

INTRODUCTION

The essence of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation is often summarized by five *solas* (*sola* in Latin meaning “alone”): *sola Scriptura*, *solus Christus*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Deo gloria*. These five refrains conveniently identified the fundamental differences between the Protestant Reformers and Roman Catholicism:

- ***sola Scriptura*** (“Scripture alone”) – the belief that the ultimate and infallible authority over Christ’s Church was not the pope or tradition, but the inspired Scriptures.
- ***solus Christus*** (“Christ alone”) – the belief that the only basis by which a sinner can be justified before a holy God was by the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- ***sola fide*** (“faith alone”) – the belief that God’s gift of salvation, made possible by the work of Jesus Christ, could only be received through faith, and not in conjunction with human effort.
- ***sola gratia*** (“grace alone”) – the belief that everything pertaining to salvation, from start to finish, was due to God’s unmerited grace, and not in any way to the sinner’s merit.
- ***solus Deo gloria*** (“the glory of God alone”) – the belief that the only one who gets credit for salvation is God.

When we consider the first of these *solas*, *sola Scriptura*, we are in large part considering the doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency. Soon after the close of the Apostolic Age, minor aberrations began to develop among some of the early church theologians with respect to the nature of the Bible. By the Medieval Ages, these aberrations had developed into serious deviations and compromises. The Bible was viewed by many as inherently obscure. Only the Roman pope and his college of bishops had the keys to unlock it. But even once unlocked, the Bible was now believed to be *insufficient* for the Church. Another source of knowledge—*tradition*—was needed to supplement what was not recorded in the Scripture. As church tradition became increasingly elevated to a status equal to and even superior over Scripture, the gospel message was veiled, putting the only hope for sinners out of reach in a mist of confusion, ambiguity, and human opinion.

It was into this context that the Protestant Reformers exclaimed, *sola Scriptura*! They were moved to let the Bible speak for itself, and when they listened to its testimony, they found that it spoke clearly and definitively on all necessary matters pertaining to life and doctrine. Their recovery of the Bible’s own witness concerning itself—summarized in the motto *sola Scriptura*—then allowed for the recovery of the gospel, summarized so well in the other four *solas*—*solus Christus*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *solus Deo gloria*. One of the earliest Protestant confessions of faith, the *Geneva Confession of Faith* (1536), articulates well the Reformers’ recovery of the sufficiency of Scripture:

First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other thing which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord. (Article 1)

Motivated in part by its longstanding rejection of the Bible’s sufficiency, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent in 1546 to counter the Reformers’ views of the Bible and salvation. One of its resulting declarations highlights its refusal to see the Bible as sufficient for the Church:

The council clearly perceives that this truth [what is necessary for salvation] and rule [what is necessary for norms of conduct] are contained in the written books *and unwritten traditions* that have come down to us, having been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ himself or from the apostles by the dictation of the Holy Spirit, and have been transmitted, as it were, from hand to hand. Following, then, the example of the orthodox Fathers, it receives and venerates with the same sense of loyalty and reverence all the books of the Old and New Testament—for the one

God is the author of both—together with all the traditions concerning faith and practice, as coming from the mouth of Christ or being inspired by the Holy Spirit and preserved in continuous succession in the Catholic Church. (“Decree on the Reception of Sacred Books,” emphasis added).

In response to the efforts of the Reformers, the Roman Catholic Church explicitly rejected the notion of *sola Scriptura* and instead entrenched its belief that the Church was to be ruled by both Scripture and unwritten traditions. Scripture was not enough, and he who believed so was cursed. In fact, this view continues to be the view of the Roman Catholic Church to this day. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council reemphasized what had been stated by the Council of Trent some three centuries earlier:

Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God committed to the Church. . . . It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand with the others and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. (*Dei Verbum*)

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church is not the only opponent to *sola Scriptura* and the sufficiency of the Bible. Sadly, similar opposition is pervasive in Christendom today beyond the boundaries of Roman Catholicism. For example, this opposition exists in certain *Christian counseling contexts*, where the Bible is treated as a guidebook related to basic spiritual issues, but not as a sufficient, infallible resource for matters pertaining to the deepest problems of the soul. After using the Bible as an introductory tool, recourse is eventually made to other human manuals and authorities to diagnose problems and prescribe solutions.

Opposition to *sola Scriptura* and the sufficiency of the Bible is also manifest in the modern-day Charismatic movement, where the focus typically falls on seeking “fresh words of God” to help navigate personal circumstances in life. In the place of the Reformation anthem of *sola Scriptura*, the Charismatic movement sings “God told me so”—and what is “told” is that which is beyond the Bible.

But rejection of the Bible’s sufficiency can manifest itself in far more subtle ways, even among those who claim a high view of Scripture. To the question, “Do you believe the Bible is the word of God?,” Christians can answer, “Absolutely.” To the question, “Do you believe the Bible is inspired?,” Christians can respond with a loud “Amen!” To the question, “Do you believe the Bible is inerrant and infallible?,” Christians can again offer hearty affirmation. But to the question, “Do you believe the Bible has all the answers you need to glorify God and flourish spiritually?,” the answer can easily be an “I’m not sure.” Real doubt exists among many professing Christians over the Bible’s ability to diagnose and remedy their most difficult problems or to answer their most pressing questions.

This common uncertainty over the Bible’s sufficiency led James Montgomery Boice to declare, **“Inerrancy is not the most critical issue facing the church today. The most serious issue, I believe, is the Bible’s sufficiency”** (*Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace*, 72).

THE NATURE OF SUFFICIENCY

What It Means

As always, we must begin with the key term itself—in this case, *sufficiency*—and define it correctly. Simply stated, when we affirm that Scripture is *sufficient*, we affirm that it contains ***all that is necessary for the purpose for which God has given it***. Here are some additional definitions:

- Kevin DeYoung: “The Scriptures contain everything we need for knowledge of salvation and godly living. We don’t need any new revelation from heaven” (*Taking God at His Word*, 44).
- Guy Waters: “When Reformed Protestants have affirmed Scripture to be sufficient, they are saying that the Bible is sufficient for the purposes for which it was written In matters of faith and practice, then, human beings need go no farther than Scripture to discern what it is that God would have them to believe, and what it is that God would have them to do” (*For the Mouth of the Lord Has Spoken*, 152, 153).

What is the purpose for which Scripture has been given? Much could be said in response, but it can be summarized by the Apostle Paul's concise exhortation to the Corinthians: "**Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God**" (1 Corinthians 10:31). In other words, the chief purpose for man is *to live for the glory of God*. Or, as Paul said the Colossians, "so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, **to please Him in all respects**, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Colossians 1:10). Accordingly, God has given us His word to provide us with all the knowledge needed to fulfill this most important duty correctly.

Another helpful definition of the concept of Scripture's sufficiency is articulated by Wayne Grudem (*Systematic Theology*, 127), who wrote,

The sufficiency of that Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.

In other words, as those who come *after* the close of the canon of Scripture, we can speak of the sufficiency of Scripture *in totality*—in the light of everything God will ever give us for life and godliness in this present church age. However, Scripture's sufficiency also extends to times *before* the close of the canon. Scripture itself was given *progressively over time*. As God's plan of redemption progressed, so did the accumulated revelation. But even before it was brought to its state of completion with the writing of the book of Revelation in AD 96, in whatever age God's people found themselves (whether in the time of Moses, David, Isaiah, Paul, or John), the special knowledge from God which they possessed in the amount of Scripture written by that time *was always enough* to inform them about how to live pleasing to God at that time.

What It Does Not Mean

But the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture has often been mischaracterized, and then dishonestly rejected. As such, it is important to acknowledge intended "limitations" to the doctrine of the Bible's sufficiency. But as Guy Waters rightly acknowledges, "To say the sufficiency of Scripture has limitations is not to attribute a defect to Scripture. It is to say, however, that the Divine Author of Scripture has purposely set certain parameters around what he has designed Scripture to be and to do" (*For the Mouth of the Lord Has Spoken*, 171). So, what mischaracterizations exist? What rightful limitations to the doctrine must be acknowledged?

- **Mischaracterization 1:** To affirm Scripture's sufficiency suggests that it is then exhaustive on all aspects of human understanding. **Correction:** Scripture was never *intended* to be a textbook on biology, physics, music, economics, engineering, etc., and therefore not intended to be sufficient on *those* issues.
- **Mischaracterization 2:** To affirm Scripture's sufficiency necessitates that it must be exhaustive on all matters of faith and practice. **Correction:** Scripture is not intended to provide *exhaustive details* even on the matters it does address (e.g., John 20:30). Rather, the amount of knowledge it does provide, whether vast or limited, is exactly *enough* for accomplishing its purpose. We may wish it contained more, but we don't actually *need* more to fulfill our duty before God.
- **Mischaracterization 3:** To affirm Scripture's sufficiency renders all other extra-biblical authorities superfluous and unhelpful. **Correction:** Scripture itself prescribes the use of *secondary* authorities like pastors and teachers (e.g., Ephesians 4:11–13). The kinds of helps produced by godly teachers—whether creeds, confessions, commentaries, or sermons—are *ministerial* in nature, not *magisterial*. They serve; they do not lord it over. Secondary, ministerial authorities that serve their purpose well never attempt to eclipse the ultimate authority (God's word), but openly rely upon and point toward upon and point that ultimate authority.
- **Mischaracterization 4:** To affirm Scripture's sufficiency implies that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is no longer needed. **Correction:** Scripture itself teaches that the depravity of man requires Spirit-wrought *regeneration*, and the regenerate believer needs Spirit-wrought *illumination* (e.g., 1 Corinthians 2:14; Psalm 119:18). The Spirit's help is needed not to rectify an inadequacy in Scripture, but to treat an inadequacy in the reader.

	<p>→ Mischaracterization 5: To affirm Scripture’s sufficiency eliminates the need for reasoning in the application of Scripture. Correction: Applying the Bible’s contents to today’s context is not merely a matter of finding the appropriate proof text. Careful thoughtfulness is required to systematize the right texts, discern the correct principles, and deduce the appropriate applications. In fact, the sufficiency of Scripture is put on display through the right use of reason in discerning how Scripture’s contents sufficiency address issues of the 21st century.</p>
THE TESTIMONY TO SUFFICIENCY	<p>The evidence for the sufficiency of Scripture is found in three primary areas:</p> <p>A. Scripture’s Direct Testimony: Psalm 19:7–11; 2 Timothy 3:14–17; 2 Peter 1:2–4, 19.</p> <p>B. Scripture’s Intended Purpose: Luke 1:1–4; 16:19–31; John 20:30–31; Romans 15:4; 1 Timothy 3:15; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23; 2:1–2; 1 John 5:13.</p> <p>C. Scripture’s Warning against Alteration: Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:5–6; Revelation 22:18–19. This includes its warnings against allowing tradition to rise to the level of Scripture: Isaiah 29:13–14; Mark 7:1–13.</p>
IMPLICATIONS OF SUFFICIENCY	<p>The sufficiency of Scripture cannot be merely an article of faith that is confessed, as the Reformers did in their motto <i>sola Scriptura</i>. It must also bring about practical results in our own lives. Here are three important practical applications of the doctrine of biblical sufficiency:</p> <p>A. Scripture is sufficient for your most pressing problems. We often languish in our problems because of our tacit assumption that God’s word won’t have the answer. “To the law and to the testimony!” (Isaiah 8:20).</p> <p>B. Test everything with Scripture, not vice versa. Tradition, intuition, emotions, and reason must always be secondary, and must always be made to submit to the teachings of Scripture.</p> <p>C. If you don’t find what you are looking for in Scripture, you’re either not looking hard enough, or you’re looking for the wrong thing. We give too much credence to the trustworthiness of our longings. What is needed is not a “better” word from God, but different longings—longings for the right things.</p>
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS	<p>Discuss these questions in your small group:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In your own words, explain what “the sufficiency of Scripture” means. 2. Refer to the five mischaracterizations of the sufficiency of Scripture listed above. Briefly summarize each of those mischaracterizations and provide a concise response to each. 3. Identify several areas in your own life in which you have been tempted—whether in the past or present—to assume that Scripture <i>does not</i> provide the sufficient response to your spiritual struggles. 4. James Boice stated, “Inerrancy is not the most critical issue facing the church today. The most serious issue, I believe, is the Bible’s sufficiency.” Boice certainly wasn’t denying the inerrancy of the Bible. But why do you supposed he said that doubt in the sufficiency of the Bible is a more serious issue in the church today? 5. Take time this week to meditate on 2 Timothy 3:14–17. Compile a list of observations of all the ways in which the Scripture’s sufficiency is emphasized in this text.
FURTHER STUDY	<p>For further study this week:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Memorize 2 Peter 1:2–3. 2. Listen to the sermon by Tom Pennington, “The Sufficiency of Scripture,” preached at Countryside Bible Church on 8/3/2014, and available at this link: The Sufficiency of Scripture Countryside Bible Church. 3. Read Kevin DeYoung, <i>Taking God at His Word</i>, chapter 3, “God’s Word Is Enough,” pp. 43–55. 4. Read John MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of Scripture,” in the Fall 2004 edition of <i>The Master’s Seminary Journal</i>, accessible at this link: tmsj15g.pdf. <p>Audio, video, and handouts for this session: www.gracechurch.org/motw</p> <p>Next meeting: October 30, Evening of Prayer (patio fellowship beginning at 6pm)</p>