

Tradition

(A Catholic response to Protestant objections)

The Protestant doctrine of Sola Scriptura – the idea that the Bible alone is our sole authority – is built upon extremely shaky and virtually non-existent ground. Nowhere in all of Scripture are we told that the Scriptures are our final authority on earth.

The Bible is abundantly clear, however, that the Church is the final Authority on earth in all matters of faith and morals (**Matt. 16:15-19, 15-18, Luke 10:16, John 16:12-15, 20:21-23, 1 Cor. 11:2, 2 Thess 2:15, 2 Thess. 3:6, 2 Tim. 2:2**) and is the *pillar and foundation of truth* (**1 Tim. 3:15**). Despite the solid evidence supporting Tradition, many non-Catholics still argue against the very Scriptures that they believe to be *more* binding than Tradition.

Whereas, most Protestants believe in **Sola Scriptura** (*the Scriptures Alone*), Catholics adhere to the doctrine of **Sola Dei Verbum** (*the Word of God Alone*). We know that the Scriptures are the *written* word of God but they do not explicitly encompass all of God's truth. We see this in the very first line of John's Gospel where it explicitly states that **Jesus** is the Word of God – not the Bible. Conversely, the very last line in that same Gospel tells us that Jesus did many things that were *not* written down and that **"if all were written down, the world itself would not hold the books recording them."**

Even the Jews placed their traditions on the same level as the Old Testament Scriptures. One glaring example of this is in **2 Timothy 3:8**. In this verse Paul says, **"Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so they also oppose the truth--people of depraved mind, unqualified in the faith."** You might think that Paul is quoting the Old Testament but is, in fact, quoting Rabbinical Tradition. The names of the magicians who opposed Moses (**Ex. 7:11-12**) are *never* mentioned in the Old Testament, yet St. Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit reveals these names to us as part of the inspired Word of God.

Here are several examples of NT authors making references to oral traditions that cannot be found in Scripture. **NONE** of the following references made are from the Old Testament, but from **Oral Tradition** and are all held as the inspired Word of God:

Matthew 2:23 – Here, we read that Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth after their stay in Egypt, *"that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'"*

(This prophecy is found nowhere in the Old Testament).

Matthew 23:2 - As Jesus begins to rebuke the Pharisees and scribes, he says: *"The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not office in Israel.*

(There is no mention of a "Seat of Moses" in the Old Testament).

1 Corinthians 10:4 - Paul refers to the rock in the desert from which the Israelites drank: *"All drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ."*

(There is no mention of in the Old Testament of the rock following the Israelites).

Jude 9 - Jude speaks of a dispute between the Archangel Michael and Satan: “*When the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, ‘The Lord rebuke you.’*”

(You will find no mention of this altercation in the Old Testament).

Jude 14-15 - St. Jude is telling us about the disobedient and refers to Enoch: “*It was of these also that Enoch in the seventh generation from Adam prophesied, saying, ‘Behold, the Lord came with his holy myriads, to execute judgment on all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness which they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against him.’*”

(This statement is found nowhere in the Old Testament).

To say that **all** of God’s truth is contained in the pages of the Bible is to plummet into the proverbial rabbit hole that is the false and self-refuting Protestant doctrine of Sola Scriptura.

Those who would profess this falsehood usually point to the “*human precepts*” and “*traditions of men*” that Jesus warned against (**Matt. 15:9, Mark 7:5-9**). When read these verses in context, we see that Jesus was decrying the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes who placed their own traditions **above** the word of God and the spirit of the Law.

St. Paul tells us that we are to **hold fast** to the traditions taught by the Apostles – either by an “*oral statement or written letter*” (**2 Thess. 2:15, 2 Thess. 3:6, 1 Cor. 11:2**). He goes on to say in **1 Tim. 3:15**, that the Church is the “*pillar and foundation of truth.*” He **doesn’t** make this claim about the **Bible** it because it hadn’t been compiled and much of it had not yet been written. In these verses, he is stating plainly that Sacred Tradition and Scripture go hand in hand and are of equal importance.

In one of the many passages where Jesus relayed his authority to the Apostles, he promised them that there were many things they needed to know but could not hear at that time. He also promised them that the Holy Spirit would guide his Church to **all** truth about the things that were coming (**John 16:13-15**).

We see that the importance of Sacred or Apostolic Tradition – **even when compared to the Scriptures** - is confirmed by the Scriptures themselves. There are other minor traditions, however, that may be disciplinary and others that are cultural and not necessarily binding to the faith. Some of these might include wearing head-coverings during mass, feast days, advent wreaths, or other customs.

One common Protestant argument against the authority of the Sacred Tradition spoken of in verses like **2 Thess. 3:6** and **1 Cor. 11:2** involves the traditions themselves. They issue the challenge to Catholics to produce one single tradition that is not **explicitly** taught in the Bible. The Catholic can point straight to the canon of the Bible itself. Nowhere in the Scriptures do we see a list of books that comprise the Bible. This canon was declared by the Catholic Church, guided by the Holy Spirit (**Acts 15:28**) centuries *after* the Apostolic Age. Paul does **not** say in these passages that one should stop believing in traditions handed down by the Church after they (the Apostles) were dead. Despite Protestant objections to the sacred traditions of the Church, verses like **2 Thess. 3:6** have **no** expiration date.

Early Church Teachings on Tradition

The Early Church was keenly aware of St. Paul's admonitions about Sacred Traditions and understood well their importance. They didn't always appeal *solely* to the Scriptures in matters of faith and morals - nor did their predecessors, the Apostles (**Acts 15:28**).

Papias

Whenever anyone came my way, who had been a follower of my seniors, I would ask for the accounts of our seniors: What did Andrew or Peter say? Or Phillip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any of the Lord's disciples? I also asked: What did Aristion and John the Presbyter, disciples of the Lord say. For, as I see it, it is not so much from books as from the living and permanent voice that I must draw profit.

(The Sayings of the Lord [between A.D. 115 and 140] as recorded by Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3:39 [A.D. 325]).

Irenaeus

For even creation reveals Him who formed it, and the very work made suggests Him who made it, and the world manifests Him who ordered it. The Universal [Catholic] Church, moreover, through the whole world, has received this tradition from the Apostles.

(Against Heresies 2:9 [A.D. 189]).

True knowledge is the doctrine of the Apostles, and the ancient constitution of the Church throughout all the world, and the distinctive manifestation of the body of Christ according to the successions of the bishops, by which they have handed down that Church which exists in every place, ***and has come even unto us, being guarded and preserved, without any forging of Scriptures, by a very complete system of doctrine, and neither addition nor curtailment [in truths which she believes];*** and [it consists in] reading [the Word of God] without falsification, and a lawful and diligent exposition in harmony with the Scriptures, both without danger and without blasphemy...

(ibid. 4:33 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

For wherever both the true Christian rule and faith shall be shown to be, ***there will be the true Scriptures, and the true expositions, of all the true Christian traditions.***

(The Prescription of Heretics 19 [A.D. 200]).

Origen

Seeing there are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted in orderly succession from the Apostles, and remaining in the churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.

(On First Principles Bk. 1 Preface 2 [circa A.D. 225]).

Eusebius

While [Ignatius of Antioch] was making the journey through Asia under the strictest military guard, he strengthened the diocese in each city where he stayed by spoken sermons and exhortations, and he especially exhorted them above all to be on their guard against the heresies which then for the first time were prevalent and he urged them to

hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles to which he thought it necessary, for securities sake, to give form by written testimony.

(Ecclesiastical History, 3:36 [A.D. 325]).

Athanasius

Without prefixing Consulate, month, and day, [the Fathers] wrote concerning Easter, "It seemed good as follows," for it did then seem good that there should be a general compliance; but about the faith they wrote not, "It seemed good" but, "Thus believes the Catholic Church"; and thereupon they confessed how they believed, in order to show that their own sentiments were not novel, but Apostolic; and what they wrote down was no discovery of theirs, but is the same as was taught by the Apostles.

(Letter on the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia [A.D. 359]).

Basil

Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us "in mystery" by the tradition of the Apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force. And these no one will contradict; - no one, at all events, who is even moderately versed in the institutions of the Church. ***For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground that the importance they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel in these matters...***

(On the Holy Spirit 27 [A.D. 375]).

Jerome

Don't you know that the laying on of hands after baptism and then the invocation of the Holy Spirit is a custom of the Churches? Do you demand Scripture proof? You may find it in the Acts of the Apostles. And even if it did not rest on the authority of Scripture the consensus of the whole world in this respect would have the force of a command. ***For many other observances of the Churches, which are do to tradition, have acquired the authority of the written law.***

(The Dialogue Against the Luciferians 8 [A.D. 382]).

John Chrysostom

"So then brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word, or by epistle of ours" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). ***Hence it is manifest, that they did not deliver all things by epistle, but many things also unwritten, and in like manner both the one and the other are worthy of credit. Therefore let us think the tradition of the Church also worthy of credit. It is a tradition, seek no farther.***

(Homilies on Second Thessalonians [circa A.D. 400]).

Vincent of Lerins

I have often then inquired earnestly and attentively of very many men eminent for sanctity and learning, how and by what sure and so to speak universal rule I may be able to distinguish the truth of Catholic faith from the falsehood of heretical pravity; and I have always, and in almost every instance, received an answer to this effect: That whether I or any one else should wish to detect the frauds and avoid the snares of heretics as they rise, and to continue sound and complete in the Catholic faith, ***we must, the Lord***

helping, fortify our own belief in two ways: first, by the authority of the Divine Law, and then, by the Tradition of the Catholic Church.
(Commonitory 2 [A.D. 434])

Theodoret

I have ever kept the faith of the Apostles undefiled... *So have I learnt not only from the Apostles and the Prophets but also from the interpreters of their writings, Ignatius, Eustathius, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory, John, and the rest of the lights of the world;* and before these from the holy Fathers in council at Nicaea, whose confession of the faith I preserve in its integrity, like an ancestral inheritance [styling corrupt and enemies of the truth all who dare to transgress its decrees]
(*Letters no. 89 [circa A.D. 443]*).