

## CHAPTER I: SOLA SCRIPTURA

In Deuteronomy, we are given the command to test, try, or hold accountable those who come speaking in the name of the Lord. *"If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them.' you shall not listen to that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.*(Deuteronomy 13:1-3)

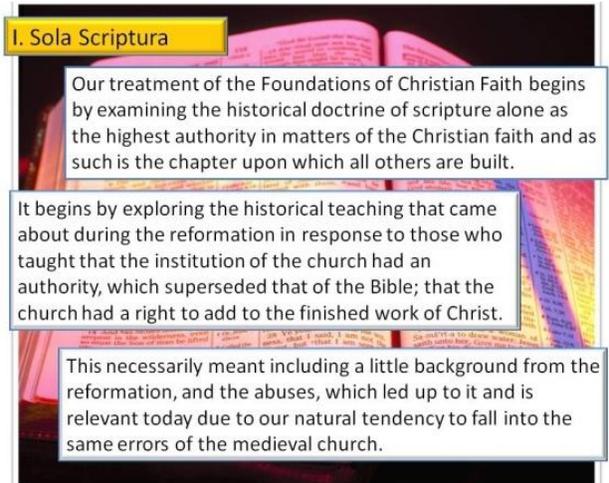
Here is the biblical doctrine of sola scriptura concisely. If a prophet arose, and even if he showed miraculous signs and wonders then the people were not to just automatically accept him as a true prophet but were told to not trust in the man or his miracles but to examine his message. It did not matter how holy he sounded or what great miracle he did, or what great success and acceptance he enjoyed for the moment. If his message was for them to do something plainly forbidden in the scriptures like,....*go after other gods*, then it didn't matter in the least what he did even if he healed the sick or raised the dead. They should know that it was not from God because the scriptures had already shown plainly that God would never instruct them to follow other gods.

In this way, the false prophet was a test of faith for God's people. When confronted with false teachings will they believe the so-called prophet or the written word of God? Which comes first? The choice is thus laid before the people of God; will they choose the word of God over anything and everything else? God allowed the false prophet to arise in order to test his people and see whether they would love Him or not. Thus to love the Lord is equivalent to loving his word. If you love Him, you will love his word even more than your experiences, or signs and wonders, or religious traditions, or what the pastor says, or what the church says.

The Lord called them to value his clear teaching in the scriptures-"*thou shalt have no other gods before me*", more than the signs and wonders that they could see and since his message didn't measure up to the word of God they were not to accept that prophet. In this way, not prophets or preachers or the ministry or our experiences was to be our final authority but only the word of God.

The apostle Paul tells us that "*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household. Having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*" (Ephesians 2:19-20 NASB)

In scripture, the term "the prophets" was a synonym for the Old Testament and it therefore follows that to be built upon the prophets means to be built upon the teachings of the prophets, which is of course the Old Testament. In like manner, the term apostle here means the teachings of the apostles, otherwise known as the New Testament.



Therefore, along with the Old Testament, the New Testament or the whole Bible is the foundation and the cornerstone is the first four books of the New Testament which are the biographical books of Christ, containing the record of his life and works, and which is certainly the chief cornerstone of our faith. So then what our faith should be built upon, is the works of God revealed through the apostles and prophets in the scriptures.

In opposition to this are the worldly values that deny the word of God or the false religious values that make experience, feeling, or even the church, the foundation upon which our faith must be built. But like the noble Jewess Rebecca in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* said to the villain who offered her the world to leave her faith and be his wife, "Your beliefs may lie in the wild and changeful billows of human opinion but mine are anchored in the rock of ages," meaning the word of the living God.

### **THE NECESSITY OF THIS DOCTRINE**

Heresy and false doctrine come not blowing a trumpet to announce to all their presence but rather sneak in by subtle degrees. Slipping in unnoticed at first, it begins to grow until, as the



apostle Paul warned, "*A little leaven (yeast) leaveneth the whole lump.*" (1 Corinthians 5:6). At the turn of the 16th century, biblical Christianity did not exist except in small, mostly isolated instances such as the Lollards in England or the Hussites in Bohemia.

The average Christian thought praying at the shrine of some saint was a perfectly normal Christian thing to do and would have been highly offended at the suggestion that it was not a biblical or even Christian practice but a false doctrine and a superstition that had arisen only because it was allowed to go unopposed for so many centuries.

Praying to the virgin Mary and to the numerous saints, not being allowed to read or even own



a copy of the scriptures in your own language, and trading your prayers, fasts and penances for a temporary forgiveness; pilgrimages to pray before the relics of various saints, such as a vial of liquid said to be milk from the breast of the virgin Mary or the splinter of wood that was supposed to be a piece of the true cross were all considered perfectly normal in Christian practice. That is, until a little monk in Germany was forced by his superior to become a professor and lecture on the scriptures at the recently formed university in Wittenberg.

Something happens when people get into the Bible. The monk's name was Martin Luther and after years of the most distressing psychological and spiritual torment over how to find peace with God and the forgiveness of his sins he finally saw, or to be more specific, was made by the Holy Spirit to see, that forgiveness of sins and peace with God can only come through faith, which in the Bible, and thus for Luther, meant trusting Jesus Christ to take away one's sins and make one righteous in the sight of God.

Of course this implied that all the practices of the church at that time, the whole system of religious works-fasts and mortifications and pilgrimages and praying for the saints to intercede on one's behalf were not only useless to get one forgiven and received into God's favor, but were blocking the path to salvation and sending men on a detour that would lead them to hell itself. The church, which he was taught to trust in to make him right with God, was actually teaching men *not to trust Jesus for salvation*, but instead to trust in the church and in their own religious works.

From the cradle to the grave medieval man's overriding concern was for salvation. The whole world was one big legalistic cult and the church stoked the flames of fear of death constantly and in many ways just to remind the people that this life is all too brief.

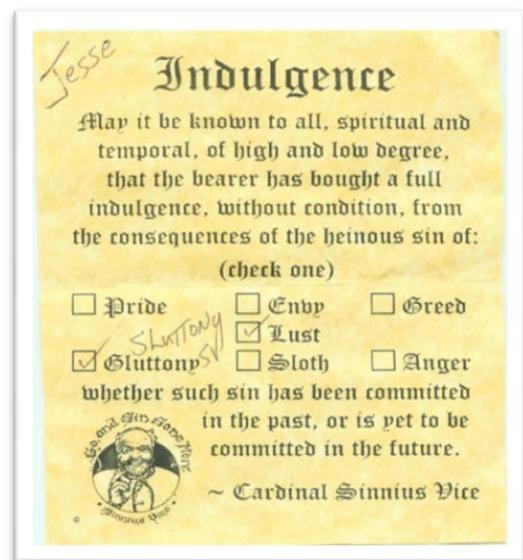
Besides provoking a fear, which bordered on mass hysteria, the church, offered the solution to man's sin problem in setting forth a series of works to do in order to earn one's salvation. Luther's discovery, or rather revelation, that these religious works kept people from seeing that they needed to simply trust Christ alone for forgiveness, soon provoked the resentment of the church hierarchy.

Things came to their attention when the pope, partly in order to pay for the magnificent palace of St. Peter's basilica in Rome, issued licenses to preachers to preach and sell pieces of paper, known as indulgences, to which the papal seal was affixed and which purported to be able to get all your deceased relatives out of purgatory.

The little monk also happened to be a pastor and a conscientious one too, and when he found that his parishioners were crossing the border into the neighboring province to purchase indulgences he was outraged and drew up 95 theses for debate. These proved that unscriptural practices such as the selling of indulgences were wrong and quoting scripture in support of this.

This was significant in that whether anyone realized it at the time or not, it was the first time that church practice was to be held accountable to the Bible since the cruel burning at the stake of the bohemian preacher Jan Huss a century or so earlier. What Luther was saying was that the authority of the church is not above the scriptures and that Christian doctrine and practice must be held to what is taught in the word of God.

In other words, Luther put the Bible above the monks and the pope. This radical idea came to be known by the Latin phrase *sola scriptura*, which meant that we must recognize **only the scriptures** as the ultimate authority in matters of the faith. This is important for us today because it gives us an authority to which we can refer whenever we find ourselves in disagreement on issues.



Just as the medieval opponents of Luther put the word of church councils and popes in opposition to the word of God, so too do some today put the word of the successful television preacher or the latest TV star prophet, or even the local pastor, on an equal level with the Bible. This is a direct result of not knowing the doctrine of sola scriptura.

It is obvious that our faith has to stand on something. If you believe what you believe because the church told you, in which case your faith is either second hand, based on what the church believes, or you believe because you came to that belief by a personal quest to know and understand. One may believe because of a feeling or an experience but the Bible teaches that it is only through the word of God itself that a person can come to real biblical faith.

So we need to know why we believe, which can be done by simply asking yourself-what am I trusting in? And also we need to have an ultimate authority to which we can refer all questions and controversies in matters of doctrine. Is it to be the church which may and often has taught things which are completely opposed to the scriptures? Or is it to be the mystical voice that tells people like Shirley Maclaine that they are actually reincarnated spirits? Or is it not to be found in the wild and changeful billows of human opinion but anchored in the rock of ages, the eternal word of the living God?

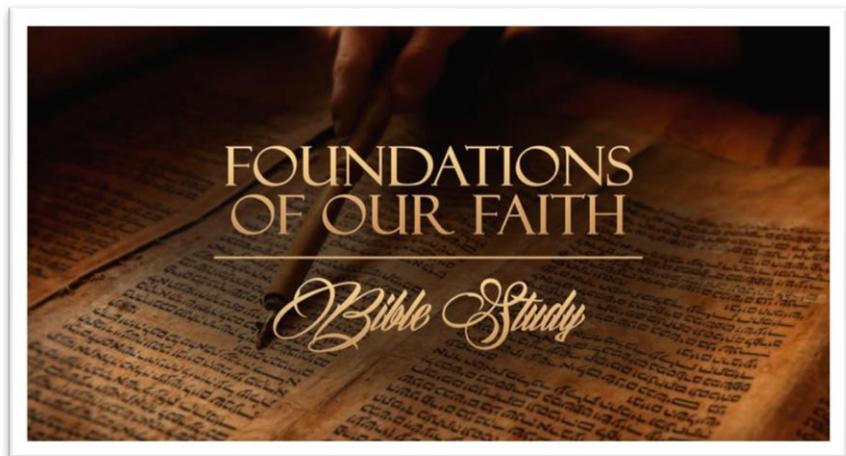
### **THE CHIEF GROUND OF OUR FAITH**

The scriptures themselves must be the chief ground of our faith, though they are not the only ground. We have also the witness of the Spirit. If we had not this witness of the Spirit, how could we know that what is in the Bible applies to us personally?

John Wesley was an English missionary to the colony of Georgia in what would later become the United States. He failed miserably in his efforts as a missionary and confronted the truth that "I have a fair summer religion. I can talk well; nay, and believe myself while no danger is near. However, let death look me in the face and my spirit is troubled... What if the gospel is not true?"

His troubles led him to seek out the German pastor of a group known as the Moravian brethren who asked him,

"Brother Wesley, do you know Jesus Christ?" Wesley was taken aback by the question. After all, he was a missionary and an ordained minister of the Church of England and here was this pastor questioning his salvation. "I know Jesus Christ is the savior of the world," Wesley replied in answer. "Yes, brother," the pastor answered back, "but do you know he is your savior?"



This question floored the young missionary and haunted him for months. He went back to England and one evening in a church service in Aldersgate Street in London, as the preacher read of Luther's commentary on Romans, Wesley came to understand and believe that the Jesus of the Bible was indeed real. Jesus was as real at that moment as He had been in biblical times and that He had died for Wesley's sins too as well as the sins of the whole world. Moreover, at that moment, Wesley actually trusted Jesus Christ to take away all of his sins and make him right with God.

This was the moment when John Wesley was converted, born again, and actually became a Christian, according to his own testimony.

Therefore, although John Wesley had the Bible by heart, had studied at Oxford, and knew the scriptures, he had not the witness of the spirit and it was not personal until he trusted Jesus Christ to take away his sins. It is not enough to know that Jesus is the savior of the world, we must know that Jesus is our savior, personally. The other authority and ground of our faith, along with the witness of the spirit is the church. Although we hold that the Bible is the ultimate authority, we should not forget that God ordained the church and that throughout the ages He has never completely left us without a witness of his grace.

Even in the darkest ages, when superstition had replaced doctrine, we are able to discern, here and there, the faith that the apostles handed down and that the spirit of God makes known to men and women in all ages. This is an important witness and shows the continuity of the apostle's doctrine at least of salvation. However, although we acknowledge and are grateful for the witness of the spirit and of the church, we dare not make up a new doctrine, that these are to be placed on an equal level with the word of God.

### THE CHIEF TARGET OF SATAN

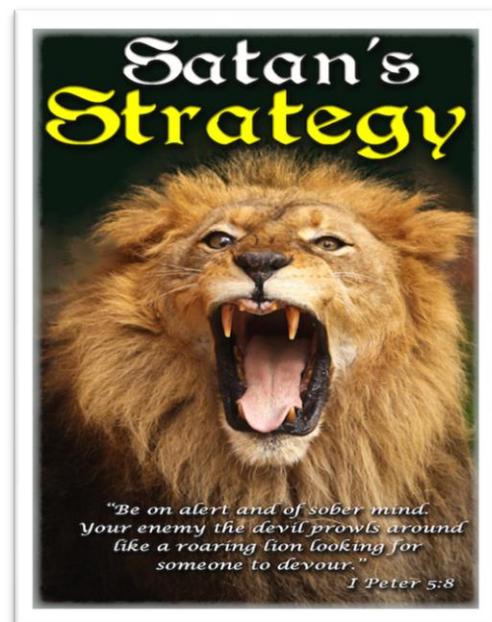
In the parable of the sower we see that the word of God is the seed which is sown.

*"The sower soweth the word. And these are they by the wayside, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately and taketh away the word which was sown in their hearts."* (Mark 4:14-15)

From this, we see that the word of God is the chief target of Satan. Nothing rouses satanic opposition like when the word of God is sown in the hearts of the children of darkness. This is for the obvious reason that the word of God is the most powerful force in changing the heart of the sinner and translating him into the kingdom of God. It's the same in all spiritual opposition to the church too.

Satan must remove the faith of the church from the word of God if he is to be successful against the church. If he can get the church to put something above or even on the same level as the word of God then the church will soon drift into false doctrines and become very ineffective for the kingdom of God. Imagine being a Christian before Luther came along, when the church would not allow people to own or even read the Bible! The doctrine of sola scriptura came about to address this very problem.

After sola scriptura, the church could never again claim that it was necessary to keep the Bible from the people. So many good people suffered persecution and even death to make sure you and I have the word of God in our own language that it is a shame to see a Bible in every house yet so often not known or appreciated. It is no sin to doubt the word of the church and it is no sin to doubt one's own experience, but it was the first temptation and original sin in the Garden of Eden to doubt the word of God. Look closely at how Satan tempted the woman *"Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?"* (Genesis 3:1)



This is the same work he is about in the parable of the sower. God speaks his word to the man and his wife and the devil comes along and tries to get them to doubt God's word. Hath God said? Are you sure that's what the word said? Surely he didn't mean that?

The word of God is in addition to all that, the very seed whereby we are born again. The sinner is converted by the means of preaching the word of God. Does not the apostle James tell us to "...receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls." (James 1:21)

As the apostle Peter says also "*Being **born again**, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, **by the word of God**, which liveth and abideth forever.*"(1:23)

In other words, the word of God is the agent of our conversion, the seed which is sown that brings about the new birth.

### **THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE VS THE AUTHORITY OF EXPERIENCE**

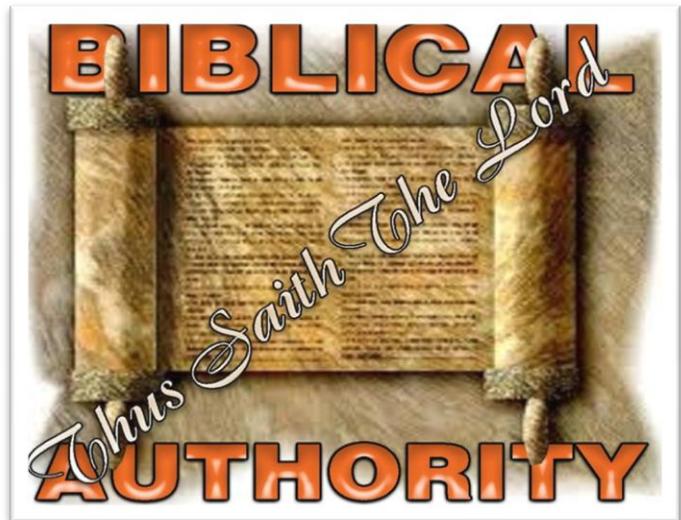
The authority of scripture must, for the Christian, rank higher than the authority of one's own experience. There are and always will be some who put their experience on an equal or even higher level than the word of God. Somebody prophesies something and you just know it is God's voice speaking to you, or a successful and revered television preacher says something and we just accept it even though objections arise from those who are concerned that it may be unscriptural. Do you just accept it unquestioningly? Or does the Bible teach us to hold the prophets accountable?

*"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try (test) the spirits whether they are of God; for **many** false prophets are gone out into the world."*(1 John 4:1)

And didn't the Lord Jesus himself tell us to "*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.*" (Matthew 7:15)

Christians today act like its a sin to question a spiritual experience or prophecy and yet the Bible specifically tells us to test them; try them and make them measure up to the word of God. I was told of a young Christian in prison (there are many conversions in prison) who knew if something was from God because if it was God's will a flock of birds would always fly by his cell window. While we must not discourage believers from seeing God's providence in all their circumstances we obviously cannot accept this sort of sign as a sure determinant of the will of God. No, we must put our trust, not in outward signs, but in the written word of God. I have no problem saying that God in his providence sent a flock of birds past a prisoner's window, but to infer therefrom that God wills this or that, is just trusting in a sign, not in the God who sent that sign.

Accept and be grateful for all the little kindnesses God sends throughout your day but he never meant for you to put your trust in them. This is especially important in the things of the conscience for "... *if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.*(1 John 3:20)



In other words even if our heart should condemn us, as is often the case for those who have been involved in legalism for example, our heart is not to be trusted more than God's word and though your heart should say you've sinned beyond God's grace, your heart is lying because God's word says he died for all your sins. Luther wrote,

*For feelings come and feelings go and feelings are deceiving  
My warrant is the word of God, naught else is worth believing  
Though all my heart should feel condemned for lack of some sweet token  
There is one greater than my heart whose word cannot be broken  
I'll trust in God's unchanging word till soul and body sever  
For though all things shall pass away, his word will stand forever*

### **THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE VS THE AUTHORITY OF REASON**

Benjamin Franklin was a very brilliant and in many ways even a wise man. The world admires him for his outstanding qualities and we count him not the least among the founding fathers of our nation. In his old age he wrote to a friend

*"As to Jesus of Nazareth...I have, along with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having **never studied it**, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble."*

In other words, since he was old and would die soon he didn't think it worth the trouble to look into the claims of Jesus, because he would find out for himself soon enough. A wise man by the world's estimation and yet more foolish words were never spoken. Modesty restrains me from quoting Tom Paine or Monsieur Voltaire or David Hume or any of the other worldly wise men of what is known to historians as the age of reason. The worldly wise man may have the respect of the world but it is only God's estimation of us that will mean anything in the end. This same wise founding father was a friend of George Whitefield, one of the greatest evangelists of all time; the same Whitefield who gave such offense by insisting on being allowed to preach the gospel to the black slaves saying that their souls were as precious in God's sight as white souls. He had great success among the slaves too and though the world looked down on the slave or the poor uneducated whites who accepted Christ through Whitefield's preaching, in God's eyes they were much wiser and richer by far than the great philosophers of the age of reason.

Benjamin Franklin, so esteemed by this world, died in his sins, rejecting the light that his friend Whitefield shed on all who came near him, yet the poor and despised of this world joyfully received the savior that the philosophers disdained. And so it is as is written

*"For the natural man receiveth not the things of the spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."*(1 Corinthians 2:14)

The age of reason has been over for a long time but there are still people who will subject everything to their understanding. The problem with this is that our understanding is flawed by our sinful condition.

*"Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject unto the law of God, neither, indeed, can be."*(Romans 8:7)

The natural or unregenerate man cannot know the things of the spirit of God just as Mr. Franklin could not know them because he accepted only what could be proved by reason. However, mark why he could not receive the things of the spirit of God.

*for they are foolishness unto them.* The great wits and philosophers of the age of reason thought the doctrines of Christianity were foolish and said so quite openly. And so the gospel is a stumbling block to these worldly wise Greeks as it says in 1 Corinthians 1:23.

*"But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness."*

There are many such Greeks in all ages and among all nationalities who will despise what they cannot comprehend. But however brilliant it may be, the human intellect, unregenerate and defiled by original sin as it is will never be able to reach up to heaven, grab the almighty by the throat and compel him to render a reason for things. The carnal mind simply cannot comprehend the truths of the Bible no matter how brilliant it may be and many an intellectual has missed what uneducated simple faith joyfully received. The word of God then must not be placed below or even on the same level as our carnal reason or intellect, but must be above even our reason.

### **THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES VS THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH**

There are still others who insist that the church is the highest authority in matters of the faith. This was the dilemma that Luther presented to the church in his day. The church demanded that he admit he was wrong when he taught that it was only by faith in Christ that man could find forgiveness of his sins. Luther thought and prayed about it and gave the church this answer;

*"Since it is well known that popes and councils have erred and contradicted themselves in the past my conscience must remain prisoner to the word of God, and so I cannot and will not retract. To go against the conscience is neither safe nor right. Here I stand, God help me. Amen."*

He was, he said, perfectly willing to accept correction when someone could show him he was wrong *FROM THE WORD OF GOD*, but would not deny God's word just because the pope or the church said he must. The church insisted that what they taught was right and must be accepted even above the word of God. Luther insisted that scripture should be the ultimate authority; this is the doctrine of sola scriptura, the Bible as the final arbiter in matters of the faith, with a higher authority than even the church. This is pretty straightforward and most contemporary Christians would take it for granted that the Bible, being God's word, is more authoritative than any man made decree, so it's not hard to get people to agree that Luther was right and the church wrong but what if we put it in contemporary terms? Such things happen not only in the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

When we put pastors and teachers on a higher level than ordinary Christians; when we teach that your pastor is the one who will get you to heaven; when being in the pastor's good graces means you're right with God or being out of favor means you're not, then we are following in the footsteps of the medieval Catholic Church. This is just priestcraft; men making themselves a mediator through which sinners have to go to get to God, and the Bible teaches that

*"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus."* (1Timothy 2:5)

So we must hold the word of God to be of greater authority than the pastor or any other man no matter how anointed he may be. What we need are more Christians like the Bereans in Acts 17:11, *"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."*

They received the word readily, but they made the message the apostles were preaching measure up to the scriptures. They held the apostles themselves accountable to the word of God, and the Bible calls them more noble for doing so!

Some preachers and prophets nowadays would be highly offended to be held accountable to the scriptures; some have even cursed those who dared to hold them accountable to God's word, arrogantly proclaiming *"Touch not God's anointed!"*

However, if they held the apostles themselves accountable to the Bible and the Bible commends this as a noble thing then they have no right to be offended and think themselves above being made to measure up to scripture.

### ***SCRIPTURE AS THE FINAL ARBITER***

That scripture itself is the final arbiter in matters of the faith is evident in the words of Jesus in John 12:48 *"He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."*

This is not the only time in the Bible that the word itself is presented as the judge or the instrument by which we will be judged. The final judgment of sinners, pictured in Revelation 20:12 shows this clearly enough

*"And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God, the books (plural form) were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works."*

Most biblical commentators agree that the books referred to here are the sixty-six books of the Bible, the written word of God. The word of God then, is the standard to which we will be held accountable, and if the word is the standard then the church cannot issue a decree or change beliefs in contradiction to the scriptures.

*"My covenant will I not break, nor will I alter the thing that is gone out of my lips"* (Psalms 89:34). God is not changing it for popes or pastors or anybody else. If such were the case then truth would indeed be relative to what the church says it is and there would be no moral absolutes.

