

The Reformations and Sacred Scripture

Perhaps there is no more fundamental ground upon which the Reformation(s) is based. It was at the core of the philosophy and understanding of Wyclif and Hus, Erasmus and Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, and all the other reformers, mainline and radical alike. Its battle cry was “*sola scriptura*” - Scripture alone. The initial framing of the discussion is necessarily based on the authority of the biblical writings.

The reformers' dispute with Rome was not over the inspiration or inerrancy of Scripture. All the parties essentially agreed on those principles. The reformers saw the problem as that over the course of many centuries, the Catholic Church had gradually adopted a view of the relation between the church, Scripture, and tradition that effectively placed final authority somewhere other than God. Tradition was conceived of as a second source of revelation, and the pope and Roman magisterium were viewed as the final authority in matters of faith and practice. In other words, the Catholic magisterium reserved the final word

The Reformers viewed their positions as wanting to call the church back to a view of the relation between Scripture and tradition that they found in the early church and that was itself taught in the Bible. The Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, rightly understood (at least in the beginning) is a doctrine of the relation between Scripture and tradition. It affirms that Scripture is to be understood as the sole source of divine revelation, the only inspired, infallible, final, and authoritative norm of faith and practice. This is because Scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Note: there is a common misunderstanding of *sola Scriptura* that views the Bible not only as the sole final authority, but as the sole authority altogether. In other words, the church, the ecumenical creeds, the confessions of faith, are largely dismissed even as secondary authorities. That was not the position of the Reformers of the 16th century, who looked not only to the Bible but to those creeds, and the writings of the early Church patriarchs. Remember that the German renaissance was not a recovery of Greco-Roman roots, but the roots of Christianity. Their look to those sources was an implicit recognition that the medieval Church of Rome had become ungrounded from those roots and it was their intention to reground Catholicism in those roots.

The Authority of Scripture

Before the Reformation: the basic understanding of Scripture and Tradition

- all authority can be traced back to Christ’s authorization of the apostles as his infallible witnesses. This infallible apostolic witness was partially deposited in the Bible, thereby making it the authoritative Word of God. Nevertheless, they argued, the apostles did not write down all of what they had been taught, reminded of by the Holy Spirit, and what was inspired by the Holy Spirit after Pentecost.
- What they had not written down in the form of the New Testament was deposited in the institutional Church as an oral tradition containing doctrines and practices that (a) gave context and proper understanding to what is found in the Bible, and in minority of cases, doctrines and practices not found in the Bible, but nevertheless apostolic and authoritative. In 20th century Catholic understanding this would refer to large “T” traditions. Such distinctions were not always clear in 16th century understanding.
- Finally, since the bishops of the Church occupied the offices of the apostles, it was possible under special circumstances (such as an official Church council) for them to exercise the same authority

as the apostles and actually teach infallibly. (*Note: papal infallibility was not part 16th century Catholic doctrine; it was a strongly conciliar church*)

Simply put, for the Reformers, *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone, is inerrant (infallible) and absolutely authoritative. The doctrine of the supremacy of scriptural authority is the formal principle of the Reformation, because that doctrine is the foundation upon which everything else is built. The doctrine of the supreme authority of the Bible was understood to mean that there are no secondary authorities in life, such as parents, governors, and church leaders. But the Bible and the Bible alone (*sola scriptura*) is the final and ultimate authority for our lives and the canon by which all secondary authorities are to operate.

This then leads to three other intertwined topics

- The Canon of Scripture
- The Authoritative Interpreter of Scripture
- Inerrancy of Scripture

The Canon of Scripture

Without recounting the history of what books were inspired (that is, with in the Canon) and accepted by the early church, a divergence from the Canon began with what is sometimes referred to in the Reform tradition as “Luther’s Canon,” attributed to Martin Luther, which has influenced Reformers since the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. While the Lutheran Confessions specifically did not define a biblical canon, “Luther’s Canon” is widely regarded as the canon of the Lutheran Church. It differs from the long-held Roman Catholic canon in that it rejects the books referred to as “deuterocanonical” or Apocryphal books and questions the four New Testament books, called “Luther's Antilegomena” (books that were spoken against or disputed: Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation).

One of the mainstays of the Protestant Reformation(s) was intense scrutiny of the biblical canon and its contents. Martin Luther did not broach the issue in his 95 Theses, but it became clear that the exact contents of the biblical canon would need to be addressed. Luther increasingly claimed that Christian doctrine should rest on biblical authority, a proposition made somewhat difficult if there is disagreement on which books can confer “biblical authority.”

There was debate among church patriarchs and leaders since the earliest times of Christianity. The answer to the question, “How many gospels are there?” is different from “How many gospels are considered part of the Canon of Scripture?” The answer to the latter is four: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The answer to the former is 54. The same crowded field holds true for Acts, Epistles, and Apocalyptic literature. Along the way “the church” compiled the Canon of Sacred Scripture. One of the arguments of the reformers is that it was never a decision of an ecumenical council before the time of the reformation and was thus still an open question. It is true that no ecumenical council addressed the question, but it was not considered an open question within the Western Church as evidenced the decisions and recommendations of the following synods and councils - especially those at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th centuries as “field of scripture became quite crowded.”

- Synod of Laodicea (end of IV cent.),
- Synod of Rome (382)
- Synod of Hippo (393)
- III Synod of Carthage (397)
- Pronouncement of Pope Innocent I (405);
- Council of Florence (1438)

There were at times scholarly debates and discussions about the Canon, but the church operated for 1600 years on the Canon held by the Catholic Church at the beginning of the Reformation(s). It is often noted that St. Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin (*Vulgate*) excluded the deuterocanonical books, true. Here are the books/parts he excluded: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, and 1–2 Maccabees. There are also two books with deuterocanonical portions: Daniel and Esther (the portions written only in Greek).

In Luther's *On Translating the Bible*, he notes that one reason for not including the Deuterocanonical texts is that they were not part of the Jewish scrolls (one assumes he refers to the Masoretic text) - and he was correct.

Historians and scholars will continue to debate the topic of what is the proper canon of Sacred Scripture, but at its core, the underlying question is "who has the authority to decide the list of canonical books of Scripture?). Clearly the Catholic Church claims that authority for itself. The Reformers did not agree and essentially were arguing out of a different authority - ones in which they did not agree among themselves.

The Authoritative Interpreter of Scripture

The four senses of Scripture is a four-level method of interpreting the Bible. This method originated in Judaism and was taken up in Christianity by the Church Fathers. In Judaism the four meanings of the biblical texts are literal, allusive, allegorical, and mystical. In Christianity, the four senses are literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical. For example, when Scripture speaks about Jerusalem it was understood as talking about the city in Israel (literal), the Church (allegorical), the soul (tropological), and heaven (anagogical). In Luther's understanding the shortcomings of this approach, which was too often dependent upon guesswork and the whims of the interpreter. He wrote, "It was very difficult for me to break away from my habitual zeal for allegory. And yet I was aware that allegories were empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures. It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine."

Luther identified that the Scriptures had only one sense, the literal (historical) sense. This did not mean that he was a complete literalist. For example, he stated that figures of speech are meant to be taken figuratively. However, when the Scriptures speak plainly, they should be taken literally according to the normal use of language. The implication of this approach is that the Bible is clear in its meaning and can be understood by ordinary people (the principle of perspicuity).

It is from this came the fundamental principle: the Bible is the only authoritative interpreter of Scripture. Luther wrote: "Scripture interprets Scripture." The primary tool was that Old Testament people and institutions were to be understood as types or patterns that foreshadowed and proclaimed the Christ, who would surpass them and fulfill them. For example, in his Preface to the Psalter, Luther wrote, "The true, the only sense of the Psalms is the Christ-sense."

The Principles of Scriptural Understanding for Life in the Church

"Principles" is perhaps not the correct word, but it will suffice. Eventually all the reformers had to move from the theological and scriptural debates to the life of the church and service to the people. Without tracing the development, there are perhaps two easily understood modalities:

- If it is prescribed by Scripture then do it. If Scripture is silent on the matter, then if it seems useful and holy, it is permissible to do. (German and Swiss Reformers)
- If it is prescribed by Scripture, then do it. But otherwise it is forbidden. (The later and more radical reformers)

The Perspicuity of Scripture

“Perspicuity” means the clarity of something. In the arena of Scripture, the Reformers took it to mean, In that the central salvific message of the Bible is clear and understandable and that the Bible itself can be properly interpreted in a normal, literal sense by anyone. While its initial point of view was that the Reformers did not need the Magisterium of the Catholic Church to interpret Scripture, its natural evolution during the reform was that the new waves of reformers did not need the first wave to tell them the meaning of Scripture. This led to its natural end-point that each person in the pew was free to interpret Scripture differently and thus free to form their own denomination of Christianity.

A century later, the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith (1.7) explains what Anglicans believe about the perspicuity of Scripture: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all. Yet, those things that are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or another, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”

While not often talked about, the claim of some degree of perspicuity of Scripture is perhaps the most fundamental cause of Reformation division. Zwingli and Luther possessed the same Scriptures and yet could not agree on matters such as the Eucharist and its celebration. The Anabaptists could not agree on the nature of Baptism. Later generations did not agree on the necessity of baptism.

“Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch...who had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home. Seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit said to Philip, “Go and join up with that chariot.” Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” (Acts 8:27-31)

The dynamic then returns to the topic of what constitutes the Canon, what is the role of Tradition, who is the authoritative interpreter, and a number of other issues that are part of *sola Scriptura*.

A Short Summary

By its very nature a “short summary” will be a gloss, lose nuance, and perhaps not be helpful. Nonetheless... How does this all play out?

- All the denominations held the authority of Scripture as primary (and as nuanced)
- In 16th Century Catholicism, the ecclesiastical authorities defined the Canon and gave meaning and interpretation of Scripture grounded in 1600 years of reflection. It was reasoned that Scripture and the Church could not be opposed to one another.
- For the Lutherans and the Swiss Reformers, it was not the Church that determined the meaning of the Bible, but it was the Bible that assessed the faithfulness of the Church. A rigorous study of the text (with the then popular humanistic methods made it possible to grasp the exact teaching. However, preachers and teachers must have solid university training; their skills and competence in ancient languages were required, and all this was a necessary guarantee for authentic understanding, guided by the Spirit.
- The Anabaptists and later radicals reproached the Lutherans and the Reformers with giving too important a role to specialists, and with replacing “papal tyranny by that of the linguists.” They advocated a spontaneous reading, popular in style, naive and inspired, since only the Holy Spirit can reveal the meaning of the Bible to the heart and mind of the believer.

What was the Catholic Counter-Reformation Response?

In a way, there was no response if measured by engagement. At this point in time it has been 29 years since Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses. Germany, large parts of Switzerland, England, and the Low Countries are all solidly in the Reformed Camp - while Catholic France is in the midst of religious warfare. The Catholic response was a formal assertion of the position and teaching of the Church for a millennia before the Reformation - as seen in the decree on Scripture:

Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures (Council of Trent, Session IV, 1546)

Scripture is the “source at once of all saving truth and rules of conduct”

“these truths and rules are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions ... have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand.”

“the traditions, whether they relate to faith or to morals, as having been dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church in unbroken succession.”

After listing the Canon of Sacred Scripture: “If anyone does not accept as sacred and canonical the aforesaid books in their entirety and with all their parts, as they have been accustomed to be read in the Catholic Church and as they are contained in the old Latin Vulgate Edition, and knowingly and deliberately rejects the aforesaid traditions, let him be anathema”

The list of the “aforesaid traditions” include:

- Synod of Laodicea (end of IV cent.),
- Synod of Rome (382)
- Synod of Hippo (393)
- III Synod of Carthage (397)
- Pronouncement of Pope Innocent I (405);
- Council of Florence (1438)

And in addressing the increasing variations of interpretations: “Furthermore, to check unbridled spirits, it decrees that no one relying on his own judgment shall, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, distorting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions, presume to interpret them contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation, has held and holds, or even contrary to the unanimous teaching of the Fathers, even though such interpretations should never at any time be published.”

The Counter-Reformation wrap-up:

The Bible is the final and ultimate authority for our lives and the canon by which all secondary authorities are to operate - but not the Bible alone. The final and ultimate authority is shaped by the Sacred Tradition that has been handed on since the time of the Apostles and through the successors of the Apostles.

Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” He replied, “How can I, unless someone instructs me?” (Acts 8:30-31)