



## Answering Eastern Orthodox Objections Canon & Sola Scriptura

A quick guide for live conversation. Each spot follows the same four beats: **what they say, the trick hidden in it, what you say back, and a short line to remember.** Stay calm, agree with whatever is actually true, and only push back on the one hidden assumption. Technical terms are kept in, but each is defined in plain words the first time it shows up, so the sheet works whether your opponent is a parish layman or a seminary-trained apologist.

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### QUICK GLOSSARY (the terms that keep coming up)

- **Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone):** the teaching that Scripture is the only *infallible* rule of faith, the final standard everything else answers to. It does not mean the only authority of any kind; creeds, councils, and teachers all have real but secondary authority.
  - **Canon:** the official list of which books belong in the Bible (from a Greek word for "measuring rule").
  - **Infallible:** unable to be wrong. **Fallible:** able to be wrong.
  - **Recognition vs. constitution:** *recognizing* something means spotting a fact that is already true; *constituting* it means creating that fact. Central distinction in this whole debate.
  - **Apostolic:** coming from the apostles or their close circle. The early church's main test for a book.
  - **Antilegomena:** the handful of New Testament books whose place was disputed for a while (for example 2 Peter, James, Jude, 2-3 John, Revelation). From Greek for "spoken against."
  - **Indefectibility vs. infallibility:** *indefectibility* means the Church as a whole will never completely fail or lose the gospel; *infallibility* means a particular office cannot teach error. The first does not require the second.
  - **Presuppositional / transcendental argument:** an argument that says your opponent's whole way of reasoning secretly depends on assumptions only your side can supply.
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### START HERE: They almost always run the same play

Most of their objections are one move wearing different outfits. It is a **transcendental argument**, meaning an argument that your very ability to reason about this secretly borrows from their Church: "*You can't account for X without our infallible Church, so you must be leaning on us whether you admit it or not.*" The aim is to get you defending a standard you never signed up for, namely perfect, infallible (can't-be-wrong) certainty, and then announce that you fell short of it.

**Your default reaction:** Don't accept the sky-high standard. Ask whether *they* can meet it. They can't, because they reached their own Church by the same ordinary, fallible (can-make-mistakes) human reasoning they want to forbid you. The demand for infallible certainty trips up the person asking just as much as you.

Say this in your own words again and again: **"Recognizing something true is not the same as making it true. Reliable is not the same as infallible. And you reached your Church the same human way I reached my canon."**

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## SITUATION 1 - "You can't even know your canon"

**What they say:** "Sola Scriptura falls apart right at the canon. You have no infallible table of contents. Even your own R.C. Sproul called the canon 'a fallible collection of infallible books.' So you don't really know which books are Scripture. We do, because the Church defined it without error."

**The trick:** Getting you to agree that "fallible" (able to be wrong) means "useless" or "unknown," and that you can only really know something if you can't possibly be wrong about it.

**What you say:**

1. Separate *recognition* from *constitution*, that is, spotting a fact from creating it. The books carry their weight because they came from the apostles. The church recognized that; it didn't grant it. A paternity test recognizes a father who already is the father. It doesn't make him one.
2. Reject the buried premise that you must be infallible to recognize something infallible. A jeweler reliably picks out real diamonds without being someone who never errs. A student learns true math from a teacher who sometimes slips.
3. Flip it around: the canon actually came together gradually, from the ground up, across many churches, and was basically in place and recognized by Athanasius in his Festal Letter of 367, with no infallible decree doing the work. Even Israel received the Old Testament with no infallible committee stamping it, and Jesus still held them to it.
4. Point at the infinite regress (the way the problem just keeps backing up a step), and this is the strongest hit: "Which councils count as infallibly binding? Rome says twenty-one ecumenical councils, you say seven, the Oriental Orthodox say three. Each group certifies its own list by its own authority. You never escaped fallible human judgment. You just pushed it back one step, to your own decision about *which church to trust*, and you made that call with your own fallible mind before any infallible certainty ever showed up."

**Line to remember:** *"You didn't get your list of books mailed from heaven either. You reasoned your way to a church you judged trustworthy, then accepted its list. That's the same fallible step you say ruins me. You just hid it one move earlier."*

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## SITUATION 2 - "A text can't interpret itself, so you need the Church"

**What they say:** "Scripture can't interpret itself. The Constitution needs the Supreme Court, and Scripture needs the Church to make binding rulings. Without an infallible interpreter, you end up with thousands of denominations and total confusion."

**The trick:** Getting you to agree that "needs interpreting" automatically means "needs one infallible, official church body."

### What you say:

1. Agree with the obvious part: yes, every text needs interpreting. So do laws, treaties, and the Constitution. None of those gets handed to an interpreter whose rulings can never be questioned or checked against the text.
2. Drop the Supreme Court comparison, because it actually cuts both ways. The Constitution is the highest law *before* any court rules on it. The court answers to the text, and a later court can overturn an earlier one by appealing to that same text. So the picture really shows a binding interpreter sitting *under* a higher written standard, which is *your* view, not theirs.
3. Move the problem along: adding an infallible interpreter doesn't end interpreting. It just relocates it. Now you have to interpret the interpreter. Which rulings are the binding ones, what did they mean, how do they apply today. Orthodox and Catholics argue about exactly these. The same "wax nose" problem (a text or ruling bent to fit whatever the reader wants) pops back up one floor higher.
4. Note that having a *principled* standard (a real, reasoned test) doesn't require a *procedurally final* one (a supreme court that ends all argument). The early church settled the Arian controversy, the fourth-century fight over whether the Son is fully God, by showing what the apostolic writings could and couldn't be made to say, not by a panel ending debate by force.

**Line to remember:** *"An infallible interpreter doesn't remove the need to interpret. It just hands you one more infallible thing you now have to interpret with your own fallible mind. So who interprets the interpreter?"*

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## SITUATION 3 - "The canon idea is anachronistic, a late invention"

**What they say:** "Nobody had the idea of a closed, finished canon before the fourth century. The whole concept shows up late. Your talk of a settled core in the second century is anachronistic, reading a later idea back into a time that didn't have it."

**The trick:** Getting you to claim a *closed, finished* list existed in the second century, which the evidence doesn't support, so you look like you're overreaching.

### What you say:

1. Happily grant the distinction between a book *functioning as Scripture* (being read and quoted as the word of God) and a *closed canon* (a fixed, finished, bounded list). This is the distinction the mainstream scholar John Barton draws, so you are on solid academic ground. Don't fight it. Use it.
2. Point out you never needed the stronger claim. Your claim is only that the *core*, the Gospels, Acts, and the major letters of Paul, was already functioning with full Scriptural authority very early. Irenaeus around 180 insists on exactly four Gospels as a settled fact. The later lists *recognized* that authority; they didn't create it.
3. The fourth-century work was mostly settling the edges (the antilegomena, the long-disputed books) and writing out a formal list. It wasn't where the core got its authority. Matthew and Romans didn't suddenly acquire authority in the year 367.
4. "No explicit concept of canon yet" is not the same as "no functioning canon." People followed grammar rules before grammarians formalized them. Courts treated documents as binding before anyone theorized "binding precedent." The practice comes first, the vocabulary comes later.

**Line to remember:** *"I don't need a closed list in the second century. I need the core books already functioning as Scripture, which even the scholars pressing this objection admit happened. The late part is closing the edges, not founding the center."*

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## SITUATION 4 - "The Church gave you the Bible, so the Church outranks it"

**What they say:** "The Church came first and produced the New Testament. You're epistemically dependent on the Church, meaning you can't even know your canon without it. So the Church stands above Scripture."

**The trick:** Sliding from "you needed the church to *learn* the canon" to "the church has authority over Scripture and *constituted* the canon."

**What you say:**

1. Distinguish *epistemic dependence* (needing a witness in order to *learn* a fact) from *authority over* the fact itself. You depend on many witnesses to learn many facts. That doesn't put the witness in charge of the fact. I learned my birthday from my mother. She can't change it.
2. Recognition versus constitution, again. The church recognized which books were apostolic, using evidence: who wrote them, how old they were, and how widely they were received (their *catholicity*, meaning acceptance across the whole church, not just one region). Recognizing is not creating.
3. The antilegomena (the disputed books) prove the point: the church didn't decree them shut by fiat. It weighed the evidence for generations and kept the doubtful ones in an open, self-aware "disputed" category. That's the behavior of a body tracking a fact, not inventing one. A body that truly *constituted* the canon could have closed the matter in an afternoon.
4. Scripture itself sets the order: the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph 2:20), and it's the "pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). A pillar holds up something it didn't make.

**Line to remember:** "A coroner identifies the body. He doesn't make the man dead by saying so. The Church recognized the apostolic books. It didn't make them apostolic."

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## SITUATION 5 - "Sola Scriptura means Christ abandoned His Church (ecclesial deism)"

**What they say:** "On your view Jesus founded the Church and then let it sit in error for centuries until the Reformation showed up to fix it. That's *ecclesial deism*, treating Christ like an absentee god who walks away from His Church. It denies His promise that the gates of hell won't prevail (Matt 16:18)."

**The trick:** Getting you to admit you think the gospel was *lost*, or that "the Church" has to mean one single visible chain of command.

**What you say:**

1. Distinguish *indefectibility* (the Church as a whole never completely fails, because a faithful remnant always holds the gospel, which you affirm) from *infallibility* (one

particular office can never teach error, which you deny). The first does not require the second. Matthew 16:18 promises the Church won't be destroyed, not that a particular See never errs.

2. The promises held *through those who stayed faithful to the apostolic testimony*, not through an office that couldn't err. In the Arian crisis the gates didn't prevail, but not because an office was infallible. It was because the truth survived in the faithful even when much of the official leadership had drifted.
3. *Tu quoque* (Latin for "you too," turning their objection back on them): the Orthodox must explain their own stretches of serious institutional failure. Their answer, that "indefectibility doesn't mean every officeholder is preserved from error," is, stated plainly, *your* distinction.
4. The forward-looking version is your strongest ground: "If the Church could err for centuries without noticing, how does anyone today know their own tradition isn't off course right now? The Protestant principle of *semper reformanda* (Latin, 'always reforming') builds in a safety check: always measuring against a fixed external standard that can catch the error. Your claim that the Church can't err *right now* is the one thing that can never be tested."

**Line to remember:** *"I'm not saying the gospel got lost. I'm saying it was preserved by the faithful, not guaranteed by an office. The promise is that the baton reaches the finish line, not that no runner ever stumbles."*

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## SITUATION 6 - The deep one: the presuppositional gambit

**What they say:** "You can't treat the Gospels as ordinary historical documents neutrally. The moment you do, you've already assumed a naturalist, autonomous-reason framework that quietly rules us out. Only the Church's authority can ground how you know Christ at all. You're standing on our ground while pretending it's neutral ground." (This is the **presuppositional** move: the claim that your starting assumptions, your presuppositions, secretly require their worldview.)

**The trick:** This is the toughest one. It tries to disqualify *ordinary historical reasoning itself*, so the only road left to Christ is submitting to their Church first. If you start defending your method, they claim that proves their point.

**What you say:**

1. Deny that ordinary historical method is a naturalist (anti-supernatural) assumption. Dating documents, weighing how well-attested a claim is, judging whether a source is reliable. That's the same toolkit *everyone* uses, including them, including in ordinary life. It isn't "faith versus autonomous reason." It's just inquiry.

2. Show it proves too much: if using normal historical reasoning begs the question (assumes what it's trying to prove), then every historical claim anyone makes begs the question, which collapses into total skepticism that nobody actually holds. They're certain Constantinople fell in 1453, and they know it the ordinary way.
3. The self-defeating turn, and this is the move that ends it: *they can't reach their own infallible Church except by the very reasoning they're trying to ban*. They had to investigate the history and weigh it, using ordinary reason, to decide which church was the true one *before* they ever submitted to it. The method they want to take from you is the method they used to get where they stand.
4. Name it calmly: "This isn't really an argument. It's a request that I accept your conclusion before we even look at the evidence. A test that only your side can pass, by design, isn't a neutral test. It's your conclusion smuggled in and relabeled as a ground rule."

**Line to remember:** *"You used ordinary historical reasoning to decide which church to trust. You can't kick away the ladder you climbed and then tell me ladders aren't allowed."*

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## SITUATION 7 - "You two can't even agree on the books" (the Deuterocanon jab)

**What they say:** "You and the Catholics don't even carry the same Bible. You cut books at the Reformation. Your canon is in dispute, so your whole rule of faith is undefined."

**The trick:** Conflating the New Testament list (which all sides share) with the Old Testament *Deuterocanon* dispute (the "second canon," the extra books in the Greek Old Testament that Protestants call the Apocrypha), and painting you as the one who "removed" books.

**What you say:**

1. Separate the two questions. The 27 New Testament books are shared by Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. The disagreement is about the *Old Testament*, and that's a genuine historical question with a historical answer.
2. The Reformers didn't remove books from a long-closed canon. They sided with the *Hebrew* Old Testament that Jesus used, and with early figures like Jerome (who produced the Vulgate, the standard Latin Bible) and Rufinus, who already set those extra books aside as good for edification (building up the reader) but not for establishing doctrine. Rome only made the longer list binding dogma (official, required teaching) at the Council of Trent in 1546, reacting to the Reformation.
3. Jesus pointed at the Hebrew Bible's own three-part shape: "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). That tracks the Hebrew canon, not the larger Greek collection. The Deuterocanon falls outside that structure.

4. If they cite the councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397) affirming the longer Old Testament: grant it honestly, but note those same councils were mostly registering the New Testament consensus that already existed. On the Old Testament they backed regional practice over the Hebrew canon, which is exactly why it stayed genuinely disputed until Trent had to make it dogma. Consistency means applying the same criteria, not rubber-stamping every single thing a council ever said.

**Line to remember:** *"We didn't subtract from a settled Bible. We kept the one Jesus used. Rome made the longer list binding dogma in 1546, reacting to us. The change ran the other direction."*

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## HOW TO CARRY YOURSELF (drill this rhythm)

When you feel cornered, come back to the same three anchors every time:

1. **Recognition, not constitution.** The Church found the canon. It didn't found it.
2. **Reliable, not infallible.** You don't need to be incapable of error to know something, and they aren't incapable of error either, since they reached their Church the ordinary human way.
3. **The regress is theirs, not yours.** Every demand for an infallible authority just pushes the human judgment back one step, to "which authority do I trust," and they made that call with the same mind they say disqualifies you.

And the one key under all of it: **the demand for infallible certainty is self-defeating, because the person demanding it can't meet it either, and can't even reach his own Church without the ordinary reasoning he's trying to outlaw.**

Stay relaxed. Freely concede what's true: texts need interpreting, the church genuinely bore witness, the edges of the canon were settled late. Refuse exactly one thing: **the buried premise that you can only know something if an infallible institution hands it to you.** That one premise is the whole game.