us in our day of many competing voices of authority. We must acknowledge and live by the fact that *the Bible alone possesses supreme authority over life, faith and conduct*. This alone is our one ultimate, infallible and unchanging authority.

The question we may ask is why is the Bible supremely authoritative? What is the basis or the source of its authority? On what does its authority rest? We may first of all say without hesitation, that the Bible's authority is **not** based upon its age, its enlightened morality, the profundity of its wisdom, the beauty of its poetry (all of which are true), the church or even the testimony of a Pope. Simply put, the supreme authority of the Bible is based upon the supreme authority of its author. The Bible is supremely authoritative because the one who authored it is supreme in authority.

This simple answer can be looked at in two parts: 1.) who God is as author; and 2.) that he has communicated to us authoritatively through the written word of the prophets and apostles.

First, the Bible is supreme in authority because of who God is and what he has done. Foremost, God is the Creator of all things seen and unseen. He spoke all things out of nothing, set ablaze the sun and stars, formed the planets and set them on their axis indicating that all things are ultimately his. From your piece of property to which you hold the deed to the landscape of Mars, God owns it. As such, he as Creator possesses ultimate authority and sovereignty over his creation. This is implied in Isaiah 45:9 where he says, "Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker – an earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands?'" No, the clay, that is the creature, has no authority to question his maker. The Maker is the sovereign authority over his creation.

Not only is he supremely authoritative as Creator, but he is supremely authoritative as Redeemer. That which is redeemed is owned by and under the authority of the Redeemer. God makes this point to Israel when he says through the prophet Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by my name; *you are mine*" (Isaiah 43:1). By nature of the fact that he has purchased us, bought us, redeemed us, we are no longer our own but his. We are his possessions (Deut. 7:6; 14:2; Eph. 1:14) and therefore under his authority. It is this truth which underlies Paul the apostle identifying himself as "slave" of Christ (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 7:22, etc.). Christ owns him and is his master – supremely authoritative over his life because he, Christ, has redeemed him. God is our supreme authority as redeemer!

Moreover, God's authority is supreme as Judge. He is the one who will "judge the living and the dead" through his Son (2 Tim. 4:1). Above all earthly powers and over all earthly powers he sits as ultimate judge and will one day exercise universal and ultimate judgment. He will, "judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. James captures his supremacy as judge saying, "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy" (James 4:12).

Thus, by nature of the fact that God is Creator, Redeemer and sovereign Judge, he is supreme in authority over all things. Furthermore, it is of no small importance to note that in each of these categories, God exercises his power to create, redeem and judge through speaking and communicating. It is by the "word of the Lord that the heavens were made..." (Psalm 33:6) and by the word made flesh that he redeemed the world" (John 1:1 ff.), and "with the rod of his mouth" that he will slay or judge the wicked" (Isaiah 11:4).⁷ God from beginning to end, Genesis to Revelation, is a God who communicates and speaks. His words carry authoritative

⁷ See also Revelation 19:15, 21.

power. And it is precisely this God presented to us in Scripture as one who speaks and communicates who has communicated to us through his prophets and apostles. He did not remain shrouded behind invisibility or speechless, but has revealed himself and his will to us through speech.

This brings us to the second aspect of the supreme authority of the Bible. First, it is grounded in who God is: a Creator, Redeemer and Judge. Secondly, the Bible is supremely authoritative because God has spoken to us authoritatively in the Bible. Here we must acknowledge that God has codified his infallible and authoritative word in written form through the prophets and apostles.

Turning once again to Jesus' words in Mark 7:9-11, we note that Jesus makes a crucial distinction between what Moses said, which he equates with the "commands of God," and what "you say" – speaking of the tradition of the Rabbis. Jesus' words clearly imply that God's commands were spoken authoritatively through Moses in a way that they were not through the Rabbis and teachers of Israel. Moses words were God's very words whereas the Rabbi's words were "rules of men" with no divine authority. Jesus acknowledges that God has spoken uniquely and authoritatively through chosen men or mouthpieces.

When these special chosen men spoke and wrote, they knew they were speaking and writing the very words of God. That is why, for instance, they oftentimes prefaced their words with "Thus says the Lord." Moses, when he came to Pharaoh as a mouthpiece for God said, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel, let my people go..." (Exo. 5:1). He actually stood before Pharaoh and spoke for God. And so it was with Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and down the list of prophets. They knew they were speaking the absolute and authoritative words of God.

Jesus knew he was speaking the very words of God when he said in John 12:49, "...I have not spoken of myself, but the Father which sent me. He gave me a commandment, what I should say and what I should speak." Paul as well, knew he was speaking the very words of God when he said in 1 Corinthians 14:37, "If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command."

Moreover, when the New Testament writers would cite Old Testament passages, they would introduce the quotation in such a way that pointed toward divine authorship. For example, when a passage from Isaiah is quoted in Matthew 8:17, it is introduced as "what was spoken **through** the prophet," not what was spoken **by** the prophet.⁸

It is as Paul asserted in 2 Timothy 3:16, "all Scripture [speaking of the Hebrew Scriptures] is God-breathed . . ." and therefore of divine origin and authority.

The conclusion then is that based upon who God is and what he has done along with the witness that he has spoken absolutely and authoritatively through the writings of the prophets and apostles (that is, the Bible), ***the Bible alone possesses supreme authority over life, faith and conduct.***

⁸ The preposition in the Greek is *dia* with genitive denoting agency or means through which something is done, accomplished or passed. See also Matt 1:22; 2:17; 12:17 and other occurrences that are too numerous to list. Some translations do translate it "by" but do so with agency or means in mind. See also Acts 28:25 for more explicit reference to divine authorship.

Having established the supreme authority of the Scripture, what is its contemporary significance? What difference does it make for us today? My answer – all the difference in the world!! For while many evangelical Christians would affirm what has been established above, in practice and oftentimes their thinking, the Scripture does not hold supreme authority. This is because we have subtly, most of the time without even knowing it, allowed the values of culture, media and society to determine what we think, feel and hold to be true. That is, our society with all of its subtle voices has seduced the church into allowing it to have greater sway and authority than the words of Scripture. This is why I believe the issue of the supreme authority of Scripture and Scripture alone must be reconsidered, re-embraced and rediscovered. The future of the church will rise or fall upon this doctrine.

For this reason, let us consider several key areas where the doctrine of Sola Scriptura engages our contemporary situation. I confess from the outset that the significance of Scripture moves far beyond what I will cover in the following paragraphs. Further, the areas which I will focus in on have been selected intentionally because they are to some degree controversial in society. I did so because it is precisely in these socially charged issues where the rubber meets the road, as it were, when it comes to Biblical authority.

First let's consider biblical authority as it relates to Doctrine. **The Bible alone is our supreme authority on issues of Doctrine.** If then, the Bible is supreme in its authority, should we pray to the saints or to Mary? If the Bible alone is our supreme authority then the answer is an emphatic no. How is it that we are saved? Are we saved by faith alone or do we earn it through works of various kinds? Again, the Bible speaks clearly.

Or let's consider a more controversial question. Is Jesus the only way to God? Our society and culture around us views any affirmative answer to this question as arrogant intolerance and religious bigotry of sorts. As such, the exclusivity of salvation through Christ is offensively unpopular today. How we answer this question largely depends upon whether or not we accept the Bible as supremely authoritative or some other voice (culture, etc). When Jesus said, "I am the way" and "no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), was he kidding? Was he mistaken? Was he exaggerating? Or is this unequivocally the truth – namely, that he is the only way?! Where does ultimate authority rest – in popular consensus that such a claim can't be true, or on the authoritative word of God? Again, the question of the ultimate authority of the Bible is crucial.

If we hold that the Bible is supremely authoritative because it is God's very word to us, then we should unabashedly stand for its truth – even if it flies in the face of everything our world believes. The bottom line is that we cannot hold that the Bible is supremely authoritative and hold to doctrines which conflict with Scripture – the salvation through Christ alone being one example. We must not allow the voices of the world to function as our ultimate authority.

Let's consider a second area of authority – ethics and morality. **The Bible alone is supremely authoritative on issues of morality and ethics.** When it comes to moral questions facing society, what is our ultimate authority? For example, when it comes to the issue of homosexuality, is it right or is it wrong? Our society would have us believe that homosexuality is simply another viable option that should be accepted and approved by all. In fact, to say otherwise is to risk being labeled "bigot," "intolerant" or "prejudiced." With this kind of

tremendous social pressure, many people, Christians, have compromised and given in to the secular “morality.” What they have compromised, however, is their confidence and commitment to the authority and truthfulness of the Scripture. They no longer live by the doctrine of Sola Scriptura. If the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin (and it does), then we must be willing to stand unwaveringly on the very words of God despite what others would say. We must be willing to stand upon the supreme authority of God’s words as Luther did in the face of whatever opposition may come. If we are labeled with derogatory and politically inflammatory names, then so be it. At least we stand in good company.

On a side note, it is important to note that we can hold something to be sin without hating the person committing it. I say this because some accuse those who disapprove of homosexuality on Biblical grounds as those who “hate” homosexuals. This, however, is not true (at least in most cases). We can say that lying, stealing, gossiping and homosexual acts are sins and do so lovingly. My parents pointed out repeatedly my areas of sin in early life, and yet they did so in love. To say something is immoral does not mean we are unloving or lack compassion. Quite the contrary, it may be a true demonstration of love and care.

Or let’s consider another example. What about sexual intimacy outside the context of marriage? The Bible calls this fornication and condemns it outright. Is it wrong or is it right? If we are to hold to the supreme authority of Scripture, we must continue to condemn it as sin regardless of how many oppose us. If you are the only one in a group of thirty who thinks it is a sin and everyone else, the majority, believes it to be right if the two people are “in love,” do you stand firm upon the authority of Scripture or give in to democratic consensus? Let us stand on the authority of the word despite and in opposition to the gale force winds of contemporary culture.

Let’s focus on one final area in which the Bible engages contemporary culture – the issue of marriage and family. **The Bible alone is our supreme authority on issues of marriage and family.** The controversial nature of this is evident. What is marriage? Is it something that can bind a man to a man or a woman to a woman? Or is marriage, as instituted by God, to be a union between a man and a woman? On what do we stand in our views about the nature of marriage? The Scripture teaches that marriage is a binding union between a man and a woman.

Or how about roles within the family? Are there differences in roles between husband and wife? Paul plainly said so when he said that “The husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph. 5:23). Yet the notion of role distinction in the family – male headship and leadership, for example – is a highly offensive notion even, amazingly enough, in the church. Why is this? Because we have subtly allowed the voice of culture to have sway over the authority of Scripture. Our culture with its androgynous spirit of equality despises roles in family and looks upon those who embrace such structures as “old fashioned,” “out of date,” and “Leave it to Beaver-is”. I say that it is simply “biblical.” What is sad, however, is that God’s people have embraced this unbiblical thinking and convulse at the very mention of “male headship” within the family. The question is, where does ultimate authority lie? Is it in our intuition, our reason or in the values of culture? Or is it in the infallible and supremely authoritative word of our Creator, Redeemer and Judge? The latter is without question the truth and highest authority in the land.

One of the hymn writers of the past wrote, “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, has been laid for your faith in His excellent word.” My concern for the church is that we are slowly and unknowingly leaving that firm foundation of God’s authoritative truth and exchanging it for the thoughts and words of men. My prayer and hope is that we will rediscover and recommit our hearts and minds to the foundation of our faith - the firm foundation of God’s word. May he give us courage to stand firmly and humbly upon the solid rock of his authoritative word - and that word alone.

Soli Deo Gloria