

THE DOCTRINE OF THE SCRIPTURE
Part II: The Medieval and Reformation Church

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I. INTRODUCTION.

The position of the Ancient Church, excepting that of the Church Fathers, toward the Scriptures is best amplified in the views of Augustine. Polman wrote (*The Word of God According to Scripture*, 40): “Together with the entire Church of his day. St. Augustine was firmly convinced that the Bible was divinely inspired, and was greatly heartened in his belief by the unanimous witness of the Church from Apostolic times onwards.” The verbs that Augustine used to denote the mechanics of inspiration were *inspirare*, *dictare*, *sugguere* and *gubernare*. Polman concluded (*The Word of God According to Scripture*, 51): “The Bible was both the exclusive work of the Holy Spirit alone and at the same time the exclusive work of biblical writers. Beyond that St. Augustine did not theorize.” Augustine clearly ascribed to verbal, plenary inspiration, but the issue was essentially that of the canon. This important point is made in contradistinction to recent assertions by evangelical scholars, such as Rogers and McKim (*The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible*) that the church taught, until the rise of Protestant scholasticism, an accommodation view of Scripture that included error in historic facts. It might be diagrammed as follows:

- N.B.** The issue of the extent, not inspiration, of the canon was a prime consideration in the Ancient Church as was the relationship of tradition to authority.

Augustine elevated the *Book of Wisdom* into the canon (*Tobias* also) and held the Septuagint text, not the Hebrew original, to be inspired. This on the criteria of “time-hallowed church usage.” Jerome rejected the O.T. apocryphal books because they were written in Greek; his understanding was that Hebrew was the language of O.T. inspiration.

As one turns to the Medieval era, the not-so Dark Ages, the unresolved extent of authority continued in the church.

II. THE DOCTRINE OF THE SCRIPTURE IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH.

A. The Scriptures to the Schoolmen.

It becomes readily evident that the canon was not finalized (the discussion was not concluded) in the Church by the Council of Carthage (397 A.D.) and Athanasius' Festal Letter (365/66 A.D.).

1. **Gregory the Great (604d)** understood the Maccabees to be apocryphal, but elevated Tobias and Wisdom by using the term "Scripture." He also ascribed fifteen epistles to Paul, not fourteen.
2. **Isadore of Seville (636d)** placed the Apocrypha into the canon while expressing doubts about Hebrews, 2 Peter, James, and John's letters.
3. **John of Damascus (754d)**, the first Christian theologian who attempted a complete reduction of theology to systematics, rejected the O.T. apocrypha, but added the Apostolic Constitutions and I and II Clement to his N.T. corpus of sources.
4. **Nicephorus of Constantinople (828d)** added Baruch to the O.T. and rejected Revelation in the N.T. He rejected the O.T. and N.T. apocryphal literature otherwise.

N.B. The canon was not fixed by an ecumenical council and, thus, not part of "Dogmatic Theology" until the sixteenth century.

5. **The Great Carolingian Revival** in the West was significant in the development of the canon as Charlemagne sought after the purity of the Scriptures. Charlemagne appealed to Pope Adrian I who supplied him with a list of sacred Scriptures and at Aux-la-Chapelle (789). He adopted the previous findings of Laodicea (363). The emperor rejected the Apocrypha of the O.T. and the Apocalypse.

N.B. A debate was waged over inerrancy in the period (the reign of Louis the Pious) between Fredegisus of Tours and Agobard of Lyon.

6. **Hugo of St. Victor (1141d)**, the mystic, stated that the O.T. Apocrypha was read in the churches, but not written into the canon.
7. **John of Salisbury (1182d)** had the same view of the O.T. Apocrypha, and ascribed fifteen epistles to Paul.

B. The Scriptures After the Schoolmen.

Reuss has argued that the church from the fourth to the fourteenth century was not settled, as in the sixteenth century, on the question of the canon (*History*, 266-67): “On this point, things were no further advanced at the end of the fourteenth century than they had been at the end of the fourth; appeal was made at one and the same time to the rules laid down at Laodicea and Carthage, which contradicted each other, and to those of Trullam [sic., Trullam Synod, 692] which assigned the same authority to them both. Exclusive use was made of the text of Jerome, who presented in a confused mass the elements of the double canon, and carefully distinguished between them in his prefaces. From the standpoint of a scriptural theology such as ours, such a state of things would have been intolerable. The reality of the fact, and the absence of all greater inconvenience which might have resulted from it, prove of themselves that the theology of the Middle Ages, or rather Christian theology at the time when official Catholicism was coming into existence, was not based on biblical teaching as such to the exclusion of all other, but on an ecclesiastical tradition sufficiently powerful in itself to have nothing to fear from the fluctuations of opinion which scarcely touched the outer fringes of the system. The Bible had its practical value; it was of use for private and common edification; in that respect it lost nothing by being enriched and extended. As to its dogmatic teaching, the elementary truths it consecrated had, from the first and quite independently, become indisputable axioms for every member of the church; and the science of the schools when it did come to discuss questions for which Holy Scripture gave no clear and direct reply, soon ceased to consult it, turning by preference to the authorities which had succeeded in deciding them, and promulgating their opinions. The discussion of the scriptural canon presented no practical interest whatever, and that explains how a question which to us seems all-important, should have remained without answer for six centuries.

But it also explains why this same question remained undecided even when the attempt was made to resolve it officially. Down to the close of the Middle Ages, the see of Rome had not delivered any categorical opinion of the canon of the Bible.”

N.B. In the Trullam Synod, which met at Constantinople in 692, Article two, refers to both synods Laodicea and Carthage on the question of the extent of authority.

1. Pope Eugenius IV at the Council of Florence (1438–45), in a hopeful attempt to bring the Eastern church back into the fold, published the first papal bull regarding the canon. Eugenius' list contained those in the Vulgate as universally inspired (Tobit and Judith are between Nehemiah and Esther; Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus between Song of Solomon and Isaiah; Baruch before Ezekiel; and Maccabees after Malachi). He obliterated Jerome's careful distinction between books to be read in the

churches (O.T. - Hebrew texts) and those to read for edification (Greek O.T. apocryphal books). Reuss wrote (*History*, 269), “There is therefore ground in saying that the Church of Rome concerned herself very little with the caprices or the theories of its great writers, and continued to walk with a firm step in a path marked out by the ancient usages of its ritual.”

N.B. This did not end the debate in the West as the Apocalypse was still questioned by a few.

The opening of the sixteenth century brought a renewal of scientific and literary life as the Renaissance burst upon the clergy of the church.

2. **Thomas de Vio (Cajetan)**, bishop of Gaeta and Luther’s opponent at Leipzig, evidenced reservations about the O.T. and N.T. apocrypha. He further doubted James, Jude and 2 and 3 John; he had no trouble with 2 Peter however.
3. **Erasmus of Rotterdam**, the prince of the Humanist scholars (1536d), questioned the Apocalypse and 2 Peter, but was willing to submit to the Church (“If however the Church were to declare the titles they bear to be as canonical as their contents, then I would condemn my doubts, for the opinion formulated by the Church has more value in my eyes than human reason, whatever they may be.”).

N.B. The Roman Church finally spoke to the issue at the **provincial synod at Paris in 1528**, called by the bishop of Sens (sometimes referred to as the Sens Synod), by denouncing as heretical and divisive anyone who refused to adhere to the Synod of Carthage (397) and Innocent III, (the latter’s list included Tobit, Judith, and the Maccabees. This declaration was provincial, not ecumenical or papal.

Of utmost importance in the mounting polarization in the church between Roman Catholics and Protestant Catholics was the four article of the council. “That to the Church it belongs to determine the authenticity of the canonical books, and to settle the sense of Holy Scripture.”

III. THE DOCTRINE OF THE SCRIPTURE IN THE REFORMATION CHURCH.

The advent of the Reformation brought a massive schism into European Christianity as Romanists and Protestants polarized into divergent groups, each claiming divine, apostolic authority. Each appealed to the error of the other and in that holocaust the question of ultimate authority was finally addressed.

A. The Scriptures and the Dogma of Rome.

1. The context for the calling of the first ecumenical council in the history of the Roman Church was the distress in the church due to the reformers. Hence, when the theologians of the Council of Trent decided to formulate

orthodox Catholic dogma in all particulars, in order that they might have a precise system to oppose the “new heresy,” they began with articles concerning their authority base.

2. The Council of Trent was convened in December 1545 and the following was decreed.
 - a) The council decreed that the tradition of the Church was of irrefragable authority in determining truth (essentially Augustine’s “time-hallowed church usage” to the neglect of intrinsic context on the witness of the Holy Spirit). Article III of the Tridentine on Faith reads, “I also admit the Holy Scriptures, according to that sense which our Holy mother Church has held and does hold, to which it belongs to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the Scriptures; neither will I ever take and interpret them otherwise than according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.”
 - b) The council then proposed that all the books as found in the Latin Vulgate to be of equal canonical and divine authority. This obliterated Jerome’s distinction of inspired books and books worthy to be read for edification. Baruch was sorely debated and was admitted because “the church sometimes uses it in her offices.”
 - c) The council then equaled the authority of tradition and the Scriptures, pronouncing anathemas for contrary opinions (The council followed Eugenius and the Council of Florence). The Vulgate became the official translation of the Church. The Council stated (Session 4): “The sacred and holy, ecumenical, and general Synod of Trent, —lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same three legates of the Apostolic See presiding therein, —keeping this always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church: which (Gospel), before promised through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature, as the fountain of all, both saving truth, and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth, and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand: (the Synod) following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New

Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as also the said traditions, as well as those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ’s own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.”

N.B. Reuss wrote (*History*, 280), “Had the Protestant Reformation not taken place, the indecision regarding such questions might have continued.”

B. The Scriptures and the Reformation Tradition.

The reformers saw themselves forced to break with the tradition of the church; and in order to justify their opposition and maintain the struggle with confidence and success, they were compelled to face the issue of the canon. The reformers rejected church usage as the primary test of authenticity and based canonicity upon the internal witness of the Holy Spirit (“the fundamental thesis of Protestantism”).

1. **Martin Luther** spoke of the Bible as the Word of God. Heick wrote of him (*A History of Christian Thought*. I, 347), “Scripture is the Word of God because it is the original witness to the redemptive work of God and because it participates in the nature of that which it records.” The inspiration of the canon was unquestioned because inspiration (inerrancy) and canon were terms that were held in common. Four books troubled Luther and he placed them in a secondary position in his list of books.
 - a) Jude because it added nothing to the faith not stated elsewhere.
 - b) James because of its apparent incompatibility with Paul’s teachings in Romans.
 - c) Hebrews because it refuses repentance to sinners after baptism (chaps. vi, x, xii).
 - d) Revelation “because of the images and visions, such as are found nowhere else in the Bible, and the author adds threats while no one knows what he means,” argued Luther.
2. **John Calvin** spoke to the issue of the method of determining authority, by rejecting tradition, and arguing for the witness of the Spirit (*Institutes*. I, 7.1): “A most pernicious error has very generally prevailed—viz. that Scripture is of importance only in so far as conceded to it by the sufferage of the Church; as if the eternal and inviolable truth of God could depend on the will of men. With great insult to the Holy Spirit, it is asked, Who can assure us that the Scriptures proceeded from God; who guarantees that

they come down safe and unimpaired to our times, who persuades us that this book is to be received with reverence, and that one expunged from the list, did not the Church regulate all these things with certainty? On the determination of the Church, therefore, it is said, depend both the reverence which is due to Scripture and the books which are to be admitted into the canon. Thus profane men, seeking, under the pretext of the Church, to introduce unbridled tyranny, care not in what absurdities they entangle themselves and others, provided they extort from the simple this one acknowledgement—viz. that there is nothing which the Church cannot do. But what is to become of miserable consciences in quest of some solid assurance of eternal life, if all the promises with regard to it have no better support than man’s judgment? On being told so, will they cease to doubt and tremble? On the other hand, to what jeers of the wicked is our faith subjected—into how great suspicion is it brought with all, if believed to have only a precarious authority lent to it by the goodwill of men?”

Calvin’s ultimate basis for sustaining the authority of the Scripture as the Word from God is two-fold: the witness of the Spirit and the conscience of the godly. He wrote (*Institutes*. I, 7.5): “Let it therefore be held as fixed, that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture, carrying its own evidence along with it, deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God; but, in a way superior to human judgment, feel perfectly assured—as much so as if we beheld the divine image visibly impressed on it—that it came to us, by the instrumentality of men, from the very mouth of God. We ask not for proofs or probabilities on which to rest our judgment, but we subject our intellect and judgment to it as too transcendent for us to estimate.”

The extent of Calvin’s canon comprises our current list, the same for Luther (although he had doubts) and all the reformers.

3. **The Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century**

- a) **The First Helvetic Confession** (1536) has a brief statement that does not delineate the exact number of books in the canon. It assumed sixty-six. “The holy, divine, biblical Scripture, which is the Word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit and delivered to the world by the prophets and apostles, is the most ancient, most perfect and loftiest teaching and alone deals with everything that serves the true knowledge, love and honor of God, as well as true piety and the making of a godly, honest and blessed life.”

- b) **The Gallican Confession** (1559), Article III, lists every book in the canonical Scriptures and then states (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 illuminations of the Holy Spirit, which enables us to distinguish them from other ecclesiastical books upon which, however useful, we cannot find any articles of faith.”

Commenting on inspiration it states (Article V), “We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God and receives its authority from him alone.”

- c) **The Belgic Confession** by Guy de Bray (1561) listed the canonical books (Article IV) and then the apocryphal books arguing of the latter that the Church may read and take instruction from, so far as they agree with the canonical books; but they are far from having such power and efficacy as that we may from their testimony confirm any point of faith or of the Christian religion; much less to detract from the other sacred books.”

Inspiration was expressed in Article III: “We confess that this Word of God was not sent nor delivered by the will of man, but that holy men of God spake as they were moved by the holy ghost, as the Apostle Peter saith. And that afterwards God, from a special care which he has for us and our salvation, commanded his servants, the Prophets and Apostles, to commit his revealed Word to writing; and he himself wrote with his own finger the two tables of the law. Therefore we call such writings holy and divine Scriptures.”

- d) **The Westminster Confession (1647)** lists the Protestant canon book by book (Article II) and adds, “all which are given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life.” The ultimate criteria for the validity of the canon (Article V): “is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.” Concerning extra-canonical books Article III reads, “The books commonly called Apocrypha, not being of divine inspiration, are no part of the Canon of the Scripture; and therefore are of no authority in the Church of God, nor to be any otherwise approved, or made use of, than other human writings.”
- e) **The Thirty-Nine Articles (1571)** represents the definitive statement of the religion of the church of England. The O.T. books are listed (Article VI) followed by certain apocryphal books with

this preface, “And other Books of the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners, but yet it doth not apply them to establish any doctrine.”

4. **William Ames** was an English theologian, a student of William Perkins at Cambridge, wrote an excellent Systematic Theology in the early seventeenth century (d. 1633). He is an heir of the Reformation in regard to the integrity and extent of the Scripture. A very excellent statement on inspiration of the sixty-six books is given by Ames as follows (*Marrow of Sacred Theology*, 186):
 3. “They received from God the command to write. This was partly outward and general, as when they were commanded to teach, and sometimes special, as when specific writings was called for (Deut. 31:19; Rev. 1:19) “Write the song.” “Write the things which you have seen.” It came partly by the inward impulse of the Spirit. 2 Peter 1:21, “For prophecy came not in former times by the will of man, but holy men spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit;” 2 Tim. 3:16, “All Scripture is inspired by God.”
 4. “They also wrote by the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit so that the men themselves were at that point, so to speak, instruments of the Spirit. 2 Tim. 3:16; Jer. 1:9, “Behold, I put my words in your mouth;” Acts 28:25, “Well indeed spoke the Holy Spirit by Isaiah the prophet.”
 5. “But divine inspiration was present among those writers in different ways. Some things were altogether unknown to the writer in advance, as appears in the history of past creation, or in the foretelling of things to come. But some things were previously known to the writer, as appears in the history of Christ written by the apostles. Some things were known by a natural knowledge and some by a supernatural. In those things that were hidden and unknown, divine inspiration was at work by itself. In those things which were known, or where the knowledge was obtained by ordinary means, there was added the writers’ devout zeal so that (God assisting them) they might not err in writing.
 6. “In all those things made known by supernatural inspiration, whether matters of right or fact, God inspired not only the subjects to be written about but dictated and suggested the very words in which they should be set forth. But this was done with a subtle tempering so that every writer might use the manner of speaking which most suited his person and condition.

7. “Therefore, Scripture is often attributed to the Holy Spirit as the author with no mention of the writers. Heb. 10:15, “Whereof the Holy Spirit also is a witness to us.”

His basis for rejecting the Apocryphal is clear (*Marrow of Sacred Theology*, 189).

36. “The books commonly called among us apocryphal do not belong to the divine canon nor were they rightly joined by men in earlier times to the canonical books as a secondary canon. First, some of them contain manifest fables told and affirmed as true histories, as those of Tobias, Judith, Susannah, Bel and the Dragon, and the like. Second, they often contradict the sacred Scriptures and themselves. Third, they were not written in Hebrew or delivered to or received by the Jewish church to which God committed all his oracles before the coming of Christ, Rom. 9:4. Fourth, they were not approved by Christ, not being among those books which he designated when he commanded his own to search the Scriptures. Fifth, they were never received by either the apostles or by the early Christian church as part of the divine canon.”

5. **James Arminius (1610d)**, though often an opponent of Calvin and Luther over the interpretation of the Bible, was in agreement with them over the nature of the Bible. He assumed the fixity of the canon and described its authority as follows (*Disputation. I, I*), “The authority of Scripture is nothing else but the worthiness according to which it merits (1) CREDENCE, as being true in words and true in significations, whether it simply declares anything; or also promises and threatens; and (2) as a superior, it merits OBEDIENCE through the credence given to it, when it either commands or prohibits anything.”

He argued that the validity of the Scriptures ultimately rested on the character of God (*Disputation. I, II*): “The authority of any word or writing whatsoever depends upon its author, as the word ‘authority’ indicates; and it is just as great as the veracity [truth] and the power, that is, the authority (truth) of the author. But God is of infallible veracity, and is neither capable of deceiving nor of being deceived; and of irrefragable power, that is, supreme over the creatures. If, therefore, He is the Author of Scripture, its authority is totally dependent on Him alone. (i) Totally, because He is the all-sufficient Author, all-true and all-powerful. (ii) On Him alone, because He has no associate either in the truth of what he says, or in the power of his right. For all veracity and power in the creature proceed from him; and into his veracity and power are resolved all faith

and obedience, as into the First Cause and the Ultimate [*terminum*] Boundary. (Gal. iii, 8, 9; 1 John v, 9; Rom. iii, 4; Titus i, 2; Psalm 1, 1-23; Gal. i, 1, 7, 8; John v, 34, 36; Rom. xi, 34-46; xiii, 1.)”

His confidence in the Scriptures is clearly manifested when he wrote (*Disputation. ii, xxiv*): “We conclude, then, that all things which have been, are now, or to the final consummation will be necessary for the salvation of the church, have been of old perfectly inspired, declared and written; and that no other revelation or tradition, than those which have been inspired, declared and contained in the Scriptures, is necessary to the salvation of the church (2 Tim. 3:16; Matt. 4:3, 4; 22:29; 9 Acts 18:28). Indeed we assert, that whatsoever relates to the doctrine of truth is so perfectly comprehended in the Scriptures, that all those things which are brought either directly or indirectly against this truth are capable of being refuted, in a manner the clearest and most satisfactory, from the Scriptures themselves alone. This asseveration we take with such solemnity and yet assurance of mind, that as soon as anything has been proved not to be contained in the Scriptures, from this very circumstance we infer that things not to be necessary to salvation ; and whenever it is evident, that any sentiment cannot be refuted by the Scriptures, we judge from this that it is not heretical. When, therefore, the Papists sedulously attempt to destroy the whole perfection of Scripture by (*exempla*) specimens of articles, which they call necessary, but which are not proved from Scripture, and by those which they consider heretical but which are not confuted from Scripture the sole result of their endeavors is, that we cannot conclude with any certainty the former to be necessary and the latter heretical.

IV. CONCLUSION.

The purpose of this lesson has been to trace the development of the doctrine of the Scriptures through the Middle Ages and into the Reformation. The question of the extent of the canon (sources of authority) remained unresolved until the Reformation when Protestant pressure forced the Roman Church to solidify and dogmatize its authority base. The Roman Church determined its canon on the basis of “usage” which the reformers rejected for the witness of the Holy Spirit to consistent truth. Thus, the reformers rejected spurious tradition at odds with the testimony of the Prophets, Christ, and the Apostles. The Protestant Reformation agreed in establishing the canon (standard) at sixty-six books. This has not been aggressively questioned in the Protestant Church since the sixteenth century. While the standard was fixed, the quality of that standard was challenged by the “Enlightened” German theological world only to spill over to America in the nineteenth century. That is the story of the next lesson!