

1. The Protestant Position: "A Fallible List of Infallible Books"

- The **Church** played a role in *recognizing* the canon, but this does not mean the Church itself is infallible.
- The **Bible alone** is divinely inspired and infallible.
- The Church can make **fallible** decisions while still correctly identifying the canon.

Epistemological Problem:

- If the Church is fallible, how can we have **certainty** that the list of books it recognized is correct?
- If we require absolute certainty (infallibility) about the canon, then we need an infallible source to validate it.

This creates a **foundationalist challenge**:

- If **fallible** means (historical reasoning, Church councils) are used to establish the canon, then the result is **only as strong as its weakest link** (i.e., it remains fallible).
- If the canon is **infallible**, then the process of its recognition should also be infallible—otherwise, how do we know we have the right books?

2. The Catholic & Orthodox Position: "An Infallible Church Gave Us the Canon"

- The Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, **infallibly** recognized the canon.
- The Church's authority is **logically prior** to the Bible's recognition—otherwise, how do we know which books belong?
- The Church's infallibility ensures that we have the correct list of books.

Epistemological Problem:

- How do we know the Church itself is infallible?
- If we say the Church's infallibility is confirmed by Scripture, but Scripture's canon is confirmed by the Church, this creates **circular reasoning**:
 - "The Bible is infallible because the Church says so."
 - "The Church is infallible because the Bible says so."
- This threatens **epistemic foundationalism**—there is no independent, infallible *starting point*.

3. Possible Epistemological Resolutions

(A) Radical Foundationalism: A Self-Authenticating Canon

Some Protestants argue that the Bible is **self-authenticating**—it does not need an external authority.

- This follows a **foundationalist** model where **God's Word** is an **axiomatic truth** that does not require external validation.
- The problem is that **historical processes were necessary** to determine the canon.
- How do we justify *which* books are self-authenticating?

(B) Reliabilism: The Church Was Merely a Reliable Instrument

Some Protestants take a **reliabilist** approach, saying:

- The Church is **not infallible**, but was a **sufficiently reliable instrument** in recognizing the canon.
- This means the canon can be **infallible** even though its recognition was **fallible but reliable**.

The issue remains: how do we verify that the Church was "sufficiently reliable" in this case and not in others (e.g., doctrinal matters like Apostolic succession, Synergism, veneration of the saints)?

Epistemological Foundation: What is Reliabilism?

Reliabilism is a theory of justification in epistemology that holds:

A belief is justified if it is produced by a **reliable cognitive process**, even if the believer cannot prove its infallibility.

For example:

- **Perception:** If my vision is generally reliable, I am justified in believing I see a tree, even if I cannot prove my vision is always correct.
- **Memory:** If my memory is generally reliable, I can trust my recollection of events without needing absolute certainty.

Applied to the canon:

- The **Church's process of recognizing the canon** was generally reliable (guided by history and tradition).

- Therefore, the Church could correctly identify the canon **without needing to be infallible**.

How Reliable Was the Church?

If the Church was merely reliable in **recognizing the canon**, why not also in **other doctrinal decisions**?

Protestantism rejects many doctrinal decisions from the same Church councils that defined the canon. On what grounds is the canon reliable but not other teachings?

Evaluating Reliabilism in Light of the Church's Canon Criteria

The **Reliabilist** argument claims that the Church was merely a **historically reliable instrument** in identifying the canon—not infallible. However, this claim must be evaluated in light of **how the Church actually identified the canon** using the following three criteria:

1. **Apostolic Authorship** – The text had to be written by an apostle or a close associate.
2. **Universal Acceptance** – The book had to be widely recognized by the Church.
3. **Orthodox Doctrine** – The content had to align with the established Christian faith.

Each of these criteria raises epistemological questions about whether the Church could apply them **reliably without being infallible**. Let's analyze this within the reliabilist framework.

1. Apostolic Authorship: Can the Church Reliably Identify Apostolicity?

Reliabilist Claim: The Church used historical methods to determine whether a book had apostolic origins, without needing infallibility.

Epistemological Issues:

- Many NT books do not explicitly name their authors (e.g., Hebrews, the Gospels).
- Some books took **centuries** to gain full acceptance (e.g., 2 Peter, Revelation).
- The Church relied on **tradition and testimony**—but if the transmission of apostolic oral tradition is unreliable (according to protestantism), how do we know it correctly preserved this information?

Scholarly Consensus on Pseudonymity

Modern biblical scholarship has widely concluded that several books traditionally attributed to apostles or their associates are actually **pseudonymous**, meaning they were written under a false name:

- **2 Peter** – Nearly all scholars agree that Peter did not write it. It differs in style from 1 Peter and seems to be from a later period.
- **Hebrews** – No claim of apostolic authorship is made within the text, and its author remains unknown. The early Church debated its inclusion.
- **Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy, Titus)** – Many scholars argue these were written in the second century, not by Paul.

If the Church was merely **reliable** but not **infallible**, it is **possible** that a **wrong book was included** or an **authentic book was excluded**. The reliabilist position does not guarantee certainty.

Counterpoint: If God ensured that the Church did not err in recognizing apostolic authorship, then this implies **divine protection**, which is indistinguishable from infallibility.

2. Universal Acceptance: Can the Church Reliably Identify Consensus?

Reliabilist Claim: The Church identified the canon by looking at what was widely accepted across Christian communities.

Epistemological Issues:

- Early Christians **disagreed** on several books (e.g., James, Jude, 2 Peter, Revelation).
- Some **accepted non-canonical books** as Scripture (e.g., Shepherd of Hermas, 1 Clement).
- **Regional variations** in accepted books lasted for centuries.
 - The **Muratorian Fragment (c. 170 AD)** excludes Hebrews and 1 Peter.
 - **Eastern Churches** accepted different canons for a long time.
 - **Some Church Fathers** doubted books that were later included (e.g., Eusebius questioned Revelation).

If universal acceptance was **gradual**, and if different communities had different views for centuries, then how do we know **the final decision was correct**? (4th century when protestants claim that many false traditions arised) If the Church was merely reliable, then **it could have made a mistake**.

Case of Disputed Passages

Some passages included in the New Testament were later identified as **later additions**:

- **Mark 16:9-20 (Long Ending of Mark)** – Missing from the earliest manuscripts, widely regarded as a later addition.
- **John 7:53–8:11 (The Woman Caught in Adultery)** – Absent from the oldest manuscripts; many scholars consider it a later insertion.

If these **interpolations** were accepted for centuries, what does this imply about the Church's reliability? If the Church **could be wrong** about certain passages, how do we know it was right about the **whole canon**?

Counterpoint: If the Holy Spirit ensured that the Church **did not make a mistake**, this implies a **level of infallibility**—contradicting the reliabilist claim.

3. Orthodox Doctrine: Can the Church Reliably Identify Right Doctrine?

Reliabilist Claim: The Church determined the canon by excluding books that contradicted established Christian doctrine.

Epistemological Issues:

- **Circular reasoning:** The Church determined doctrine using Scripture, but also determined Scripture using doctrine.
- If the Church was **merely reliable** (but not infallible), how do we know it did not wrongly exclude some books based on **misinterpretation**?
- The **same Church councils** that defined the canon also affirmed doctrines like the **Trinity**, **apostolic succession**, and **sacraments**.
 - If the Church was reliable in recognizing doctrine for the canon, why is it **not reliable in defining other doctrines**?
 - If the Church **erred** in doctrinal decisions, how do we know its **canon decision was not also an error**?

Counterpoint: If the Holy Spirit ensured that the Church **did not err** in defining doctrine for the canon, then this implies **infallibility**—contradicting reliabilism.

1. The Epistemological Parallel: Scripture vs. Church

Protestant Claim	Catholic/Orthodox Counterpoint
The Church was a reliable but fallible instrument in recognizing the canon.	If the Church was fallible , then it could have made mistakes in selecting the canon (demonstrated by the 3 criterias in defining the canon), leading to an uncertain canon.
The Bible is infallible because God ensured its correct transmission.	If God ensured the Bible's infallibility, then why would He not ensure the infallibility of the Church , which safeguarded it?
Oral tradition is unreliable, leading to corruption over time.	The canon of Scripture was determined by oral tradition . If oral tradition was unreliable, then so was the process of determining the canon.

Apostolic teaching was infallible, but its transmission later became fallible.	If fallible transmission led to corruption, then how can we trust that Scripture was not corrupted during its transmission?
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Distinguishing Between Historical Reliability and Theological Infallibility

One of the fundamental errors in many apologetic discussions is the conflation of **historical reliability** with **theological infallibility**. While the New Testament books may be established as historically reliable through standard historical methods, **their infallibility requires a theological justification that goes beyond historical analysis**. Here's why:

1. Historical Reliability vs. Infallibility: Conceptual Distinction

Historical Reliability	Theological Infallibility
A book is historically reliable if it accurately reports past events and sayings.	A book is infallible if it is incapable of error and perfectly conveys divine truth.
Can be assessed through historical methods: textual criticism, archaeology, internal consistency, external corroboration.	Requires divine intervention: the belief that God ensured the text is completely free from error.
Examples: The writings of Josephus and Tacitus may be historically reliable but are not infallible.	Only divinely inspired writings can be infallible.

Thus, even if **every historical claim in the New Testament were verified**, this would not **logically necessitate** that the text is **infallible**.

2. The Limits of Historical Analysis: What It Can and Cannot Prove

What historical methods can prove:

- ✓ That the NT books were written in the first century.
- ✓ That they accurately preserve apostolic teaching.
- ✓ That they have been faithfully transmitted.

What historical methods cannot prove:

- ✗ That the NT books are divinely inspired.
- ✗ That they are incapable of error.
- ✗ That their human authors were prevented from making any mistake.

Even if historians confirm that **no actual errors** exist in a text, this does not establish **infallibility**, because **the mere absence of error does not prove the impossibility of error**.

Example:

- A historian might find no errors in a well-researched history book.
- But that does not mean the book was **incapable** of error—it simply happened to be correct.

Infallibility, however, is **not just correctness—it is the impossibility of error, which history cannot establish.**

3. The Need for Theological Justification for Infallibility

Since **history alone** cannot demonstrate infallibility, we must turn to **theological reasoning**. This is where divine intervention comes into play.

For the NT books to be infallible, one must establish:

1. **Divine inspiration** – That God directly guided the authors to write without error.
2. **Divine preservation** – That God ensured the correct books were selected.
3. **Divine protection of transmission** – That God safeguarded the text from corruption.

None of these can be verified by **historical methods alone**; they require faith in a **divine promise**.

This is why Protestant reliance on **historical arguments for the NT's reliability** does not suffice to establish **Sola Scriptura**. They must provide a theological reason why the NT is **not just reliable, but divinely protected from error.**

Distinction Between Historical Analysis and Theological Infallibility: The Promise of Christ and the Early Church's Belief

1. Historical Analysis: What It Reveals vs. What It Cannot Prove

Historical analysis, when applied to early Christian writings and practices, allows us to gain **insight into the beliefs and actions of the early Church**. Through the study of sources such as the writings of the Church Fathers, creeds, and other historical documents, we can confirm that the Church **believed** it was guided by the Holy Spirit and that its leadership—through the apostolic succession—held a special status in preserving and teaching the truth.

However, historical analysis **cannot prove the theological claim of infallibility**. It can only reveal that **the early Church thought** it possessed the ability to faithfully teach and preserve the truth, but this belief in **infallibility** is itself a **theological assertion** that requires more than just historical evidence. The belief that the Church is infallible is rooted in **the promise of Christ**, which is understood by the Church to be a divine guarantee of truth, irrespective of human limitations.

2. The Church's Belief in Infallibility: A Theological Claim

The **theological claim** that the Church is **infallible** stems directly from Christ's promise in the Gospels, particularly in John 14:26 and 16:13, where Jesus assures His followers that the Holy Spirit will guide them into all truth. This promise, as interpreted by the Church, is understood to mean that the Church's teachings, especially on matters of faith and morals, cannot err when they align with this divine guidance. This **infallibility** is not based on the Church's human capability, but on the **divine intervention** promised by Christ.

For example, in **Irenaeus' "Against Heresies"** (Book IV, Chapter 26), he argues that the Church, through apostolic succession, holds the **"gift of truth"** and preserves the **unadulterated** faith. This, however, is not simply a historical fact—it is a **theological interpretation** of the promise that Christ made to the Apostles about being guided into truth through the Holy Spirit.

The **historical analysis** can confirm that the Church maintained this belief across time, but **it is the promise of Christ** that justifies the claim of **infallibility**. The historical record does not demonstrate **infallibility** itself; it only shows the belief that the Church considered itself **guided and protected** by the Holy Spirit in its doctrinal teaching.

3. The Role of Apostolic Succession and the Church's Authority

As reflected in the writings of **Tertullian**, **Cyprian of Carthage**, and **Origen**, the early Church believed that **apostolic succession** was the means by which the truth entrusted to the apostles was passed down unbroken. The belief that the Church is the **spouse of Christ**, **incorruptible**, and **pure**, as described by **Cyprian**, is rooted in the understanding that the Holy Spirit preserves the Church from error in doctrinal matters.

However, this is again a **theological claim**. The Church's reliance on **apostolic succession** does not, in and of itself, guarantee infallibility—this guarantee is theological, stemming from the belief in Christ's promise and the Church's role in safeguarding the truth. The historical documentation of the Church's practices and beliefs in **apostolic succession** reveals that the Church thought of itself as possessing this divinely protected authority, but historical evidence cannot establish the **actual** truth of this claim; it can only demonstrate that this belief was held.

4. The Church's Claim to Infallibility: Evidence from Christ's Resurrection

The **promise of the Holy Spirit** and **Christ's resurrection** provide the theological basis for the Church's infallibility, a basis that **historical evidence** affirms, but does not **prove**. The resurrection of Christ and the **apostolic witness** are key events that confirm the belief in **divine intervention**—the Church's conviction that the Holy Spirit guides it into truth. Historical evidence from the time of the apostles, such as the succession of bishops and the faith passed down through the Church, confirms that the Church understood its authority in these terms, but infallibility remains a claim that can only be fully validated by faith in Christ's promise. Faith requires sufficient evidence, not

infallible evidence, and we can have sufficient evidence in Christ's resurrection to have faith in the divine preservation of the Church.

Historical evidence for the belief that the Church is infallible

Such presbyters does the Church nourish, of whom also the prophet says: I will give your rulers in peace, and your bishops in righteousness. Isaiah 60:17 Of whom also did the Lord declare, Who then shall be a faithful steward (actor), good and wise, whom the Lord sets over His household, to give them their meat in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his Lord, when He comes, shall find so doing. Matthew 24:45-46 Paul then, teaching us where one may find such, says, God has placed in the **Church, first, apostles; secondly, prophets; thirdly, teachers.** 1 Corinthians 12:28 Where, therefore, the gifts of the Lord have been placed, there it behooves us **to learn the truth, [namely,] from those who possess that succession of the Church which is from the apostles,** and among whom exists that which is sound and blameless in conduct, as well as that which is **unadulterated and incorrupt in speech.** For these also **preserve this faith of ours** in one God who created all things; and they increase that love [which we have] for the Son of God, who accomplished such marvellous dispensations for our sake: and **they expound the Scriptures to us without danger,** neither blaspheming God, nor dishonouring the patriarchs, nor despising the prophets."

(Irenaeus of Lyons: Against Heresies (Book IV, Chapter 26 , 5)

Wherefore it is incumbent to obey the presbyters who are in the Church — those who, as I have shown, **possess the succession from the apostles; those who, together with the succession of the episcopate, have received the certain gift of truth, according to the good pleasure of the Father.** But [it is also incumbent] **to hold in suspicion others who depart from the primitive succession, and assemble themselves together in any place whatsoever,** [looking upon them] either as heretics of perverse minds, or as **schismatics** puffed up and self-pleasing, or again as hypocrites, acting thus for the sake of lucre and vainglory. **For all these have fallen from the truth. And the heretics, indeed, who bring strange fire to the altar of God** — namely, strange doctrines— shall be burned up by the fire from heaven, as were Nadab and Abiud. Leviticus 10:1-2 But such as rise up in opposition to the truth, and exhort others against the Church of God, [shall] remain among those in hell (apud inferos), being swallowed up by an earthquake, even as those who were with Chore, Dathan, and Abiron. Numbers 16:33 But those who cleave asunder, and separate the unity of the Church, [shall] receive from God the same punishment as Jeroboam did. 1 Kings 14:10

(Irenaeus of Lyons: Against Heresies (Book IV, Chapter 26 , 2)

“Grant, then, that all have erred; that the apostle was mistaken in giving his testimony; that the Holy Ghost had no such respect to any one (church) as to lead it into truth, although sent with this view by Christ, John 14:26 and for this asked of the Father that He might be the teacher of truth; John 15:26 grant, also, that He, the Steward of God, the Vicar of Christ, neglected His office, permitting the churches for a time to understand differently, (and) to believe differently, what He Himself was preaching by the apostles — is it likely that so many churches, and they so great, should have gone astray into one and the same faith? No casualty distributed among many men issues in one and the same result. Error of doctrine in the churches must necessarily have produced various issues. When, however, that which is deposited among many is found to be one and the same, it is not the result of error, but of tradition. Can any one, then, be reckless enough to say that they were in error who handed on the tradition?”

(The Prescription Against Heretics Chapter 28. (Tertullian))

“The spouse of Christ cannot be adulterous; she is uncorrupted and pure. She knows one home; she guards with chaste modesty the sanctity of one couch. She keeps us for God. She appoints the sons whom she has born for the kingdom. Whoever is separated from the Church and is joined to an adulteress, is separated from the promises of the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ.”

(Treatises (Cyprian of Carthage: Treatise 1, 6))

“From this, therefore, do we draw up our rule. Since the Lord Jesus Christ sent the apostles to preach, (our rule is) that no others **ought to be received as preachers than those whom Christ appointed**; for no man knows the Father save the Son, and he to whomever the Son will reveal Him. Matthew 11:27 Nor does the Son seem to have revealed Him to any other than the apostles, whom He sent forth to preach — that, of course, which He revealed to them. Now, what that was which they preached — in other words, what it was **which Christ revealed to them** — can, as I must here likewise prescribe, **properly be proved in no other way than by those very churches which the apostles founded in person, by declaring the gospel to them directly themselves, both vivâ voce**, as the phrase is, and subsequently by their **epistles**. If, then, these things are so, it is in the same degree **manifest that all doctrine which agrees with the apostolic churches**— those moulds and **original sources of the faith must be reckoned for truth**, as undoubtedly containing that which the (said) churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, Christ from God. **Whereas all doctrine must be prejudged as false which savours of contrariety to the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God**. It remains, then, that we demonstrate whether this doctrine of ours, of which we have now given the rule, has its origin in the **tradition of the apostles**, and whether all other doctrines do not ipso facto proceed from falsehood. We hold communion with the apostolic churches because our doctrine is in no respect different from theirs. **This is our witness of truth.**”

(The Prescription Against Heretics Chapter 21 (Tertullian))

“Since many, however, of those who profess to believe in Christ differ from each other, not only in small and trifling matters, but also **on subjects of the highest importance**, as, e.g., regarding God, or the Lord Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit; and not only regarding these, but also regarding others which are created existences, viz., the powers and the holy virtues; it seems on that account **necessary first of all to fix a definite limit and to lay down an unmistakable rule regarding each one of these**, and then to pass to the investigation of other points. For as we ceased to seek for truth (notwithstanding the professions of many among Greeks and Barbarians to make it known) among all who claimed it for erroneous opinions, after we had come to believe that Christ was the Son of God, and were persuaded that we must learn it from Himself; so, 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.**”

(De Principiis (Origen) > Preface, 2

Argument Against Sola Scriptura

Premise 1: During the time of the apostles, both Scripture and oral teaching were considered infallible and authoritative.

Premise 2: Sola Scriptura asserts that Scripture alone is the sole infallible rule for doctrine and practice.

Premise 3: Since both Scripture and oral teaching were infallibly authoritative during the apostolic period, there was an additional infallible rule of faith outside of Scripture.

Premise 4: Sola Scriptura cannot be true during the apostolic period because there was another infallible rule of faith (oral tradition) alongside Scripture.

Premise 5: Scripture does not anticipate a time when oral tradition will become fallible.

Premise 6: There is no paradigm shift in the early church where tradition becomes fallible.

Conclusion: Therefore, Sola Scriptura is an extra-biblical, post-apostolic, and ahistorical tradition.

The argument against Sola Scriptura is grounded in the historical reality of the early Church, which regarded both Scripture and oral tradition as equally authoritative and infallible. Since the apostolic period recognized the dual role of oral and written teaching, and because Scripture itself does not anticipate the fallibility of oral tradition, the doctrine of Sola Scriptura fails to align with the practices and beliefs of the early Church. Moreover, the absence of any paradigm shift in the early Church that would signal a change in the role of tradition suggests that the Protestant doctrine of

Sola Scriptura is not only unbiblical but also anachronistic, emerging long after the apostolic period. As such, Sola Scriptura can be seen as a later innovation in Christian theology, one that is unsupported by the historical and theological framework of the early Church.

The Theological Necessity of Infallible Oral Tradition

The claim that Christ ensured the infallibility of the scriptural transmission process but not the oral tradition lacks theological justification and overlooks the integral role that oral tradition played in the early Church. Both Paul and the early Church regarded oral and written teachings as equally authoritative. The Apostle Paul emphasizes the transmission of the Gospel by word of mouth and written letters, instructing the faithful to hold onto both traditions (2 Thessalonians 2:15). Similarly, the Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, highlight that the oral teachings of the apostles were not only complementary to Scripture but foundational to it. If divine revelation was safeguarded from error in the written word, it follows that the oral transmission of that word was equally protected from error by Christ's promise to guide His Church into all truth (John 14:26, John 16:13).

If divine revelation is indeed preserved from error, why should we assume that only the written form of revelation—Scripture—was protected, while the oral form became unreliable? The notion that Scripture is infallible while oral tradition is not is self-contradictory. The canon of Scripture itself was determined by the Church based on apostolic oral tradition. The early Church, which recognized the guidance of the Holy Spirit in determining the canon, relied heavily on the living oral tradition that was passed down from the apostles. These teachings were passed on in person, often by the apostles themselves or their immediate successors, and not merely through written texts.

If the process of transmitting oral tradition were fallible, then there would be no way to verify that the correct books were chosen as Scripture. How could the Church confidently recognize certain writings as inspired if the very process by which those writings were selected rested on unreliable, fallible oral tradition? Therefore, belief in the reliability of oral tradition is necessary to believe in the reliability of Scripture. If oral tradition was fallible, then the entire foundation for Christianity would collapse.

The Burden of Proof

The burden of proof falls on those who argue that the Church was once infallible in transmitting divine revelation but later lost this attribute. The early Church's belief in its own infallibility is well-documented and can be traced back to the teachings of Christ and the apostles. Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Cyprian, and Tertullian attest to the Church's understanding that it had been divinely entrusted with the preservation and transmission of the faith in both its written and oral forms.

If one asserts that this infallibility was later lost, they must provide evidence for when and how this occurred. The historical record offers no such evidence to support this claim. Without this

evidence, the assertion that the Church ceased to be infallible is an unsubstantiated claim that cannot be substantiated by Scripture, tradition, or historical fact. Instead, the early Church's consistent belief in its own infallibility, especially in safeguarding both oral and written tradition, provides a firm theological foundation for the continuity and reliability of the Church's teachings.