

Sola Scriptura and the Early Church

by William Webster

The 16th century Reformation was responsible for restoring to the church the principle of sola Scriptura, a principle that had been operative within the church from the very beginning of the post apostolic age. Initially the apostles taught orally but with the close of the apostolic age, all special revelation that God wanted preserved for man was codified in the written Scriptures. Sola Scriptura is the teaching; founded on the Scriptures themselves, that there is only one special revelation from God that man possesses today, the written Scriptures or the Bible. Consequently the Scriptures are materially sufficient and are by their very nature, as being inspired by God, the ultimate authority for the church. This means that there is no portion of that revelation which has been preserved in the form of oral tradition independent of Scripture. We do not possess any oral teaching of an Apostle today. Only Scripture therefore records for us the apostolic teaching and the final revelation of God.

The Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, on the other hand, declared that the revelation of God was not contained solely in the Scriptures. It was contained partly in the written Scriptures and partly in oral tradition and therefore the Scriptures were not materially sufficient. This was the universal view of Roman Catholic theologians for centuries after the Council of Trent. (It is interesting to note, however, that in Roman Catholic circles today there is an ongoing debate among theologians on the nature of Tradition. There is no clear understanding of what Tradition is in Roman Catholicism today. Some agree with Trent and some do not). It must be noted that the view espoused by Trent is contradictory to and is a repudiation of the belief and practice of the church of the patristic age. The early church held to the principle of sola Scriptura in that it believed that all doctrine must be proven from Scripture and if such proof could not be produced the doctrine was to be rejected.

From the very beginning of the post apostolic age with the writings of what are known as the Apostolic Fathers (Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement, the Didache, and Barnabus) we find an exclusive appeal to the Scriptures for the positive teaching of doctrine and for its defense against heresy. The writings of the Apostolic Fathers literally breathe with the spirit of the Old and New Testaments. In the writings of the apologists such as Justin Martyr and Athenagoras we find the same thing. There is no appeal in any of these writings to the authority of Tradition as a separate and independent body of revelation. It is with the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian in the mid to late 2nd century that we first encounter the concept of apostolic Tradition, that was claimed to be handed down in the church in oral form. The word 'tradition' simply means teaching. What did Irenaeus and Tertullian mean when they claimed Apostolic Teaching or tradition is handed down orally? All they meant was that the bishops of the church preached the truth orally and anyone interested in learning the true apostolic Tradition could learn it by simply listening to the preaching or oral teaching of the bishops of any orthodox church of the day. But Irenaeus and Tertullian state emphatically that all the teachings of the Bishops that was given orally was rooted in Scripture and could be proven from the written Scriptures. Both men give us the actual doctrinal content of the apostolic Tradition that was orally preached in the churches, and every doctrine was derived from Scripture. There was no doctrine in that apostolic Tradition that is not found in Scripture. The apostolic Tradition for Irenaeus and Tertullian is simply the teaching of

Scripture. It was Irenaeus who stated that while the apostles at first preached orally, their teaching was later committed to writing in the Scriptures, and the Scriptures have since that day become the pillar and ground of the Church's faith. His exact statement is as follows:

“We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith”.¹

Tradition, when referring to oral proclamation such as preaching or teaching, was viewed primarily as the oral presentation of Scriptural truth, or the codifying of biblical truth into creedal expression. There is no appeal in the writings of Irenaeus or Tertullian to a tradition on issues of doctrine that is not found in Scripture. Irenaeus and Tertullian had to contend with the Gnostics who were the very first to suggest and teach that they possessed an Apostolic oral Tradition that was independent from Scripture. These early fathers rejected such a notion and appealed to Scripture alone for the proclamation and defense of doctrine. Church historian, Ellen Flessman-Van Leer affirms this fact:

“For Tertullian Scripture is the only means for refuting or validating a doctrine as regards its content...For Irenaeus, the church doctrine is certainly never purely traditional; on the contrary, the thought that there could be some truth, transmitted exclusively viva voce (orally), is a Gnostic line of thought...If Irenaeus wants to prove the truth of a doctrine materially, he turns to scripture, because therein the teaching of the apostles is objectively accessible. Proof from tradition and scripture serve one and the same end: to identify the teaching of the church as the original apostolic teaching. The first establishes that the teaching of the church is this apostolic teaching, and the second, what this apostolic teaching is”²

The Bible was the ultimate authority for the Church of the patristic age. It was materially sufficient, and the final arbiter in all matters of doctrinal truth. As J.N.D. Kelly has pointed out:

“The clearest token of the prestige enjoyed by (Scripture) is the fact that almost the entire theological effort of the Fathers, whether their aims were polemical or constructive, was expended upon what amounted to the exposition of the Bible. Further, it was everywhere taken for granted that, for any doctrine to win acceptance, it had first to establish its Scriptural basis”.³

Heiko Oberman comments about the relationship between Scripture and Tradition in the early church:

“Scripture and tradition were for the early church in no sense mutually exclusive: kerygma (the message of the gospel), Scripture and Tradition coincided entirely. The church preached the kerygma, which is found in toto in written form in the canonical books. The tradition was not understood as an addition to the kerygma contained in Scripture but as handing down that same kerygma in living form: in other words everything was to be found in Scripture and at the same time everything was in living Tradition”.⁴

¹Alexander Roberts & W.H. Rambaugh Translators, *The Writings of Irenaeus, Against Heresies* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1874), 3.1.1

²Ellen Flessman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Van Gorcum, 1953, pp. 184, 133, 144

³*Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 42, 46

⁴*The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1963), p. 366

The fact that the Church of the patristic age was faithful to the principle of sola Scriptura is clearly seen from the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem (the bishop of Jerusalem in the mid 4th century). He is the author of what is known as the Catechetical Lectures. This work is an extensive series of lectures given to new believers expounding the principle doctrines of the faith. It is a complete explanation of the faith of the church of his day. His teaching is thoroughly grounded in Scripture. There is in fact not one appeal in the entirety of the Lectures to an oral apostolic Tradition that is independent of Scripture. He states in explicit terms that if he were to present any teaching to these catechumens which could not be validated from Scripture, they were to reject it. This tells us that his authority as a bishop was subject to his conformity to the written Scriptures in his teaching. The following are some of his statements from these lectures, on the final authority of Scripture.

“This seal have thou ever on thy mind; which now by way of summary has been touched on in its heads, and if the Lord grant, shall hereafter be set forth according to our power, with Scripture proofs. For concerning the divine and sacred Mysteries of the Faith, we ought not to deliver even the most casual remark without the Holy Scriptures: nor be drawn aside by mere probabilities and the artifices of argument. Do not then believe me because I tell thee these things, unless thou receive from the Holy Scriptures the proof of what is set forth: for this salvation, which is of our faith, is not by ingenious reasonings, but by proof from the Holy Scriptures”.⁵

“But take thou and hold that faith only as a learner and in profession, which is by the Church delivered to thee, and is established from all Scripture. For since all cannot read the Scripture, but some as being unlearned, others by business, are hindered from the knowledge of them; in order that the soul may not perish for lack of instruction, in the Articles which are few we comprehend the whole doctrine of Faith...And for the present, commit to memory the Faith, merely listening to the words; and expect at the fitting season the proof of each of its parts from the Divine Scriptures. For the Articles of the Faith were not composed at the good pleasure of men: but the most important points chosen from all Scriptures, make up the one teaching of the Faith. And, as the mustard seed in a little grain contains many branches, thus also this Faith, in a few words, hath enfolded in its bosom the whole knowledge of godliness contained both in the Old and New Testaments. Behold, therefore, brethren and hold the traditions which ye now receive, and write them on the table of your hearts”.⁶

Notice in the above passage that Cyril states that catechumens are receiving tradition and he exhorts them to hold to the traditions, which they are now receiving. Where is this tradition derived from? Obviously from the Scriptures, the teaching or tradition or revelation of God, which was committed to the Apostles and passed on to the church, is now accessible in Scripture alone. It is significant that Cyril of Jerusalem, who is communicating the entirety of the faith to these new believers, did not make a single appeal to an oral tradition to support his teachings. The entirety of the faith is grounded upon Scripture and Scripture alone. Gregory of Nyssa also enunciated this principle: He stated:

“The generality of men still fluctuate in their opinions about this, which are as erroneous as they are numerous. As for ourselves, if the Gentile philosophy, which deals methodically

⁵ A Library of the Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church (Oxford: Parker, 1845), The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril 4.17

⁶ Ibid., Lecture 5.12

with all these points, were really adequate for a demonstration, it would certainly be superfluous to add a discussion on the soul to those speculations, But while the latter proceeded, on the subject of the soul, as far in the direction of supposed consequences as the thinker pleased, we are not entitled to such license, I mean that of affirming what we please; we make the Holy Scriptures the rule and the measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings.”⁷

These fathers are simply representative of the fathers as a whole. Cyprian, Origen, Hippolytus, Athanasius, Firmilian, and Augustine are just a few of these that could be cited as proponents of the principle of sola Scriptura in addition to Tertullian, Irenaeus, Cyril and Gregory of Nyssa. The early church operated on the basis of the principle of sola Scriptura, and it was this historical principle that the Reformers sought to restore to the church. The extensive use of Scripture by the fathers of the early Church from the very beginning are seen in the following facts:

Irenaeus: He knew Polycarp who was a disciple of the apostle John. He lived from c 130 to 202 AD. He quotes from 24 of the 27 books of the New Testament. He makes over 1,800 quotations from the New Testament alone. Clement of Alexandria: He lived from 150 to 215 AD. He cites all the New Testament, books except Philemon, James and 2 Peter. He gives 2,400 citations from the New Testament. Tertullian: He lived from 160 to 220 AD. He makes over 7,200 New Testament citations.

Origen: He lived from 185 to 254 AD. He succeeded Clement of Alexandria at the Catechetical school at Alexandria. He makes nearly 18,000 New Testament citations.

By the end of the 3rd century virtually the entire New Testament could be reconstructed from the writings of the church fathers. B.F. Westcott sums up the position of the New Testament Scriptures in the early church in these words:

“The first hundred years of the existence of the 27 books of the New Testament reveal that virtually every one of them was quoted as authoritative and recognized as canonical by men who were themselves the younger contemporaries of the apostolic age”.⁸

It is true that the early church also held to the concept of tradition as referring to ecclesiastical customs and practices. It was often believed that such practices were actually handed down from the apostles, even though they could not necessarily be validated from the Scriptures. These practices however did not involve the doctrines of the faith, and were often contradictory among different segments of the Church. An example of this is found early on in the second century in the controversy over when to celebrate Easter. Certain Eastern churches celebrated it on a different day from those in the West. But each claimed that their particular practice was handed down to them directly from the apostles. This actually led to conflict with the Bishop of Rome who demanded that the Eastern Bishops submit to the Western practice. This they refused to do, firmly believing that they were adhering to apostolic Tradition. Which one is correct? There is no way to determine which, if either was truly of apostolic origin. It is interesting; however, to note that one of the proponents for the Eastern view was Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John. There are other examples of this sort of claim in church history. Just because a particular

⁷Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume V, III. Philosophical Works, On the Soul And the Resurrection

⁸B.F. Westcott, A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1889)

church father claims that a particular practice is of apostolic origin does not mean that it necessarily was. All it meant was that he believes that it was. But there was no way to verify if in fact it was a tradition from the apostles. There are numerous practices which the early church engaged in which it believed were of apostolic origin which are listed for us by Basil the Great, which no one practices today. Clearly therefore, such appeals to oral apostolic Tradition that refers to customs and practices are meaningless. The Roman Catholic Church states that it possesses an oral apostolic Tradition which is independent of Scripture, and which is binding upon men. It appeals to Paul's statement in 2 Thessalonians 2:15: "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle". Rome asserts that, based on Paul's teaching in this passage, the teaching of sola Scriptura is false, since he handed on teachings to the Thessalonians in both oral and written form. But what is interesting in such an assertion is that Roman apologists never document the specific doctrines that Paul is referring to, which they claim they possess, and which they say are binding upon men. From Francis de Sales to the writings of Karl Keating and Robert Sungenis there is this conspicuous absence. Sungenis edited a work recently on a defense of the Roman Catholic teaching of tradition entitled Not By Scripture Alone. It is touted as a definitive refutation of the Protestant teaching of sola Scriptura. His book is 627 pages in length. Not once in the entire book does any author define the doctrinal content of this supposed apostolic Tradition that is binding on all men! Yet we are told is that it exists, that the Roman Catholic Church possesses it, and that we are bound therefore to submit to this church which alone possesses the fullness of God's revelation from the apostles. What Sungenis and other Roman Catholic authors fail to define, is the contents and precise doctrines of the claimed "apostolic Tradition". The simple reason that they do not give such is because it does not exist. If such traditions existed and were of such importance why did Cyril of Jerusalem not mention them in his Catechetical Lectures? We defy anyone to list the doctrines Paul is referring to in 2 Thessalonians 2:15 which he says he committed orally to the Thessalonians. The only special revelation man possesses today from God that was committed to the Apostles is the written Scriptures. This was the belief and practice of the church of the patristic age. This principle was adhered to by the Reformers, which they sought to restore to the church after doctrinal corruption had entered through the door of tradition. The teaching of a separate body of apostolic revelation known as tradition that is oral in nature, originated not with the orthodox church, but with Gnosticism. This was an attempt by the Gnostics to bolster their authority by asserting that the Scriptures were not sufficient. They stated that they possessed the fullness of apostolic revelation because they not only had the written revelation of the apostles in the Scriptures but also their oral tradition, and the key for interpreting and understanding that revelation. Just as the early church fathers repudiated that teaching and claim by an exclusive reliance upon and appeal to the written Scriptures, so must we. *"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"* John 10:27.

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