

Distinctions Between Infallibility, Inerrancy, Inspiration, and Revelation

1. **Inspiration** – A special, positive divine influence where God Himself is the principal author of the utterance. The human writer is not merely preserved from error but is actively guided to produce words that are truly God's words.
 - **Example:** The Bible is *inspired* because its human authors wrote under divine guidance, making their words God's words.
2. **Revelation** – The supernatural act of God making unknown truths known to humanity. It introduces new divine knowledge, as opposed to merely protecting or interpreting existing truths.
 - **Example:** When God revealed the mystery of the Trinity, this was *revelation*.
3. **Infallibility** – The exemption from the *possibility* of error in defining or interpreting already revealed truths. It ensures the correctness of a doctrinal decision but does not mean that the one making the decision is inspired or impeccable.
 - **Example:** When the pope (for Catholics) or an ecumenical council (for both Orthodox and Catholics) defines a doctrine, their decision is *infallible*, meaning it is divinely guaranteed to be free from error, but they themselves are not inspired like the biblical writers.
4. **Inerrancy** – The absence of error. While *infallibility* protects against error in specific teachings, *inerrancy* refers to a text or doctrine being entirely free from any error.
 - **Example:** The Bible is *inerrant* in what it teaches about faith and morals because it is divinely inspired.

Active vs. Passive Infallibility

- **Active Infallibility** – The authority to define doctrine infallibly. This applies to the pope when speaking *ex cathedra* (for Catholics) and to an ecumenical council (for both Catholics and Orthodox) when it issues definitive doctrinal teachings.
 - **Example:** When the council of Nicaea produced its creed, the council exercises *active* infallibility.
- **Passive Infallibility** – The obligation of the Church to receive infallible teachings without error (Apostolic Tradition). The Church as a whole cannot accept heresy as doctrine because it is divinely protected.
 - **Example:** The Church as a whole passively receives and cannot err in accepting a defined doctrine like the divinity of Christ.
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Note:

- *Infallibility* does **not** mean inspiration or revelation. It only guarantees correctness in defining doctrine.
- *Infallibility* applies to the **final decision**, not the reasoning or motives behind it.
- Even sinful or unworthy individuals (e.g., Caiphas prophesying in John 11:49-52) can be used as instruments of *infallibility*.
- The **teaching Church (Magisterium)** exercises *active* infallibility, while the **learning Church (faithful)** possesses *passive* infallibility by receiving truth without error.

□ The **Bible is not "infallible" in the strict theological sense**—it is **inspired** and **inerrant**.

- Since *infallibility* refers to the ability to define doctrine without error, and *inspiration* means God is the principal author of the text, the Bible is better described as **inspired and inerrant** rather than "infallible."
- **Example:** The Bible is inerrant because, being divinely inspired, it contains no error in what it teaches about faith and morals.

□ Doctrine **defined by the Church is "infallible" but not "inspired" or "new revelation."**

- When an ecumenical council defines a doctrine infallibly, it is **not inspiration** (since they are not writing as biblical authors) and **not new revelation** (since they are only safeguarding or interpreting existing revelation).
- **Example:** The doctrine of the Trinity, though not explicitly defined in Scripture with precise terminology, was infallibly defined by the Church through councils like Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

□ Infallibility **applies to the Church's authority in defining doctrine, not the process of arriving at it.**

- The guarantee of infallibility applies **only to the final decision** (i.e., the defined doctrine itself), not to the arguments, motives, or historical circumstances surrounding it.
- **Example:** If a council defines that Christ is consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, this definition is infallible, even if the arguments leading up to it were historically influenced by Greek philosophical terms.

Epistemology and the Source of Infallibility

A common argument against infallibility is that since humans are fallible, an infallible source (like the Church or Scripture) does not improve certainty, because all interpretations must pass through fallible human reasoning. However, this argument is flawed because it confuses the **nature of infallibility** with the **reception of infallibility**.

1. **Infallibility is rooted in divine nature (passive) and divine guidance (active), not in human ability.**
 - **Passive infallibility** (the indefectibility of the Church) comes from the divine nature of Christ, who preserves His Body from falling into error.
 - **Active infallibility** (the Church's ability to define doctrine) comes from divine guidance—the Holy Spirit ensures that the Church does not err when making definitive teachings.
 - The fallibility of individuals does not override the infallibility of divine action.
2. **Apostolic Tradition remains infallible even if the transmission process is fallible.**
 - The nature of Apostolic Tradition is not affected by human fallibility.
 - *Example:* If a divinely inspired book were lost to history, it would still be inspired and inerrant, even if no one today knows for certain that it was Scripture. The same applies to Apostolic Tradition—its infallibility is intrinsic, even if some aspects of transmission are uncertain.
3. **The fallibility of individuals does not nullify the advantage of an infallible guide.**
 - Protestants accept that **Scripture alone** is better than **no infallible source**, despite requiring human interpretation.
 - If that logic holds, then **Scripture + an infallible Church** is better than **Scripture alone**, because a living interpreter clarifies doctrine rather than leaving it to private judgment.
4. **Fallible transmission does not mean absolute uncertainty.**
 - Even if human errors exist in historical transmission, we do not operate in total uncertainty—Church infallibility ensures the essential doctrines remain preserved.
 - *Example:* Just because ancient manuscript copying involved some minor errors does not mean we have no reliable biblical text.

The Protestant Claim of an “Infallible Rule of Interpretation”

Protestants argue that **Scripture is its own infallible interpreter** and that the Bible must be understood by comparing its clearer passages with more obscure ones.

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 1, Section IX:

“The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

The Church as the Infallible Interpreter of Scripture

1. Even if all Doctrines Are Derived from Scripture, but Interpretation Requires an Infallible Authority

Protestants argue that since all doctrines must be scriptural, there is no need for an external infallible authority beyond Scripture itself. However, this argument **assumes that doctrine arises automatically from Scripture without requiring an infallible authoritative interpretation.**

- **Scripture is the source of doctrine, but deriving doctrine from Scripture is a process—one that is either infallible or fallible.**

Thus, **the mere fact that doctrine is scriptural does not remove the need for an infallible interpreter.**

2. Apostolic Tradition Guarantees the Correct Interpretation

The role of **Apostolic Tradition is not to add to Scripture but to ensure its correct interpretation.**

- **Tradition is not an alternative to Scripture but the proper means of understanding it.**
- The early Church did not operate by private interpretation but followed the teaching of the apostles: *“Hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by spoken word or by our letter”* (2 Thessalonians 2:15).
- This means **Tradition does not compete with Scripture; it clarifies and safeguards its true meaning.**

Without Apostolic Tradition, **interpretation becomes subjective**, leading to doctrinal chaos (as seen in Protestantism). The only way to ensure correct doctrine **while remaining faithful to Scripture** is to recognize the Church’s role as the infallible interpreter.

Sufficiency of Scripture

Protestant Confessions

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Chapter 1, Section VI

“The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.”

Belgic Confession, Article 7: The Sufficiency of Scripture:

We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it. For since the entire manner of service which God requires of us is described in it at great length, no one—even an apostle or an angel from heaven, as Paul says—ought to teach other than what the Holy Scriptures have already taught us... For all human beings are liars by nature and vainer than vanity itself. Therefore, we reject with all our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule.

Material vs. Formal Sufficiency

The concept of **material sufficiency** of Scripture suggests that the Bible contains all the essential "bricks" necessary to build the doctrines of the faith, but it is not always explicit or clear on every point. Sometimes, Scripture may imply a doctrine rather than directly state it. Because of this, the role of Sacred Tradition and the authority of the Church (through the Magisterium) are necessary to interpret and clarify these teachings. Together, Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium form a complete and authoritative source for understanding God's revealed truth.

In contrast, **formal sufficiency** refers to the idea that Scripture alone is fully sufficient to guide all Christian doctrine and belief without needing any additional sources or interpretations. This is the principle behind *sola scriptura* — the belief that the Bible is the only infallible authority.

Complex Relationship Between Scripture and Tradition

1. **Directly Stated in Scripture:** Some truths are explicitly stated in Scripture, such as Christ’s resurrection (Matthew 28:6, 1 Corinthians 15:4).
2. **Implied in Scripture:** Doctrines like the existence of angels, while not always directly discussed, are implied throughout Scripture in passages such as Hebrews 1:14, where angels are described as ministering spirits.
3. **Inferred from Scripture:** The belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist can be inferred from passages like John 6:53-58, where Jesus speaks about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, though the exact nature of this presence is not fully elaborated in the text.

4. **Alluded or Reflected in Scripture:** The idea of the Church as a visible institution, with a hierarchical structure, can be reflected in passages like Matthew 16:18-19 and Acts 1:15-26, which show the Apostolic foundation of the Church, even if the full details of ecclesiastical authority are not outlined in Scripture.
5. **Presupposed by Scripture:** The practice of baptism is mentioned in Scripture, but the specifics of how it should be performed (e.g., immersion or sprinkling, and who can baptize) are presupposed as known and practiced in the early Church, based on passages like Acts 2:38 and Matthew 28:19.
6. **Not in Scripture at All:** The Church's role in defining the canon of Scripture is not explicitly found in Scripture, but it is a truth that developed in the early Church, as the Church discerned which writings were truly inspired and authoritative.

Paradigm Shift to Sola Scriptura

The argument for the shift toward *sola scriptura* in the second century assumes that the apostles' teachings **were fully captured in written form**. However, examining the New Testament and the early Christian practices presents a different picture, one in which authority was derived from Scripture, oral tradition, and the decisions made by Church leadership. Here's a breakdown of the approach based on the New Testament and the apostolic mindset:

1. Authority in Scripture, Tradition, and Leadership (Magisterium):

The rule of faith and practice for early Christians was not solely based on Scripture but on a combination of inspired Scripture, the oral teachings of the apostles, and decisions made by the Church's leadership in council (e.g., Acts 15). This threefold authority—Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium—reflects the early Christian worldview, where the apostles did not view written Scripture as the *sole* rule of faith.

2. Apostolic Behavior and Writing:

- **The Apostles' Actions:** Most of the apostles did not act as if they believed Scripture alone would be the sole authority after their death. The fact that many apostles didn't write their teachings down is telling. If they believed Scripture would serve as the sole doctrinal authority, they likely would have written down everything they taught. However, only three of the twelve apostles (Peter, Matthew, and John) left written records, and even these were **not exhaustive doctrinal summaries**.
- **Lack of Written Records:** If the apostles truly expected that future generations would depend on written Scripture alone, one would expect them to have been far more prolific in documenting their teachings. Instead, the early Church relied **heavily on oral transmission**, with the apostles and their successors ensuring the continuity of the faith through teaching and preaching.

3. Examples of Apostolic Teaching:

- **1 Corinthians 15:29:** Paul refers to the practice of baptism for the dead without explaining it. He assumes the Corinthians already understand this practice, showing that much of the apostles' teaching was passed on orally and assumed to be known by those who received it.
- **2 Thessalonians 2:1-12:** Paul speaks of the "man of sin" who will be revealed, but rather than explaining it in detail, he reminds the Thessalonians that he had already taught them about this in person. This shows a reliance on oral teaching and the presumption that future Christians would know what the apostles had taught through personal instruction, not simply from written documents.

4. Paul's Instructions to Timothy:

- **2 Timothy 1:13-14:** Paul instructs Timothy to follow the "pattern of sound words" that he has "heard" from Paul and to guard it through the Holy Spirit. Paul's focus is not on the preservation of his written letters but on the oral teaching he entrusted to Timothy. Paul doesn't command Timothy to gather his writings or create copies, but rather to preserve and pass on the oral teaching.
- **2 Timothy 2:1-2:** Paul tells Timothy to entrust the teachings he received to faithful men who will then pass them on to others. **This process of oral transmission**, guided by the Holy Spirit, is emphasized over the preservation of written texts.

5. Paul's View of the Church and Apostolic Succession:

- Paul's thinking reflects a view of the Church where the faith is preserved not solely through written texts but through a living tradition, passed down from one generation of leaders to the next. This echoes the New Covenant promise that **the Holy Spirit would guide the Church in all truth**, much as Christ was sent by the Father to teach the apostles.
- The preservation of apostolic teaching was seen not in the written text but in the ongoing life of the Church, with faithful leaders entrusted with the faith and empowered by the Holy Spirit to guard and pass it on.

Argument 1: Sola Scriptura Was Not in the Minds of Early Christians

Authority in the Early Church

- Authority was shared among:
 - **Scripture**
 - **Oral Teaching of the Apostles**
 - **Church Councils** (e.g., Acts 15)

- No evidence of a shift to Scripture alone after the apostles' deaths.

No Biblical Basis for Sola Scriptura

- **New Testament does not foresee a shift** to Scripture alone.
- **2 Thessalonians 2:15** – Paul affirms both oral and written traditions.
- **2 Timothy 1:13-14; 2:1** – Faith transmission includes oral teaching.

Apostolic Succession and Church Authority

- **Authority continued through Church leadership** (2 Timothy 2:1).
- **No hint in Scripture that the Church's role in decision-making would end.**
- **The Holy Spirit guided the Church, not just a static written rule.**

Argument 2: The Early Church Did Not Practice Sola Scriptura

Early Christian Authority Structure

- Early Christians relied on:
 - **Old Testament** (Jewish Scriptures)
 - **Apostolic Writings** (New Testament)
 - **Oral Tradition** (Teachings passed down)
 - **Church Councils** (Acts 15, doctrinal decisions)

No Expectation of Sola Scriptura

- Apostles **did not teach** faith should rely on Scripture alone.
- **Faith was preserved through apostolic succession and oral tradition.**

The Canon Was Not Immediately Defined

- **New Testament canon took centuries to finalize** (4th century).
- If the early church assumed apostolic writing was the sole infallible rule of faith, the early Church would have started using them as scripture and **defined the canon immediately.**
- **Canon was clarified only due to heresies**, not because the Church believed in Scripture alone.

Argument 3: Authority After the Apostolic Age

How Did Christians Know Doctrine After the Apostles?

- After the last apostle passed away, how did Christians know **Paul's doctrine of baptism, salvation, or the Church**?
- How did second, third, and fourth-century Christians know that what they had accepted as Christian teaching was true?
- **Doctrinal and moral disputes** arose—how were they expected to be resolved?
 - Did they continue using **Scripture, Tradition, and an authoritative Church** (the three-legged stool)?
 - Or did they suddenly adopt **Scripture alone**?

Early Christian Creeds Do Not Emphasize Scripture

- **Reformation-era creeds** (Westminster, Belgic, Baptist Confession) **begin with strong statements on sola scriptura** because their movement was built on rejecting Church authority.
- **Early Christian creeds** (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed) **say nothing about Scripture's authority, sufficiency, or inspiration.**
- Instead, they emphasize belief in the **Church as the guardian of the faith.**
 - **Apostles' Creed:** "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church..."
 - **Nicene Creed:** "I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church..."
- If the early Church believed in sola scriptura, its foundational creeds would have reflected this belief.
- Instead, they reflect the Catholic and Orthodox view of **authority resting in the Church guided by the Holy Spirit.**