

Sola Scriptura vs Solo Scriptura

In short: Historically, *sola Scriptura* means that canonical Scripture is the only infallible and final authority for Christian doctrine and practice. It was asserted against the idea that church tradition, councils, popes, or patristic interpretation could bind the conscience with authority equal to Scripture.

It does **not** mean that Scripture is the only (*solo*) historical source of information about Jesus, or that Christians should ignore the Church Fathers, creeds, councils, archaeology, history, or textual scholarship. The Reformers themselves quoted the Fathers extensively and accepted early creeds. Their point was that all of those authorities are subordinate and corrigible.

Sola Scriptura defines the Church's final authority for doctrine and practice. It is inclusive, not exclusive, meaning the statements within it are true, but not necessarily global and limiting.

Sola Scriptura does not mean “every verse printed in my Bible is automatically known to be part of the original text because it appears on the page.” It means that **the inspired Scriptures are the church’s final and uniquely infallible authority for doctrine and practice.**

So, that immediately raises a question: **What text actually belongs to Scripture?**

From a Protestant perspective, textual criticism helps defining that point rather than undermining Scripture. Our goal should be to recover, as closely as possible, the text originally written by the biblical authors. If John 7:53–8:11 was probably not part of the Gospel as John originally wrote it, then a strict *sola Scriptura* approach should be cautious about treating that passage as Johannine revelation merely because later manuscripts and printed Bibles contain it.

That produces an important distinction:

Sola Scriptura applies to inspired Scripture, not automatically to every later scribal addition, marginal note, translation choice, or textual variant.

This is why modern Protestant Bibles can print the *Pericope Adulterae* while simultaneously flagging it. The note is effectively saying, “This story has a long place in Christian tradition, but we are uncertain that it belongs to the original text of John.”

There is also a second important distinction between *sola Scriptura* and what is sometimes called *solo Scriptura*. Historic Protestantism did not claim that Christians should ignore church history, councils, manuscripts, scholars, or tradition. **Those are legitimate ministerial authorities.** They help us identify, interpret, and transmit Scripture. **What they do not possess, in the classical Protestant formulation, is an authority equal to or above Scripture.**

That means textual criticism is entirely compatible with *sola Scriptura*. Manuscripts are evidence. Church fathers are evidence. Ancient translations are evidence. Codex Bezae is

GUARDIANS ACADEMY

evidence. None of them becomes the ultimate doctrinal authority merely because we use them to determine what the biblical text originally said.

The harder question is the canon itself. A Catholic critique of *sola Scriptura* often asks: “If Scripture is the final authority, how do you know which books are Scripture without an authoritative Church telling you?” Protestants generally answer that the Church **recognized** the canon rather than **created** it. The books were authoritative because they were inspired, not because a council *made* them inspired. The Church’s historical reception is therefore important evidence of the canon, but not the source of the canon’s authority.

The Pericope Adulterae presses that same issue at the level of individual passages. The church received and used the story for many centuries. But if the earliest recoverable manuscript evidence suggests it was not originally part of John, *the Protestant textual principle tends to give priority to the recoverable apostolic text over later ecclesiastical usage.*

That creates a practical implication for preaching and doctrine. A Protestant committed to *sola Scriptura* can read and discuss John 7:53–8:11, and may even regard it as preserving a genuine event from Jesus’ life. But it would be prudent **not to establish a doctrine solely on this passage** if its textual originality is doubtful. Fortunately, the major theological themes in the story, mercy, repentance, judgment, hypocrisy, and forgiveness, are taught clearly elsewhere in undisputed New Testament texts.

So the relationship can be summarized this way:

Sola Scriptura does not require pretending that the manuscript tradition has no variants. It requires identifying the inspired apostolic text as carefully as possible and making that text, rather than later tradition, the final doctrinal authority.

The Pericope Adulterae is therefore not necessarily a problem for *sola Scriptura*. In some ways it is a good demonstration of how the principle works: the manuscript evidence is allowed to challenge a long-standing ecclesiastical tradition rather than tradition automatically determining the text.

There is, however, a real tension worth acknowledging in a Guardians class: **the Bible does not contain an inspired table of contents or an inspired critical apparatus.** Christians necessarily use historical evidence, manuscript comparison, and the testimony of the early Church to determine both the canon and the wording of the text. *Sola Scriptura* therefore cannot sensibly mean “Scripture is the only source of knowledge.” It means Scripture is the **final normative authority once the identity and text of Scripture have been responsibly established.**