

Lecture Fifteen

The Protestant Reformation and the Bible

Scope: The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century can be said to place a focus on the authority and reading of the Bible that was unprecedented in Christian history while reducing the number of ways in which the Bible was actually experienced. This lecture takes up the set of convictions concerning Scripture, held especially by Martin Luther, that distinguished the Reformation from the long period of interpretation that preceded it: the exclusive value of the literal sense, the principle of individual interpretation, the perspicuity of Scripture, the necessity of content criticism, and the authority of the individual reader. In some ways, there is a perfect fit between the theological convictions driving the Reformation—especially its notion of the priesthood of all the faithful—and the practices of individual pious reading that the printing press made possible.

Outline

- I. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century explicitly challenged medieval Catholicism on the basis of the Bible.
 - A. Prophets and Gospel alike provided fuel for the criticism of moral corruption among monks and clergy.
 - B. The sacramental system and the use of relics and indulgences were called into question because they were not in Scripture.
 - C. The entire institution of monasticism, with its vows of poverty and chastity, was regarded as an unhappy corruption of robust discipleship in the world.
 - D. The complexities of canon law and Scholastic philosophy were scorned to the degree that they replaced scriptural piety.
 - E. The Reformation did not entirely dismiss tradition, but it made the Bible the norm by which tradition is measured.
- II. The supreme place given the Bible can be assessed from various Reformation confessional statements compared to the classic Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed, which never mention Scripture at all.

- A. The *Augsburg Confession* (1530) is a moderate and conservative statement of Lutheran belief presented to Emperor Charles V by German princes and cities.
 - 1. The opening sections state the shared convictions of Christians but conclude with a discussion of faith and works (20) and the cult of the saints (21) that states the Lutheran position, claiming for it: “this teaching is grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures.”
 - 2. The closing sections (22–28) deal with “Matters in Dispute”: the elements of the Eucharist, marriage of priests, the Mass, confession, monastic vows, and the power of bishops. In each case, an argument is made against current Catholic practice on the basis of the New Testament.
- B. Early confessional statements from the Reformed tradition are even more explicit in the status assigned to the Bible.
 - 1. The *Ten Conclusions of Berne* (1528) states as its second principle: “The church of Christ makes no laws or commandments apart from the word of God,” and no human tradition is acceptable except as grounded in or prescribed by the Word of God.
 - 2. The *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566) begins, “We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both testaments to be the true word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men.” The first two sections are devoted to the authority and interpretation of the Bible, before turning to the elements of the traditional creed.
 - 3. The *Westminster Confession* (1646) devotes its first chapter to a lengthy discussion of the authority of Scripture (which depends not on humans “but wholly upon God [who is truth itself], the Author thereof”) and its interpretation: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.”
- C. Even the theologically more moderate English Reformation took its stand on the authority of Scripture.
 - 1. The *Edwardian Homilies*, composed by Thomas Cranmer (1547), include “A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture,” which declares, “there is no truth or doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting

salvation, but that is, or may be drawn out of that fountain and well of truth.”

2. The sixth of the Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) is “Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation,” which again declares that nothing should be believed except what can be based in Scripture.

III. Martin Luther’s principle of *sola fide*, *sola scriptura* found expression in convictions that were to hold together over time.

- A. The slogan *sola fide* was an appeal to a heartfelt religious response rather than a mechanistic ritual, but it made more difficult the consideration of “good deeds”; similarly, *sola scriptura* was a plea for a simpler, biblical religion, rather than the complexities and corruption of medieval Catholicism, but it caused problems of its own.
- B. Luther rejected all forms of allegory in favor of the literal sense of Scripture alone.
 1. On the positive side, this enabled a reading of the Old Testament in terms of promise.
 2. On the negative side, it left all the problems that allegory was devised to solve.
- C. To deal with the issue of inconsistencies and contradictions, Luther called for *sachkritik* (“content criticism”): A writing was the Word of God insofar as it testified to Christ.
 1. On this basis, Luther dismissed the Letter of James because it did not agree with Paul on faith and works.
 2. But content criticism directly conflicts with the notion of “Scripture alone” as adequate norm.
- D. Luther’s notion of the “priesthood of the faithful” led logically to the principle of individual interpretation of the Bible.
 1. The principle and practice were enabled by the rapid proliferation of personal Bibles made possible by printing.
 2. But individual reading of the literal sense alone leads inevitably to disunity, given the contradictions and inconsistencies in Scripture.

IV. The Protestant Reformation can be seen as a successful effort to bring the rich experience of Scripture in monasteries to ordinary people.

- A. Protestant worship takes many forms, but in all its forms, Scripture holds a privileged place.
 - 1. The pulpit rivals the altar as the focal point of the church, while the readings, sermons, and prayers all have a definite biblical composition.
 - 2. Scriptural piety and theology are expressed in the hymns that replaced Gregorian chant in liturgy, with stunning examples written by Martin Luther and Charles Wesley.
 - 3. The experience of Scripture in worship is continued through Bible study and private devotional reading.
- B. The scriptural piety generated by the Reformation had an obvious effect on such artists as Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), Matthias Grünewald (1475–1528), and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669).
- C. The music of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was deeply affected by his Lutheran piety and sometimes took its themes from Luther’s hymns or the Gospel accounts (*St. John Passion*, *St. Matthew Passion*); similarly, the great oratorios of George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) were based on the Bible.
- D. In literature, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) are unmistakably marked by the distinctive scriptural outlook of the Reformation.

Essential Reading:

D. C. Steinmetz, ed., *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century*.

Supplementary Reading:

R. A. Muller and J. L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation*.

Questions to Consider:

- 1. How does the assertion of the Bible’s supreme value both create and solve problems for its readers?
- 2. Discuss the ways in which the experience of the Bible remained the same and changed before and after the Reformation.