

The Perspicuity of Scripture, Justification by Faith Alone, and the Role of the Church in Reading Scripture with the Protestant Reformers

G. Sujin Pak, assistant professor of the history of Christianity, Duke Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina

As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the publication of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg, it is natural to reflect on the many important legacies of the Protestant Reformations of the sixteenth century. Among several legacies that could be identified, three rise to prominence in my own reflections: the Protestant Reformers' assertions of the prime authority of Scripture, justification by faith alone, and the perspicuity of Scripture. Certainly, these three assertions have been the subject of numerous scholarly publications. Yet such studies frequently overlook the deep and intimate connection between these crucial teachings of the Protestant Reformers. They function as natural corollaries to one another and together embody the theological core of the Reformers' message, particularly that of Martin Luther and John Calvin. Indeed, what perspicuity of Scripture has come to mean in contemporary usage differs in several important respects from the Protestant Reformers' meaning and purposes when they steadfastly insisted on Scripture's clarity. It is a helpful exercise, then, to revisit what Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin meant by the perspicuity of Scripture, how it functioned, and the goals it served. First, the Reformers' affirmation of the perspicuity of Scripture was a crucial tenet of their assertion of Scripture's prime authority and their challenge to the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Furthermore, the Reformers grounded Scripture's authority and clarity on the biblical principle of justification by faith alone as the very perspicuous heart of Scripture and as a principle

that reinforces Scripture as self-authenticating and self-interpreting. We might more accurately understand the Protestant Reformers' teachings on the perspicuity of Scripture if we understand its deep foundations in the principle of justification by faith alone. Yet even as the Protestant Reformers displaced church authority in favor of the prime authority of Scripture, this did not mean that they stripped the church of all authority concerning matters of Scripture's interpretation. Rather they strongly affirmed the authority of the church insofar as it acts under the guiding rule of Scripture.

Assertions of the Authority, Accessibility, and Perspicuity of Scripture

In many respects, Luther's reformation began with a profound challenge to papal authority specifically and church authority more generally. As early as the Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, Luther argued that authority belongs to God alone and that the gospel revealed in Scripture is the true "treasure" of the church and the primary means through which God reveals and communicates God's will.¹ By the 1520s, Luther launched a full-scale attack on the authority of the Roman Catholic Church that included not only assertions of the prime authority of Scripture but also the insistence on Scripture's accessibility to all baptized believers. Indeed, in his 1520 appeal to the German nobility, Luther intentionally addressed his exhortations to the laity because he was becoming increasingly convinced of the current ecclesial establishment's intransigence.² In this appeal, Luther attacked the claim that only the pope and those of the "spiritual estate" (i.e., the clergy) may interpret Scripture authoritatively for the church. Rather, all Christians by virtue of their baptism are consecrated priests, counted among the spiritual estate, and called to interpret and proclaim God's Word.³ Moreover, the teachings of any Christian, including the pope, are subject to the measure of the true and

1. See especially theses 6, 25–28, 53–55, and 62 in *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86) and ed. Helmut T. Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–86) [hereafter "LW"], 31:26, 27–28, 30; *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 72 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau: 1883–2007) [hereafter "WA"], 1:233, 234, 236.

2. Luther wrote, "I am carrying out our intention to put together a few points on the matter of the reform of the Christian estate to be laid before the Christian nobility of the German nation, since the clergy, to whom this task more properly belongs, have grown quite indifferent" (LW 44:123; WA 6:404).

3. Luther, LW 44:126, 127; WA 6:406, 407.

primary authority of Scripture.⁴

Similarly, in *The Misuse of the Mass* (1521), Luther insisted that a “real Christian knows that the church never ordains or institutes anything apart from the Word of God.”⁵ The true church—the true sheep of God—hear God’s voice and follow God’s Word (John 10:27). Thus, Luther continued, “It is not God’s Word just because the church speaks it; rather, the church comes into being because God’s Word is spoken. The church does not constitute the Word, but it is constituted by the Word.”⁶ In this way, Luther argued that God’s Word is prior to the church—prior in both existence and authority. Accordingly, it cannot be the case that the authority of Scripture relies in any way on the consent and authority of the church. Rather, the church is brought into being by the Word of God; the church is built on the very foundation of Scripture as God’s ordained and sufficient revelation. Indeed, Luther defined the church precisely by its relationship to this authoritative Word of God: the church is the community that hears and obeys the Word of God revealed in Scripture.⁷

Around this same time, Huldrych Zwingli made similar assertions concerning the prime authority of Scripture and its accessibility to all believers. Zwingli also defined the church as the community that hears and obeys the Word of God, writing, “Therefore, those who hear are God’s sheep, are the church of God...for they follow the Word only of God.”⁸ Furthermore, Zwingli rejected the Roman Catholic Church’s claim that only ordained priests could interpret Scripture authoritatively for the church. Rather, pointing to John 6:45 (“they shall all be taught by God”), he affirmed that any Christian through the gift of God’s Spirit may be taught directly by God and so rightly interpret Scripture.⁹ Alongside

4. Luther wrote, “When the pope acts contrary to the Scriptures, it is our duty to stand by the Scriptures, to reprove him and to constrain him, according to the word of Christ in Matthew 18” (LW 44:136; WA 6:413).

5. LW 36:144; WA 8:491.

6. LW 36:144–45; WA 8:491.

7. LW 36:144–45, 40:11, 41:150; WA 8:491–92, 12:173, 50:629–30.

8. Note that a definition of the church as the community who hears and obeys the Word of God assumes that Scripture is *prior* to the existence of the church. Zwingli, *Corpus Reformatorum* (Halle, Braunschweig, and Berlin, 1834–) [hereafter “CR”], 90:259; “Reply to Emser,” in *Commentary on True and False Religion*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1981), 373.

9. Zwingli, CR 88:321, 366; *Archeteles*, in *Ulrich Zwingli: Early Writings*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1987), 283–84; and *Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger: Selected Translations*, Library of

their arguments that any baptized Christian has what he or she needs to read Scripture rightly (i.e., faith and the Holy Spirit), Luther and Zwingli declared the principle of Scripture's perspicuity. For example, in his 1520 response to Pope Leo X's papal bull censoring his writings, Luther wrote that Scripture is "in and of itself the most certain, the most accessible, the most clear thing of all, interpreting itself, approving and judging and illuminating all things."¹⁰ Zwingli followed his own assertions of the call on all Christians to interpret Scripture with the sermon *Of the Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, in which he argued that the gifts of faith and the Holy Spirit not only make Scripture accessible to all, but are the source of its clarity.¹¹

John Calvin soundly affirmed Scripture's prime authority and carefully clarified what he believed to be the proper relationship between Scripture and the church. Calvin wrote, "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 on human decisions!"¹² Here Calvin cuts right to the core of the problem from the perspective of the Protestant Reformers: to subsume Scripture under the authority of the church is equivalent to placing it under a form of human authority rather than retaining its rightful place under divine authority alone. Similarly, Luther had already insisted that there is an irreconcilable conflict between human doctrines and Scripture.¹³ Like Luther and Zwingli, Calvin coupled the assertion of Scripture's prime authority with an affirmation of its perspicuity, writing, "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."¹⁴ Yet here he pointed to the essential work of the Holy Spirit in

Christian Classics, vol. 24, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 79. Cf. CR 90:262; "Reply to Emser," 375–77.

10. Luther, WA 7:97, as translated by Mark D. Thompson, "Biblical Interpretation in the Works of Martin Luther," in *History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Medieval through the Reformation Periods*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 303.

11. Zwingli, CR 88:342–84; *Clarity and Certainty*, 59–94.

12. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.1.

13. In his 1522 treatise *Avoiding the Doctrines of Men*, Luther wrote, "We hope that everyone will agree with the decision that the doctrines of men must be forsaken and the Scriptures retained, for they will neither desire nor be able to keep both, since the two cannot be reconciled and are by nature necessarily opposed to one another, like fire and water, like heaven and earth" (LW 35:153; WA 10/2:91).

14. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.2.

establishing the authority of Scripture as a necessary prerequisite to its clarity. The Holy Spirit promotes Scripture's clarity, but only after it *first* establishes Scripture's authority and certainty in the hearts of believers.¹⁵ Calvin explained that only "those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught" can affirm Scripture's authority, recognize that Scripture is self-authenticating, and thereby be certain of its truth.¹⁶ Hence he asserted, "Therefore, illumined by [the Spirit's] power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of [humans]."¹⁷ Calvin's crucial point is that only God can authenticate God's self; only the Spirit of God can authenticate God's Word revealed in Scripture. No human testimonies or proofs from reason will ever be sufficient to establish Scripture's authority and certainty, even as the revelation of Scripture came—as Calvin so paradoxically states it—"from the very mouth of God through the ministry of [humans]."¹⁸

Scripture's Authority and Perspicuity and the Mutual Bond of Word and Spirit

In the first instance, the Protestant Reformers' insistence that Scripture is self-authenticating and self-interpreting served to establish that Scripture is in no way reliant on human authority, judgment, or consent—including that of the church. Furthermore, dismantling the authority of the Roman Catholic Church entailed dismantling what the Protestant Reformers viewed as its "tyranny" over Scripture. The Reformers aimed to "free" Scripture from all forms of human tyranny, first among them the Roman Church's claim that biblical interpretation belongs in the hands of the clergy and the pope above all. Since Scripture belongs rightly to

15. This was basically what Luther and Zwingli affirmed as well when they asserted that the gifts of faith and the Holy Spirit are necessary prior gifts before Scripture can be accessible and clear.

16. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.5. Calvin affirmed earlier, "For God alone is a fit witness of God's self in God's Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in human hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what has been divinely commanded" (*Institutes* 1.7.4, adjusted for inclusive language).

17. *Ibid.* 1.7.5.

18. *Ibid.* 1.8.13. Thus Calvin declared, "But those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known" (1.8.13).

the domain of God—the domain of the Spirit—and is not at all under human dominion, it followed that any Christian with the gift of God’s Spirit can interpret Scripture faithfully for the church and that, by virtue of the aid of the Holy Spirit, Scripture is clear. Yet, by affirming Scripture’s clarity and accessibility, the Protestant Reformers in no way intended to subject Scripture to personal whims of interpretation. Nonetheless, one of the possible outcomes of their assertions was that any Christian might claim to have the Holy Spirit and champion their own individual interpretations of Scripture, thus leading to the possibility of Scripture’s being subjected to a plethora of individual, personal impulses.

Indeed, radical groups arising in the mid- to late-1520s advanced claims of the Holy Spirit’s guiding work in directions contrary to Luther and Zwingli’s original intentions. Certain leaders among these emerging Spiritualist and Anabaptist groups upheld the necessity of new, ongoing revelation through the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit beyond, and even apart from, Scripture. For example, near Wittenberg the radical leader Thomas Müntzer argued for the necessity of new, ongoing revelation from the Holy Spirit in order to judge and discern right teaching. He contrasted the “living Word of God” with the “dead letter” of Scripture. He contended that not only is the aid of the Holy Spirit necessary to clarify Scripture, but new revelation from the Spirit is necessary for Scripture to continue to be an ongoing, *living* Word.¹⁹ Similarly, some Anabaptist groups developed in the region of Zurich that claimed direct, new revelation from the Holy Spirit, such as the Anabaptists of Zollikon and Gallen.²⁰ Consequently, such assertions undermined the Protestant Reformers’ insistence on Scripture as a sufficient and final revelation—an insistence central to establishing Scripture’s authority.

Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin responded to the challenges of the radicals in two key ways. First, they insisted that since the Spirit is the breath of God’s Word and the very author of Scripture, it cannot speak contrary

19. “Müntzer’s Letter to Melanchthon, 29 March 1522,” in *The Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, ed. and trans. Peter Matheson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 44, 46; “The Prague Manifesto” in *ibid.*, 359; and “A Protestation Concerning the Situation in Bohemia,” in *ibid.*, 365. Gregory Kane describes Müntzer as insisting that “the Bible, although the Word of God, was a Word of the past that needed actualization through a new Word of the Spirit,” “The Exercise of Prophecy in the Early Reformation,” *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 33 (2013): 30.

20. For more information on these groups, see C. Arnold Snyder, “The Birth and Evolution of Anabaptism (1520–1530),” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80, no. 4 (2006): 501–645, particularly 540–41 and 591–94.

to God's Word revealed in Scripture. Indeed, one discerns the true Spirit of God from false spirits precisely by the Spirit's consensus with God's Word revealed in Scripture—a consensus that is a consensus with the Spirit's own self as the author of Scripture. Second, the Reformers more strongly asserted and clarified the proper guiding role of the church in the interpretation of Scripture, to which the last section of this article turns. Thus Luther aimed the following words in the 1537 Smalcald Articles against these radicals: "God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through and with the external Word that comes before. Thus we shall be protected from [those] who boast that they possess the Spirit without or before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures according to their pleasure."²¹ Luther thereby insisted that the Spirit only rightly comes through the work of the external Word of God in Scripture; only those who adhere to Scripture rightly possess the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, Calvin maintained that the Spirit of God never utters new revelations or invents new doctrines; rather, one discerns the true Spirit of God precisely by its consensus with Scripture.²² Thus Calvin warned, "But lest under the Spirit's sign the spirit of Satan should creep in, the Spirit would have us recognize him in his own image that is stamped upon the Scriptures. The Spirit is the author of the Scriptures and cannot vary or differ from himself. Hence, the Spirit must remain just as he once revealed himself there."²³ Accordingly, Calvin pointed to the mutual bond between the Holy Spirit and Scripture: "the Holy Spirit so inheres in his truth that he expresses in Scripture that only when proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth his power...for by a kind of mutual bond, the Lord joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit."²⁴ One might rightly point out, however, that such an insistence on the inseparable and mutual bond of the Holy Spirit and God's Word does not sufficiently address the potential problem of the plethora of biblical interpretations stemming from those who appeal to the guidance of the Holy Spirit to undergird their own individual readings of Scripture. Here, elucidating the ways in which the Reformers grounded Scripture's authority and clarity on the biblical principle of justification by faith alone proves instructive.

21. *The Book of Concord*, ed. T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), 312.

22. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.9.1–2.

23. *Ibid.* 1.9.2.

24. *Ibid.* 1.9.3.

Justification by Faith Alone and Scripture's Authority

One of the crucial aims of the Protestant Reformers was to establish the prime authority of Scripture and to remove it from subjection to any form of human authority. In this light, affirming Scripture's clarity and accessibility could never entail a larger array of persons claiming to have the singular, authoritative reading of Scripture by virtue of the Holy Spirit. Such a result would actually multiply the initial problem. Rather than just the ordained leadership of the church making this claim, any Christian could make it—in effect placing Scripture under innumerable human-based authorities! That this may very well be the assumption in many Protestant churches today makes it all the more important to understand what the Protestant Reformers advocated and how they thought one should practice faithful interpretation of Scripture. Their point was not that any person, even any Christian, has what they need to interpret Scripture in and of their own ability. More specifically, the Reformers' point was not that by the gift of faith and the Holy Spirit one's *own abilities* were purified and empowered. Rather, their very point was that Scripture is clear and accessible *not* by virtue of any human efforts or abilities, even sanctified abilities, but *solely* by virtue of the gift of faith through the work of the Spirit—precisely the gift of faith given when one is justified by faith alone. Just as the Protestant Reformers affirmed that *only God* can initiate faith and do the work of salvation in a person, so also they insisted that *only God* is the actor in any true interpretation of Scripture. Just as the human must despair of making any contribution to her salvation, so Luther insisted that to interpret Scripture rightly one must despair completely of one's own intelligence and ability.²⁵ This was what the Protestant Reformers meant when they asserted that Scripture is self-interpreting. This claim did not simply affirm that passages in Scripture clarify and interpret other passages of Scripture; it was equally a profound assertion of the Triune God as the only true interpreter of Scripture.

25. Luther wrote, “[T]he Holy Scriptures constitute a book that turns the wisdom of all other books into foolishness....Therefore, you should straightway despair of your reason and understanding” (LW 34:285; WA 50:659). Likewise, he wrote to George Spalatin, “No one can enter into Scripture by study or innate intelligence...you must completely despair of your own diligence and intelligence and rely solely on the infusion of the Spirit” (LW 48:53–54; *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–85) [hereafter “WABR”], 1:133–34.

For instance, Luther appealed to David's example concerning how to approach Scripture faithfully:

Thus you see how David keeps praying in Psalm 119, "Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me," and many more words like these. Although he knew well and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher, for such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason.²⁶

For Luther, keeping central an understanding of self as sinner and God as the sole actor in the work of justification means one must constantly resist resorting to one's own abilities—especially to reason—lest one go back to being one's own teacher or looking to other human teachers, particularly in the activity of interpreting Scripture.²⁷ When one keeps front and center the principle of justification by God's gift of faith alone—thereby having a right understanding of self as sinner entirely reliant on the gracious action of God—then one rightly perceives that God is the true actor in and through Scripture; the Holy Spirit is the only true interpreter. Thus Luther proclaimed, "The Holy Spirit must be the Teacher and Guide. Since [the Spirit] reaches [humans] only through faith in Christ, whereas the works-righteous reject faith and retain the Law, it is impossible for them" to "kiss the Son"—that is, to

26. Luther, LW 34:286; WA 50:659. Modern definitions of Scripture's perspicuity that emphasize a role of human reason depart from the early Protestant Reformers' views. Keith Stanglin insightfully depicts this transition in modernity toward optimistic views of the role of reason in Scripture's perspicuity in "The Rise and Fall of Biblical Perspicuity: Remonstrants and the Transition toward Modern Exegesis," *Church History* 83, no. 1 (2014): 38–59.

27. Against Emser, Luther insisted that Scripture stands alone and that God should be the sole interpreter of Scripture; hence, one should not rely too heavily on the church fathers' interpretations: "One should not use the fathers' teachings for anything more than to get into Scripture as they did, and then one should remain with Scripture alone. But Emser thinks that they should have a special function alongside the Scriptures, as if Scripture were not enough for teaching us" (LW 39:167; WA 7:641). Luther wrote just prior, "God's sayings stand alone and need no human interpretation" (LW 39:165; WA 7:639).

worship God rightly or, for that matter, to interpret Scripture rightly.²⁸ Luther's insistence on God's Spirit as the true interpreter of Scripture, and his refutation of reliance on reason and human exposition, included a rejection of his own attempts at biblical interpretation as any kind of sufficient, authoritative guide. In his 1520 response to Pope Leo X's papal bull, he wrote, "I do not desire to be honored as one more learned than all, but Scripture alone to rule: to be interpreted neither by my spirit nor any human spirit, but understood through itself and by its own Spirit."²⁹ He echoed this at the conclusion of his 1522 sermon on Matthew 2:1–2: "Would to God that my exposition and that of all doctors might perish. . . . [L]et my exposition and that of all doctors be no more than a scaffold, an aid for the construction of the true building, so that we may ourselves grasp and taste the pure and simple Word of God and abide by it."³⁰

Moreover, Luther's immediate response to the unrest in Wittenberg in the late 1520s, caused by radical teachings, was to return to Wittenberg and proclaim a series of eight sermons that specifically emphasized God's Word as a living and active Word that is the only real agent of any true reform. In the second of these 1522 sermons, Luther preached,

God's Word should be allowed to work alone without our work or interference. Why? Because it is not in my power or hand to fashion [human] hearts as the potter molds the clay and fashion them at my pleasure. I can get no farther than their ears; their hearts I cannot reach. And since I cannot pour faith into their hearts, I cannot, nor should I, force anyone to have faith. That is the work of God alone, who causes faith to live in the heart. Therefore, we should give free course to the Word and not add our works to it. We have the *jus verbi* [the right to speak] but not the *executio* [power to accomplish]. We should preach the Word, but the results must be left solely to God's good pleasure.³¹

Luther thereby connected the principle of justification by faith alone directly with the prime authority of Scripture and the assertion of God's

28. Luther, LW 12:87; WA 40/2:304.

29. Luther, WA 7:98–99, as translated by Mark D. Thompson, "Biblical Interpretation in the Works of Martin Luther," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Medieval through the Reformation Periods*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 304.

30. LW 52:286; WA 10/2:728.

31. LW 51:76; WA 10/3:15.

Word as the only actor that can accomplish the true applications and fruits of God's Word. He clarified that though any Christian has the right to *proclaim* God's Word (i.e., the priesthood of all believers), God alone has the power to *accomplish* what God intends in and through its proclamation. These fruits belong solely and ultimately in the hands of God. This, in essence, disciplines all human attempts to interpret Scripture, so that one must wait and see whether and how God acts in and through a proposed interpretation to accomplish *God's* purposes.

Similarly, Calvin asserted that the effectiveness of God's Word in Scripture relies completely and solely on the work of the Holy Spirit. He maintained, "The Word of God is like the sun shining upon all those to whom it is proclaimed, but with no effect among the blind. Now, all of us are blind by nature in this respect. Accordingly, it cannot penetrate into our minds unless the Spirit, as the inner teacher, through his illumination makes entry for it."³² Calvin thereby pointed both to the Holy Spirit as the true interpreter of Scripture and to the necessity of the Holy Spirit for Scripture's meaning and intent to take effect and/or have authority in the lives and hearts of believers.³³ Furthermore, he argued that "faith is the principle work of the Holy Spirit," for "the Spirit is the inner teacher by whose effort the promise of salvation penetrates into our minds, a promise that would otherwise only strike the air and beat upon our ears."³⁴ Consequently, Calvin also connected the principle of justification by faith alone with the recognition of Scripture's prime authority and self-interpreting character, in which the Holy Spirit is the only true agent who can effect God's purposes.

Justification by Faith Alone and Scripture's Perspicuity

For Luther and Calvin, the principle of justification by faith alone undergirds the authority and effectiveness of Scripture in the believer's life. Given that the human makes no contribution to his or her salvation, given that salvation is dependent on faith and the Holy Spirit as one hundred percent God's gift, given that the affirmation of Scripture's authority and Scripture's fruit-bearing effects require this gift of faith and the

32. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.2.34.

33. Likewise Calvin wrote, "So also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts unless it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit" (*Institutes* 1.7.4); and "the sun rises upon the earth when God's Word shines upon men; but they do not have its benefit until he who is called the 'Father of lights' either gives eyes or opens them. For where the Spirit does not cast his light, all is darkness" (*Institutes* 2.2.21).

34. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.1.4

Holy Spirit, and given that the Holy Spirit is the only true interpreter of Scripture, it follows that the principle of justification by faith alone also undergirds and informs the Protestant Reformers' assertions of Scripture's perspicuity. Scripture is clear solely because of *God's* actions—because of God's gift of faith and the Holy Spirit to the believer. Scripture is clear only through the effective working of justification by faith alone in the life of the believer.³⁵ The Protestant Reformers established the prime authority of Scripture above and beyond any form of human authority while maintaining the rightful place of the priesthood of all believers (i.e., Scripture's accessibility and clarity). Moreover, they delineated the proper bounds of human activity, for God alone performs and effects the clarity and fruits of God's Word. It should come as no surprise, then, that the assertions of Scripture's authority and perspicuity figured prominently in Luther's argument with Erasmus over whether the human will is in bondage or free.

For Luther, the key issues of justification by faith alone and Scripture's authority and perspicuity were at the heart of his debate with Erasmus over the human will. Erasmus began his 1524 treatise on the freedom of the will with a statement of his dislike of assertions (in direct reproof of Luther's earlier *Assertio* that denounced Pope Leo X's papal bull). He contended that some parts of Scripture are obscure, among which he reckoned the matter of the freedom or bondage of the human will. Thus, Luther's assertion of the total bondage of the human will is a dangerous assertion on an ambiguous subject that opens a "window to impiety."³⁶ Rather, it is truer to say that Scripture is obscure on this matter, for arguments from Scripture can be garnered to assert both a free and a bound will.³⁷ Consequently, Erasmus insisted that the authority of Scripture is not in dispute here, but "our battle is about the meaning of Scripture."³⁸

35. Luther wrote, "No person perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he has the Spirit of God. All have a darkened heart, so that even if they can recite everything in Scripture and know how to quote it, yet they apprehend and truly understand nothing of it" (LW 33:28; WA 18:609). Similarly, according to Calvin, "Flesh is not capable of such lofty wisdom as to conceive God and what is God's unless it be illumined by the Spirit of God" (*Institutes* 2.2.19); "Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing" (*Institutes* 3.2.33). Cf. *Institutes* 2.2.21, quoted in n. 33 above.

36. Erasmus, *On the Freedom of the Will*, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, ed. and trans. E. Gordon Rupp, Library of Christian Classics 17 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 37–41, 41.

37. Erasmus then recounted these opposing evidences from Scripture, yet with clear preference for the view of the freedom of the will. *Freedom of the Will*, 47–74.

38. *Ibid.*, 43.

Moreover, he defined freedom of the will in this way: “By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a human may apply one’s self to the things that lead to eternal salvation or turn away from them.”³⁹ Ultimately, Erasmus maintained it is better to proffer (yet not “assert”) that with the aid of God’s grace—with the gift of faith and the aid of charity—the human will is healed enough to make a positive contribution to salvation; for Scripture supports this view, and this view better accounts for human culpability concerning sin.⁴⁰

Noteworthy for our purposes here are the clear connections Erasmus drew between Scripture’s obscurity, arguments for human free will (notably based on reason), and the definition of the human free will as one that still needs the aid of God’s grace, but an aid that thereby empowers the human will to choose the good. Indeed, in Luther’s view, each of these claims constituted a direct attack on the authority of Scripture, the perspicuous content of Scripture, and the doctrine of justification by faith alone as well as the exact connections between these. Luther conceded that “there are many texts in the Scriptures that are obscure,” but he immediately insisted that these texts in “no way hinder a knowledge of the subject matter of Scripture.”⁴¹ Scripture’s subject matter is clear and accessible, so much so that “when the thing signified is in the light, it does not matter if this or that sign is in darkness, since many other signs of the same thing are meanwhile in the light.”⁴² Luther identified the incarnation, Trinity, salvation in Christ, and Christ’s eternal kingdom as the clear subject matter of Scripture.⁴³

In his 1538 exposition of Psalm 51, Luther expounded on Scripture’s clear soteriological subject matter: “The proper subject of theology is the human guilty of sin and condemned and God the Justifier and Savior of the human sinner. . . . All Scripture points to this. . . . the God who justifies,

39. *Ibid.*, 47.

40. *Ibid.*, 49–50. Erasmus wrote, “And in these things, it is probable that there was a will in some way ready for the good but useless for eternal salvation without the addition of grace by faith. . . . Faith, therefore, cures reason, which has been wounded by sin, and charity bears onward the weak will,” pp. 49, 50. He continued, “If the power to distinguish good and evil and the will of God has been hidden from humanity, it could not be imputed to them if they made the wrong choice. If the will had not been free, sin could not have been imputed,” p. 50.

41. Luther, LW 33:25; WA 18:606.

42. LW 33:26; WA 18:606.

43. Luther identified the clear subject matter as “that Christ the Son of God has been made man, that God is three and one, that Christ suffered for us and is to reign eternally” (LW 33:26; WA 18:606).

repairs and makes alive and the human who fell from righteousness and life into sin and eternal death. Whoever follows this aim in reading the Holy Scriptures will read holy things fruitfully.”⁴⁴ For Luther, all Scripture not only points to Christ, preaches Christ, and “drives Christ home,” it precisely confesses the necessity of Christ’s saving work in the principle of justification by faith alone.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is a nonnegotiable component of the perspicuous content of Scripture. Thus, it cannot be the case that Scripture is obscure on the matter of the human will; its meaning is not up for negotiation (as if it were a matter of free will!). Rather, the clear, authoritative teaching of Scripture is that the human will is in bondage to sin and that salvation comes only through Christ’s work of justification by faith alone—a work that is one hundred percent God’s action and gift. Consequently, Scripture can never be obscure on this matter, for it is the whole purpose of God’s provision of Scripture to reveal the true path of salvation: justification by faith alone. Nor can it be the case that the gift of faith empowers the human will and abilities; rather, Luther insisted on the constant return to the recognition of one’s absolute dependence on God’s gracious, saving action in Christ through the Holy Spirit’s work of faith in the believer. Lastly, for Luther there is a direct connection between the insistence on God as the sole actor in justification and the insistence on God as the sole true interpreter of God’s Word; together they substantiate

44. Luther, LW 12:311; WA 40/2:328. Several scholars point to the Protestant Reformers’ principle of the “evangelical clarity” of Scripture, arguing that the “defense of Scripture’s clarity was solely concerned with the accessibility of the evangelical message” and that the Protestant Reformers did not espouse an idea of Scripture’s “plenary perspicuity.” See James Patrick Callahan, “*Claritas Scripturae*: The Role of Perspicuity in Protestant Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Studies* 39, no. 3 (1996): 359, 360; David J. Lose, “Luther and the Evangelical Clarity of Scripture and Sermon,” *Lutheran Forum* 31, no. 4 (1997): 33; and Paul Brewster, “The Perspicuity of Scripture,” *Faith and Mission* 22, no. 2 (2005): 27. Yet, these accounts tend to speak broadly of an “evangelical clarity” and stop short of its specific content in the doctrine of justification by faith alone, though James A. Nestingen very briefly points to this connection in “Biblical Clarity and Ambiguity in *The Bondage of the Will*,” *Logia* 22, no. 1 (2013): 32. Erling T. Teigen and David Lose correctly argue that, contrary to Erasmus’s dislike of assertions, Luther insists on the confessional, proclamatory, and propositional character of Scripture. See Teigen, “The Clarity of Scripture and Hermeneutical Principles in the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 42, nos. 2–3 (1982): 147–66. Lose, “Luther,” 32, writes, “Scripture proclaims, declares, pronounces and confesses the faith, it does not explain it.” Hence, Luther’s affirmation of Scripture’s clarity points to the clarity of its *confession* and is not necessarily an explanatory clarity.

45. LW10:7, 11:517, 33:26, 35:122, 396; WA 3:13, 4:379–80, 18:606, 10/1–1:15; WADB 7:384.

the prime, self-authenticating authority of Scripture.

Calvin also strongly maintained that the key subject matter of Scripture is clear. He affirmed the perspicuity of the trinitarian, christological, and soteriological scope and content of Scripture. This affirmation of the christological center of Scripture came alongside the affirmation of the clear saving purposes of Scripture. In his “Preface to Olivétan’s New Testament,” Calvin wrote, “This is what we should in short seek in the whole of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by him from God the Father.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Calvin’s main purpose in writing the *Institutes* was to highlight the key subject matter of Scripture to serve as a guide in reading it, precisely by arranging the *Institutes* in accordance with the scriptural loci outlined in Romans: creation, the fall, Trinity, incarnation, law and gospel, justification by faith alone, election, the church, and the sacraments. Though Calvin and Luther differed in some important details, they both affirmed the perspicuous content of Scripture as teaching about human sinfulness, the inability of humans to save themselves by their own efforts, and their need for Christ through the Spirit’s work of faith.⁴⁷ Hence Calvin advanced the teaching of the bound will as a central element of Scripture’s clarity, but he added that it can be comprehended only with the aid of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸

To put it another way, in the view of the Reformers, the primary goal of Scripture is to reveal Christ. Luther and Calvin affirmed that all of Scripture points to Christ.⁴⁹ This goal of revealing Christ connects

46. Calvin, “Preface to Olivétan’s New Testament,” in *Calvin: Commentaries*, trans. and ed. Joseph Haroutunian, Library of Christian Classics 23 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958), 70.

47. For example, Luther more exactly identified the perspicuity of Scripture with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, law, and gospel. Calvin affirmed these doctrines, but expressed them under slightly different terms and emphases; he named them more in terms of God’s single covenant (dependent on grace with no role for human merit) that spans both testaments and God’s providential care of the church.

48. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.2.1–18. Calvin repeatedly accentuated the Holy Spirit’s necessary illumination to comprehend and accept the biblical teaching of the bondage of the will (*Institutes* 2.2.19–21, 25).

49. Luther, LW 10:7; 33:26; 35:122, 236, 247; WA 3:13; 18:606; 10/1:16; WADB 8:11–12, 28; Calvin, *Joannis Calvini opera selecta*, 5 vols., eds. Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel (Munich: Kaiser, 1926–1952) [hereafter “CO”], 45:486, 47:125; *Commentary on the Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1:311 (Matthew 17:3); *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 1:218 (John. 5:39); *Institutes* 1.13.7 and 4.2.4.

directly to Scripture's soteriological telos: to reveal Christ is to reveal God's ordained path of salvation (i.e., justification by faith alone). For the Protestant Reformers, the true act of reading Scripture is a moment of transformative encounter with God. Should God act to give the necessary gift of faith and the Holy Spirit, one then encounters the Triune God as the very illuminator and interpreter of God's Word. It is an encounter that calls for the confession of self as sinner and the recognition of the gracious Triune God to whom all honor is due. Thus Calvin proclaimed, "The Word of God is something alive and full of hidden power that leaves nothing in the human untouched."⁵⁰ Similarly, Luther described the encounter of the believer with Scripture in these words: "And note that the strength of Scripture is this: that it is not changed into the one who studies it, but that it transforms its lover into itself and its strengths."⁵¹ In this way, reading Scripture creates a sacred space in which the Holy Spirit illuminates the words of Scripture so that one may be transformed into greater conformity to Christ and glimpse the very heart of God.

Misunderstandings of the Protestant Reformers' Assertions of Scripture's Clarity

There are a number of common misunderstandings regarding the Protestant Reformers' assertions of Scripture's perspicuity. First, their affirmation of Scripture's clarity does not entail an affirmation that Scripture is clear for anyone and everyone. Rather, since Scripture's clarity is dependent on God's activity alone, it is clear only to those who have been given the gift of faith through the working of the Holy Spirit. Second, the affirmation of Scripture's perspicuity does not mean that *all* of Scripture is clear. Rather, the Protestant Reformers maintained that the *subject matter* of Scripture is clear: Scripture clearly reveals the Triune God, the incarnation, the path of salvation through Christ in justification by faith alone, and the necessary aid of the Holy Spirit. That is, Scripture clearly teaches about human sinfulness, the inability of humans to save themselves by their own efforts, and their need of Christ. Third, the Protestant Reformers grounded their affirmation of Scripture's perspicuity in the central biblical teaching of justification by faith alone.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the very perspicuous heart of Scripture, the very key to accessing Scripture's clear content,

50. Calvin, CO 55:50; *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 51.

51. Luther, LW 10:332; WA 3:397.

and the very principle that undergirds Scripture's prime authority. First and foremost, the doctrine of justification by faith alone undergirds the Reformers' insistence that God is the primary, even the sole, agent in the act of Scripture's true interpretation. Consequently, Scripture is its own authority, and Scripture is literally self-interpreting. It is the prime authority ordained by God and, therefore, is not subject to any form of human authority, whether in the form of the church, ecclesial hierarchy, human reason (of learned academics), *or the priesthood of all believers*. Moreover, since Scripture is not subject to *any* form of human authority, it cannot be subject to human interpretation as in itself carrying any authority. An incredibly robust pneumatology is absolutely crucial to the Protestant Reformers' affirmation of Scripture's authority and clarity. They expected an encounter with the living God in Scripture; they expected the Holy Spirit to act, to speak, to guide, and to interpret. They also expected that these operations of the Holy Spirit would be clearly recognizable to any truly faithful Christian as the very work of the Spirit and not a human work. The last thing the Reformers wanted was for Scripture to be subjected again to human forms of authority, whether in the form of papal authority or in the form of individual Christians who claimed the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁵² Yet in actual practice, discerning the true work of the Spirit from human manipulation was an immensely challenging task that ultimately required a re-articulation and repositioning of the authoritative role of the church in Scripture's interpretation.

The External Clarity of Scripture and the Role of the Church

In his response to Erasmus on the bondage of the human will, Martin Luther wrote of two kinds of clarity in Scripture: an external clarity that "pertained to the ministry of the Word" and an internal clarity that is

52. Luther pointed to the pope and the "fanatics" as equally incorrect in their approaches to Scripture. He wrote, "Nor do I approve of those who have recourse to boasting in the Spirit; for I have had this year and am still having a sharp enough fight with those fanatics who subject the Scriptures to the interpretation of their own spirit. It is on this account also that I have hitherto attacked the pope, in whose kingdom nothing is more commonly stated or more generally accepted than the idea that the Scriptures are obscure and ambiguous, so that the spirit to interpret them must be sought from the Apostolic See of Rome. Nothing more pernicious could be said than this, for it has let ungodly men to set themselves above the Scriptures and to fabricate whatever they please" (LW 33:90; WA 18:653).

53. Luther, LW 33:28; WA 18:609. In several respects, this article thus far has addressed more the matter of Scripture's internal clarity.

“located in the understanding of the heart.”⁵³ He described this internal clarity by asserting that no person “perceives one iota of what is in the Scriptures unless he [or she] has the Spirit of God.”⁵⁴ Concerning Scripture’s external clarity, Luther added, “If, on the other hand, you speak of the external clarity, nothing at all is left obscure or ambiguous, but everything in the Scriptures has been brought out by the Word into the most definite light and published to the whole world.”⁵⁵ Such descriptions do not immediately clarify the definitions of or differences between these two kinds of clarity. Later in this treatise, however, Luther aligned them with two kinds of judgment, in which he had exactly in mind the problems of papal authority and the radicals’ “boasting of the Spirit”:

The spirits are to be tested or proved by two sorts of judgment. One is internal, whereby through the Holy Spirit... anyone who is enlightened concerning oneself and one’s own salvation judges and discerns with the greatest of certainty human dogmas and opinions. Of this it is said in 1 Corinthians 2:15: “The spiritual person judges all things but is judged by no one.” This belongs to faith and is necessary for every individual Christian. We have called it previously the internal clarity of Scripture...but this judgment helps no one else and with it we are not here concerned.... There is another—an external judgment—whereby with the greatest of certainty we judge all human spirits and dogmas, not only for ourselves but also for others and for their salvation. This judgment belongs to the public ministry of the Word and to the outward office and is chiefly the concern of leaders and preachers of the Word. We make use of it when we seek to strengthen those who are weak in faith and confute opponents. This is what we earlier called the external clarity of Holy Scripture. Thus we say that all spirits are to be tested in the presence of the church at the bar of Scripture. For it ought above all to be established among Christians that the Holy Scriptures are a spiritual light far brighter than the sun itself, especially in things that are necessary to salvation.⁵⁶

54. *Ibid.*

55. LW 33:28; WA 18:609.

56. LW 33:90–91; WA 18:653. The quote in footnote 52 appears immediately prior to this quote.

Luther went on to clarify that the internal clarity of Scripture aids the individual believer in judging right interpretation and teaching of Scripture, but it is a judgment that does not hold authority beyond the life of that individual believer. Indeed, Calvin described this as the working of the Holy Spirit to confirm the authority of Scripture and enable the acceptance of Scripture's teachings in the hearts of believers by the "seal of the inward testimony of the Spirit."⁵⁷ Thus there is a place for the working of the Holy Spirit in the individual, but this is not to lead to the individual's asserting his own biblical interpretation as the true, Spirit-inspired, authoritative interpretation. When it comes to the *public* judgment of others' teachings and interpretations of Scripture, Luther points to Scripture's external clarity, and he places this work of discernment under the leadership of the public ministerial offices of the Word. Lest one mistake this as reasserting ecclesiastical authority akin to that of the Roman Catholics of his day, he crucially added that they should be "tested in the presence of the church *at the bar of Scripture*." In this way, ultimately the authority exercised is not in the first instance the public minister's authority *per se*; rather, it is the duty of the public minister to *uphold and implement the authority of Scripture*. Here the external clarity of Scripture equates with the clear subject matter of Scripture—Trinity, incarnation, salvation in Christ (i.e., justification by faith alone), and Christ's eternal kingdom—to serve as a boundary line to judge right teaching and interpretation. Indeed, this is what the Protestant Reformers called the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith) or *regula fidei* (rule of faith). Luther specifically identified this "rule of faith" with the rule of justification by faith alone, which he believed to be the perspicuous content of Scripture.⁵⁸ Calvin followed in similar suit, asserting the *analogia fidei* as the "clear rule and test of all interpretation of Scripture" in which the criterion of this test was the recognition that "we are naked of all virtue in order to be clothed by God."⁵⁹

The Protestant Reformers sought carefully to carve out the proper function of church authority between the so-called "tyranny" of the Roman Catholics and the "sedition" of the radicals. For example, Calvin maintained that both the radicals and the Roman Catholics misconstrued

57. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.7.4–5.

58. See, for example, LW 17:114, 256; WA 31/2:350–51, 458–59.

59. Calvin, "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France," in the *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 12–13.

the proper role of the church in the proclamation and interpretation of Scripture. Many radicals, on the one hand, despised the ministerial offices and “even Scripture itself in order to attain the Spirit.”⁶⁰ On the contrary, argued Calvin, God designated human ministers as the means by which the Word of God should be proclaimed and the faithful edified.⁶¹ Hence Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli strongly affirmed the necessity of properly called, trained, and ordained public ministers. While they continued to affirm the priesthood of all believers, they clarified that this affirmation in no way disregarded the ministerial offices God ordained. Rather, “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Hence, though any Christian has the right of judging whether a public proclamation is in accordance with Scripture, this should not be a disruptive public practice but a private reproof, in accordance with Matthew 18:15 (“go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone”).⁶² On the other hand, the Protestant Reformers instructed ordained clergy not to act like tyrants but to allow room for lay voices. They charged the clergy to cultivate the necessary virtues of humility and teachableness, for “God has never so blessed his servants that they each possessed full and perfect knowledge of every part of their subject. It is clear that God’s purpose in so limiting our knowledge was first that we should be kept humble and also that we should continue to have dealings with our fellow Christians.”⁶³ Hence pastors, even as they preach and teach, continue to be lifelong learners, for it is incumbent upon them “to determine whether what they say conforms to that which God has given through the Scriptures.”⁶⁴

In essence, the Protestant Reformers aimed to retain the authority of public ministerial offices insofar as these functioned under and in

60. Calvin, CO 52:176; *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thesalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, ed. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 377.

61. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.5, 4.3.2.

62. Luther, LW 45:358–61, 363; 40:388, 390–92. Cf. Zwingli, CR 91:394–99; “The Preaching Office,” trans. Edward J. Furcha, in *Huldrych Zwingli Writings*, vol. 2, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 1984), 158–61; Bullinger, *In Priorem D. Pauli ad Corinthios Epistolam Commentarius* (Tigvri apvd Christoph froscho mense ive, 1534), 183a.

63. Calvin, *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 4.

64. Calvin, *Supplementa Calviniana*, Sermons inédits V, Sermons sur le Livre de Michée, ed. Jean Daniel Benoit (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1964), 89, as cited and translated by Ward Holder, “*Ecclesia, Legenda atque Intelligenda Scriptura: The Church as Discerning Community in Calvin’s Hermeneutic*,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 36 (2001): 283.

compliance with the prime authority of Scripture. They believed that the subject matter of Scripture was sufficiently clear to act as the authoritative guide. One may be rightfully wary of their confidence in this criterion, given that even agreement regarding the topics of Scripture's clear subject matter does not necessarily entail agreement about how to interpret or apply them. Yet this is precisely why anchoring these claims in the doctrine of justification by faith alone was so crucial and absolute for the Protestant Reformers. This principle not only established the necessity of Christ; it also aimed to call and recall the faithful Christian repeatedly to a posture of *profound humility*—the humble recognition of absolute dependence on God. It aimed further to call the Christian to a *profound life of faith*—a faith that looked for and expected *God's* action, a faith that waited to see if one's reading of Scripture truly bore the fruits of the Spirit. Perhaps we have struggled with rightly understanding and practicing the Reformers' affirmation of the perspicuity of Scripture not so much because it does not solve the problem of the actual role of human interpretation (which, admittedly, it does not) but because we (and the Protestant Reformers themselves!) too often fail to embody the necessary virtues of the profound humility and faith it demands.