

Protestant Denominational Division Disproves Sola Scriptura

LDS Apologetics Research
ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

This argument operates offensively rather than defensively. Latter-day Saint apologists observe that Protestantism, which claims the Bible alone as the sole rule of faith (*sola scriptura*), has produced over 40,000 distinct denominations and an enormous range of contradictory doctrines — on baptism, salvation, the Eucharist, church governance, eschatology, predestination, and virtually every other major theological question. If the Bible alone were truly a sufficient guide for faith and practice, one would expect it to produce doctrinal unity, not chaos. The persistent fragmentation of Protestantism constitutes powerful evidence that *sola scriptura* fails as an epistemological principle and that additional authoritative revelation — precisely what Latter-day Saints claim — is necessary.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The Protestant defender of *sola scriptura* will respond:

- 1. Denominations agree on essentials.** Most Protestant denominations agree on the core: the deity of Christ, the Trinity, salvation by grace, the authority of scripture. Disagreements are on secondary matters (mode of baptism, church governance, eschatology). Unity exists where it matters most.
- 2. The problem is sin, not scripture.** Division results from human pride, cultural context, and sin — not from any deficiency in the Bible. The Bible is perspicuous (clear) on essential matters; disagreements arise from human failure to submit to its clear teaching.
- 3. The 40,000 number is misleading.** The World Christian Encyclopedia's figure counts every nationally distinct church body as a separate denomination. There are far fewer truly distinct theological traditions.
- 4. Catholic/Orthodox unity is an illusion.** Roman Catholics disagree internally on enormous theological questions (Traditionalists vs. progressives, sedevacantists, etc.). Orthodox churches have their own divisions. LDS members also disagree on many issues. Institutional unity is not the same as doctrinal unity.
- 5. Authoritative interpreters create their own problems.** If unity requires a pope or a prophet, then the authority figure becomes the real authority rather than scripture — and authority figures themselves disagree over time (papal reversals, prophetic changes in LDS doctrine).

These are serious responses. But they do not resolve the fundamental problem.

3. Biblical Response

The Bible Itself Warns Against Private Interpretation

The very book that Protestants claim as their sole authority warns against the principle of *sola scriptura*:

- **2 Peter 1:20** — "No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." Scripture is not designed to be interpreted by individuals independently.
- **2 Peter 3:15-16** — Peter warns that Paul's letters contain "some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction." The apostles themselves recognized that scripture could be misunderstood — and that misinterpretation leads to destruction.
- **Acts 8:30-31** — Philip asks the Ethiopian eunuch, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" The eunuch answers: "How can I, except some man should guide me?" Scripture requires an authoritative interpreter.

The New Testament Church Was Not Sola Scriptura

The apostolic Church did not operate on the principle that scripture alone was sufficient:

- **Ephesians 4:11-14** — "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints... that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine." Living apostles and prophets — not scripture alone — were given to prevent doctrinal chaos.
- **Ephesians 2:20** — The Church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets." The foundation is not "the Bible" — it is living persons with divine authority.
- **Acts 15:1-29** — The circumcision controversy was not settled by each believer reading the Old Testament independently. It was settled by apostolic council, with the declaration: "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us." An authoritative body, guided by the Spirit, made a binding decision.
- **2 Thessalonians 2:15** — "Hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle." Paul places oral apostolic teaching on equal footing with written scripture.
- **1 Corinthians 11:2** — "Keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you." Authoritative oral tradition, not scripture alone.
- **1 Timothy 3:15** — "The church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." The Church — not the Bible — is called the pillar and ground of truth.

Jesus Promised Ongoing Revelation, Not a Closed Book

- **John 16:12-13** — "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth." Jesus promised ongoing guidance through the Spirit — not a static text.
- **Amos 3:7** — "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets." God's pattern is ongoing prophetic revelation.

- **Revelation 19:10** — "The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." Testimony of Jesus inherently involves ongoing prophecy.

Unity Is a Mark of the True Church

- **John 17:20-21** — Jesus prayed "that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." Unity is not optional — it is the witness that Christ was sent by God. Division undermines the very witness of the gospel.
- **1 Corinthians 1:10-13** — "Now I beseech you, brethren... that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me... that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided?" Paul treats denominational division as a grave sin.
- **Ephesians 4:4-6** — "One Lord, one faith, one baptism." Not many faiths. Not many baptisms. One.

The existence of 40,000+ denominations with conflicting doctrines on baptism, the Lord's Supper, salvation, predestination, and church governance is a direct contradiction of the unity Jesus commanded and Paul demanded.

4. Early Christian/Historical Evidence

Sola Scriptura Did Not Exist Before the Reformation

No Church Father, no ecumenical council, and no major Christian figure before Martin Luther taught *sola scriptura* as a formal principle:

- **Irenaeus (c. 130-202)** — In *Against Heresies* 3.4.1, Irenaeus argued that when heretics misinterpret scripture, one must appeal to the tradition of the apostles preserved in churches founded by apostles. Scripture must be read within the tradition of the Church.
- **Tertullian (c. 155-220)** — In *Prescription Against Heretics* 19, Tertullian argued that heretics have no right to appeal to scripture because scripture belongs to the Church. The Bible is the Church's book, not the individual's.
- **Augustine (354-430)** — "I would not believe in the Gospel myself if the authority of the Catholic Church did not move me to do so" (*Against the Epistle of Manichaeus* 5.6). Augustine recognized that the Church's authority undergirds the authority of scripture.
- **Vincent of Lerins (d. c. 445)** — His *Commonitorium* established that scripture must be interpreted according to the consensus of the Church — universality, antiquity, and consent. Not private interpretation.

The Reformation Itself Demonstrates the Problem

- **Luther vs. Zwingli on the Eucharist.** At the Marburg Colloquy (1529), Luther and Zwingli — both claiming *sola scriptura* — could not agree on the meaning of "This is my body." Same Bible, same principle, opposite conclusions.

- **Luther vs. the Anabaptists on baptism.** Luther retained infant baptism; Anabaptists insisted on believer's baptism only. Both appealed to scripture alone.
- **Calvin vs. Arminius on predestination.** Both used scripture to support contradictory positions on human freedom and divine sovereignty.
- **The proliferation continues.** From the 16th century to the present, *sola scriptura* has produced an ever-increasing number of denominations, each claiming biblical authority for its distinctive beliefs.

The historical record is clear: *sola scriptura* produces not unity but fragmentation.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Restoration Addresses the Problem of Division

Joseph Smith's experience in the Sacred Grove (Joseph Smith—History 1:10-19) was precipitated precisely by the confusion of denominational division: "The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists... On the other hand, the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others."

The Lord's response — calling a prophet, restoring apostles, and providing additional scripture — directly addresses the failure of *sola scriptura*:

- **D&C 1:30** — The restored Church is "the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth."
- **Articles of Faith 1:5** — A man must be "called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority" — not self-appointed by reading the Bible alone.
- **Articles of Faith 1:6** — "We believe in the same organization that existed in the primitive Church, namely, apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, evangelists, and so forth."
- **Articles of Faith 1:9** — "We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God." Ongoing revelation is the solution to interpretive chaos.

Living Prophets and Apostles Provide What Sola Scriptura Cannot

The LDS Church has a First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles — the same structure as the New Testament Church (Ephesians 4:11). This structure provides:

1. **Authoritative interpretation** — Doctrinal questions are settled by prophetic authority, not individual opinion.
2. **Ongoing revelation** — God continues to speak, as He always has (Amos 3:7).
3. **Structural unity** — A global Church of over 17 million members maintains doctrinal unity across every nation and culture.

6. Key Scriptures

Scripture	Relevance
2 Peter 1:20	"No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation"
2 Peter 3:15-16	Scripture can be "wrested" to one's "destruction"
Acts 8:30-31	The Ethiopian eunuch cannot understand scripture without a guide
Ephesians 4:11-14	Apostles and prophets given to prevent doctrinal chaos
Ephesians 2:20	Church built on apostles and prophets, not Bible alone
1 Timothy 3:15	The Church is "the pillar and ground of the truth"
2 Thessalonians 2:15	Hold traditions taught by word and epistle
Acts 15:1-29	Apostolic council settles doctrine, not individual Bible reading
John 17:20-21	Jesus prays for unity — division contradicts His prayer
1 Corinthians 1:10-13	"Is Christ divided?" — denominational division is sin
Ephesians 4:4-6	One Lord, one faith, one baptism
Amos 3:7	God reveals through prophets — His ongoing pattern

7. Responses to Common Objections

"Denominations agree on the essentials."

Who defines what is "essential"? Calvinists and Arminians disagree on whether God predestines some to hell — is that essential? Baptists and Presbyterians disagree on whether infants should be baptized — is the proper subject of baptism essential? Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists disagree on whether the Eucharist is Christ's literal body — is the Lord's Supper essential? The "agree on essentials" response begs the question by assuming a consensus that does not exist.

"The 40,000 number is inflated."

Even granting that some denominations are merely national variants, the number of genuinely distinct theological traditions is still in the hundreds if not thousands. The exact number is less important than the underlying reality: *sola scriptura* has not produced agreement on baptism, the Lord's Supper, predestination, church governance, eschatology, soteriology, or dozens of other doctrines. The fragmentation is real regardless of the precise count.

"The problem is human sin, not scripture."

If human sin prevents correct interpretation, then *sola scriptura* is insufficient in practice, which is the entire point. A system that works in theory but fails in practice is a failed system. The biblical response to human interpretive failure is not "try harder" but "God provides authoritative teachers" (Ephesians 4:11-14).

"Catholic and Orthodox unity is also an illusion."

Internal disagreement within a structured authority is categorically different from thousands of separate institutions each claiming independent authority. The Catholic Church has one Magisterium; the Orthodox have conciliar authority. Internal debate within a unified structure is healthy. The Protestant situation is not internal debate — it is institutional fragmentation into thousands of competing bodies with no mechanism for resolution.

"A living prophet creates new problems — what if the prophet changes doctrine?"

Living prophets can clarify, correct, and develop doctrine because they receive ongoing revelation. This is a feature, not a bug. The New Testament Church also developed doctrine over time (Acts 15; the inclusion of Gentiles). A God who speaks is better than a God who is silent.

8. Conclusion

The fragmentation of Protestantism into thousands of competing denominations is not an accident or a minor embarrassment — it is the inevitable and predictable consequence of the principle of *sola scriptura*. The Bible itself warns against private interpretation (2 Peter 1:20), identifies the Church — not scripture — as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), and presents apostles and prophets as God's provision against doctrinal chaos (Ephesians 4:11-14). The Reformers' own inability to agree on fundamental doctrines while all appealing to *sola scriptura* demonstrated the problem from the very beginning. The Restoration of the gospel through Joseph Smith — with living prophets, apostles, and ongoing revelation — provides exactly what *sola scriptura* cannot: a mechanism for authoritative, unified, Spirit-guided interpretation of God's word.

Further Reading:

- [FAIR: Sola Scriptura](#)
- [Gospel Topics: Apostles](#)
- Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1994).
- D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism* (Eerdmans, 1999).