

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

TRADITION AND AUTHORITY

The real issue behind the Reformation is much larger than the thoughts of men; it most fundamentally has to do with the authority of thoughts. The Reformation came against the backdrop of the Renaissance. The Renaissance celebrated man; the Reformation celebrated God. The Renaissance was essentially man-centered (though a bit different than today's self-engrossment); the Reformation was essentially God-centered. The Renaissance elevated human reason; the Reformation elevated divine revelation. For the Renaissance, authority was found in man-based constructs; for the Reformation, ultimate authority was found in Scripture alone.

The foundational collision was between authorities—God's and man's—divine revelation on one side and human reason and tradition on the other. In fact, Martin Luther's first official debate with Rome ended up being a debate over authority. Later Luther would recount the whole drama of the Reformation as being the result of the Word of God and nothing of his own doing. He said energetically, "I did nothing. The Word of God did it all!" He also said, "Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? The more we reject it, the more we become satisfied with men's books and human teachers."¹

SOLA SCRIPTURA

The first and formal principle of the Reformation is captured in the Latin slogan *Sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone." This was the Reformation's nucleus. Whatever theology the Reformation fought to recover, all would be based upon the sacred Scriptures. Apart from a return to the Word of God, there would be no true Reformation. It was not an enlightenment of human ideas, nor a revolution of human authority. It was distinctively a spiritual revival borne out of a rediscovery of divine revelation.

The Reformation did not fight for the rights of institutions or individuals, rather it fought for the right of God to be heard. Why is the Reformation such a pivotal point in the history of Christianity? Because it was a theological revolution concerned first with the antecedent of theology itself—namely sacred Scripture. From whence comes doctrine? Christianity points to the Bible.

¹ *Luther's Works*, 32:11.

TRADITION AND AUTHORITY

He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic.

These were the words of the Roman Catholic theologian and Master of the Sacred Palace, Sylvester Prierias, in response to Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses.

The Scriptures were not necessarily hidden during the Dark Ages, Rome simply insisted that the clergy maintain exclusive control of them. The Scriptures, so they said, were too mysterious and difficult for the commoner to understand much less use authoritatively. The result was that the authority of the Scriptures was mediated through the authority of the church.

By *Sola Scriptura*, the reformers were declaring that Scripture alone is our ultimate authority. According to this principle, the authority of the church and its traditions are necessarily subservient to the Scripture. Rome taught that church tradition was equal to Scripture. The reformers insisted, on the testimony of sacred Scripture itself, that Scripture is over the church and its traditions. Indeed, they maintained that Christ ruled His church through His written Word. The scarlet thread woven throughout the tapestry of the Reformation was Scripture's final authority. This principle is illustrated by the fact that virtually every major reformer is portrayed on canvas or by statue as pointing to sacred Scripture.

Rome responded to the Reformation's appeal to Scripture by insisting that the Scripture is simply a written record of tradition. The effect is that the Scripture is reduced to the notion of tradition and tradition is elevated to a position of authority. The problem with this response is that the Scriptures themselves disagree. The distinct issue is that God's written Word is inspired—literally God-breathed: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). The Scriptures declare, "first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20–21). The word "prophecy" means to speak on behalf of God and the meaning behind "interpretation" is to explain. So, no word of Scripture comes from the writer's own explanation, but rather God carries them along to produce precisely what He wills them to write. For this reason, the Scriptures contain the very Word of God, which was preached by the apostles, "And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Jesus calls that which is truly the spoken "word of God," the Scripture: "the word of God came—

and Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). John Calvin insisted, “Scripture has its authority from God, not from the church.”²

Rome insists that “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other ... [as] two distinct modes of transmission.”³ The official teaching of the Church then goes on to say,

As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence (§82).

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God (§97).

The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him (§100).

We believe all that which is contained in the word of God, written or handed down, and which the Church proposes for belief as divinely revealed (§182).

The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful—who confirms his brethren in the faith—he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. ... The infallibility promised to the Church is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium, above all in an Ecumenical Council. When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine for belief as being divinely revealed, and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions must be adhered to with the obedience of faith. This infallibility extends as far as the deposit of divine Revelation itself (§891).

Martin Luther insisted:

Since the fathers have often erred, as you yourself confess, who will make us certain as to wherein they have not erred, assuming their reputation is sufficient and should not be weighed and judged according to the divine Scriptures? ... What if they erred in their interpretation, as well as in their life and writings? In that way you make gods of all that is human in us, and of men themselves; and the word of men you make equal to the Word of God. ... The saints could err in their writings and sin in their lives, but the Scriptures cannot err.⁴

Commenting on 1 Timothy 3:15 Calvin says, “The difference between us and the papists is that they believe that the church cannot be the pillar of the truth unless she presides over the Word of God. We, on the other hand, assert that it is because she reverently subjects herself to the Word of God that the truth is preserved by her, and passed on to others by her hands.” William Tyndale said,

² *Institutes*, 1.7.1.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), §80.

⁴ *LW*, 36:136.

So now thou seest that in the kingdom of Christ [Scripture is the chiefest of the apostles], and in his church or congregation, and in his councils, the ruler is the scripture, approved through the miracles of the Holy Ghost, and men be servants only; and Christ is the head, and we all brethren. And when we call men our heads [we give the ministers reverence, not for themselves, but because of the word that they minister], that we do not because they be shorn or shaven, or because of their names, parson, vicar, bishop, pope; but only because of the word which they preach. If they err from the word, then may whomsoever God moveth his heart, play Paul, and correct him (cf. Galatians 2:11). If he will not obey the scripture, then have his brethren authority by the scripture to put him down, and to send him out of Christ's church among the heretics, which prefer their false doctrine above the true word of Christ.⁵

Scripture plainly states that God alone is infallible (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18; Romans 11:29) and God the Holy Spirit is the authoritative teacher of the Church (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 John 2:27). In addition to this, the Holy Spirit uses the Scripture to interpret Scripture, illuminating its meaning to the mind of man (Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 2:12-16) when rightly handled in the original, literary sense (2 Peter 3:14-16). No one has the right to go beyond what is written in Scripture (1 Corinthians 4:6). The Scripture is the Church's final rule of faith, while tradition is the word of man:

"In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, 'Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.'" (Mark 7:7-13).

Before the New Testament was fully received, the church was instructed by the apostles to "stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). So, tradition played an important role in preserving the apostolic Word. Once their writings were received, the church was to steward them as the oracles of God. The Scriptures possessed supreme authority in the church and tradition was her servant for preserving the rule of faith accordingly. Scripture was the master, tradition the servant.

Over the centuries, the voice of the servant became louder and more authoritative. Eventually, the church allowed tradition to eclipse Scripture.

Even in apostolic times, the Scriptures of the apostles were misunderstood, misapplied, and twisted. Peter, speaking about Paul's inspired letters, says, "There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16). Implicit in this statement is the caution against private individual authority of interpretation. The Scriptures were given by the apostles to the church, who was to then steward them with the utmost care, *including*

⁵ *The Works of William Tyndale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), 1:251.

their meaning. After all, the church is “a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). Indeed, the responsibility of interpretation belongs to the church, with men appointed by God and affirmed by the congregation as overseers, who are “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). Overseers “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). They are guardians of the truth (1 Timothy 6:20). They are to “follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13), and so “teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). In fact, they are the ones responsible to expose whatever “is contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:10). The right handling of the Scriptures is not left up to private interpretations and personal intuitions. The charge for the guardians of the Scriptures is captured in Paul’s exhortation to Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). Any handling of the Word of God that is not in accord with the apostolic rule of faith and practice, diligently applying hermeneutical principles to the meaning of a given text, is not approved by God to handle the Scripture.

The following table outlines the various positions on the relationship between the Scripture, Church, and tradition.

Tradition 0 Individual <i>over</i> Church	Here is an error more common in our day, though it was claimed by some Anabaptists. This view runs the dangerous risk of private interpretation and willfully neglects the value of church history. This is what the Reformers would call <i>nuda scriptura</i> (“Scripture stripped”), or <i>sola experiential</i> (“experience alone”), opposing either idea as shameful.
Tradition 1 Scripture <i>over</i> Tradition	This is the position of the Reformation. In this view, tradition is not altogether disregarded, but rather it is tested against and guided by Scripture. In this position alone does Christ rule His Church through His Word.
Tradition 2 Tradition <i>and</i> Scripture	This is the official position of the Roman Catholic Church.
Tradition 3 Church <i>and</i> Tradition	This is on occasion the practical position of the Roman Catholic Church when they insist on doctrines such as: (a) Scripture proceeds from the Church; (b) Papal infallibility; (c) All authority rests in the “magisterium of the moment.” These claims go beyond treating tradition and Scripture as equals and plainly rejects the authority of Scripture for the sake of a naked assertion of authority (as Luther says).

WHAT CAME FIRST, THE SCRIPTURE OR THE CHURCH?

Some in Rome claimed that the Church was over Scripture because the Church gave us the Scripture. In other words, the Scripture derives from the Church and therefore the Church holds authority over it.

Inherent in the very idea of *Sola Scriptura* is the Holy Spirit and His work both to humble a man to see that he is blind and to give him sight through the written Word. Christ's church was born by the power of the Holy Spirit through the preached Word of the crucified and risen Christ. That Word was entrusted to the apostles, who attested to its truth by authenticating signs and holy lives. The apostles nourished the infant Church with this Word and finally gave it to her in writing—we call it the New Testament.

It is important to remember that true Christians have never been without the Scriptures. From the very time of the apostles and down throughout the ages, God's children have had His voice in writing. Our conviction, and the cry of the Reformation, is that Scripture gave birth to the Church and not the other way around. So, in the words of Martin Luther, "Scripture is the womb from which arises divine truth and the church."⁶ John Calvin plainly argued that Scripture has its authority from God and not from the church:

Before I go any farther, it is worth-while to say something about the authority of Scripture, not only to prepare our hearts to reverence it, but to banish all doubt. When that which is set forth is acknowledged to be the Word of God, there is no one so deplorably insolent—unless devoid also both of common sense and of humanity itself—as to dare impugn the credibility of Him who speaks. Now daily oracles are not sent from heaven, for it pleased the Lord to hallow his truth to everlasting remembrance in the Scriptures alone [cf. John 5:39]. Hence the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard. This matter is very well worth treating more fully and weighing more carefully. But my readers will pardon me if I regard more what the plan of the present work demands than what the greatness of this matter requires.

But a most pernicious error widely prevails that Scripture has only so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church. As if the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended upon the decision of men! For they mock the Holy Spirit when they ask: Who can convince us that these writings came from God? Who can assure us that Scripture has come down whole and intact even to our very day? Who can persuade us to receive one book in reverence but to exclude another, unless the church prescribe a sure rule for all these matters? What reverence is due Scripture and what books ought to be reckoned within its canon depend, they say, upon the determination of the church. Thus these sacrilegious men, wishing to impose an unbridled tyranny under the cover of the church, do not care with what absurdities they ensnare themselves and others, provided they can force this one idea upon the simple-minded: that the church has authority in all things. Yet, if this is so, what will happen to miserable consciences seeking firm assurance of eternal life if all promises of it consist in and depend solely upon the judgment of men? Will they cease to

⁶ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 10: First Lectures on the Psalms I: Psalms 1-75*, vol. 10 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 397.

vacillate and tremble when they receive such an answer? Again, to what mockeries of the impious is our faith subjected, into what suspicion has it fallen among all men, if we believe that it has a precarious authority dependent solely upon the good pleasure of men!

The church is itself grounded upon Scripture

But such wranglers are neatly refuted by just one word of the apostle. He testifies that the church is “built upon the foundation of the prophets and apostles” [Eph. 2:20]. If the teaching of the prophets and apostles is the foundation, this must have had authority before the church began to exist. Groundless, too, is their subtle objection that, although the church took its beginning here, the writings to be attributed to the prophets and apostles nevertheless remain in doubt until decided by the church. For if the Christian church was from the beginning founded upon the writings of the prophets and the preaching of the apostles, wherever this doctrine is found, the acceptance of it—without which the church itself would never have existed—must certainly have preceded the church. It is utterly vain, then, to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that its certainty depends upon churchly assent. Thus, while the church receives and gives its seal of approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial. But because the church recognizes Scripture to be the truth of its own God, as a pious duty it unhesitatingly venerates Scripture. As to their question—How can we be assured that this has sprung from God unless we have recourse to the decree of the church?—it is as if someone asked: Whence will we learn to distinguish light from darkness, white from black, sweet from bitter? Indeed, Scripture exhibits fully as clear evidence of its own truth as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.⁷

THE CANON

As far as questions concerning the selection of books included in the New Testament (the canon of Scripture), The French Confession of Faith (1559) addressed that issue directly. Article II states,

As such this God reveals himself to men; firstly, in his works, in their creation, as well as in their preservation and control. Secondly, and more clearly, in his Word, which was in the beginning revealed through oracles, and which was afterward committed to writing in the books which we call the Holy Scriptures.⁸

Article III opens with the words, “These Holy Scriptures are comprised in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, as follows,” and then proceeds to name each of the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament.

The next two articles concisely articulate in confessional format the doctrine of Sola Scriptura.

ARTICLE IV

We know these books to be canonical, and the sure rule of our faith, not so much by the common accord and consent of the Church, as by the testimony and inward illumination of

⁷ *Institutes*, 1.7.1-2.

⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 360.

the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we can not found any articles of faith.

ARTICLE V

We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from men. And inasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them. And therefore we confess the three creeds, to wit: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian, because they are in accordance with the Word of God.⁹

Bruce Metzger, New Testament manuscript scholar, notes, “Despite the very human factors (the *confusio hominum*) in the production, preservation, and collection of the books of the NT, the whole process can also be rightly characterized as the result of divine overruling in the *providential Dei*.”¹⁰ Robert Reymond helpfully adds,

the Christian must accept by faith that the church, under the providential guidance of God’s Spirit, got the number and the ‘list’ right since God did not provide the church with a specific list of New Testament books. ... God’s Spirit providentially led his church—imperceptively yet inexorably ... to adopt the twenty-seven documents that the Godhead had determined would serve as the foundation of the church’s doctrinal teaching and thus bear infallible witness throughout the Christian era to the great objective central events of redemptive history, and that this ‘apostolic tradition’ *authenticated and established itself*.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 362.

¹⁰ Metzger, 285.

¹¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 67.