

P Protestant University



STUDY GUIDE | LESSON 1

SOLA SCRIPTURA



Many people believe truth is relative. Christians, on the other hand, believe truth is absolute. And while some Christians believe it's up to the church to tell them what's true, others look to the Bible to determine for themselves what is true.

The Protestant Reformation gave us five primary biblical truths—the five solas—that are the keys of our faith. Since a majority of Protestant Christians may have a hard time naming them, much less understanding what they mean in practice, let's invest some time looking at each one and challenge ourselves to objectively consider how well we are living by them.

We will start with *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone).

Protestants today are split on the core principles of the reformation while Catholics basically echo the traditional views of their church, following church traditions and relying on the church to tell them what Scripture teaches. Is it possible that the church is falling a second time from the truths of the gospel, just as they did in the dark ages?

We may be following tradition more than we think or want to admit. Consider the following statements that church members have made. Do they sound more Catholic or Protestant? Circle your answer.

“You should only read books written by Adventist authors and listen to messages by Adventist speakers.”

Catholic or Protestant?

“Adventists must conform to every fundamental belief, voted action, statement, and policy of the General Conference because it is the voice of God on earth.”

Catholic or Protestant?

The Bible and the Bible alone is to be the standard by which all religious teachings are measured. Commentaries, books, and sermons are all helpful in our spiritual walk so long as they are in agreement with the Bible. How often do you check to see if what you read or hear agrees with God’s Word? If we aren’t spending sufficient time studying the Bible for ourselves, we are more likely to believe teachings that aren’t biblical.

As council after council convened to determine truth, the church gradually shifted their trust to the traditions and teachings of the church as the source of truth, rather than to the Word of God. Over time, the church began turning to Rome to settle disputes in matters of doctrine and discipline.

Do you think the Seventh-day Adventist Church is in danger of going down the same path? Why or why not?

The Adventist Church published its first list of fundamental beliefs in 1931. They were intended to simply be a description of our mutual understanding of Scripture, as was stated in the preamble to the original writing of the fundamental beliefs, and not a creed-like test.

If Scripture is our authority, how should we relate to the 28 fundamental beliefs of the Adventist Church?

The Adventist Church has also stated many policies by which it is to be governed. If Scripture is our authority, how should we relate to General Conference policy decisions? Circle the number that best reflects your church.

Traditions (Catholic) 1 2 3 4 5 Bible only (Protestant)

Most Christians consider themselves either Protestant or Catholic. The Catholic Church argues that if Scripture were sufficient by itself, there wouldn't be so much disagreement among Christians who all read from the same Bible. All the disagreements and arguments lead them to conclude that in order to have unity and a correct understanding, the church must serve as "the definer of truth, practice, and discipline."

The supposition here is that knowledge merits salvation and therefore must be perfectly uniform. But Jesus said, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me" (John 5:39). Jesus, not knowledge, is our Savior.

Is it possible that this same mindset of salvation-by-correct-knowledge has infiltrated our thinking today?

The Catholic Church also contends that since it determined what books went into the Bible, it has authority over the canon. It argues that the church is therefore equal or greater in authority to the Bible and may therefore interpret the Bible according to its teachings.

But the claim that the Catholic Church determined the biblical canon is simply not true. There is plenty of evidence that other groups were determining the canon before the Catholic Church was even formed. It is not the church that decides what is Scripture, but rather it is Scripture itself that defines what writings will be authoritative or not (Isa. 8:20, 2 Tim. 3:16-17, Acts 17:11).

The Adventist Church's position on Ellen White is that she had the gift of prophecy. Her writings have been a great blessing to our church. If we go by what she wrote, we will place Scripture above her writings. Here are some of her statements on this subject:

- "The Bible and the Bible alone is to be the rule of our faith" (*From the Heart*, p. 24).
- "The words of the Bible and the Bible alone should be heard from the pulpit" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, 626).
- "The Bible and the Bible alone is to be our creed, the sole bond of union . . . Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, 'The Bible, our rule of faith and discipline'" (*Review and Herald*, Dec. 15, 1885).

What do you see as the proper relationship between Ellen White's writings and sola scriptura?

If we are truly Protestants who believe in the great principle of sola scriptura, then the role of the church is to be descriptive, rather than prescriptive.

To what extent should we allow the church to set up “ideals of religious practice” on subjects for which Scripture has little to say and there is no consensus by church theologians on the matter?

Do Adventists rely on the church too much, not studying enough for themselves? What about you?

The Bible says that “when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth . . .” (John 16:13). Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is enough for you to understand Scripture? Are you allowing the Word of God to be the standard of faith and practice in your life? Will you commit today to go to the Word for yourself by spending time in the Bible daily? Will you allow God Himself to lead you to an understanding of biblical truth through His Spirit?

What are the dangers of relying too heavily on the guidance of a “perceived authority,” whether from traditional values or respected and credible figures (professors, theologians, scholars, or church leaders)?

What does the statement, “the church is to be descriptive rather than prescriptive” mean to you? Is there ever a time when the church should be prescriptive?

Does culture or tradition change the way people view the Bible today?
