

Authority and The Gospel

The year 1517 was pivotal in the history of denominations. On October 31 of that year, Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic professor at the University of Wittenberg, Germany, posted ninety-five theses (grievances) about which he invited debate. The occasioning event for Luther's action was the visit of an indulgence¹ salesman, Johann Tetzel, to a town near Wittenberg. Luther was angered by what he saw as an extreme abuse of spiritual authority in Tetzel's trade. However, it would soon become clear that the underlying issues that gave rise to Tetzel's abuse were deep and far-reaching. The indulgence system was part and parcel of a system of religion that Luther believed had exceeded its authority and created requirements for eternal life that were contrary to the biblical Gospel.

The twin issues of authority and the Gospel had caused conflict between the Roman Catholic Church and dissenters long before Luther. It is necessary to understand these conflicts in order to appreciate the issues involved in the Protestant Reformation begun by Luther. Therefore, we will begin by looking at the *root* of the division before looking at its *fruit*.

I. The Ultimate Issues – Authority and the Nature of the Gospel.

The Reformers taught that salvation is “by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone on the authority of Scripture alone.” The word “alone” in Latin is “sola.” The “solas” of the Reformation are *Sola Fide* (faith alone), *Sola Gratia* (grace alone), *Sola Christus* (Christ alone), and *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone).

As evidence that the issues that led to the Protestant Reformation were extremely significant, witness the reaction to the Reformers' teaching from the (Roman Catholic) Council of Trent (1546):

If anyone says that by faith alone the sinner is justified, so as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification...let him be anathema (Session 6, Canon 9).

If anyone says that the righteousness received is not preserved and also increased before God by good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained, but not a cause of its increase, let him be anathema (Session 6, Canon 24).

If any one saith, that the sacraments of the New Law are not necessary unto salvation, but superfluous; and that, without them, or without the desire thereof, men obtain of God, through faith alone, the grace of justification; - though all (the sacraments) are not necessary for every individual: let him be anathema. (Session 7, Canon 4)

¹ “An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven...an indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints...the ‘treasury of the church’ is [of] infinite value, [and] can never be exhausted...This treasury includes [in addition to the infinite merit of Christ], the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary...In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints...Through indulgences the faithful can obtain the remission of temporal punishment resulting from sin for themselves and also for the souls in Purgatory.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994), Articles 1471, 1478, 1476, 1477, 1498.

If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace, whereby we are justified is only the favor of God: let him be anathema (Chapter 16, Canon 11)

II. The Forerunners of the Reformation.

A. John Wycliffe: “Morning Star of the Reformation”.

John Wycliffe (ca. 1328-1384) “attacked the authority of the pope in 1379 by insisting in writing that Christ and not the pope was the head of the church. He asserted that the Bible instead of the church was the sole authority for the believer and that the church should model itself after the pattern of the New Testament. To support these beliefs, Wycliffe made the Bible available to the people in their own tongue...Wycliffe went still further by 1382 by opposing the dogma of transubstantiation. Whereas the Roman church believed that the substance or essence of the elements changed while the outward form remained the same, Wycliffe argued that the substance of the elements was indestructible and that Christ was spiritually present in the sacrament and was apprehended by faith. (Cairns, p. 252)

Despite having had five papal bulls (pronouncements) issued against him, having been tried for heresy by the Catholic Church three times, and having two popes summon him to Rome, Wycliffe died peacefully at his home on December 31, 1384. Nevertheless, in 1415, the Church ordered that his body be exhumed, his bones burned, and his ashes scattered in a nearby river. The reason for such anger was that Wycliffe’s influence was spreading. The 1415 Council of Constance that ordered the exhumation of Wycliffe’s body also issued a death sentence against a Wycliffe disciple, John Hus (see below). In addition, in 1521 Martin Luther was accused of renewing the errors of Wycliffe and Hus by making the Scriptures his final authority.² No wonder that the chronicler Fuller said of Wycliffe’s influence:

They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into the Swift, a neighboring brook running hard by. Thus the brook running hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow seas; and they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine which now is dispersed the world over. (Christian History Institute, Glimpses, Number 13)

B. John Hus: Faithful Until Death.

The reform-centered writings of John Wycliffe found their way into Bohemia (what is now Czechoslovakia) where John Hus, a preacher in the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, read and agreed with them. He stressed the role of the Bible as authority in the church, and preached against the sale of indulgences, which were being used to finance the pope’s expedition against the king of Naples. The pope excommunicated Hus and placed Prague under the interdict – roughly meaning that the entire city was excommunicated and could not receive the sacraments. Hus refused to recant his views, was condemned by the Council of Constance, and on July 6, 1415, was burned at the stake.³

² *Christian History*, Volume II, No. 2, Issue 3, p. 4.

³ *Glimpses*, Number 14.

C. The early church fathers.⁴

On the supreme authority of Scripture:

Justin Martyr (wrote after 151): “Accordingly He revealed to us all that we have perceived by His grace out of the Scriptures,...” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume I, Dialogue of Justin, Chapter 100.*

Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200): “Such, then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures...” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume I, Against Heresies, Book 1:8:1.*

Irenaeus (c. 130-c. 200): “We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume I, Against Heresies, Book 3:1:1.*

Clement of Alexandria (150 - c. 215): “Cannot we be silent where Scripture is silent, and leave all to Him who loved the Gentiles, and died for them on the cross?” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume II, Book IV, Elucidations.*

Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236) “There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source....Whatever things, then, the Holy Scriptures declare, at these let us look; and whatsoever things they teach, these let us learn;...but even as He has chosen to teach them by the Holy Scriptures, so let us discern them.” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume V, Against the Heresy of One Noetus, section 9.*

Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220): “I revere the fulness of His Scripture,...If it is nowhere written, then let it fear the woe which impends on all who add to or take away from the written word.” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume III, Against Hermogenes, Chapter XXII.*

Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220): “Up to this point there is room for controversy, until the matter is brought to the test of the Scriptures, and fails to make good its case.” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume III, Against Hermogenes, Chapter XXXIII.*

Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220): “Take away, indeed, from the heretics the wisdom which they share with the heathen, and let them support their inquiries from *the Scriptures alone* [emphasis mine]; they will then be unable to keep their ground. For that which commends men’s common sense is its very simplicity, and its participation in the same feelings, and its community of opinions; and it is deemed to be all the more trustworthy, inasmuch as its definitive statements are naked and open, and known to all.” *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume III, On the Resurrection of the Flesh, Chapter 3.*

⁴ I am indebted to Pastor David King for supplying these quotes and citations. These are contained in his book, along with William Webster, *Holy Scripture*, Volume 3 (Christian Resources, 2001).

Athanasius (297-373): “For the tokens of truth are more exact as drawn from Scripture, than from other sources;” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume IV, De Decretis or Defense of the Nicene Definition, Chapter VII.*

Athanasius (297-373): “Vainly then do they run about with the pretext that they have demanded Councils for the faith’s sake; for divine *Scripture is sufficient* [emphasis mine] above all things;” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume IV, Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia, Part I History of the Councils, Section 6.*

Athanasius (297-373): [Lists the books of the canon and says] “These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. *In these alone* [emphasis mine] is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these. For concerning these the Lord put to shame the Sadducees, and said, ‘Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures.’ And He reproved the Jews, saying, ‘Search the Scriptures, for these are they that testify of Me.’” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume IV, Letters of Athanasius, Festal Letters, Letter 29.*

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-67): “Hear, I beg you, what the Bible says of Christ, lest what it does not say be preached instead. Bend your ears to what I shall say from the Scriptures.” Lionel R. Wickham, *Hilary of Poitiers: Conflicts of Conscience and Law in the Fourth-century Church, Liber II Ad Constantium, section 10* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), p. 108.

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-67): “...it is well with you if you be satisfied with the written word.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume IX, On the Trinity, Book III, Section 23.*

Cyril of Jerusalem (318-386): “For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell thee these things, give not absolute credence, unless thou receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume VII, Catechetical Lectures, Lecture IV, section 17.*

Cyril of Jerusalem (318-386): “Let us then speak concerning the Holy Ghost nothing but what is written; and whatsoever is not written, let us not busy ourselves about it. The Holy Ghost Himself spoke the Scriptures; He has also spoken concerning Himself as much as He pleased, or as much as we could receive. Let us therefore speak those things which He has said; for whatsoever He has not said, we dare not say. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume VII, Catechetical Lectures, Lecture XVI, section 2.*

Ambrose (c. 339-97): “For how can we adopt those things which we do not find in the holy Scriptures?” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume X, On the Duties of the Clergy, Book I, Chapter 23, section 102.*

Ambrose (c. 339-97): "I do not wish that credence be given to us; let the Scripture be quoted." *Fathers of the Church, Vol. 44, Saint Ambrose: Theological and Dogmatic Works, The Sacrament of the Incarnation of Our Lord, Chapter 3* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), p. 224.

Basil of Caesarea (329-379): "We ought carefully to examine whether the doctrine offered us is conformable to Scripture, and if not, to reject it. Nothing must be added to the inspired words of God; all that is outside Scripture is not of faith, but is sin. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Prolegomena, 2. Work, 3. Ascetic (iii)*.

Jerome (347-420): Hoc quia de Scripturis non habent auctoritatem, eadem facilitate contemnitur, qua probatur. Jacques Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae, Commentariorum In Evangelium Matthaei, Liber Tertius*, 26:180 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857-87). Trans: "That which does not have authority from the Scriptures, we may as readily despise [condemn], as well approve."

Chrysostom (349-407): "But this comes to pass, when any hold fast their own prejudices contrary to what is approved by the Scriptures." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume X, Homilies on Matthew, Homily 86, Section 4*.

Augustine (354-430): "All things that are read from the Holy Scriptures in order to our instruction and salvation, it behooves us to hear with earnest heed... And yet even in regard of them (a thing which ye ought especially to observe, and to commit to your memory, because that which shall make us strong against insidious errors, God has been pleased to put in the Scriptures, against which no man dares to speak, who in any sort wishes to seem a Christian), when He had given Himself to be handled by them, that did not suffice Him, but He would also confirm by means of the Scriptures the heart of them that believe; for He looked forward to us who should be afterwards; seeing that in Him we have nothing that we can handle, but have that which we may read." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume VII, Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Homily 2, 1 John 2:12-17, section 1*.

On the clarity of Scripture:

Justin Martyr (wrote after 151): "Pay attention, therefore, to what I shall record out of the holy Scriptures, which do not need to be expounded, but only listened to." *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume I, Dialogue of Justin, Chapter LV*.

Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220): "Now the Scripture is not in danger of requiring the aid of any one's argument, lest it should seem to be self-contradictory. It has a method of its own, both when it sets forth one only God, and also when it shows that there are Two, Father and Son; and is consistent with itself." *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume III, Against Praxeas, Chapter 18*.

Athanasius (297-373): "For did they know, they would not dishonor and ridicule the Lord of glory, nor interpreting things immaterial after a material manner, pervert good words. It were sufficient indeed, on hearing only words which are the Lord's, at once to believe, since the faith of simplicity is better than an elaborate process of persuasion." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume IV, Four Discourses Against the Arians, Discourse III, Chapter XXIII, Texts Explained; Seventhly, John 14:10*.

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-67): “Now we ought to recognize first of all that God has spoken not for Himself but for us, and that He has so far tempered the language of His utterance as to enable the weakness of our nature to grasp and understand it.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume IX, On the Trinity, Book VIII, section 43.*

Basil of Caesarea (Ad 329-379): *To a widow.* “Enjoying as you do the consolation of the Holy Scriptures, you stand in need neither of my assistance nor of that of anybody else to help you to comprehend your duty. You have the all-sufficient counsel and guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead you to what is right.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series: Volume VIII, Letters, Letter 283.*

Augustine (354-430): “It is therefore very rare and very difficult to find any ambiguity in the case of proper words, as far at least as Holy Scripture is concerned, which neither the context, showing the design of the writer, nor a comparison of translations, nor a reference to the original tongue, will suffice to explain.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume II, On Christian Doctrine, Book III, Chapter 4.*

Augustine (354-430): “Call this fancy, if it is not actually the case that men all over the world have been led, and are now led, to believe in Christ by reading these books.” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume IV, Reply to Faustus the Manichaean, Book XVI, section 20.*

Augustine (354-430): “Therefore hath God lowered the Scriptures even to the capacity of babes and sucklings,…” *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series: Volume VIII, St. Augustin on the Psalms, Psalm VIII:2, section 8.*

Augustine (354-430): “Let us treat scripture like scripture, like God speaking; don’t let’s look there for man going wrong. It is not for nothing, you see, that the canon has been established for the Church. This is the function of the Holy Spirit. So if anybody reads my book, let him pass judgment on me. If I have said something reasonable, let him follow, not me, but reason itself; if I’ve proved it by the clearest divine testimony, let him not follow me, but the divine Scripture.” John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine, Newly Discovered Sermons, Part 3, Vol. 11, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., Sermon 162C.15* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997), p. 176.

IV. Scripture and Tradition.

A. Scripture on Scripture.

1. The sufficiency of Scripture.

a. The explicit statement of sufficiency.

...the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

b. The provision of Scripture through the Apostles.

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:26)

...when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. (John 16:13)

For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." (1 Timothy 5:18)

Note: This passage equates Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7 both as "Scripture". This shows that, even though the canon of Scripture had not been codified when 1 Timothy 5 was written, the writings of the apostles and their associates (such as Luke) were recognized as authoritative.

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Note again that the writings of the apostles (in this case, Paul) are recognized as "Scripture" without a formal canonization process.

2. The authority of Scripture.

Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands?" He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*" These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

They worship me in vain;

their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

And he said to them: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! (Mark 7:5-9)

B. Vatican II on Scripture and Tradition.

*...there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture...For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. **Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.** (Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Second Vatican Council, Article 9).*

V. **The Connection Between Authority and Indulgences, Purgatory, etc.**

Karl Keating is the president of Catholic Answers, a Catholic apologetics organization. He accurately summarizes the connection between authority and the contents of the Gospel:

This [discussion about purgatory] takes us, of course, to the rule of faith - is it to be found in the Bible alone or in the Bible and Tradition, as handed down by the Church?...The reader...needs to keep in mind that the controversy about purgatory is really a controversy about much more than purgatory. Purgatory has just been a convenient warring ground. The ultimate disagreement concerns the doctrine of sola scriptura. If fundamentalists understood why that doctrine will not wash - why, in fact, it is contrary to Scripture - they would have little difficulty in accepting purgatory and other Catholic beliefs, such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, which are not explicitly stated in the Bible. (Catholicism and Fundamentalism, p. 197).

Keating has written extensively in defense of Roman Catholicism and yet, concerning the Assumption of Mary (the teaching that Mary's body has been taken directly to heaven), he does not even attempt to marshal a scriptural case. He says bluntly, "no express scriptural proofs for the doctrine are available" (*Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, p. 273). After citing "negative historical proof" (i.e. no one has claimed to have found Mary's bones), he says:

*Most arguments in favor of the Assumption, as developed over centuries by the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, concern not so much scriptural references (there are few that speak even indirectly to the matter), but rather the fittingness of the privilege. The **speculative** grounds considered include Mary's freedom from sin, her Motherhood of God, her perpetual virginity, and - the key - her participation in the salvific work of Christ. It **seems** most fitting that she should attain the full fruit of the Redemption, which is the glorification of the soul and body. But there is more than just fittingness. Pius XII said the Assumption is really a consequence of the Immaculate Conception... Still, fundamentalists ask, **where is the proof from Scripture? Strictly, there is none.** It was the Catholic Church that was commissioned by Christ to teach all nations and to teach them infallibly. The mere fact that the Church teaches the doctrine of the Assumption as something definitely true is a guarantee that it is true. [emphases mine] (Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, Ignatius Press, 1988, pp. 274-275).*