

THE GOSPEL IS REVELATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BATTLE CRY OF THE REFORMATION

The light of the gospel that broke into the world in the Reformation came through the rediscovery of divine revelation. Man is not the source of the light he needs, God is. Therefore, divine revelation, not human reason, must be the source of all true and transformative light. The Reformation reintroduced the gospel to the world through the Word of God.

The Word of God is the light in a pitch-dark place ... It is God's Word, the Gospel, that we have been redeemed from death, sin, and hell through Christ.

Martin Luther, *Works*, 30:165–166.

Without the supremacy of Scripture, the gospel is lost. The gospel is not something reachable by man, it is revelation by God. Obscure the truth, authority, and reliability of Scripture and you obscure the truth, authority, and reliability of God—and what remains for mankind is only darkness and hopelessness. Knowledge of God, reconciliation with God, and everlasting delight in God—the gospel itself—rests on God's self-revelation in Scripture alone.

Revelation

Truth, authority, reason, and revelation—these are vital elements in every worldview. To elevate human tradition over divine revelation is to trust in the rituals of man rather than the works of God. And to elevate human reason over divine revelation is to trust in self rather than God. Both are egregious errors that rob God of rightful glory and rob humanity of all true hope.

The Reformation advanced the world forward by going back to the Scripture. The importance of truth, the recognition of ultimate authority, and the supremacy of revelation over reason were issues that changed both the church and the world—the Reformation recovered a biblical worldview of reality.

*The Reformation still matters
because truth still matters.*

The igniting power that God used to erupt the Reformation came through His very own Word. The first and foundational discovery of the Reformation was the voice of God in the Holy Scriptures. In divine irony, while the Renaissance was busy painting new faces on a stagnant culture by *ad fontes*, returning to the sources (of ancient civilization), so God had another meaning in mind.¹ Indeed, the fountains of the great deep burst forth as the Holy Scriptures were brought out of obscurity and into contact with Spirit-illuminated hearts.

“Each of the emphases of the Reformation, summed up in the *solas*, is focused upon protecting the integrity and identity of the gospel itself. Without the inspiration, authority, harmony, and sufficiency of Scripture, we do not know the gospel (*sola Scriptura*).”²

God was at work in a most conspicuous way. Nearly two-hundred years before Martin Luther, John Wycliffe, a Roman Catholic priest and Oxford University professor, was given by God the conviction to communicate the Scriptures in the common language of the people. Wycliffe was an exceptional scholar who was the first, along with a team of academic helpers, to translate the Scriptures from the Latin Vulgate into Old English. The Scripture had awakened Wycliffe to some of the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church, of which he began to speak against. Wycliffe and his translation of the Bible were opposed by the established authorities in Rome and Wycliffe was later condemned a heretic. Later, John Huss, a priest in Bohemia, was given some of Wycliffe’s writings and he too came under God’s spell (Gospel) by studying the Scriptures for himself. He was strongly opposed by the bishops and eventually condemned. He was burned at the stake in 1415. Luther would later claim that what he learned (in appreciating the authority of Scripture), he learned from Huss. In about 1456, God brought about the invention of the movable type printing press through Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz, Germany. The pieces were in place for revolutionizing the production of print, but one essential ingredient was still needed before the glorious eruption of the gospel would give rise to reform.

The Greek New Testament

The very first book that was printed on Gutenberg’s press was the Holy Bible, in Latin of course. But that didn’t spark the Reformation. It was particularly the Greek New Testament sparked it all. Original sources of Scripture would be the cause of doctrinal reform. To better understand why, let’s step back to the early Church.

The infant church was ruthlessly persecuted. Scripture could only be copied by hand and translation was costly. Once the imperial ban was removed through Constantine and Christianity began to flourish in the Latin speaking world, a new problem was felt. Some

¹ See “The Renaissance” in *The Reformation and its Relevance* (2017), 17.

² James R. White, “For the Church: The Reformation Isn’t over,” *Tabletalk Magazine*, March 2014: *John Knox & The Scottish Reformation* (Sanford, FL: Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 2014), 67.

say that there were more than forty different Latin translations of the Scriptures in circulation. In an effort to bring order and improve unity, Jerome, a learned scholar of languages, was commissioned by the Bishop of Rome (A.D. 382) to furnish an official Latin translation (later called the Latin Vulgate for “common Latin” version), which in time and in some places would be the only authorized Bible.

It was a fair but imperfect translation. McGrath tells us that with the rise of textual and philological techniques, “distressing discrepancies between the Vulgate and the texts it purported to translate” were exposed. This process, he said, “demonstrated the total unreliability of this translation of the Bible—and hence, it seemed, of theologies based upon it.”³ Partly owing to the nature of translation and partly to word-choice, several theologically charged terms were tragically obscured by it. For instance, the Vulgate translated our Lord’s words in Matthew 4:17, as “do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” This was used to link a connection between the kingdom of God with the sacrament of penance in the medieval Church. In another example, the sacrament of marriage was founded on a bad translation of Ephesians 5:32, with the Vulgate calling marriage a *sacramentum* (sacrament), where the Greek used *mysterion* (mystery). Nowhere does the original Scriptures suggest that marriage is a sacrament in the Roman sense. Another one is found in Luke 1:28. There the Vulgate has Gabriel telling Mary that she is “the one who is full of grace (*gratia plena*).” The choice of words suggests an overflowing substance as in a reservoir that could be drawn upon. This falsely grounded the erroneous medieval theology of the merits of the saints (and particularly Mary) as well as offered a proof text for treating grace as a metaphysical substance. Even Erasmus (Roman Catholic) pointed out that the Greek simply means, “favored one.” The last example touches the subject of justification, which will be discussed later. In short, it was Luther’s reading of the Greek, as opposed to the Latin, that opened his understanding of the gospel.

In 1516, Desiderius Erasmus, the famed humanist, printed the Greek New Testament, making the New Testament available in its original language for the first time in a millennium. This providence of God would be the fuel to the fire of the Reformation. The spark would come soon after as the Holy Spirit would direct men to rediscover the gospel through the Scriptures recovered from their original languages.

The foundation of our religion is the
written Word, the Scriptures of God.

Ulrich Zwingli

³ Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology*, 121.

Rediscovering the Gospel

After many struggles, Providence graciously led young Martin Luther to the Sacred Scripture. It was through his study of the Greek New Testament that newfound convictions in the old and unimproved truth erupted. The original New Testament used terms that conveyed the idea that those who lived by faith were “declared” righteous rather than “made” righteous. The Latin Vulgate used *iustificare*, which is a compound word that joins “righteous” with “to make.” Medieval theology followed the implication of the Latin, namely that a person is “made” righteous, in degrees, by works of faith. But the original Greek used *dikaiosyné*, a word that was often used to describe the act of acquitting guilt (Deuteronomy 25:1) or declaring or pronouncing someone as righteous (1 Kings 8:32; Luke 16:15; Romans 3:24, 26, 28, 30; 4:5; 5:1; 8:30, 33; Galatians 2:16; 3:8, 24; etc.). In the second of his Ninety-Five Theses, Luther noted that the word “repentance” in the Greek text cannot be understood as “penance” as the Latin Vulgate had it. Therefore, the sacrament of penance, or the act of confession and satisfaction administered by priests, was built not on Scripture. Luther pointed out that the word in Greek speaks of a change of heart and mind, a complete turn-around from sin to God, not a sacrament for earning merit.

The “good news” (gospel) was revealed afresh through the Greek New Testament. It was in the Scripture alone, as opposed to all the religion in the world, that Luther found satisfaction for his soul. God opened the eyes of his heart to behold the love and grace of Christ towards sinners in the gospel. He came to an understanding of God, faith, the gospel, and the church that had largely been lost for nearly a millennium. But his newfound convictions in the old and unimproved truth soon collided with the church that he loved. Power, control, pride, and politics all conspired to oppose Luther's efforts to correct the corruptions of the church. His convictions that came from the Scripture cast him into conflict with the Pope and through dreadful circumstances eventuated in his being excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church, of which he was an ordained friar and professor of theology. He was accused of heresy, subjected to magisterial trials, church-wide censorship, and even threatened with execution, yet through it all God sustained him, and Luther stood firm.

Within in a year of posting his Ninety-Five Theses, Luther was summoned to be appear before an appointed Cardinal for examination by the Church of Rome. When the Cardinal began to accuse him of opposing the church's authority, Luther responded, “The truth of Scripture comes first. After that is accepted one may determine whether the words of men can be accepted as true.”⁴ This is characteristic of what became the formal principle of the Reformation, namely *Sola Scriptura*.

⁴ Mark Thompson, “Sola Scriptura,” in *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 153.

The conflict between Rome and Luther's tenacity with Sacred Scripture escalated to a breaking point. On January 3, 1521, Luther was excommunicated by Pope Leo X in a formal papal decree. Luther was later summoned to Worms for an Imperial Diet⁵, where he would be charged with heresy. Luther responded that he would gladly recant of any error that could be shown to him from the Scriptures. It was then made clear to Luther that the tradition of the church and its councils could not be questioned in such a manner and that he must give a clear answer to the charges at hand. Would Luther recant or not? This was his reply:

Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.⁶

Sola Scriptura “is the corner-stone of universal Protestantism; and on it Protestantism stands, or else it falls.”

B. B. Warfield, *Works*, 9:602.

⁵ “A formal deliberative assembly of princes” — Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003).

⁶ Martin Luther, *Works*, 32:112-113.