



**Lecture # 16 Part 3**

# The Continuation of the Doctrine of Inspiration to the Reformation

Just as the Old Testament claim for inspiration finds support in the New Testament, so the New Testament claim for inspiration finds support in the testimony of early Christian writers, the church Fathers. Although the testimony of the Fathers is not authoritative or inspired, it does reveal the orthodox doctrine of inspiration that prevailed throughout the history of the church. Their testimony, with hardly a dissenting voice, reflects the traditional view of the origin and nature of Scripture from apostolic times to the rise of Deism and Rationalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

## THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH (FROM C. A.D. 350)

The established church period covers a much larger span of time and space, and, as a result, will necessitate an even more cursory treatment of the subject matter. This period extends to the **rise of Rationalism**, including **the medieval church**, **the Reformation church**, and **the early modern church** in its scope.

### THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH (C. 350-C. 1350)

The medieval church may be represented by several outstanding men who had widespread influence. These individuals represent large and varied segments of Christianity and their collective voices **reflect what is known as the traditional teaching on the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.**

#### *Ambrose of Milan (340–397).*

Ambrose had the distinctive honor of guiding Augustine in his early Christian experience. The Bishop of Milan also did much work with the Christian Scriptures. His *Letters* gives a clear insight into his view of the New Testament. In his letter to the Emperor Valentinian II, Ambrose cites **Matthew 22:21** by using the familiar introductory statement **“It is written” (20.19)** as he proceeds to quote loosely **John 6:15** and **2 Corinthians 12:10 (20.23)**. He also appeals to **“The Divine Scriptures” (10.7)** in his letter to the Emperor Gratian, where he presents his disputation with the Arians.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Jerome (c. 340–420).*

According to H. F. D. Sparks, **“Jerome was, next to Origen, the greatest biblical scholar of the early Church.”** Since he and his work will be discussed at length elsewhere, Jerome needs only to be mentioned in passing. His writings include many references to the “Holy Scriptures” and to their authority. **Much of his life work centered around translating the Bible and disputing with others over the canon of the Old Testament.** In addition, he assumed the inspiration, canonicity and authority of the New Testament as it has come down to the modern world.



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According to **B. F. Westcott**, The testimony of Jerome may be considered as the testimony of the Roman Church; for not only was he educated at Rome, but his labours on the text of Scripture were undertaken at the request of Damasus bishop of Rome; and later popes republished the canon which he recognised.<sup>28</sup>

In a letter to Nepotian in A.D. 394, Jerome set forth a systematic treatise on the duties of the clergy and the rule of life they ought to adopt. In it he writes, **“Read the divine scriptures constantly; never indeed, let the sacred volume out of your hand.”** In the same year he wrote to Paulinus to make diligent study of the Scriptures, and he enumerates the books of the New Testament as he writes, “I beg you, my dear brother, to live among these books, to meditate upon them, to know nothing else, to seek nothing else. Does not such a life seem to you a foretaste of heaven here on earth? Let not the simplicity of the scripture offend you; for these are due either to faults of translators or else to deliberate purpose: for in this way it is better fitted for instruction.”<sup>30</sup>

In his discussion of the difference between righteous ignorance and instructed righteousness, Jerome answers the question, “Why is the apostle Paul called a chosen vessel?” His response is, “Assuredly because he is a repertory of the Law and of the holy scriptures.”

#### *The Syrian School at Antioch*

**John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)** and **Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428)** are representative exegetes and theologians of the Syrian School at Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians ([Acts 11:26](#)).

[Acts 11:26 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>26</sup> **and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.**

During the early centuries of the Christian church, Antioch was the chief rival to Alexandria in the struggle for theological leadership in the East. As in the general Antiochene conception of redemption, Theodore and his contemporaries held that the primary author of all Scripture was the Holy Spirit. He viewed the Holy Spirit as providing the content of revelation and the prophet (in cooperation with the Holy Spirit) as giving it the appropriate expression and form. Such a notion formed the basis for their literal approach to hermeneutics.

#### *Augustine (354–430).*

Augustine, the **“Medieval Monolith,”** wholly endorsed the claims of the New Testament for its inspiration. An example of this view may be seen in his *Confessions* (8.29), where the reading of [Romans 13:13–14](#) was sufficient for him to be converted.

[Romans 13:13-14 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> **Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife**



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and jealousy.

**<sup>14</sup> But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts.**

His monumental work *The City of God* contains much Scripture, and he indicates the authority of Scripture therein in contrast to all other writings (see 11.3; 18.41). All through his letters and other treatises, Augustine asserted the truth, authority, and divine origin of Scripture. In *The City of God* he used such expressions as “**Sacred Scripture**” (9.5), “**the words of God**,” (10.1), “**Infallible Scripture**” (11.6), “**divine revelation**” (13.2), and “**Holy Scripture**” (15.8).

Elsewhere he referred to the Bible as the “oracles of God,” “God’s word,” “divine oracles,” and “divine Scripture.” With his widespread influence throughout the centuries, such a testimony stood as an outstanding witness to the high regard given to the Scriptures in the church. Speaking of the gospel writers, Augustine said,

When they write that He has taught and said, it should not be asserted that he did not write it, since the members only put down what they had come to know at the dictation [dictis] of the Head. Therefore, whatever He wanted us to read concerning His words and deeds, He commanded His disciples, His hands, to write. Hence, one cannot but receive what he reads in the Gospels, though written by the disciples, as though it were written by the very hand of the Lord Himself.

Consequently, he added, “**I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error.**”

**Gregory I (540–604).**

Gregory I, “the Great,” wrote his *Commentary on Job* in which he refers to [Hebrews 12:6](#) as “Scripture.”

**Hebrews 12:6 (NASB)**

**<sup>6</sup> “FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES,  
AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.”**

He, being the first medieval pope, set the tone for the succeeding centuries just as he epitomized the preceding ones. **Louis Gaussen** summarized the situation very well when he wrote,

... that with the single exception of Theodore of Mopsuestia, (c.A.D. 400), that philosophical divine whose numerous writings were condemned for their Nestorianism in the fifth ecumenical council, ... it has been found impossible to produce, in the long course of the *eight first centuries of Christianity*, a single doctor who has disowned the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, unless it be in the bosom of the most violent heresies that have tormented the Christian Church; that is to say, among the Gnostics, the Manicheans, the Anomeans, and the Mahometans.



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#### *Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109).*

In his famous *Cur Deus Homo?* (chap. 22), Anselm continued to state the orthodox view of inspiration when he wrote, “And the God-man himself originates the New Testament and approves the Old. And, as we must acknowledge him to be true, so no one can dissent from anything contained in these books.” As Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm addressed the question of authority in another treatise, where he said, “Leaving aside what is said in Scripture, which I believe without doubting, of course.”<sup>39</sup>

#### *The Victorines*

Outstanding men of the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris in the twelfth century followed the historical and literal approach to biblical interpretation in the tradition of the Syrian School at Antioch. Its representatives included **Hugh (d. 1142)**, **Richard (d. 1173)**, and **Andrew (d. 1175)**. They insisted that liberal arts, history, and geography are basic to literal exegesis, which gives rise to doctrine, and that doctrine forms the natural background for allegorization of Scripture. Such literal interpretation they held to be basic to the proper study of the Bible, which they assumed to be the very word of God.

#### *Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274).*

The foundations for medieval theology were laid by such outstanding scholars as the categorizer **Peter Lombard (c.1100-c. 1160)** and the encyclopedist **Albert the Great (c. 1193 or 1206–1280)**. With them the age of medieval Scholasticism emerged.

But the chief spokesman of Scholasticism was **Thomas Aquinas**, the great systematic theologian. Thomas Aquinas clearly held to the orthodox doctrine of inspiration. In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas, the great Roman Catholic theologian, states that “the Author of Holy Scripture is God.” Although he asks the question of “senses” of Scripture, he *assumes* the “inspiration” of both the Old and New Testaments. He concurred with the traditional view that the Scriptures are “**divine revelation**” (*Summa* 1.1.1,8; 2) and “**without error**” (*Summa* 2.1.6.1); *In Job* 13.1).

After the time of Aquinas and his critic **John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308)**, Scholastic philosophy moved into its period of decline. That culminated in the nominalistic skepticism of **William of Ockham (c. 1300–1349)**, and it set the stage for the removal of theology from the untrained during the period between the death of Ockham and the Reformation. Nevertheless, the great scholars, theologians, and doctors of the established church believed, as did the early Fathers, that the whole Bible is the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God written. They accepted it as the divinely authoritative standard for the Christian church without hesitation and without reservation.

#### **THE PRE-REFORMATION CHURCH (C.1350-C. 1500)**

In the meantime other movements were making their appearance in Europe and the church. Long before the Reformation era (c. 1500-c. 1650) there was a strong desire



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among the common people to return to the Scriptures. This desire was evidenced in such movements as the Waldensians, the Lollards, and the Hussites.

#### ***Valdes (fl. 1173–1205/28).***

Valdes, also known incorrectly as “Peter Waldo,” was a rich merchant of Lyons. His followers, “the poor men of Lyons,” came to be known as the Waldensians. At the Third Lateran Council (1179) Valdes and his followers sought ecclesiastical recognition and produced vernacular translations of the Bible. They were forbidden to preach except by invitation of the clergy, but they were soon placed under the ban of excommunication (1184).

They began to organize themselves increasingly apart from the church, ignore its decrees and sanctions, and appoint their own ministers. Their movement was based on the traditional doctrine of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures. They tended to doubt the validity of the sacraments administered by unworthy ministers, and they appealed to the Scriptures for support of their opposition to various practices within the church as well as of their right and duty to preach. They soon spread to Southern France and Spain, and then to Germany, Piedmont, and Lombardy.

Their numbers were decimated after the time of Innocent III, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), and the Inquisition. Although they developed no central leadership or organization, they quickly contacted the Reformers in the sixteenth century.

#### ***John Wycliffe (c. 1320–84).***

Wycliffe marks a turning point in the transmission of the Scriptures, but not in the history of the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures. From the time of his death onward his name has been associated with the movement for the translation of the Bible into English. The pioneer work of the English reformer and theologian was directed toward the translation and distribution of the Scriptures, which he and his followers, the Lollards, believed to be the very Word of God.

Wycliffe felt that the Bible alone in the hands of the people would be sufficient for the Holy Spirit to use among them. So confident of that was he that he advocated the Scriptures as the only law of the church, and he devoted his life and energies to their dissemination. Although Wycliffe and his immediate followers worked within the pale of the church, there was opposition to translations based on several grounds.

#### According to **Henry Hargreaves,**

In England, the question of the legality of biblical translations and their use did not come to the fore until the last quarter of the fourteenth century. Old English versions of biblical books seem to have aroused no antagonism, and to judge by the number of manuscripts extant, Rolle’s *Psalter* must have had a fair popularity, and possibly therefore official countenance. But the aim of the Wycliffite translators was undoubtedly to set up a new and all-sufficient authority in opposition to the Church. By now the Church sanctioned much that was un-biblical and did not satisfy Wycliffe’s criterion for ecclesiastical institutions: that they should



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conform to the practice of Christ and his followers as recorded in the Scriptures. The Wycliffites therefore appealed to Goddis lawe' and Christis lawe'—their regular names for the Bible and the New Testament. Moreover, they asserted that these laws were open to the direct understanding of all men on the points most essential to salvation. For such understanding it was necessary that all men should be able to study the Gospels in the tongue in which they might best understand their meaning.

Wycliffe's use of allegory in interpretation was based on his predisposition that the Words of Scripture were utterly reliable. His view of the plenary inspiration of Scripture was the basis for Wycliffe's efforts in Bible translation and theology, which made such an impact on **John Hus, Martin Luther**, and others that he is known as "The Morning Star of the Reformation."<sup>44</sup>

#### ***John Hus (c. 1372–1415).***

Born of a peasant family at Husinec in Bohemia, John Hus earned his Master's degree at the university in Prague (1396) before being ordained (1400). He became a well-known preacher at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague just as Wycliffe's writings became widespread in Bohemia, and he became a champion of Wycliffe's views.

**In 1411 a new pope, John XXIII, excommunicated Hus and placed his followers under interdict.** Disputations led Hus to publish his chief work, *De Ecclesia (1413)*, the first ten chapters of which were taken directly from Wycliffe, and in 1414 Hus left Bohemia for the Council at Constance. **He was later arrested and executed at the stake in July 1415.** His view of the Scripture was the same as Wycliffe's. In fact, when Martin Luther began his own work of reformation and made his appeal to the Scriptures rather than to the established authorities of the Church, he was frequently chided for following the "error of Hus." The common ground of the Bohemian Hussites (sometimes referred to as Waldenses) and Martin Luther was their appeal to the authority of Scripture.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When Martin Luther appeared on the scene, he was not entirely original on his point that the Scriptures are the ultimate source of authority for Christians and that the pope is not their sole interpreter. Just as the Old Testament claims for inspiration found support in the New, so the New Testament claims for inspiration found support in the writings of the church Fathers.

In the early church the evidence is early and widespread for the acceptance of the New Testament claims for inspiration. In the established church the evidence is consonant with the former period. **Throughout the Middle Ages and into the period of the Reformation, church Fathers, scholars, reformers, and others followed the traditional doctrine of the inspiration of Scriptures even when they differed over their interpretation.** Roland H. Bainton attested that the Reformers were in this very stream of continuity concerning the inspiration and authority of Scripture. He noted,



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William of Occam had already said that to be saved a Christian is not called upon to believe that which is not contained in Scripture or to be derived from Scripture by manifest and inescapable logic .... The counciliarists appealed to the Bible against the pope and in their Leipzig disputation in 59, John Eck told Luther that his teaching betrayed the Bohemian virus, in his reliance more on sacred Scripture than on the supreme pontiffs, councils, doctors and universities .... Luther replied that he did not disdain the opinions of the most illustrious Fathers, but that clear Scripture is to be preferred. The authority of Scripture is beyond all human capacity.