

500 Years of Sola Scriptura

By Greg Witherow

The question of authority was one of the key flash points during the Reformation. The question was as follows: What authority binds consciences on the tenets of the faith? For centuries, the Church asserted it was scripture, tradition and the magisterium of the Church. This three pronged strategy was used in the seven ecumenical councils¹. In each case, the goal was to settle disputes and maintain unity. The councils pored over scripture, revered as sacred. Tradition served as a firewall, guarding against innovations. The Magisterium arrived at conclusions, propagating creeds and canons. The Nicene Creed serves as the most famous. The Nicene Creed is an irreversible dogma, recited in the Mass to this day. Put into practice, the fruit of this authority model, coupled with the Holy Spirit, is settled dogma and unity².

The Reformers rejected the Catholic model. Instead, Scripture alone was the **sole, binding** authority. Tradition could be consulted, but not as authoritative. Individual churches of likeminded men, did create statements of faith and catechisms. However, these were not binding (in theory) nor regarded as infallible. In effect, the private judgement of the individual was (and is) the final arbiter of scripture. Each man, armed with his bible, decides for himself.

With this model, there have been no ecumenical councils within Protestantism for 500 years. Why? Because it is impossible to settle disputes³. Presbyterians will never convince Baptists to baptize infants. And Presbyterians will not relent. Why? Scripture is not explicit. Both sides have a case. 500 years prove, sola scriptura **starts arguments it cannot settle**.

Catholic bibles contain 73 books. How did this happen? F.F. Bruce, a renowned Protestant authority on scripture, writes as follows.

“In 393 a church council held in Augustine’s see of Hippo laid the limits of the canonical books along the lines approved by Augustine himself. The proceedings of this council have been lost but they were summarized in the proceedings of the Third Council of Carthage (397), a provisional council. These appear to have been the first church councils to make a formal pronouncement on the canon. When they did so, **they did not impose any innovation on the churches**; they simply endorsed what had become the general consensus of the churches of the west and the greater part of the east”.⁴

The resulting canon includes the 73 books found in Catholic bibles today. Note that tradition was used to guard against innovations. This was the bible of the Church for 1,500 years. Read that again. Slowly. One thousand, five hundred years. Protestants rely on this canon for the New Testament, while eliminating 7 Old Testament books⁵. With sola scriptura, how do you settle this dispute? There’s no inspired index! If you wanted to build a Machine of Division, sola scriptura is just for you. The results are guaranteed; 100%. 500 years proves it.

¹ The councils held from 325 to 787 AD, are accepted by Catholics and Orthodox. See <http://bit.ly/2cypowG>.

² The split between the east and the west was primarily political. A council was not given the chance to address it

³ A Calvinist once confronted me, “Catholics have just as much division in their church as Protestants do!” I answered, “It’s one thing to argue with your wife, it’s another thing to get a divorce”. He conceded the point.

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1988) p.97. Emphasis mine.

⁵ Catholic apologists Eck cited 2 Maccabees as scriptural proof of purgatory, forcing Luther to reject the books canonicity.