

Reformed Theological Seminary

Wycliffe and Sola Scriptura

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CHAPTER 1

SOLA SCRIPTURA IN THE 21ST CENTURY

An essential, though often overlooked and, even more often, avoided, principle is that all theology is practical. Belief, if it is sincere, and often even when it is not, is a kind of cause that gives rise to effects. These practical consequences, in turn, provide some indication of the soundness of the theology that drives them. The wise theologian—unfortunately many are not—considers not only the carefully developed basis for his or her beliefs, but also the practical consequences that arise from them. When the effects are different than expected, and especially when they are harmful or adverse, this gives pause for a reevaluation of the theology behind them. While pure pragmatism has its own dangers, there does appear to be at least some wisdom in the willingness to consider that bad results, when they happen, may be the result of theology that is defective to some degree. At the very least, a closer look and a fuller explanation would seem desirable.

Such appears to be the need with regard to the very important Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*. The need for a closer look at the theological formulation of this doctrine is argued for a couple of important reasons. First of all, is the considerable importance of this doctrine to the Reformation. It is not an overstatement to suggest that the formal cause of the Reformation is the watershed issue at the center of every theological difference, not only between the Reformers and Rome, but also among the Reformers themselves. *Sola scriptura*

is not just a belief, it is a belief about everything that is to be believed. It has to do, not so much with the content of belief, but with the context in which it takes place. Second, there is the practical consideration of the adverse effects that have been caused or, at least, supported by this doctrine. This is developed further below, but for now let it be simply noted that, after almost 500 years, *sola scriptura* has not produced the coherent faith of one, holy, catholic church but rather, at the very least, has allowed the chaos of a church shattered by schism, whose core message is often lost in the ambiguity of the conflicting beliefs of its proponents. What was most certainly well intended, in theory, to be a foundation for the recovery and preservation of absolute truth has instead turned out practically to be a recipe for relativism.¹

The Protestant Problem

There are several significant charges that have been leveled against the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* both from a practical and theoretical perspective.

Conflicting Beliefs

The first of these is that establishing the written text as the only authority to which the believer is held accountable may contribute to, or at least is unable to avoid, a multiplicity of conflicting beliefs. Philip Blosser points out that there are some 28,000 recognizable denominations of Christianity,² of which it is reasonable to assume that a significant number involve groups maintaining, at least in theory, the position of *sola scriptura*. The trouble, as

¹ Patrick Madrid argues that *Sola Scriptura* is a grave theological error that has led countless souls to doctrinal ruin, a purely human construct that all Christians who love and obey God's Word should reject as a tradition of men that nullifies and distorts that Word. Patrick Madrid, "Sola Scriptura: A Blueprint for Anarchy," in *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of 'Sola Scriptura'*, ed. Robert A. Sungenis (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing Company, 1997), 2. While this indictment is harsh and perhaps overstated, it does merit serious consideration. Ironically, it suggests that *Sola Scriptura* contributes to the very kind of problem that the Reformers intended it to correct.

² Philip Blosser, "What are the Philosophical and Practical Problems with *Sola Scriptura*?" in *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of 'Sola Scriptura'*, ed. Robert A. Sungenis (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing Company, 1997), 93. See also Kenneth L. Woodward, "The Changing Face of Christianity," *Newsweek* (April 16, 2001), 49 where the author indicates that, according to the World Christian Encyclopedia "there are now

noted by Yves Congar, is that Scripture consists of the two elements of the written text and its meaning,³ the latter of which may vary depending on how the former is interpreted. The practical effect of liberating the individual believer from the authoritative interpretation of a Pope is to make every member of the church his own pope,⁴ free to interpret Scripture according to his own tastes.⁵ This is hardly a recipe for the kind of unity associated with the idea of “one, holy, catholic church,”⁶ and the concern here is hardly theoretical.

What some proponents of *sola scriptura* overlook is that the words of the ancient text have no meaning or significance beyond a latent potential until they are combined with a modern interpreter.⁷ The practical reality is that the principle of “Scripture alone” can, and often does, become a front for the “individual interpreter alone.” Whether this is a fundamental flaw of this doctrine or simply a distortion that has arisen from it is a matter to be explored further in this study; the point here is that individualism⁸ is very often supported and even encouraged by an appeal to *sola scriptura*.

The Insufficiency of Scripture

The ambiguity of the written text gives rise to different, sometimes contradictory, interpretations that cannot be resolved by the text alone. As such, *sola scriptura* would seem

33,800 different Christian denominations.”

³ Yves Congar, *Tradition & Traditions: The Biblical, Historical, and Theological Evidence for Catholic Teaching on Tradition* (Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster, c1966), 384.

⁴ Blosser, “Problems with *Sola Scriptura*,” 74.

⁵ See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1963), 403.

⁶ Congar, *Tradition & Traditions*, 407.

⁷ George M. Marsden, “Everyone One’s Own Interpreter? The Bible, Science, and Authority in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 79.

⁸ For a perspective on how the contemporary emphasis on individualism also drives this process, see Paul Galbreath, “Protestant Principles in Need of Reformation,” *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 7:8 (October 1992).

to be insufficient, by itself, to distinguish between correct and unbiblical conclusions concerning the meaning of the text. This leads Patrick Madrid to charge that the principle is “epistemologically unviable”⁹—written words alone are not able to protest when they are misunderstood,¹⁰ or, for that matter, to signal approval when they are properly grasped. In many of the conflicts that have arisen in the Church, including that between the Reformation and Rome, “Scripture alone” is inadequate to decide between true and false opinions because “both parties claim to have it on their side.”¹¹

The insufficiency here arises not only with regard to conflicting opinions among different individuals, but also causes a problem with regard to certainty for the individual interpreter. As Robert Sungenis notes, “because [the interpreter] is left to his own fallible judgment, he can never be sure that he is indeed interpreting correctly even the bedrock Scriptures that he claims to know absolutely.”¹² In addition, foundational Christian doctrines, such as those related to the Trinity and the person and nature of Christ, require more than explicit statements of Scripture for their formulation.¹³

The Problem of Heresy

Even more serious than the problem of differing opinions, and the lack of unity that

⁹ Madrid, “A Blueprint for Anarchy,” 3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4. Cf. p. 18.

¹¹ George H. Tvard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959), 71.

¹² Robert Sungenis, “Point/Counterpoint: Protestant Objections and Catholic Answers,” in *Not By Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of ‘Sola Scriptura’* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing Company, 1997), 223.

¹³ See Tvard, 135. Cf. Sungenis, “Point/Counterpoint,” 221 where the author points to the distinction between ‘formal’ and ‘material’ sufficiency with regard to Scripture. He points out that “formal” sufficiency requires that doctrine be formulated only from explicit statements in Scripture, whereas “material” sufficiency requires only that Scripture contain implicit statements.” He further notes that while many Roman Catholic theologians, increasingly in recent years, are willing to accept the ‘material’ sufficiency of Scripture (e.g. Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 410) they strongly reject its ‘formal’ sufficiency. Protestants are understood to imply, and many affirm, the latter.

often results from this, is the issue of heresy in the Church. A more formal definition will be advanced later in this study, but for now heresy can be thought of as beliefs recognized by some to be unacceptable or contrary to Christian faith. What has been recognized in church history, extending to earliest days following the apostles, is that it has been possible to derive false teaching simply by appealing to Scripture. In many cases, heretics were not those who derived their beliefs from some other source, but those who “distorted the Scriptures, perverting their meaning by reading into them their own personal and erroneous ideas.”¹⁴ Even those Roman Catholics who affirm that “Scripture alone” is a materially sufficient rule of faith, point out that because it is not “self-explanatory” both heretics and orthodox may appeal to it.¹⁵ Even Protestants who affirm the right to base their understanding of orthodoxy on “Scripture alone” have faced challenges from those, like the Unitarians and Universalists, who “argued against evangelical orthodoxy by appealing to the Bible.”¹⁶

In relation to the first two points, it is also suggested that one of the identifying features of heresy is a lack of agreement among its proponents. A lack of unity in terms of what is believed is considered a sign of error.¹⁷ The fact that so many, often contradictory, beliefs have arisen by appealing to *sola scriptura* would seem to call into question either the doctrine itself or the popular understanding of it.

Sola Scriptura Before Scripture?

Beyond these important practical considerations, there are also some technical

¹⁴ Congar, *Tradition & Traditions*, 383. Cf. 2 Peter 3: 15-16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹⁶ Nathan Hatch, “Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum,” in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 63.

¹⁷ Congar, *Tradition & Traditions*, 383.

deficiencies that have been identified concerning this doctrine. The first and foremost is that the gospel did not exist in written form during the early years of the New Testament Church. There is no indication that Jesus himself left anything in writing,¹⁸ and his apostles advanced the gospel and built the Church, at least initially, without any such documents. As Yves Congar notes, “the Gospel existed in its fullness before the individual gospels and epistles were written down.”¹⁹ This same author goes on to argue, “that the Church was never more itself than when it had the Christian mystery itself alone imprinted on its heart, without any Scripture apart from the prophetic writings.”²⁰ The Church was able to celebrate the Eucharist for some thirty years based on “tradition alone” since none of what later became the written text existed at that time.²¹ It certainly is reasonable that “if apostolic doctrine was able to exist in the Church, in the apostolic period, without writings, it could continue to do so.”²² Certainly there must have been many Christians during the apostolic era whose faith was not based on the availability of a written document to support it. There should be at least some concern with appealing to apostolic authority to support a doctrine that, during the time of the apostles, most certainly could not have been true.

Sola Scriptura without Scripture

Another crucial objection to the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is that it is not formulated explicitly in Scripture.²³ In a sense, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is an example of the very

¹⁸ Ibid., 284. Congar makes this observation repeatedly. Cf. p. 350.

¹⁹ Ibid., 284.

²⁰ Ibid., 285. Cf. Yves Congar, *Tradition and the Life of the Church* (London: Burns and Oates, 1964), 20.

²¹ Ibid., 351.

²² Congar, *Tradition & Traditions*, 416.

²³ See Sungenis, “Point/Counterpoint,” 212. See also Madrid, “*Sola Scriptura*: A Blueprint for Anarchy,” 2 where the author charges *Sola Scriptura* with being “unbiblical.”

thing that it purports to avoid—an extra biblical tradition. Like the traditions it condemns, it has emerged, especially in its contemporary expressions, from the life of the Church without clear roots either in Scripture or Apostolic Tradition.

In fairness to both Rome and the Reformation, each side seeks to defend its understanding of the nature and scope of divine truth, with each viewing the other as guilty of a heretical departure from that truth.²⁴ Both appeal to Scripture and both appeal, at least to some degree, to Tradition. The latter, though, is problematic for many proponents of *sola scriptura*. For those who seek to defend this position in its strictest sense, there is the double challenge of not only defending it in the present, based exclusively on Scripture, but of also explaining how that defense could be maintained before some of those scriptures existed and before the canon of Scripture was fully established and scriptures were more readily available.

Protestant Tradition

The final objection to the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* involves a charge of inconsistency. On the one hand, the Reformers embraced the principle of Scripture in order to escape the stranglehold of Roman tradition, only to turn around and develop their own traditions.²⁵ The dust of the Reformation conflict was not even settled before Lutheran, Reformed and Zwinglian traditions began to emerge and engage in conflict with each other. In light of the practical difficulties outlined above, dominant interpretations of Scripture could establish and maintain ascendancy only by means of the fortification provided by tradition.²⁶

²⁴ Heiko Augustinus Oberman, “*Quo Vadis Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis*,” *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1986), 269.

²⁵ See Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, 109.

²⁶ See Blosser, “Philosophical and Practical Problems with *Sola Scriptura*,” 107.

In some cases these traditions were established in written form as creeds and confession;²⁷ in other cases adherents, who might prefer to deny the need for such written creeds, have maintained them almost as dogmatically in unwritten form. In recent years the more innocuous term “presuppositions” has taken the place of “tradition,” but the effect is the same. It is difficult to avoid Congar’s observation that “clearly the Church of *sola scriptura* does not live by “Scripture alone;” like the others, it reads Scripture within a tradition.”²⁸

Wycliffe Reconsidered

The charges outlined above are serious and challenge not only the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, but the integrity of the Reformation itself, which depends so heavily on this principle. Before abandoning *sola scriptura* altogether, though, it would seem prudent to address three related questions. First of all, is the doctrine itself fundamentally flawed or has it, instead, become deformed from a legitimate, or at least more workable, original expression? Is the popular understanding of *sola scriptura* in the 21st century a fair representation of what was intended by the early Reformers, or do its flaws represent a distortion of that position? Second, what motivated the early Reformers to espouse the principle of *sola scriptura*? It would appear to be unwise to judge the doctrine of *sola scriptura* solely on the basis of practical problems attributed to it, without considering the issues, perhaps equally as serious, which motivated it in the first place. Without such a consideration, there is a risk of jumping from the fire back into the frying pan. It is possible that the contemporary understanding of *sola scriptura* has become distorted because it is no longer understood in terms of the

²⁷ See John Mckenzie, “Scripture and Tradition: A Roman Catholic View,” in *Reconsiderations: Roman Catholic/Presbyterian and Reformed Theological Conversations 1966-1967* (New York: World Horizons, Inc., 1967), 14. The author notes that “the very act of a confession of faith is implicitly an appeal to tradition and a departure from *sola scriptura* in a rigorous sense; for the confession, and not the New Testament, becomes the test of orthodoxy.”

²⁸ Congar, *Tradition & Traditions*, 471.

conditions that gave birth to it. Finally, is the doctrine of *sola scriptura* fundamentally flawed, making it wise to reject it altogether, or is it merely in need of reformation itself? It may be that a reacquaintance with the early development and motivation for this doctrine, along with an honest evaluation of contemporary problems associated with it, can both contribute to a reformulation of *sola scriptura* that more effectively addresses the concerns both past and present.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine the teaching of John Wycliffe concerning Scripture with the hope that his insights may shed some light on the questions outlined above. Wycliffe is known as the *stella matutina*²⁹ of the English Reformation. This great English scholar³⁰ has been described as “one of the greatest of Englishmen” and “the first of the Reformers”³¹ and most certainly was a forerunner of those who broke with Rome in the sixteenth century.

A Time of Crisis

Wycliffe came on the scene during a time in which the Church was in a great crisis, especially with regard to Scripture. While it may be inappropriate to label the medieval period the “dark ages,” this term does well describe the spiritual condition of the Church, and especially her earthly head, as that era approached its close. In 1294 Benedict Gaetani began

²⁹ See Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation: Wycliffite Texts and Lollard History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 60 where the author records that John Bale described Wyclif as the *stella matutina* because he saw him as a forerunner to the reformers of the 16th century.

³⁰ As Workman observes, even an opponent lauded him as ‘the most eminent doctor of theology of his times’. Herbert B. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1926), 4.

³¹ W. W. Shirley, ed., *Fasciuli Zizaniorum Magistri, Johannis Wyclif Cum Tritico—ascribed to Thomas Netter of Walden* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1858), xlvi. Schaff says, “In the history of the intellectual and moral progress of his people, he was the leading Englishman of the Middle Ages.” Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (Saginaw, Michigan: Historical Exegetical ‘Lectronic Publishing, 1996), 6, V, §40.

his “reign”³² as pope Boniface VIII. In contrast to his weak, but saintly predecessor, Boniface is described as “a politician, overbearing, implacable, destitute of spiritual ideals, and controlled by blind and insatiable lust of power.”³³ The year 1302 witnessed a remarkable assertion of papal authority with the publication of the Bull *Unam Sanctum*, which opened with the words, “Urged by faith, we are obliged to believe and to maintain that the Church is one, holy, catholic, and also apostolic. We believe in her firmly and we confess with simplicity that outside of her there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins...”³⁴ This document, occasioned by a power struggle between Boniface and Philip IV³⁵ of France, was designed to link the unity of the Church with the Church’s holding of the “temporal sword”³⁶. The extent of this claim is evident in the Bull’s conclusion, “we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.”³⁷ In very clear terms the locus, not only of the authority of the Church, but also of her unity and faith, was identified with the Bishop of Rome.

Boniface VIII died the year following the issue of his famous bull, and during the century that followed, two crises plunged the Church into conflict and confusion and challenged the essential features of his claim. First came the transfer of the Papacy to

³² B. Tierney, “Boniface VIII, Pope,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (NCE), vol. 2, p. 671.

³³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Church*, 6, I, § 3. Even the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, while more restrained in its critical remarks, can only commend Boniface as “a great lawyer.”

³⁴ *Unam sanctam ecclesiam catholicam et ipsam apostolicam urgente fide credere cogimur et tenere, nosque hanc firmiter credimus et simpliciter confitemur, extra quam nec salus est, nec remissio peccatorum ...* Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctum*, from Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6, I, § 4.

³⁵ Philip the Fair.

³⁶ Boniface identifies two sources of power, spiritual and temporal (associated with the sword), but asserts that both of them are under the control of the church through her *spiritual* earthly head—namely himself.

³⁷ *Unam Sanctum*.

Avignon France in 1309, which effectively uprooted it from its “maternal soil”³⁸ and long established historical context in Rome. The stress of having a dislocated head gave way to an even greater crisis in 1378, when the Church found itself with two heads, as two duly elected popes simultaneously claimed to be the rightful successor of Peter.³⁹ Ironically, Boniface VIII had unintentionally, and yet almost prophetically, provided the most apt assessment of this situation when, speaking of the Church, he had said, “had she two heads, she would be a monster.”⁴⁰

In the midst of this darkness, the “morning star,”⁴¹ arose, signaling the dawn of a new day. The date⁴² and circumstances of Wycliffe’s birth are uncertain⁴³ but he was ordained as a priest by 1351⁴⁴ and, enjoying the support of that benefice, he was able to pursue an academic career at Oxford. In 1369 he took his Bachelor’s degree in Theology followed by his doctorate in 1372.⁴⁵

³⁸ Schaff, 6, II, § 6.

³⁹ The College of Cardinals had first elected Urban VI to the office of pope, but when he turned out to be a threat to their power and worldly lifestyle, the cardinals claimed that they had been pressured in their choice of Urban. The cardinals then denounced Urban as an apostate and voided his election, replacing him with Clement VII. Urban refused to accept resignation, though, establishing his position in Rome while Clement took up residency in Avignon.

⁴⁰ *Unam Sanctum*.

⁴¹ See footnote 29.

⁴² John Lewis sets the date around 1324. John Lewis, *Life of Wyclif* (This is a very abbreviated form of the original title), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1820), 1. Shirley argues that this is simply based on the estimate by Lewis that Wycliffe was around sixty years old when he died. *Fasciuli Zizaniorum*, xi f. Lechler prefers an earlier date, but again, this is arrived at by estimating his age when he died. Gotthard Lechler, *John Wyclif and His English Precursors*, tran. Peter Lorimer (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co, 1881), 91-92. Workman suggests a *terminus a quo* of 1319, which was the date of the marriage of his parents. Workman, 21. J. Loserth reasonably estimates the range 1320-1330. “John Wyclif,” *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, vol. 12, p. 454.

⁴³ There is significant evidence that the place of his birth was the York village of Ispwell. See Lechler, 85 ff.

⁴⁴ John Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. with Introduction and Notes by Ian Christopher Levy (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 3 ff.

⁴⁵ See Workman, “Chronology of Wyclif’s Life,” Vol. 1, xxxvii-xxxviii. Master of Arts and B. D. degrees were taken in 1361 and 1369 respectively. Cf. K. B. McFarlane, *The Origins of Religious Dissent in England* (New York: Collier Books, 1952), 26.

Politics and Religion

During the decade following the receiving of his doctorate, Wycliffe enjoyed a considerable reputation and prestige as a scholar, but the fame that gave him a lasting place in history was found, not in the halls of academia, but in the rough-and-tumble world of fourteenth century politics.⁴⁶ England, at this time, was ruled by the increasingly disengaged and eventually senile Edward III—a circumstance that imposed a measure of uncertainty on the political landscape.⁴⁷ His son Edward, the “Black Prince,”⁴⁸ returned to England from the European battlefield in 1371. By this time his reputation as a military commander was well established, but his health was severely impaired, thereby limiting the role he would play until his death in 1376. His son, the future Richard II, born in 1367, was still in his nonage and would require regency upon his grandfather’s death in 1377. This political vacuum allowed a place of significant influence for Richard’s uncle, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster.

This was also a time of growing tension between England and the Roman Church, centered mostly on the taxation of clergy and the right claimed by the Pope to fill vacancies in the Church of England.⁴⁹ The bottom line here was that both the king of England and the Pope were in need of money. This was in the period of the Hundred Years War between France and England (1337-1453), and it necessary for the English king to raise large sums of money in order to fund that cause. Early in the 1370s, Pope Gregory XI was also in need of funds to finance wars in Italy. In seeking to raise taxes to fund their efforts, the prime target of

⁴⁶ McFarlane, 17.

⁴⁷ See McFarlane, 44-45. The author argues that “the king was rather lazy than imbecile,” which made the situation more difficult to remedy. He describes these last years of Edward’s reign as “one of the most confused periods in fourteenth-century history.”

⁴⁸ This epithet was latter attributed to his wearing black armor, but this is not confirmed by contemporary accounts.

⁴⁹ McFarlane, 48.

both was the wealthy clergy of England. While most of the clergy in England were little better off than the peasants they ministered to, there was a small group, scornfully referred to by their critics as “possessioners,”⁵⁰ who enjoyed significant endowments that generated sizeable revenues to those who held them. Caught in the squeeze between Pope and king, they naturally resisted efforts to extract a growing portion of their wealth. The situation was further complicated by the relocation of the Papacy to Avignon early in the century. For many Englishmen, the thought of English gold flowing across the channel into the hands of a French pope caused them no small discomfort.⁵¹

It was at this “critical and exceptional time”⁵² that Wycliffe became increasingly involved in the political machinations of the day. At least initially, it was in the interest of the king to encourage public criticism of the Church, and Wycliffe possessed intellectual skills, along with an abrasive temperament, that made him useful to accomplish this end. Those who employed Wycliffe were looking for justification to “access”⁵³ the sizeable resource of clerical wealth, which necessitated answering the argument that the superior authority of the Church protected its property from secular appropriation. Wycliffe helped this cause, not by discrediting the authority of the Church altogether, but by linking that authority to character—only those in a state of grace could exercise true lordship.⁵⁴ Wycliffe’s motive was not so

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ McFarlane, 85.

⁵² McFarlane, 65. The author indicates that “All the signs point to 1370 or 1371 as the year in which [Wycliffe] first indulged a taste for political controversy” (p. 67).

⁵³ McFarlane reasonably describes it as a “desire to coerce and despoil the higher clergy.” See pp. 66-67.

⁵⁴ McFarlane, 68. This view had been advanced earlier by Richard FitzRalph, archbishop of Armagh from 1348 to 1360. It was also bolstered by the teaching of Marsiglio of Padua who championed imperial power in his *Defensor Pacis*. Wycliffe set forth his views in his significant works *De Civili Dominio* and *De Divine Dominio* written 1375-1376. Shirley identifies “the true epoch of the beginning of the English reformation” with the preface to the latter of these works. See Introduction to *Fasciculi Zizaniorum Magistri Johannis Wyclif Cum Tritico*, xxxviii.

much to advance the financial interests of the state as it was to see an empowered state bring about needed reform in the Church. He did not view the diminishing of ecclesiastical power and wealth as unfortunate collateral damage, but as essential to restoring the Church to its pre-Constantine and apostolic poverty and purity.

It is of some interest to this study to note that some of Wycliffe's adversaries impugned his motives as being driven by personal disappointments related to missed career advancements that would have allowed him to obtain a greater share of the wealth that he argued others more successful than he should be deprived of. While a more contemporary author like K. B. McFarlane is not willing to go so far as to say that the certainty of this indictment is established, he does repeat it enough to give the impression that he supports its credibility.⁵⁵ While it is difficult enough to establish the facts of history without trying to discern the motives of the players involved, it should at least be clear that "anti-clericalism" is a complex phenomena that can be understood to derive from a variety of motives, not all of which are either consistent or in harmony with each other. There were genuine issues, and that there was room for reform is beyond question, but the proponents of change were not always above reproach, and what they called for did not always represent improvement.

Beginning around 1378 Wycliffe's polemic against the Church began to take on a new and even more serious dimension. With the remnants of his confidence in the authority of the Pope eroded by the Roman schism, Wycliffe increasingly began to appeal to the authority of Scripture over the accumulated wisdom of the Church. It was during this year that he

⁵⁵ See McFarlane who suggests concerning Wycliffe that "in the race for preferment...It might have been better for his ecclesiastical superiors had they allowed him a larger share" and that "a plum or two...even as late as the early 1370s might have shut his mouth for ever" (p. 32). Concerning the charge that Wycliffe was motivated by disappointment or even bitterness, "it is at least credible" (p. 75).

defended this position with his work *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*. Two important ways in which this impacted his thinking should be noted. First, he became convinced that Scripture could be interpreted even by the most humble of folk, and it was only natural that this should give rise to an impulse toward translating the Bible into vernacular English.⁵⁶ Second, his increasing appeal to the authority of “Scripture alone” had the practical effect of undermining his confidence in the Church’s doctrine of transubstantiation. Up to this point, while Wycliffe may have been controversial, polemical and even offensive to some in the Church hierarchy, he had remained within the pale of orthodoxy. The rejection of transubstantiation, though, took him into the realm of heresy and began to weaken the support of those like John of Gaunt, who had protected him in the past.⁵⁷

Two events of the year 1381 brought significant troubles for Wycliffe. First of all, the support of his sympathizers was further eroded by the Peasant’s Revolt in June of that year.⁵⁸ There is little reason to think that this rebellion was either inspired by Wycliffe’s teaching or encouraged by his support,⁵⁹ but at the very least it did cause his works to be scrutinized more closely as a potential cause of sedition. Wycliffe’s primary patron, John of Gaunt, was also weakened at this time by growing unpopularity, and this, in turn, increased Wycliffe’s

⁵⁶ McFarlane, 99. While it is likely that Wycliffe did not translate any of the Scriptures into English himself, he certainly stirred this interest in his followers.

⁵⁷ See McFarlane, 105.

⁵⁸ This was a rebellion of the lower classes led by Wat Tyler. It was the culmination of a long period of economic discontent brought to a head by an unpopular poll tax imposed in 1381.

⁵⁹ Wyclif is implicated by Netter in *Fasciculi Zizaniorum* in the charge that John Ball (one of the leaders in the rebellion) was one of Wycliffe’s followers: “*Et praecipue cum esset dilectus sequax Wyclyff sacerdos dominus Johannes Balle.*” pp. 272-274. More modern writers have rejected this implication. See McFarlane, 108; Anne Hudson, though suggests that “it seems possible that disclaimers of Wyclif’s involvement may have gone too far.” *The Premature Reformation*, 68; M. E. Aston, “Lollardy and Sedition 1381-1431,” *Past and Present* 17 (April 1960): 5.

vulnerability.⁶⁰ It was also in this year that William Courtenay became the archbishop of Canterbury.

The purpose of this paper is to examine John Wycliffe's views on Scripture in relation to what we refer to as the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Wycliffe was deeply troubled by the crisis that was growing in the Church of his day. The great papal schism began during his tenure at Oxford and Wycliffe's response to the spectacle of two popes damning each other was to agree that they were both right.⁶¹ The only solution for Wycliffe was for the true Church to return to the authority of the Holy Scriptures.⁶² He was not the only one to champion the cause of Scripture, but as William Mallard observes, "No prior medieval schoolman quite paralleled Wycliffe in setting forth Holy Scriptures alone as the final religious authority."⁶³ What is interesting and relevant, though, is that Wycliffe's appeal to Scripture is not at the expense of tradition in its entirety. He does not abandon the "catholic" faith. Despite the opinion of some,⁶⁴ Wycliffe did not seek to drive a wedge between the Holy Church and the Holy Scripture, but rather to restore them to their proper relationship. As such he sought a truly catholic faith that was grounded in "Scripture alone." His view of *sola scriptura* was held in tension with, rather than in opposition to, the "catholic" faith of the Church. His view of Scripture, then, is one in which "only Scripture" must be understood in an essential connection with "all the Church."

⁶⁰ McFarlane, 108.

⁶¹ William Farr, *John Wyclif as Legal Reformer*, in *Studies in the History of Christian Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 26.

⁶² Cf. John Stacey, *John Wyclif and Reform* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964), 87.

⁶³ Mallard, *John Wyclif and the Tradition of Biblical Authority*, 50. John Stacey points out that Wyclif was called *Doctor Evangelicus* "because of his love for the Bible and his constant reference to it" so that "Christian thought since the Reformation has always linked his name with the sacred book." John Stacey, *John Wyclif and Reform*, 73.

Scripture and Tradition prior to Wycliffe

Before focusing on Wycliffe's view of Scripture in relation to the teaching of the Church, it is important to establish some background and terminology. Wycliffe, like Hus and the sixteenth century Reformers after him, is part of a flow of thought. However unique the forms of his expression, his ideas were shaped by the times in which he lived⁶⁵ and the history that preceded him. The purpose here is not to develop a detailed historical theology of the relationship between the Church and Scripture prior to and leading up to Wycliffe, but to identify some important, general received conclusions from the work of others. This discussion involves four key terms: *Kerygma*, the Church, Scripture and Tradition. The *Kerygma* (or *Apostolic Kerygma*) refers to the content of what was preached by Jesus Christ and the apostles directly appointed by him.⁶⁶ The *Kerygma* in written form is identified with Scripture, the latter of which came to be associated with the sixty-six canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. Tradition involves the *Kerygma* in "living form"⁶⁷ as it is transmitted or passed down by the Church.⁶⁸ In this form, Tradition resides not on a written page, but in the human heart and consists of all that Christians are required to believe (*fides quae creditur*). The Church consists of all those individuals who share faith (*fides qua*

⁶⁴ See George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, 41.

⁶⁵ Cf. Gordon Leff, "Wyclif and Hus: A Doctrinal Comparison," in *Wyclif and his Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 105.

⁶⁶ Oberman describes "apostolic kerygma" as the "coinherence of which Scripture and the Church form the constitutive elements." Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1963), 368. Cf. *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (p. 3) where the author identifies this apostolic message as the "gospel." For the purposes of this discussion, the term *kerygma* is intended to serve as a base reference point which is neither altered or increased. What the church proclaims, after the apostles is more appropriately described as tradition.

⁶⁷ *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 366.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, 3. Tavard describes tradition as "the art of passing on the Gospel." He is correct in asserting that the word *tradition* literally expresses an action but in most discussions concerning tradition the focus of attention is more on the object than the act.

creditur) in the Tradition of the Church.⁶⁹ In this sense, the Church is the living repository of Tradition, apart from which Tradition would not exist.

There is considerable agreement among modern scholars that in the early Church (pre-Augustinian) there is no divergence among *Kerygma*, Scripture and Tradition or that, as Oberman observes, “*kerygma*, Scripture and Tradition coincide entirely. The Church preaches the *Kerygma* which is to be found *in toto* in written form in the canonical books”⁷⁰ (See Figure 1a). The very same message (*Kerygma*) is communicated in written form (Scripture) and in “living form” (Tradition) as shown in Figure 1b.⁷¹ Oberman observes “that Scripture and

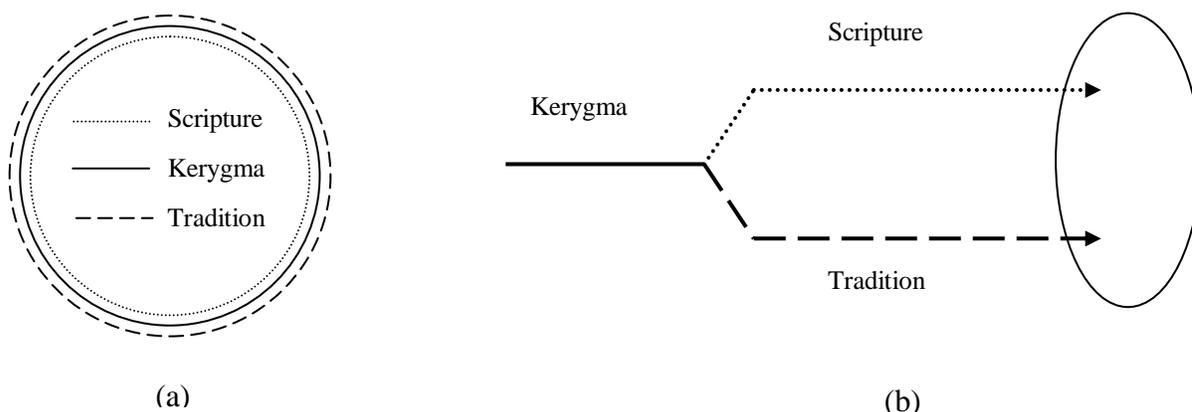


Fig. 1. *Kerygma*, Scripture and Tradition in the early Church.

Tradition are for the early Church in no sense mutually exclusive.”⁷² It could be said, though, that they provide a mutual restraint on each other: Tradition limits the understanding that can

⁶⁹ None of these definitions is intended to be theologically precise but rather to serve as practical vehicles for the discussion that follows. The definitions will be refined to reflect various significant nuances as this discussion proceeds.

⁷⁰ *Harvest*, 366. See also *Holy Writ*, 8.

⁷¹ *Harvest*, 366.

⁷² *Ibid.*

be attached to the words of Scripture and Scripture excludes the introduction of purely “human traditions”. Since Tradition resides in the Church as a living repository, the former should be clarified or limited further. In this regard, Vincent of Lérins provided what came to be a standard formulation, that “in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all.”⁷³ The Tradition of the early Church, then, could be described as consisting of what was believed by all the Church based on Scripture alone, and it was this formula that preserved the original Apostolic *Kerygma*.

A quantitatively small, but qualitatively significant, change in the concept of Tradition emerged with Basil the Great in the East and Augustine in the West.⁷⁴ With regard to certain liturgical practices, Basil affirmed the existence of unwritten Apostolic Traditions preserved “in a mystery” which “in relation to true religion have the same force” as the Scriptures.⁷⁵ Augustine, while on the one hand supporting the coinherence of Scripture and Tradition,⁷⁶ also advanced this notion of Basil by suggesting that the authority of the Church could establish faith not contrary to Scripture but beyond it.⁷⁷ Oberman identifies this “two-

⁷³ Vincent of Lérins, “A Commonitory,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 11, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 132.

⁷⁴ See Heiko Augustinus Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought*, (London: Lutterworth Press, c1966), 55f.

⁷⁵ Basil, “On the Spirit” in *Nicene and Post-Nicent Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 41.

⁷⁶ *Harvest*, 370.

⁷⁷ In an oft quoted statement Augustine declares, “For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church.” Augustine, “Against the Epistle of Manichaeus,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicent Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 131. Oberman sees this as “a practical priority” involving an “instrumental authority” in which the authority of Scripture “does not oppose...at all to the authority of the Church.” *Harvest*, p. 370. In another work, though, Augustine states that “there are many things which are observed by the whole Church, and therefore are fairly held to have been enjoined by the apostles, which are not mentioned in their writings” (sunt multa quae universa tenet ecclesia, et ob hoc ab apostolic praeepta bene creduntur, quamquam scripta non reperiantur. – *Harvest*, 371) Augustine, “On Baptism, Against the Donatists,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, 475.

sources” (written and unwritten) idea of Tradition as Tradition II in contrast to the earlier view of Tradition I based on “Scripture alone.”⁷⁸ Though it is certain that neither Augustine or Basil intended to undermine the authority of Scripture, the practical effect of their ideas was to open the door to the authority of the Church to operate beyond the authority of Scripture in order to develop traditions for which there was no objective accountability.⁷⁹

It is important to note here that there is an essential qualitative distinction between Tradition I and Tradition II. In the former, Scripture and Tradition have a mutually restrictive effect on each other. Tradition is limited to the interpretation of “Scripture only” and the interpretation of Scripture is limited to Tradition. The effect of this is that holding to Scripture *and* Tradition identifies something less than “Scripture only,” rather than more. What are eliminated are interpretations of Scripture, mostly heretical, that were not intended by the authors.⁸⁰ In Tradition II, though, the situation is very different. Scripture remains limited to Tradition (heretical interpretations of Scripture remain excluded) but Tradition is free to grow in such a way that Scripture *and* Tradition now refers to something more than “Scripture only.”⁸¹

The effect of these ideas became most pronounced in the fourteenth century. The increased involvement of the papacy in temporal and secular matters supported an exponential growth in canon law. As George Tavard points out, “the fourteenth century was a golden age

⁷⁸ *Harvest*, 371.

⁷⁹ Tavard points out that the term Tradition is often identified with the “overflow of the Word outside Sacred Scripture.” *Holy Writ*, 8. In this sense, Tradition is thought of as outside of and opposed to Scripture. There is Tradition based on Scripture and Tradition that exists independent of what was written by the apostles, or simply, Scripture and Tradition.

⁸⁰ In logical terms, this would refer to the intersection of Scripture and Tradition or what is common to both rather than the sum of both.

for canonists.”⁸² With the status of the canon lawyer increasingly overshadowing that of the theologian, canon law became a major tributary feeding the stream of Church Tradition. It was in this setting that the previously mentioned ideas of Basil and Augustine developed into “a truly theological argument” that justified investing unwritten Traditions with the same apostolic authority as Scripture.⁸³ Augustine’s emphasis on the practical priority of the Church was used to justify a metaphysical priority⁸⁴ in which “the church had her own revelation, independent of that which the Apostles recorded in their writings.”⁸⁵ It was against this trend that men like Wycliffe reacted by affirming the ultimate authority of “Scripture alone” for the faith and practice of the Church.

Before turning to Wycliffe and his views on Scripture and the Church, there is one other interesting current in the increasingly turbulent stream of late medieval theology that is worth examining in greater detail. This involves ideas associated with a theologian by the name of Henry of Ghent (d. 1293). Henry affirmed the well-established principle of the early Church that “there is no ultimate discrepancy between the church [Tradition] and Scripture.”⁸⁶ He was interested, though, in the hypothetical situation where the community identified as “the Church” was in disagreement with the Scripture on some point. The question, for him, was whether it was better to trust the Church or Scripture in such a case. His solution was to argue that, rather than accepting the Church over Scripture, it would be preferable for

⁸¹ In logical terms, this would be described as the union of Scripture and Tradition (excluding heretical understandings of Scripture as implied by Tradition).

⁸² *Holy Writ*, 38.

⁸³ Oberman, “*Quo Vadis, Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis*,” *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 281

⁸⁴ Oberman, *Forerunners*, 56.

⁸⁵ *Holy Writ*, 36.

⁸⁶ *Holy Writ*, 23.

believers holding to Scripture to go against or even depart from the body considered to be the Church.⁸⁷ He operated under the assumption, both reasonable and consistent with the early history of the Church, that there could be no enduring contradiction between Scripture and the Church. Scripture represented a fixed truth that remained constant, but, in contrast, “truth” could evolve among the persons in the Church so that “the majority can dissent and renounce faith by mistake or malice, although the [true] Church remains in a few just men.”⁸⁸

Henry suggested the possibility, then, that a small group, separating from the larger body of the Church, rather than being an heretical sect might in fact be “a small remnant of orthodoxy within an all but universal heresy.”⁸⁹ This idea was not really new with Henry since it had been the basic premise of most sectarian movements, but its uniqueness was that it presented this idea from a position of orthodoxy.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Henry of Ghent, *Commentary on the Sentences*, art. 10, q. 1, n. 5, quoted from *Holy Writ*, 23.

⁸⁹ *Holy Writ*, 25.

CHAPTER II

SOLA SCRIPTURA

Since the time of the Reformation, the term *sola scriptura* has become a common way to identify the formal principle of the Protestant Reformation. In Wycliffe's time and writings, though, this term did not enjoy the same technical meaning or popularity that it does today. Whatever his doctrine of *Scripture* alone, it is not formally identified using the terminology of *sola scriptura*. It is the purpose of this chapter to systematically consider statements made by Wycliffe⁹⁰ to which some significance of the term *sola scriptura* might reasonably be applied. Another way to express this would be to try to answer the question: "How does Wycliffe think of Scripture in terms of its uniqueness or exclusiveness?" The answer to this question can be summarized in a statement he makes that foreshadows both the terminology and understanding that would later be expressed formally by the Protestant Reformation. In *De Civili Dominio*, he affirms "only sacred Scripture is that authority and object of respect that, whatever it asserts, ought to be believed."⁹¹

⁹⁰ It seems appropriate here to say something of the methodology that has been followed. This and the following chapters are based on a survey of the writings of Wycliffe indicated in the bibliography. In his Latin Works, appropriate selections were identified almost exclusively from the often extensive English marginalia. A greater proficiency in Latin would have enabled a more exhaustive study. Even a brief survey of Wycliffe's writings, though, will discover his considerable tendency toward repetition. As a result, one does not have to consider his writings exhaustively in order to obtain a relatively complete picture of his beliefs.

⁹¹ Iohannis Wycliffe, *Tractatus De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, ed. Reginald Lane Poole (London: Trübner & Co., 1885), 409; "*Sola autem scriptura sacra est illius auctoritatis et reverencie quod quidquam asserit, debet credi.*" See also 416, "*solum Scripture sacre demus ad tantum credere.* See also John Wycliffe, *Sermones*, vol. I, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1885), 175, "*Vera autem pascua sunt solum scripture sacre...*" See also, *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, ed.

The Nature of Scripture

In evaluating Wycliffe's views on the uniqueness of Scripture, it is very important to clarify his understanding of the nature of Scripture. The term "scripture" has an element of ambiguity associated with it that can cause confusion. The word itself comes from the Latin *scriptura*, which generally indicates something that is written. As such, it came to refer technically to the sacred writings of the Bible.⁹² The ambiguity has to do with whether the word refers to the written text of Scripture or to the meaning associated with that text. In order to clarify this ambiguity, Wycliffe describes the nature of Scripture by means of what he refers to as five "levels" (*gradus*) of Scripture.⁹³ He introduces these levels as part of his defense against the charge that the Scriptures are tainted by the fallibility of its human authors. The effect—the understanding of which is essential to any discussion of Wycliffe's doctrine of "Scripture only"—is to broaden the concept of *scripturae sacrae* beyond mere reference to manuscripts. He explains that "the law of God exists beyond the books or sensible signs that convey the truths indicated by them," so that it is "*more preferably sacred Scripture than the*

Alfred W. Pollard (London: Trübner & Co., 1886), 23, "*quia si in tali materia solum debet fidelis creder scripture sacre.*" Emphasis added in these quotes.

⁹² The issue of how Wycliffe viewed the Apocrypha in relation to the rest of Scriptures is not a matter to be considered here.

⁹³ John Wyclif, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, vol. 1, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg (London: Trübner & Co., 1905), *capitulum sextum* (107-138). He also uses the term *modus* ("manner" or "way") synonymously to refer to these levels. It is appropriate to acknowledge here that while quotes and translations of this work are presented directly from the Latin text, consideration has also been given to the translation into English by Christopher Levy of portions of this work. John Wyclif, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. Ian Christopher Levy (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001).

Concerning Wycliffe's use of the word "scripture", see also Iohannis Wycliffe, *Opus Evangelici Liber Tertius Et Quartus Sive De Antichristo Liber Primus Et Secundus*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Paternoster House, 1896), 36. Here Wycliffe speaks of three ways of taking the word "scripture": "*primo personaliter et fundabiliter pro ipsa veritate que est Dominus Jesus Christus...Secundo pro ipsis veritatibus sive eternis sive alio modo necessariis...Tercio autem modo magis improprie accipitur scriptura sacra pro ipsis codicibus que sunt membrana et incaustum cum aliis ligamentis. Et ist scriptura sacra comburi poterit atque mergi; sed non prima vel secunda, in qua fides viancium terminatur et in patria clara visio beatorum.*"

books” (emphasis added).⁹⁴ The levels are as follows: (1) “The first is the book of life referred to in chapters twenty and twenty-one of the Apocalypse;”⁹⁵ (2) “The second is the truths written in the book of life according as they are understood;”⁹⁶ (3) “In the third, Scripture is taken up according to truths to be believed in categories (*genere*);” (4) “In the fourth, Scripture is taken up according to truths as they are believed in the book of the natural man...;”⁹⁷ (5) “In the fifth way, Holy Scripture is taken up according to written books, sounds or the effects of other methods, which are signs bringing to mind the first truths.”⁹⁸ Another way of thinking of this is that the words (the fifth way) form the material element of Scripture, while the meaning, or sense, of these words are the formal element of Scripture.⁹⁹

This will be developed further in the next chapter, but for now, there are two very important points to be made. The first is that sacred Scripture should not normally be considered only in terms of what is written, separated from its meaning; it is more than just a “manuscript made of the skins of dead animals.”¹⁰⁰ As Wycliffe says, “Holy Scripture is an aggregate formed from the manuscript and the sacred sense or meaning, which the Catholic¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ *De Veritate Scrae Scripturae*, i: 107. “*de lege dei est preter codices vel signa sensibilia dare veritatem signatam, que potius est scriptura sacra quam codices.*”

⁹⁵ *De Veritate Scrae Scripturae*, i: 108: “*primus est liber vite...*”

⁹⁶ *De Veritate Scrae Scripturae*, i: 108: “*secundus est veritates libro vite inscripte secundum esse earum intelligibile...*” Concerning the distinction between these two Wycliffe says that “*non diferens essencialiter sed secundum racionem.*”

⁹⁷ *De Veritate Scrae Scripturae*, i: 108: “*quatro sumitur scriptura pro veritate credenda, ut inscribitur libro hominis naturalis ut anima...*” It is suggested that this level involves the extension of the third to all the actions and trusts that are summed up by it.

⁹⁸ *De Veritate Scrae Scripturae*, i: 108-109: “*sed quinto modo sumitur scriptura sacra pro codicibus, vocibus aut aliis artificialibus, que sunt signa memorandi veritatem priorem...*”

⁹⁹ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 207: “*sonus...est quasi materiale et originale...et sensus est quasi formale.*”

¹⁰⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 22: Speaking of Augustine he does not “*intelligat de scriptura, que est codex factus de pellibus animalium mortuorum.*”

¹⁰¹ This term will be developed further in the next chapter. It is used by Wycliffe to identify either orthodox faith or orthodox Christians.

gathers from the material element, just as from a sign.”¹⁰² In this sense, Scripture designates both the writings themselves and their meaning, so that when Wycliffe refers to *sacra scriptura*, unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, it should be understood as including both the writings and what has come to be described as Tradition I.¹⁰³ Thus, Scripture in its fullest and truest sense necessarily combines both the written text and a proper understanding of it,¹⁰⁴ and this aggregate “is more Sacred Scripture than the manuscripts.”¹⁰⁵ A second observation is that understanding Scripture in terms of these five levels, rather than just as written documents, establishes the existence of Scripture before the establishment of the Canon, and even before the apostolic writings themselves.¹⁰⁶ As Oberman notes, by the end of the Middle Ages, the Church had come to think of its practical authority involved in identifying the Canon as implying a “metaphysical priority” over Scripture.¹⁰⁷ If the authority of the Church existed before Scripture, then how could it be replaced by the authority of Scripture? Based on Wycliffe’s understanding of Scripture, though, the writing of biblical texts and the collection of documents did not bring Scripture into being at a point well in to the

¹⁰² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 189: “nam sacra scriptra est agregatum ex codice et sensu vel sententia sacra, quam catholicus habet de illa materiali ut signo.” Cf. John Wycliffe, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, vol. 2, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg (London: Trubner & Co., 1905), 18: “illa signa extrinseca non sunt propositio vel scriptura sacra, sed agregatum ex illis et sensu.”

¹⁰³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 287: “quia agregatum ex voce et sensu catholico inscripto in anima est scriptra...”

¹⁰⁴ See *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 140: “illa enim mentalis intelleccio est verius scriptura quam lieoacio membrane, que non est scriptura sacra, nisi per habitudinem ad illam, nec scriptura mentis est sacra, nisi per scripturam obiectivam, quam concipit. illa enim est primo sacra, in qua omnes catholici comunicant, cum sit una comunis fides toti ecclesie, et sic est variacio scripture quinto modo dicte racione materialis signi, racione obiecti signati, racione conceptus animi et mixtim.”

¹⁰⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 107: “que pocius est scriptra sacra quam codices.” Cf. i: 238: “secundo notandum, quod nulli signulares codices sunt pocius quam bestie de substancia fidei pro se ipsis, sed sensus vel veritas, quam signant, quia tunc illis combustis vel aliter pereuntibus perit fides.”

¹⁰⁶ Regardless of whether one is dealing with either the Old or New Testament, it is clear that the body of believers existed before any written documents provided them a norm for their faith.

¹⁰⁷ *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 56.

history of the Church; these acts simply established an objective, authoritative record of what had existed from the very beginning. The truth of Scripture, in this sense, preceded the Church, which was built on it. The metaphysical priority, and therefore the final authority, belongs to Holy Scripture in terms of levels one and two. While Wycliffe does not develop this particular argument, he does conclude that his understanding of the nature of Scripture preserves it as a basis for faith even if the manuscripts were destroyed.¹⁰⁸ From this it is easy to see how the same faith could have existed even before the manuscripts came into being. Remarkably, Roman Catholic scholar George Tavard's understanding of the formation of the Canon fits very well with Wycliffe's thesis. The former argues that the motive of the Church in forming a Canon of Scripture is "no other than the common experience of its members: the Word spoke to them when they read or listened to some writings. He kept silent when others were read. The power of the Word imposed itself on the Christians."¹⁰⁹

Another important and unique aspect of the nature of Scripture for Wycliffe is that it is the word of God¹¹⁰—as he says, "God is the author of Scripture."¹¹¹ The apostles, as human instruments, were "inspired by the Holy Spirit" so that the opinions they expressed were the "word of the Lord"¹¹² and "authentic."¹¹³ In Scripture, the voice of Christ could be heard

¹⁰⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* i: 238.

¹⁰⁹ *Holy Writ*, 5.

¹¹⁰ John Wyclif, *De Blasphemia*, ed. Michael Henry Dsiewcki (London: Trubner & Co., 1983), 129: "*scripture, que est verbum domini.*"

¹¹¹ John Wiclif, *Polemical Works in Latin*, vol. 1 (London: Trübner, & Co., 1883), 80: "*quod deus auctor scripture.*"

¹¹² *De veritate Sacrae Scripturae* i: 402: "*quod inspiranti sunt apostoli a spiritu sancto, et secundum quod sententia, quam dicunt, sit verbum domini...*"

¹¹³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* i: 397: "*nec dicta autorum scripture sacre sunt tam autentica, quia illi hoc dixerant, sed quia deus instruxit eos sic dicere.*"

without doubt,¹¹⁴ and so it is commonly referred to as “the law of Christ.”¹¹⁵ This status applies to all of Scripture¹¹⁶ and sets it apart from all others writings, so that “all sacred Scripture is the unique word of God.”¹¹⁷ As such it stands in sharp contrast to “human laws,”¹¹⁸ “human inventions,”¹¹⁹ “modern opinions,”¹²⁰ and “traditions of human invention.”¹²¹ Also, being the Word of God establishes Scripture as a unique source of truth in its entirety.¹²² It is the “perfect word of God.”¹²³ Only this standard is free from any impurity.¹²⁴ Popes and the Church may err,¹²⁵ and so are unable to provide the level of certainty that only Scripture affords.¹²⁶ While it is true that the human authors of Scripture were also fallible men, Wycliffe argues that in comparison to the ultimate divine authorship

¹¹⁴ Iohannis Wyclif, *Sermones* i: 177: “*in scriptura sacra que indubie est vox Christi.*”

¹¹⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae* ii: 131: “*lex Christi in Scriptura tradita.*” Cf. i: 268.

¹¹⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 55: “*quod Cristus capud ecclesie loquitur ubilibet in scriptura...*” Cf. 1: 269: “*tota igitur scriptura est unum magnum verbum dei.*”

¹¹⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 392: “*tota scriptura sacra est unicum verbum dei.*”

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, “*leges humanas.*” Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 429.

¹¹⁹ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 428: “*adinvenciones humane.*”

¹²⁰ Iohannis Wyclif, *Tractatus de Benedicta Incarnacione*, ed. Edward Harris (London: Trübner & Co., 1886), 2: “*modernorum sententias.*”

¹²¹ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 125: “*traditiones humanitus invente.*” See also *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 403: “*tradiciones hominum;*” ii: 136.

¹²² *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 440: “*quod sit vera de virtute sermonis secundum quamlibet eius particulam.*”

¹²³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 268: “*quod tota lex Cristi est unum perfectum verbum, procedens de ore dei...*”

¹²⁴ *De Blasphemia*, 127. Wycliffe quotes Psalm 18:8 which refers to “*lex domini immaculata.*”

¹²⁵ John Wycliffe, *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1904), 347: “*Ex omnibus istis colligi potest ...quod nendum dominus papa sed ecclesia Romane errare potest heretica privitate; et per consequens vocate constitutiones Romani pontificis non sunt plene paris auctoritatis cum scriptura sacra, licet conclusiones catholice quas sapienter elicit ex scriptura sunt paris auctoritatis cum illa, non quia iste papa sic asserit, sed quia Veritas sic affirmat.*” Cf. John Wycliffe, *De Ecclesia*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1886), 563: “*Scimus autem quod papa cum cetu cardinalium eciam in materia fidei sepe errat, sed supponendum est quod scriptores bullarum papalium vel examinatores aut falso suggestores sepe falsificant bullas suas.*”

¹²⁶ See John Wycliffe, *De Apostasia*, ed. Michael Henry Dziewicki (London: Trübner & Co., 1889), 219, where Wycliff argues concerning judgements of heresy concerning the Eucharist, “*Unde argumentum...a testimonio talium doctorum, et multo magis ex testimonio Romane ecclesie, non sufficit per se hereticare quicquam, quia omnes illi possunt decipi atque decipere, et sic contra dominum diffinire.*” As a result it is necessary “*recurrere ad fontem veritatis, scripturam sacram.*”

they are only authors “figuratively” (*equivoce*). It is on the basis of this divine authorship that all of Scripture is authoritative both as a whole and in its parts.¹²⁷

The Unique Authority of Scripture

Wycliffe’s understanding of the nature of Scripture was not radical in itself, but, for him, it provided a fresh way of considering the nature of authority, which, in turn, brought him into conflict with the established Church of his day. Rome viewed authority as apostolic—an authority received from Christ that could be passed on to the successors of the apostles, and, therefore, an authority residing fundamentally in the Church. If Scripture was authoritative because it contained the words of the apostles, then the decrees and dogmas of their successors would also be authoritative. This was especially true of the bishop of Rome, who was the successor of Peter. For Wycliffe, though, the words of the apostles were to be believed not because the apostles were the authors, but because God was the author.¹²⁸ The authority of the apostolic writings was not based on apostleship, but because the writings were given by the Holy Spirit working in the apostles.¹²⁹ This allowed Wycliffe to depart from many of his predecessors in making a distinction between Scripture, and the teaching of the Church and its

¹²⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 392: “*tota scriptura est paria auctoritatis secundum singulas eius partes.*” See also p. 268: “*tota lex Christi est unum perfectum verbum, procedens de ore dei, cuius singule partes concausant totam auctoritatem vel efficaciam legis Christi.*”

¹²⁸ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 416: “*cum ergo credimus sententiam alicuius apostoli tamquam Dei, non sic credimus ut suam, sed ut Dei sententiam...*” See also, *Polemical Works*, i: 80: “*deus auctor scripture...*”

¹²⁹ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 418: “*si ergo scripture aliorum apostolorum sint paria auctoritatis cum ewangelio, multo magis scripta quorumcunque paparum: do pronunc argumentum, sed ex illo non sequitur paritas auctoritatis ad scribendum fidem ecclesie, qui donum sapientie et intellectus; in quo omnes apostoli scribentes sunt paria auctoritatis quantum ad veritatem, sed non quod dignitatem sentencie, qui non ut ille persone sed ut organa eiusdem Spiritus hec loquuntur. Sentencie autem Scripturarum variantur in dignitate, ut ewangelium est dignius data hostia; nec oportet omnes papas vel eciam apostolos parificari in hiis donis.*” Cf. 416: “*Nam ex fide ecclesie supponimus quod apostoli errantes legem Christi, habuerunt illam die Pentacostes scriptam immediate a Spiritu sancto in anima...Ex probabili eciam evidenciam supponimus quod idem apostoli eandem legis veritatem quam a Spiritu sancto didicerant, conscripserunt, et ipsa exarata est in codicibus nostris.*”

doctors.¹³⁰ It was to the “authority of Scripture”¹³¹ that the “doctor evangelicus” consistently made his appeal.¹³² The authority of the Church derives, not from the successors of the apostles, but to the degree that it emanates from Christ its head, in accord with his word.¹³³ It is important to maintain the perspective that “legitimate catholic conclusions wisely drawn from Scripture are on an equal authority with it, not because they are asserted by the Pope, but because they are affirmed by the Truth.”¹³⁴

The sacred writings represented the highest authority before which all others must be kept subservient. In most cases it was quite acceptable to follow the ancient doctors and the saints, but “above all [to hold to] the Holy Scripture,”¹³⁵ for it “exceeds all human canons in usefulness, authority and precision.”¹³⁶ The superiority of Scripture is related to that of Christ so that it is of “infinitely greater authority” than the writing of anyone¹³⁷ else or any decretal letter.¹³⁸ To follow any man rather than Scripture would be a blasphemous equaling of the

¹³⁰ Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, vol. 2, 149-150.

¹³¹ See *De Blasphemia*, 51; John Wycliffe, *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior: Accedit Tractatus De Eucharistia Et Poenitentia Sive De Confessione*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1892), 40.

¹³² See Graham Cole, "Sola Scriptura: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," *Churchman* Vol. 104, Number 1 (1990), 20, where the author identifies this as one of the essential features of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

¹³³ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 377: “*Et si queratur, que sit maior auctoritas, Scripture sacre sive ecclesie, dicitur, quia Scripture sacre auctoritas non est prestancior quam auctoritas Cristi circa ecclesiam, quia ecclesie auctoritas est nulla nisi de quanto emanat a capite suo Christo.*”

¹³⁴ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 347: “*licet conclusiones catholice quas sapienter elicit ex scriptura sunt paris auctoritatis cum illa, non quia iste papa sic asserit, sed quia Veritas sic affirmant.*”

¹³⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 309: “*et sequamur antiquos doctores et sanctos magis probabiles, sed per omnibus scripturam sacram.*”

¹³⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 268: “*scriptura sacra excedit omnes humanos canones in utilitate, in autoritate et subtilitate.*”

¹³⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 394: “*tota scriptura sacra quoad autoritatem capitis ecclesie est infinitum maioris autoritatis quam aliqua scriptura aliena...*”

¹³⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 395: “*quelibet pars scripture sacre est infinitum maioris autoritatis quam aliqua epistola decretalis.*” The reason for this, as indicated above is that while “*quelibet epistola decretalis est condita per aliquem papam, Cristi vicarium cum suis subditis*” it must be understood that “*quelibet pars scripture sacre immediate et*

creature with the Creator and preferring law of man to law of God.¹³⁹ In a sermon on Matthew 13:44, Wycliffe summarizes the matter in very simple terms by identifying Scripture as the “most necessary treasure of all the Church.”¹⁴⁰

It would be wrong to suggest that, for Wycliffe, Scripture represented the only authority before which Christians were accountable. He was not opposed to the authority of past tradition, or of the Church or even of Popes *per se*, but only to the idea that anything should challenge the authority of Scripture. The Pope is not permitted to dispense with Scripture,¹⁴¹ and in his judgments, the Bible is to be his standard.¹⁴² The decrees of the Pope are to be respected only if he is in accord with Scripture,¹⁴³ and his subjects are encouraged to

proxime autorizatur per deum.” Cf. John Wycliffe, *Sermones*, vol. 4 *Sermones Micellanei (Quadraginta Sermones de Tempore, Sermones Mixti XXIV)*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1890), 234: “*patet quod lex Christi est infinitum melior quam aliqua lex humana.*”

¹³⁹ *De Blasphemia*, 45: “*Blasfemum foret papam vel alium plus credere, magis diligere vel exequi magis sollicite leges proprias, quam legem Cristi et dei..Blasfemum foret in istis equiparare pure creaturam creatori...blasfemum foret equiparare vel superaddere legem creature propriam legi dei.*” Cf. *Sermones*, i: 302: “*Item, Christus Deus noster ligam et legem instituit pro confederacione dileccionis ad quam nullus christianus in auctoritate vel efficacia potest attingere. Ergo presumptiva blasphemia est ipsa postposita novam inducere.*”

¹⁴⁰ *Sermons*, ii: 426 ff.

¹⁴¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 259: “*scriptura sacra, cum qua nec papa nec angelus de celo poterit dispensare.*” Cf. *Dialogus sive Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 55: “*Nam constitutiones papae vel regule alie private non possunt infringere istam legem [i.e. legis Christi].*”

¹⁴² *De Apostasia*, 55: “*igitur oportet dare aliquod exemplum dirigens papam vel alium quemcumque ad taliter iudicandum. Quod non est fingendum, nisi fides scripture.*” Cf. 172: “*Unde posito per impossibile, quod tota ista materia sit posita in suo iudicio, patet quod ipse non habet potestatem decidendi unum aliud, nisi ut ex scriptura sacra vel revelacione notoria sibi fuerit intimantum.*” Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 316. Here Wycliffe is discussing the matter of a clergyman receiving a dispensation from a superior. Such dispensations can be given only in accord with the law of Christ as it is revealed in Holy Scripture (“*Sed patet quod non potest cum talibus dispensare contra legem Christi vel rationem: ideo oportet Scripturam sacram esse speculum et regulam in omni tali dispensacione vel habilitacione...*”) and beyond this, “*nullus Christi vicarius habet ad hoc potenciam.*”

¹⁴³ *De Apostasia*, 68: “*Quantum autem ad dicta papalia, dicitur, admittendo et honorando illa de quanto secundum aliquam scintillam veritatis sunt in scriptura fundabilia et non ultra.*” See also, 200: “*Tunc dicitur, quod fidelis crederet nullam Romanum pontificem citra Petrum cum quantocunque clero esse credendum in materia fidei, nisi de quanto se fundaverit in scriptura.*” Cf. Iohannis Wyclif, *Tractatus De Officio Regis*, eds. Alfred W. Pollard and Charles Sayle (London: Trübner & Co., 1887), 224: “*Quod si queratur de legibus, de bullis et mandatis papalibus, quomodo debet obediri vel credi illis, pat quod precipue tante quante fundabilia ex scripturis.*”

consult Scripture before obeying him.¹⁴⁴ The Roman Pontiff should not be consulted in matters of faith unless he is well acquainted with Scripture.¹⁴⁵ Nothing is to be considered “trustworthy, approved, or reproved by the Pope except according to what is founded in Scripture.”¹⁴⁶ These principles apply not only to the Pope in particular, but to the Church in general because “even the Church triumphant commands only by the authority of Christ her spouse.”¹⁴⁷

Scripture is the basis for all judgment,¹⁴⁸ and, therefore, every Christian ought to be familiar with it.¹⁴⁹ One of the common, accepted areas of judgment exercised by the Church was in determining heresy, and, again, the standard for such judgment was the law of Christ.¹⁵⁰ Laws that do not find their origin in God’s law are, at best, of no value¹⁵¹ and, at

¹⁴⁴ *De Ecclesia*, 38-39: “Videtur enim primo quod subditi debent consulere scripturam sacram in quocunque quod papa mandaverit. Quantum ad istud, concedi conclusio, cum nemo debet parere sibi plus quam alii, nisi in quantum est superior Christi vicarius, et per consequens, nisi in quantum obiditur principalius Jesu Christo; sed in omni obediencia Jesu Christo debet christianus consulere legem suam; ideo in omni obediencia christiani in quantum huiusmodi debet obedienciarum consulere legem Dei; et ideo ordinarunt iura ecclesie quod lex scripture tam generaliter et tam precipue a sacerdotibus...”

¹⁴⁵ *De Apostasia*, 173: “Nec est recurrendum in diffinitione fidei ad Romanum pontificem, nisi notorie deus dederit sibi supereminentem noticiam scripture.”

¹⁴⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 135: “ut vere concluditur, non crederetur approbacioni vel reprobacioni pape, nisi de quanto se fundaverit ex scriptura.” Cf. *De Blasphemia*, 23: “Et si queratur quid fidelis debet eligere, dicitur quod debet vivere in fide scripture et quem sensum de illa deus donaverit pie credere, et habere sensum scripture pure propter hoc quod papa et secte sic asserunt plus suspectum;” 44: “Non est credendum romano pontifici in materia fidei, nisi de quanto se fundaverit in scriptura.”

¹⁴⁷ *De Blasphemia*, 129: “Item, ecclesia eciam triumphans nichil percipit nisi auctoritate sponsi Cristi.”

¹⁴⁸ *De Officio Regis*, 125: “Basis outem cuiuscumque talis iudicii est scriptura.”

¹⁴⁹ *De Blasphemia*, 77: “Exemplum autem secundum quod iudicabitur, est scriptura quam omnes fideles debent cognoscere.”

¹⁵⁰ See John Wycliffe, *Sermons*, vol. 3 *super Epistolas*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1889), 505: “et sic scriptura foret illis regula ad heresim iudicandam;” John Wycliffe, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, vol. 3, ed. Rudolph Buddensieg (London: Trubner & Co., 1905), 198: “ex istis colligitur, cum quanta diligencia oportet notare scripturam sacram, ne error in sensu adhibito sit causa lapsus in heresim;” 274: “scriptura enim est regula, per quam optime discerni potest hereesis a suo opposito, ut pertinencius loquar, non nisi per noticiam scripture est hereesis cognoscenda.”

¹⁵¹ John Wycliffe, *Opus Evangelicum*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Paternoster House, 1895), 12: “ut allegando legem civilem, papalem sive canonicam statim contempnitur, nisi de quanto origo eius in lege Domini est edocta.”

worst, derived of Antichrist.¹⁵² It is interesting and important to note here that this authority of Scripture does not operate outside of the Church, but from within it, as the word of God spoken from Christ, the head of the Church.¹⁵³ The impression here is not that Wycliffe sees the Bible as operating alone in an exclusive sense, but as an essential basis for all other authority. Where that basis is absent, no authority exists that is binding on the believer. And so it was argued that the king of England, for example, “was not bound to obey the pope except in the case where obedience could be elicited from Scripture.”¹⁵⁴ It was also essential that the ceremonies of the Church be “grounded in Scripture.”¹⁵⁵ With regard to traditions, Wycliffe points out that faithful men maintain that none are to be accepted, whether papal or imperial, “unless they are established on the basis of the law of God.”¹⁵⁶

Closely related to the previous two points is the necessity of conformity to the sacred Scriptures in order to establish the legitimacy of any human ordinance.¹⁵⁷ Again, this did not

¹⁵² *Opus Evangelicum*, 97: “*omnis potestas in fide scripture non fundata est ab Antichristo sive diabolo false ficta...*”

¹⁵³ John Wycliffe, *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London: Trübner & Co., 1900), 69: “*Ex quo patet ulterius quod non licet dominis temporalibus redditus petere, nisi auctoritate ecclesie, quia Christi, vel quitquam facere nisi auctoritate ecclesie, quia auctoritate verbi Dei, qui est caput ecclesie.*” Wycliffe here seeks to limit the authority of the secular arm to correct clergy. Cf. *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 268: “*com omnes alie regule sunt deo et ecclesie sue odibiles, nisi de quanto fundantur in scriptura sacra...*”

¹⁵⁴ *Tractus De Officio Regis*, 146: “*Et patet quod regnum specialiter non tenetur parere pape nisi secundum obedienciam elicibilem ex scriptura.*” Cf. 224: “*Quod si queratur de legibus, de bullis et mandatis papalibus, quomodo debet obediri vel credi illis, patet quod precipure tante quante sunt fundabilia ex scripturis.*”

¹⁵⁵ *De Ecclesia*, 318: “*Si autem arguitur per locum a simili quod ritus nostri non valent, cum non sint fundabiles in Scripture, dico quod docto hoc de quocunque ritu est conclusio concedenda, qui tunc non sonaret ritus talis pietatem vel religionem Christi.*”

¹⁵⁶ *Dialogus Sive Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 77: “*Ideo fideles quidam religiose sustinent quod nulla traditio * humana est acceptanda, sive papalis, sive imperialis, sive provincialis alia, nisi de quanto in lege domini est fundata.*” See also, Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 6, v, §41.

¹⁵⁷ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 264: “*Et patet primo quod in ordinacione et operatione humana debet subintelligi condicionaliter conformatas legi Christi, Aliter enim liceret homini ordinare, obligare, vel statuere humano ingenio sine essentiali direccione voluntatis divine; quod est notorie impossibile.*” Cf. *Dialogus Sive Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 93: “*Sepe autem diximus, quod non sufficiunt omnes istam sentenciam concipere vel argue contra illam, cum tantum ad hoc sit ratio ydonea vel scriptra. Ideo tres maneries hominum hominum quantum ad artem suam attinet sunt ydonei in materia ista arguere, primo decretiste qui pure legibus papalibus innituntur, quia quid in materia ista dixerunt non valet sed*

exclude all authority except the Bible, but it did establish the necessity of the support of Christ's law. Bishops could establish ordinances, but only to the degree that these ordinances "were based on and consistent with the law of Christ."¹⁵⁸ In a similar way, "no creature is to be believed except as he speaks in conformity to Scripture."¹⁵⁹ Canon law might be necessary and useful for study, but only in so far as it expresses evangelical law.¹⁶⁰ With regard to difficulties that are not addressed by Scripture, it is the better part of wisdom to leave them unanswered.¹⁶¹

Wycliffe took a number of institutions and issues to task on the basis of this principle of the necessity of Biblical authority. The religious rites of the Church were not to be imposed on believers without the authority of God's word.¹⁶² Monastic obedience¹⁶³ and private

est contempnendum, constat enim de quanto rationi consonat vel scripture." Cf. *De Blasphemia*, 10: "Et quantum ad leges hominum que videntur istis contrarie, patet quod non lignant nisi de quanto in lege Cristi fundate fuerint, consone rationi."

¹⁵⁸ *De Officio Regis*, 221: "Veritas itaque est quod licet episcopis nostris statuere ordinaciones de quanto fundantur et consonant legi Cristi." Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 543: "patet quod nulli prelato post sanctos apostolos tenemur obedire nisi de quanto precipit aut consulti Christi consilia vel mandata."

¹⁵⁹ *De Veritate, Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 382: "non enim debet credi creature, nisi de quanto loquitur conformiter ad scripturam." Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 248. Speaking of Clement, Wycliffe says, "Unde licet iste fuit magnus doctor in propriis, in theologia non est credendum sibi, nisi de quanto se fundaverit in scriptura."

¹⁶⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 271: "et sic concedo, quod expedit, multa adiscere iura canonica, sed primo omnium secundum illiam partem, in qua expressius docetur lex ewangelica;" *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 178: "argumentum de iure canonico quod...est licitum, ymmo necessarium. Sed...non valet nisi fundet ius ewangelicum."

¹⁶¹ *Dialogus Sive Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 21: "Ideo prudentes habent hanc consuetudinem quando difficultas circa veritatem aliquam ventilatur. In primis considerant quid fides scripture loquitur in this puncto et quicquid hec fides in illa materia diffinierit credunt stabiliter tanquam fidem. Si autem fides Scripture neutram partem ejus expresserit, dimitunt illud tanquam eis impertinens, et non litigant vel contendunt que pars habeat veritatem."

¹⁶² *De Eucharistia*, 281: "Sic nec lex Christi nec eius cerimonie debent gravari sine auctoritate scripture." Wycliffe confronts church ceremonies regarding baptism. Cf. *Opus Evangelicum*, 37: "Ideo laudanda est quedam virtualis consuetudo multum in hac parte, qui ut fidei consenciant quod non valet consuetudo ordinis sive secte, nisi in lege Dei sit fundata."

¹⁶³ *De Officio Regis*, 110: "Nec video tantum sacramentum in obediencia claustrali humanitus introducta, licet per accidens multum profecerit. Nam religio Baptiste et apostolorum fuit multum perfeccior, non enim prodest nisi in quantum habilitat ad observanciam legis Cristi." Wycliffe was especially concerned that monastic obedience not diminish the Scriptural obligation to obey the king: "Et patet quod secundum legem dei, et leges utirusque partis ecclesie, plus obediendum est regi quam provato abbati, cum advencio introducta in regnum non debet dirimere obedienciam prius regi debitam ex auctorisatione scripture et legis imperatorie."

religious orders¹⁶⁴ were also condemned by Wycliffe to the degree that they operated outside of Scripture.¹⁶⁵ Clerical celibacy was ordered on the basis of canon law, but Wycliffe argued that priests should be allowed to marry without being punished, because the law of God permitted it.¹⁶⁶ Punishments related to excommunication were outside the boundaries established by Scripture¹⁶⁷ along with temporal jurisdiction of the clergy¹⁶⁸ in general. In like manner, it was argued that Church requirements concerning confession were not binding on Christians because they depended on the authority of Church tradition rather than Scripture.¹⁶⁹ In some cases, believing in “Scripture only” would mean rejecting belief in some papal bulls and definitions, as well as indulgences, et. al.¹⁷⁰

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Another important observation that Wycliffe returns to repeatedly has to do with the sufficiency of Scripture. He repeatedly emphasizes that the law of Christ is sufficient of

¹⁶⁴ *Polemical Works in Latin*, ii: 524: “*Patet quod preter patrem luminum religiositas ista habuit aliam originem. Non enim in toto ewangelio fundatur tacite vel expresse;*” cf. i: 229.

¹⁶⁵ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 19-20: “*Nulli privati ritus preter ritus eos qui in ewangelio fundantur implicite constituunt novum ordinem laude dignum. Probatur sic: Omnis lex humana laudabilis ... fundatur in ewangelio, ergo conclusio.*”

¹⁶⁶ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 384: “*Unde non est ex iure divino ded iure canonico quod clericus occidentalis ecclesie non utilitur carnali matrimonio. Confirmatur ex quo stat cum lege Christi quod clericus habeat uxorem et prolem, sequitur quod cum eadem lege stat omne quod esset necessarium sacerdoti coniugato quoad se, uxorem, filios et suam familiam; sed magis necessarie forent divicie et occupacio civilis, cum aliter propter maliciam mundi non starent pacifice, ergo conclusio..*”

¹⁶⁷ See *De Officio Regis*, 229.

¹⁶⁸ *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 268-269: “*Quod si obicitur dominum papam, episcopum et abbates habere iurisdictionem temporalem ad suspendendum et quomodolibet occidendum homines secundum iura civilia...Et istud credo numquam fundabitur ex sacra scriptura.*”

¹⁶⁹ *De Blasphemia*, 128-129: “*Ideo, opinio glossantis est quod melius dicitur confessionem institutam a quadam universalis ecclesie tradicionem, potius quam ex scripture auctoritate; et illa est obligatoria ut mandatum. Sed videtur quod deus non dedit hoc mandatum in lege completissima quod non obligat cristianum. Item, ecclesia eciam triumphans nichil percipit nisi auctoritate sponsi Cristi; et per consequens, si tradicio ecclesie sit licita, potissime fieret auctoritate scripture, que est verbum domini.*”

¹⁷⁰ *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 23: “*quia si in tali materia solum debet fidelis credere scripture sacre non crederet bullis papalibus vel diffinitioni curie romane, et sic omnis fides adhibenda sociis fidelibus conversantibus deperiret et multo magis non crederetur indulgenciis, literis episcopalibus vel literis fraternitatum de suffragio spiritali.*”

itself¹⁷¹ for the instruction,¹⁷² guidance,¹⁷³ preaching,¹⁷⁴ regulation of the Church¹⁷⁵ and temporals,¹⁷⁶ and correction¹⁷⁷ of the whole Church such that “all other laws are superfluous.”¹⁷⁸ Putting this another way, the law of Christ in Scripture is described as the “fullest and most succinct”¹⁷⁹ standard available. It is, therefore, “sufficient for the faithful Christian to love Christ purely and keep His law.”¹⁸⁰ Not only is it unnecessary to add to

¹⁷¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 131: “nonne lex Christi in scriptura tradita per se sufficit?” ii: 144: “videtur, quod lex mandatorum dei sit per se sufficiens.” This is also repeatedly emphasized in the following notes.

¹⁷² *Tractus De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 437: “colligitur quod Scriptura sacra, secundum formam et limites quibus exprimitur in nostris codicibus, debet sufficere ad completam instructionem ecclesie.” It should be noted here that Wycliffe is speaking concerning the written documents themselves.

¹⁷³ *Dialogus Sive Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 77-78: “Patet ex hoc quod lex Christi est gravissima, qui dei sufficientissima et completissima cuiuslibet hominis directiva;” *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 394-395: “Occasione ditorum duobus proximis capitula de per se sufficiencia legis Chirsti, dubitatur si ipsa per se sufficeret, sine lege human superaddita, fundare et dirigere pro statu vie religionem integram Christianam.”

¹⁷⁴ *De Officio Regis*, 111: “Et patet tercio quod scriptura foret per se sufficiens ad regimen ecclesie, sive predicando, sive subditos regulando.”

¹⁷⁵ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 401: “Item Legifer noster dedit legem per se sufficientem ad regendum universalem ecclesiam...sed non dedit aliquam legum istarum quas memini, sed patenter reprobavit, cum non sit lex ewangelica vel aliqua eius pars; ergo omnes ille superfluunt;” *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 153: “Legifer noster dominus Jesus Christus legem per se sufficientem dedit ad regimen universalis ecclesie militantis et non dedit legem ad communicandum vel distribuendum temporalia nisi duntaxat legem caritatis et ad defendendum temporalia virtutem paciendi iniurias, ergo illa per se sufficit eciam melius ad utilitatem ecclesie quam leges humanitus adinvente;” 179: “patet quod lex Christi inscripta nostris codicibus sufficit satis explicite regere matrem ecclesiam, ita quod non oportet legem novam superaddere, eciam post dotacionem ecclesie.” *De Apostasia*, 13: “Cum igitur deus dedit regulam completam religionis in lege scripture.”

¹⁷⁶ *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 195: “Ulterius conceditur quod episcopi habent leges sufficientes ex scriptura quantum ad temporalia, et sic sane tripliciter potest intelligi legem vocatam civilem esse legi Dei contrariam.”

¹⁷⁷ *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 172: “Primo quod ecclesia habet intra se ex lege scripture ius per se sufficiens ad dedandum omnem defectum intra ecclesiam, ut patet ex sufficiencia legis Christi...declarata.”

¹⁷⁸ *De Ecclesia*, 318: “Si autem arguitur per locum a simili quod ritus nostri non valent, cum non sint fundabiles in Scripture, dico quod docto hoc de quocunque ritu est conclusio concedenda, qui tunc non sonaret ritus talis pietatem vel religionem Christi”; Cf. *De Officio Regis*, 222: “conclusio ex hoc quod legifer noster dominus iesus Cristus legem per se sufficientem dedit and reegimen tocius ecclesie militantis, ut hic supponitur, ergo vel oportet quod lex quod lex papalis sit pars legis Cristi vel omnino superflua.”

¹⁷⁹ *Polemical Works*, i: 229: “Cristus, dominus noster omnipotens, omnisciens et omnivolus, fuit in lege et ordinatione sua completissimus, compendiosissimus et nullo modo a deo vel creatura aliqua culpabilis vel eciam defectivus.”

¹⁸⁰ *De Blasphemia*, 8: “Sufficit enim fidelibus quod ipsi pure diligant et teneant legem Cristi.” Cf. 127: “Ymmo, sicut obediencia facta deo sufficit ad salutem, sine obediencia humanitus adinventam...”

Scripture, because of its sufficiency; it is also unlawful.¹⁸¹

There are two matters that should be clarified here. First, Wycliffe did not advocate a mere biblicism in which all the items mentioned above were established on the basis of particular statements of Scripture explicitly taken. There was a place for case law designed to address particular needs not explicitly addressed in the Bible. He could concede that it was “lawful for bishops and Vicars of Christ [*Petri vicariis*] to compose statutes for the edification of the Church which ought to be obeyed.” The condition, however, was that these statutes not contradict Scripture. Just as important as this, though, was the principle that these statutes be clearly based on the authority of the law of Christ, rather than the law of the Church.¹⁸² This supports the point made earlier that for Wycliffe, authority was grounded in the word of Christ in Scripture, rather than apostolic succession. In some cases, this may have been more a matter of principle than practice, but it was a principle that the Church had lost sight of and it opened the door to unacceptable practices. As a result it was important to consider that Canon laws were either “traditions of men’s invention or expressions of the law of the gospel.”¹⁸³ In the former case, they were to be rejected and in the latter, the real basis of authority was to be acknowledged. This formed the basis for Wycliffe’s approval of decisions made by the early Church in contrast to his condemnation of the Church of his day.

¹⁸¹ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 13: “*Et tunc videtur quod non licet religionem novam superaddere; nam non licet legem novam superaddere; omnis religio est lex, ergo non licet religionem novam superaddere.*” Here Wycliffe is speaking against the institution of private religious orders, which were not founded based on Scripture. Cf. *Liber Primus*, 428, 429. Cf. *De Eucharistia*, 229: “*Cum ergo lex scripture tradidit nobis de eukaristia sufficiens ad credendum, videtur quod sit presumptuosa stulticia preter eius fundacionem superaddere novitates.*”

¹⁸² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 403: “*non negatur tamen, sed conceditur, quod licet episcopis, Petri vicariis, condere statuta ad edificacionem ecclesie, qualia debent supponi esse, quecunque statuerint, nisi statutorum et scripture sacre contrarietas clamet oppositum; sed quod statuta huiusmodi, in quantum a papa edita, sint paris autoritatis cum ewangelio, videtur michi sapere expressam blasphemiam.*”

The matter to be clarified is that the sufficiency of Scripture is not a statement about how much information it contains, but that what it contains is all that is necessary. It is true that Wycliffe repeatedly emphasizes his belief that “all truth is contained in Scripture,”¹⁸⁴ which is part of Wycliffe’s complex philosophy and largely beyond the scope of this paper. What is important to understand is that his emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture often implies a call to return to the intended simplicity of the gospel.¹⁸⁵ In many cases, human traditions were not necessarily wicked; they were not all opposed to or contrary to Scripture. But even the accumulation of relatively benign statutes, tended to become burdensome and a source of confusion.¹⁸⁶ His emphasis is not that the Church would be better off without papal authority altogether, but that she would be better off if that authority held to the sufficiency—and, therefore, simplicity—of Scripture.¹⁸⁷ Unfortunately, many papal obligations had become a burden that threatened “the primitive liberty of the law of Christ.”¹⁸⁸ A good example of an unnecessary complexity that had been added to the life of the Church by the

¹⁸³ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 125: “*Ius canonicum vocatur ius a prelati ecclesie institutum et promulgatum ad rebelles sacris regullis coerendum: et potest intelligi ut incommunicans iuri ewangelico, ut sunt tradiciones humanitus invente; vel ut communicans iuri ewangelico, ut sunt articuli fidei in sanctis synodis sive consiliis explanati.*”

¹⁸⁴ E.g. *De Apostasia*, 16: “*in scriptura sit omnis veritas.*” Cf. *Sermons*, i: 84; *Dialogus Sive Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 94; *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 22, 138; ii: 163; *De Officio Regis*, 221; *De Blasphemia*, 51; *Sermones*, i: 84. He also argues that “all destructive error is in the gospel.” *Opus Evangelicum*, 91: “*omnis veritas et omnis erroris destructio est in evangelio;*”

¹⁸⁵ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 13: “*suppono quod religio christiana dicat simpliciter religionem quam Christus in evangelio expresse instituit sine conmixtione ceremonie humane posterius explicatae.*”

¹⁸⁶ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 428: “*Item onerare vel perturbare legem Christi est illicitum, sed sic faciunt adinventiones humane, ergo sunt illicite.*”

¹⁸⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 402: “*et quantum ad autoritatem gubernandi, patet, quod dicta non diminuit dictam autoritatem, eo quod multi sancti Petri vicarii mediarunt inter Petrum et primum decretalium conditorem, quibus vere apperuit pro regimine ecclesie sufficere leges Cristi in tantum, quod si ille forent plene ad debitum execute, melius staret ecclesia quam hodie, postquam tradiciones hominum sunt adeo multiplicatae et cum tanta diligencia execute.*”

¹⁸⁸ *De Blasphemia*, 161: “*Et si allegatur obediencia servanda pape: moveat illud claustrales, qui observant ceremonias sui privati ordinis preter necessarie introducti. Nos autem teneamus libertatem primevam legis Cristi.*”

fourteenth century was that of the private religious orders.¹⁸⁹ In contrast, Wycliffe saw the simplicity of the gospel message in that “it is not absolutely necessary for salvation for us to believe anything except that God is and that he rewards his servants.”¹⁹⁰

Faith and Practice

Both in its necessary and sufficient authority, the Holy Scriptures stand as the only rule of faith and practice for the Christian. As the forerunner of the English Reformation said, “*scripturam sacram...est fides catholica*”¹⁹¹ to which every Christian must yield. Wycliffe opened his significant work on Scripture maintaining that the Bible “constitutes the salvation of the faithful, ...is the foundation of every catholic opinion...and is the exemplar and mirror for examining and extinguishing every error and heretical practice.”¹⁹² It is the chief foundation and measure of all knowledge for the Christian.¹⁹³ In a delightfully playful illustration the erudite Englishman spoke of “the game of this present life” in which every generation of Christians plays “in the stadium of this age” with “angels and blessed men” as “spectators.” The goal of this game is to “play one’s position well” so as to be assured of a place in the game of the next life following God’s judgment. Apparently as captains of the team, it is important for all priests to establish Holy Scripture as the “rule-book”¹⁹⁴ for this

¹⁸⁹ See *De Civilio Dominio Liber Tertius*, 13; *Polemical Works in Latin*, i: 229: “ideo catholicus debet quiescere in mensura ordinate Iesu Christi sui. Maior patet ex fide, minor ex hoc evidet, quod secta Christi compendiosissima sit per se sufficiens, ergo superflueret addere novas sectas.”

¹⁹⁰ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 437: “Non enim oportet nos de necessitate absoluta salutis quidquam fidei credere explicite, nisi quod Deus est et remunerat servos suos.”

¹⁹¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 34. Cf. i: 155: “fides enim dependet ex scriptura”

¹⁹² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 1-2: “quia in illa consistit salus fidelium, tum qui illa est fundamentum cuicunque opinioni catholice, sed ex exemplar est et speculum ad examinandum et extigendum quemcunque errorem sive hereticam pravitatem.” Cf. iii: 145: “tota scriptura signat fidem et mores.”

¹⁹³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, 399: “ita quod scriptura sacra, cum sit fides et per consequens primum fundamentum noticie cristiane, mensuret quamcunque aliam noticiam.”

¹⁹⁴ Christopher Levy, trans., *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 321. Cf. *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 129: “dedit deus scripturam regulativam humani generis...”

game. It is important that every priest in this game be exceedingly familiar with the pages of that book so that by his wisdom “he might play the game well in holiness of life.”¹⁹⁵

In a rare expression of warmth, Wycliffe reminds Christians that they must, like doves, build their nests on the living stone while finding their nourishment in the pure grain of Scripture.¹⁹⁶ In another place, he reminds the pastor who is responsible for caring for his flock that “this spiritual office cannot be performed without the knowledge of Holy Scripture.” There is no higher priority than this for the spiritual shepherd who takes his work seriously.¹⁹⁷ In fact, the essence of being a pastor is “in feeding [the flock] the law of Scripture,”¹⁹⁸ for the Bible is necessary for spiritual growth.¹⁹⁹

Along the lines that have been suggested earlier, understanding Scripture as the basis for faith and living was not intended to discourage all belief in the teaching of the Church or even the Pope. Faith in Scripture was not necessarily independent of the Church and her human teachers, but it did imply that such teachers including the Pope were to be believed only to the extent that they preached the truth of the Bible, “the entire foundation of truth.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 103: “*omnem filium ecclesie concurrere ad interludium pro tempore huius vite...erit autem post diem iudicii ludus alius consumatus, quem ludum nemini licet ingredi, nisi pro tempore huius peregrinationis in dicto interludio rite luserit porcionem, cuius iudicium spectat, ut sepe dixi, ad numerum beatorum. angeli enim et homines beati intuentur continue ex altis sedilibus totam nostram agonizacionem et quidquid bene vel male fecerimus in stadio huius vie. oportet autem, sacerdotes facere scripturam sacram, quam oportet esse originalia huius ludi, sic quod, de quanto quis ab originali pagine huius exorbitat, de tanto interludium interrumpit. ex quo patet, quod pernecessarium est, quemcunque sacerdotem in hoc interludio paginam istam supereminenter agnoscere et de exemplari suo in humanitate dicte sapiencie secundum sanctitatem vite alludere.*”

¹⁹⁶ *Sermons*, 4: 340: “*Per simplicitatem vero columbinam informatur affectus cum sine duplicitate et felle amuritudinis inmitteretur christianus lapidi vivo in nidificando nutritus puro grano scripture.*”

¹⁹⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 161: “*item ad pastorem in quantum huiusmodi spectat minandi, pascendi et defendendi officium, sed hoc officium spirituale nullo modo potest perfici sine sciencia scripture sacre, igitur omnem spiritualem pastorem oportet precipue habere scienciam sacre scripture.*”

¹⁹⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 172-173: “*consistit in pastu legis scripture.*”

¹⁹⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 142: “*spirituale autem non potest acquiri sine doctrina scriptura sacre.*”

²⁰⁰ *De Blasphemia*, 44: “*non est credendum romano pontifici, nisi in veritate: ergo, non est credendum, nisi in scriptura, in qua est omnis fundacio veritatis.*”

Both clergy and laity must be aware that the basis for religious practice can never be found outside the boundary implicitly established by the word of God.²⁰¹ In the same way, it is not acceptable to add to the faith of Scripture.²⁰² In short, “it is not lawful for man to do anything except by the authority and counsel of Scripture.”²⁰³

Sound Reasoning

Wycliffe also stressed the fundamental importance of Scripture for sound reasoning.²⁰⁴ In one place he identified three kinds of proof in terms of material element (*materiam*): (1) from the faith of Scripture (*locus a fide scripture*); (2) from rational discovery (*ab inventa racione*); and (3) from the testimony of a creature (*a testimonio creature*). He then concludes that of these, “the proof from the faith of Scripture is the strongest and most certain possibility...there is nothing better, more certain or more effective.”²⁰⁵ The reason for this is that “since all of Holy Scripture is the word of the Lord, how could anything be a better, more certain or more effective testimony? If God, who cannot lie, spoke thus in his Scripture,

²⁰¹ *Sermones*, iii: 262: “nulla circumstancia que non est implicite fundabilis in scriptura constituit aliquam religionem vel ordinem laude dignum.” Cf. *Sermones*, iii: 390: “Ex istis videtur inferri quod nulli fratres vel prelati quicquam debeant in materia fidei diffinire nisi ad hoc habuerint auctoritatem scripture vel revelacionem a spiritu speciale.” Cf. *Opus Evangelicum*, 368: “Dictum est autem quod leges humane sunt admittende a doctoribus dequantum consonant legi Dei...” Cf. *Opus Evangelici Liber Tertius*, 39: “Est autem catholica sententia, si quis ipsam audeat publicare, quod non debet esse lex aliqua nisi lex domini Jesu Christi.”

²⁰² *De Eucharistia*, 173: “Nec videtur quod ecclesia sit oneranda ut fide eorum testimonio, cum cotidie fiant ista miracula Augustinus dicit non posse fieri, sicut tempore Augustini Spiritus Sanctus noluit onerari ecclesiam dictis suis vel alterius preter auctores scripture tanquam fide catholica.”

²⁰³ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 438: “patet quod non licet homini quidquam facere nisi auctoritate et consilio Scripture.”

²⁰⁴ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 441: “patet quod locus ab auctoritate Scripture sit potissimus Deo possibilis, cum illa Scriptura sit veritas...et ipsa est verbum Dei, et per consequens sermo eius...”

²⁰⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 377: “locus autem a fide scripture est potissimus et certissimus possibilis.” In the next paragraph, he restates this opinion: “ex quibus colligitur cuilibet cristiano conclusio, quod locus ab auctoritate scripture sacre, qui est locus a fide, est potissimus possibilis. patet ex fide scripture, quam oportet credere, quod nec potest homo habere priorem nec cerciorem nec efficaciorum.”

which is the mirror of his will, it is therefore true.”²⁰⁶ Those who neglect this standard often end up fooling no one but themselves.²⁰⁷ Philosophical truths can be certain to be free of error only to the degree that they are based on the word of God,²⁰⁸ and so “the safest route is to use the terms and logic of Scripture.”²⁰⁹ In light of this, Wycliffe was careful to frame his own arguments in terms of Scripture.²¹⁰ He was confident that no argument based simply on tradition (especially that of Antichrist) would be able “to prevail against the law of Christ.”²¹¹

The Individual, Scripture and the Church

In Wycliffe’s day, the Church, and especially the Pope, exercised a considerable amount of power over the life and faith of the Church. To a large degree, individual Christians did and believed what they were told or else they faced the consequences, which could be quite severe. Individuals believed, but, for most, “faith” described their yielding to the Church (*fides qua creditur*) rather than the content of what they understood and accepted (*fides quae creditur*). The Church had established the right to keep the individual in conformity and was intent on maintaining that control. There is no doubt that Wycliffe challenged this situation by seeking to shift some power to the individual believer in matters of faith. The intent was not so much to encourage rebellion against the Church as it was to introduce (or reintroduce) an element of individual control designed to hold the Church more

²⁰⁶ Ibid.: “*cum enim tota scriptura sacra sit verbum domini, quomodo pposset esse prior, cercior vel efficacior testificancio, quam si deus, qui mentiri non potest, in scriptura sua, que est speculum voluntatis sue, hoc dixerit, igitur verum.*”

²⁰⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 380: “*et hinc pretermittentes evidenciam scripture sacre sepius illuduntur.*”

²⁰⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 127: “*non enim errores philosophorum vel alia dicta impossibilia sunt scriptura sacra, ymmo nec vera, nisi ex fide fuerint a deo autorizanta.*”

²⁰⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 309: “*ideo segura via est, uti terminis et logica scripture.*”

²¹⁰ Cf. *De Apostasia*, 19: In one of his frequent challenges to clerical wealth and corruption, Wycliffe says, “*Et istis duobus suppositis intendo procedere, non secundum vaticinium Hildegardis vel fabulas, sed secundum fidem scripture et secundum possibilitatem late vie apostasis.*”

²¹¹ *De Blasphemia*, 186: “*patet quod tradicio anticristi non debet precellere legem Cristi.*”

accountable to Scripture. In fact, Wycliffe was convinced that God had established Scripture as an objective medium (“*comunem scripturam sensibilem*”) designed to restrain the Church and her teachers and keep them from introducing new ideas under the guise of speaking for God.²¹²

In more precise terms, Wycliffe did not argue the right to believe whatever he wanted, but he did demand that his beliefs not be condemned by the Church without being shown that they were contrary to Scripture. In words that anticipated Luther’s future stand against Rome he defended his departure from the orthodoxy of his day with the willingness to recant if his views could be shown heretical on the basis of Scripture.²¹³ He challenged individual believers to hold the Church accountable by demanding that “innovations” be justified by demonstrating their basis in Scripture.²¹⁴ He also encouraged them not to allow the threat of excommunication to cause them “to decline from observing God’s law.”²¹⁵

Wycliffe argued for the right of individuals to challenge the authority of the Church on the basis of Scripture, on several grounds. He maintained that the Church had “no true privilege except to the degree that it was established, taught, or inferred from Scripture.”²¹⁶

²¹² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 380: “*et sic ne pseudo discipuli fingant, se inmediate habere a deo suam sententiam, ordinavit deus comunem scripturam sensibilem, ad cuius sensum catholicum capiendum deus non potest deficere, quin semper quosdam irradiet, ad quam irradiationem confert sanctitas vite et consonancia cum sensu sanctorum doctorum secundum etatem ecclesie a fonte sapientie derivata. et continuare istam irradiationem in matre ecclesia est theologorum officium, quos oportet stare in suis limitibus. unde non licet theologo, fingere aliena preter fidem scripture catholice. que si servaverit, erit undique non suspectus de heresi. et si queritur, quare non posset adversarius scripture dicere conformiter ad hec dicta, dicitur, quod bene posset, si vellet, sanctificare scripturam, quam maculate.*”

²¹³ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 356: “*cum sim paratus ad revocandum et emendandum me, si sim doctus, quod sit heretica.*”

²¹⁴ See *Sermones*, ii: 179: “*Quando ergo queritur a quocunque insueta exactio * vel move fidei innovacio, querat fidelis quomodo fundat suam sententiam * in scriptura; et cum sit periculosa novitas, consultat si ipsa catholice sit fundata.*”

²¹⁵ *De Blasphemia*, 106: “*Nemo debet propter excommunicacionem huiusmodi declinare ab observancia legis dei.*”

²¹⁶ *De Ecclesia*, 173: “*Ex istis elicitur quod nullum est verum privilegium ecclesie, nisi de quanto fundatur, docetur vel elicitur ex scriptura, Patet sic: Omnis lex utilis sancte matri ecclesie docetur explicite vel implicite in scriptura, omne privilegium est huiusmodi ex dictis: ergo conclusio. Confirmatur ex sepe dictis: Omnis veritas est in scriptrue sacra, omne*

He affirmed that “no law contrary to divine law is valid.”²¹⁷ Bulls and papal mandates required obedience or assent only to the degree that they were founded in Scripture.²¹⁸ Even religious orders were encouraged to free themselves from orders not based in Scripture or established only by papal determination; clergy were encouraged “to dismiss concern for papal laws in order to hold to the law of Christ.”²¹⁹

Summary

Based on the analysis in this chapter, it is argued that the term *sola scriptura* might be accurately applied to John Wycliffe’s understanding of Scripture in several ways. First, the term Scripture must be thought of primarily as the message that God seeks to communicate. More will be said of this in the next chapter, but for Wycliffe, *sola scriptura* includes the Catholic tradition associated with the words of the text. Second, the essential feature of *sola scriptura* is the uniqueness of the Bible as the word of God. This sets it apart from every human tradition and gives it an authority that no other writing enjoys. It is here that we also see some of the uniqueness of Wycliffe’s understanding of Scripture. It is because the Bible is the word of God that it is authoritative, and not because it is apostolic. If the Pope is to speak with authority as a successor of Peter, then he must do so by proclaiming Scripture and not his

privilegium est veritas quia lex, ergo conclusio.” Cf. p. 223: “*Tercio principaliter arguitur ex hoc quod omne bonum utile est fundabile in scriptura iuxta conclusionem secundam capituli VIII, sed non est fundabile in scriptura nece in lege ecclesie quod locum vel personam sic generaliter privilegiare liceat. Ergo non est bonum utile ecclesie et sic non privilegium alicui sic facere.*”

²¹⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 41: “*cum igitur nulla lex contraria legi divine sit valida, patet, quod null lex humana adiudicat tali legitime ulla bona.*” In the context of this statement, Wycliffe is addressing the issue of individuals seeking to hold the church accountable for its behavior.

²¹⁸ *De Officio Regis*, 224-225: “*Quod si queratur de legibus, de bullis et mandatis papalibus, quomodo debet obediri vel credi illis, patet quod precipue tante quante sunt fundabilia ex scripturis. Quo ad vitam operibus credite, quo ad mandata vel leges scripturam consulite, et quo ad bullas famam et facta persone respicite.*”

²¹⁹ *De Blasphemia*, 46: “*omnes privati ordines, qui non haben aliud fundamentum quam determinacionem papalem, cessare debeant. Et per idem omnes determinaciones romani pontificis, que non sunt patenter elicibiles exscriptura...totus clerus debet, dimissa solitudine legum papalium, legi Cristi intendere, etsi dicatur quod totales huiusmodi sit lex Cristi.*”

own words. Third, “Scripture alone” provides the necessary and sufficient basis for all authority in the Church. In addition, it is the unique and essential foundation for Christian faith and practice and the basis for all discussion. Finally, it represents the standard, not only for the faith of individual believers, but that by which the Church itself is held accountable.

CHAPTER III

THE CATHOLIC FAITH

The ambiguity of Scripture

The previous chapter addresses Wycliffe's understanding of the restraint that Scripture placed on the Church as a whole, which is appropriately summarized by the phrase, *sola scriptura*. This perspective contains a strong individual element in that it protects the individual from the abuse of authority applied outside of scriptural warrant, and allows even a single individual to call the Church to accountability based on the standard of "Scripture alone." By way of balance, this chapter is intended to address Wycliffe's understanding of the restraint placed on the individual with regard to Scripture. It can be summarized by the term "catholic" as a necessary limitation of the Christian faith. The standard of faith for every follower of Jesus Christ is established by the two constraints "only Scripture" and "all the Church."

The reason why this extra distinction is necessary is that the meaning of the written text of Scripture, by itself, can be either ambiguous, uncertain or both. Wycliffe describes this as the "equivocation" (*equivocis*) of Scripture²²⁰ and stresses it as an important factor to be

²²⁰ Whenever a term like equivocal is applied to Scripture it should be understood that the reference is to the written text, which is subject to interpretation. This is Scripture according to the fifth mode as described in the previous chapter. As hinted at previously and as will be developed further in this chapter, Scripture in the first four modes is not equivocal. Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 403: where Wycliffe points out that "*Codices autem nostros voco scripturam sacram equivocis tercio modo dictam; equivoce dico, qui non est nisi pictura remota humanitus inposita ad significandum scripturas priores.*" On this occasion, the "third mode" corresponds to what is referred to as the "fifth mode" in other places; it is Scripture in the form of Codices.

considered when interpreting Scripture. He says, “There are many such sayings in Scripture where the equivocation of terms can be served.”²²¹ One of the issues that Wycliffe confronted in his writings was the abuse of Scripture, common among the scholars of his day, that distorted Scripture based on an appeal to equivocal meanings.²²² They were doing this by twisting the words of Scripture in order to produce a sense that expressed error or contradiction. A particular example, from a wide variety of ways in which this was done, may be taken from John 10:7-11. There, Jesus says, “I am the door” and then a few verses later, “I am the good shepherd.”²²³ The error of Scripture was indicated in the first statement from the fact that Jesus was not really a door, and from the second, in relation to it, that he certainly couldn’t be both. A major thesis of Wycliffe, in this work, is that such false accusations based on the writings of Scripture are the result of interpreting these writings in a manner not intended by the author. He identifies the concept of equivocation (*equivocis*) as an important factor to be considered when interpreting Scripture and says that in this manner that it could be said (indeed was said) that the written documents of Scripture are filled with all manner of false statements²²⁴— if one interprets its words in ways not intended by its writers. In such cases, though, we should not “be disturbed by such false reasoning (*paralogismus*) derived from particular selections.”²²⁵ That such equivocation allowing either “erroneous or

²²¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 10. Many of these involve figurative use of language but the idea of equivocation is broader than this. Essentially it refers to situations where a sense may be applied to the words of Scripture which were not intended by the author of those words. This is aggravated by situations where this false sense unintended by the author is the most literal or superficially obvious way of taking his words.

²²² The confrontation of such abuse is a dominant element in Wycliffe’s most significant work on Scripture, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*.

²²³ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 7-9 where Wycliffe addresses this particular example.

²²⁴ Wycliffe speaks of a “*duplicem scripturam*” consisting of both “*sacram et maculatam*.” *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 191.

²²⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 136.

catholic”²²⁶ interpretations exists is not due to any defect in Holy Scripture itself, but arises from the unavoidable limitations of writing and human understanding.²²⁷ As such it is an unpreventable byproduct of what has been identified above as the fifth way of Scripture.²²⁸

At times, Wycliffe appears almost ruthless in his assessment of the deficiency of the written text of Scripture. He points out: “Scripture which is sensed through words and books is not Holy Scripture except in an equivocal sense.”²²⁹ Further on he comments concerning the fifth level of Scripture that “what it possesses is no more fittingly considered Scripture than the lines on a hand discerned in palm-reading, or the configuration of points for prognosticating from the earth.”²³⁰ As shocking as these statements may appear at first glance, they are profoundly insightful. It is a simple fact supported now by almost 2000 years of church history that the written words of Scripture may be interpreted in many different, often contradictory and even false, ways. Such interpretations are not Scripture *simply* because they can be derived from the written text alone. Only one sense extracted from the fifth mode corresponds to Holy Scripture in the first and second modes. In this way, the written text is considered holy only to the degree that it “leads the faithful into acquaintance with heavenly Scripture.”²³¹ By itself, *sola scriptura* (referring only to the written text) is too broad to serve as a basis for faith.

²²⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 125.

²²⁷ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 193: “*nichil enim est falsum nisi propter falsitatem, que sibi inest. Falsitas autem in proposito est in false intelligente et non in scriptura sacra...*”

²²⁸ See p. 26.

²²⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 111: “*scriptura sensibilis in vocibus vel codicibus non est scriptura sacra nisi equivoce.*”

²³⁰ John Wyclif, *John Wyclif: On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. Ian Christopher Levy, 102.

²³¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 115: “*sacra autem nullo modo dicitur, nisi propter manuduccionem, qua indicit fideles in noticiam Scripture celestis.*”

The Problem of Heresy

It is this inherent ambiguity of the written text of Scripture that gives rise to the problem of heresy. This is a problem that had confronted the Church from the very beginning. It is important to understand here that heresy is contrary to Scripture in terms of the formal sense of the latter. The difficulty is the fact that, in many cases, both heresy and the catholic faith appeal to “Scripture alone” in its material sense. As Wycliffe says, it is necessary “to concede a twofold Scripture, clearly the sacred and the impure.”²³² It is possible to hold to a “perverted understanding” (*sinistre...intelligens*) so that the same material of Holy Scripture may be taken as the material of an heretical understanding contrary to it.²³³ This is a problem that was recognized very early on in the Church: that “as Holy Scripture is a nest for faithful chicks, so also understanding it erroneously is a nest for heretics.” The latter “allege Scripture for themselves” and “comprehend it as they please, thereby twisting it into a perverse sense.”²³⁴ In the previous chapter it was observed that Wycliffe believed all truth to be found in Scripture; he also maintained that just as every catholic truth is included there, so every heresy is found there²³⁵ and damned there.²³⁶

²³² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 191: “*et sic iuxta hoc est dare duplicem scripturam, scilicet sacram et maculatam.*” Cf. i: 166: “*secundo argitur, cum scriptura sacra quinto modo dicta sexto cap. sit signum scriptum, quod una vice potest significare sensum catholicum et alia vice sensum hereticum, videtur de possibili, quod scriptura sacra erit heretica...*” Cf. i: 135: where it also indicated that heresy may depart from Holy Scripture in both and matter: “*dampnum ecclesie ex pravitate heretica...ex defectu imitationis scripture quoad formam et materiam exoriri.*”

²³³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 167: “*patet, quod sinistre ipsa intelligens facit ea non esse sibi scripturam sacram, sed multis contrarie intelligentibus eadem signa, tunc illa sunt uni materiale in heresi, alteri autem sunt materiale in scriptura sacra. et sic committanter habent duo in casu scripturam sacram et scripturam ut decipiat.*”

²³⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 136: “*sicut scriptura sacra est nidus pullorum fidelium, sic ius error est nidus hereticorum...heretici allegant pro se scripturam...et non concedendo eam ex integro capiunt eis placitum, quod extorquent ad sensum sinistrum...*”

²³⁵ *Opus Evangelicum*, 91: “*omnis veritas et omnis erroris destructio est in evangelio.*” Here Wycliffe is following the opinion of Augustine.

²³⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 278: “*sicut ibi omnis veritas catholica est inclusa, sic ibi omnis heresis est dampnata.*”

When it comes to interpreting the words of Scripture there are only two choices: either a meaning is “catholic or heretical;”²³⁷ whatever is opposed to orthodoxy is heresy.²³⁸ All heresy, then, involves a departure from the life and doctrine of Christ,²³⁹ and also results when Scripture is expounded contrary to the Holy Spirit. Heresy is more than just a simple misunderstanding, so that one may actually hold an heretical opinion without truly being a heretic. For example, one may unintentionally hold a false opinion and then change later when taught differently.²⁴⁰ Heresy incorporates an element of willfulness and persistence.²⁴¹ The definition that Wycliffe often refers to is that heresy is “a false dogma, contrary to Holy Scripture, which is persistently defended.”²⁴² The error lies, not in some object, but in “an evil disposition in act or habit, by which an infidel holds an opinion contrary to the catholic faith.”²⁴³

The Catholic Sense

As noted previously, the accusation has been made that the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is unable to confront or resolve the different individual interpretations and heresies that appeal

²³⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 169: “ideo indubie vel est ista sententia catholica vel heretica.”

²³⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 299: “quod heresis contrariatur fidei orthodoxe.”

²³⁹ *De Ecclesia*, 41: “Sed vita et doctrina Christi sunt optimum speculum, ubi possunt hec discerni, cum manifestum sit quod omnis homo et solum talis qui est in vita Christo contrarius est hereticus, et omnis christianus est solum talis qui est in vita en doctrina Christo conformis est ut sic ab heresi elongatus.”

²⁴⁰ *De Eucharistia*, 155: “Hic dicitur quod multi sunt heretici, aliqui cogniti et aliqui ignoti, omnes enim presciti sunt heretici, sed aliqui sunt heretici in actu et alii in habitu, licet sin in gracia secundum presentem iusticiam. Aliqui eciam sunt heretici ad tempus solum secundum presentem iusticiam ut predestinati in mortali, et sic de multis divisionibus cum suis declaracionibus quas hic suppono, sed notum est quod stat multos homines tene sententiam hereticam sine hoc ipsi sint tunc heretici, quia multi opinative vel conditionaliter tenent multas sententias parati ad revocando docto opposito.”

²⁴¹ *De Apostasia*, 80: “quicumque pertinaciter exposuerit sacram scripturam aliter quam spiritua sanctus flagitat est hereticus.”

²⁴² *De Veritate Sacrae Scapture*, i: 159: “heresis autem est dogma falsum, scripture sacre contrarium, pertinaciter defensatum.” See also iii, 275. Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 58 where this definition is attributed to Robert Crosseteste in the editors marginaliz.

²⁴³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 275: “quod heresis non est falsitas ex parte rei, sed mala dispositio in actu vel habitu, qua infidelis sentit contra fidem catholicam.”

to the written text of Scripture for their support. This accusation cannot be reasonably applied against Wycliffe's understanding of Scripture though, which clearly confronts the problem of individualism²⁴⁴ in interpretation. Different people may interpret the writings of Scripture differently, but this in no way establishes the validity of any and every interpretation. Holy Scripture is limited to the truth expressed in levels one and two and, on a human level, that truth is best expressed as the *catholic* faith.²⁴⁵ This term is found consistently throughout the writings of John Wycliffe as identifying the meaning of Scripture that God intends for every believer.²⁴⁶ Synonymous with the catholic faith, and more fully descriptive of it, is the "orthodox faith," which every Christian must believe.²⁴⁷ All truth is Catholic truth and, as such, is to be believed, learned and studied by the Christian.²⁴⁸ A distinction is to be made between an erroneous sense (*sensibus erroneis*) and the catholic sense (*sensus catholicus*),²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ The term "individualism" here is used to identify a unique or particular interpretation of Scripture that is accepted by only one or a small number of Christians. It represents an obvious departure from the formula of Vincent of Lerin. As Wycliffe says, "*ille enim est primo sacra, in qua omnes catholici communicant, cum sit una comunis fides toti ecclesie.*" *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 189.

²⁴⁵ With regard to a particular subject, Wycliffe makes a statement that would seem to have general application when he says, "*ideo indubie vel est ista sententia catholica vel heretica.*" *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 169.

²⁴⁶ It would be difficult and unnecessary to identify every instance in which Wycliffe uses the term "catholic". The following are just some examples of what is typical throughout his writing: *De Ecclesia*, 334: "*catholice veritati*;" *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 71; *Opus Evangelicum*, 388: "*querendi fidem catholicam*;" *De Apostasia*, 47; "*sensus catholicus*" *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 99; *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 123. "*conclusiones katholice*" *De Officio Regis*, 78. Wycliffe identifies those who hold to the truth faith as "catholics." See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 182: "*adiruo autem catholicos...*;" The church is the "catholic" or "universal" church based on a common faith. See *De Ecclesia*, 7: "*Secunda conclusio sequens ex quiditate matris ecclesiae est quod tantum est una, sic quod non multe ecclesiae catholice. Demonstratur sic: Eo ipso quod est ecclesia universalis sive catholica, ipsa continet in se omnes predestinatos. Non est possibile quod sit nisi una talis, igitur non est possibile quod sit nisi una universalis ecclesia;*" The faithful teacher of the church is the *doctor catholicus*. See *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 403.

²⁴⁷ *Sermons*, i: 208: "*et ideo necesse est omnem hominem habere fidem orthodoxam domini Jesus Christi.*" Cf. *Tractus De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 191: "*fides orthodoxa artat nos credere potest catholicus philosophice sustinere.*"

²⁴⁸ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 404: "*Ex istis quinto sequitur quod omnis veritas est catholica: nam omnem veritatem debet Christianus credere, discere, et studere; ad veritatem catholicam licet Christiano taliter se habere; ergo conclusio.*"

²⁴⁹ *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 99.

and truths that are “*contrarius catholice veritati*” are to be rejected as heretical.²⁵⁰ It is very important to understand that, for Wycliffe, “Holy Scripture... is the Catholic faith,”²⁵¹ and that “the truth which the catholic understands from Scripture is called the understanding of Scripture.”²⁵² This catholic sense is associated, not simply with the material of the text, but with the form of the words,²⁵³ and is the sense intended by the Holy Spirit.²⁵⁴ Another way of saying this is that the Christian is obligated to believe “catholically.”²⁵⁵ When Scripture is understood in a false sense, it ceases to be Scripture,²⁵⁶ even if it is derived from “Scripture alone.”

The word *catholic* is simply too much a part of Wycliffe’s vocabulary to support any notion of individualistic interpretation based on “Scripture only.” This catholic sense is the sense of the author or author’s intent and represents the only legitimate understanding of the words of Scripture.²⁵⁷ There is, however, an individuality to Wycliffe’s understanding of the

²⁵⁰ *De Ecclesia*, 334-335. Cf. *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 273. Here Wycliffe is dealing with those who initially make accusations against Scripture, charging it with falsehood based on certain equivocations, who then turn around “*fatentes, quod scriptura non debet habere sensum illum fictum, sed sensum catholicum, quem exponunt.*” While this technically is not heresy, Wycliffe does see it as undermining the authority of Scripture. See i: 375: “*Finaliter quoad auctoritatem scripture colligendo predicta patet, quod falsificantes scripturam sacram secundum sensum sinistrum nedum tollunt ab ea auctoritatem, sed quantuncunq[ue] catholicum sensum sciunt ei apponere, faciunt, quantum in se est, auctoritatem eius titubare vel minui.*”

²⁵¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 34: “*Scripturam sacram, que est fides catholica.*” See also, i: 380. Cf. i: 130: “*ideo sepe dixi, quod error in sensu scripture, cum ipsa sit fides catholica, introduxit totum malum humani generis.*”

²⁵² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 124: “*ut veritas, quam catholicus senit de scriptura, vocatur sensus scripture.*”

²⁵³ *De Apostasia*, 78: “*Cum itaque fidelis debet tenere formam verborum scripture sacre cum sensu catholico.*”

²⁵⁴ *Polemical Works in Latin*, 75: “*Secundo arguiter pro hac parte, quemcunq[ue] sensum catholicum, quem verba pretendunt secundum sensum grammaticalem, primarium illum sensum spiritus sanctus per verba sua intelligit, sed sic processum est in istis verbis ewangelii exponendo, ergo spiritus sanctus illos intelligit.*”

²⁵⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 53: “*sed omne tale credi debet de deo catholice.*” Cf. *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 97: “*intelligo catholice...*” Cf, p. 116.

²⁵⁶ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 404: “*Unde difformans ipsa per sensum erroneum facit ea tunc non esse scripturam sacram.*”

²⁵⁷ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 183: “*item capio scripturam sacram legalem vel prophetica[m], que nunc solum intelligatur catholice, pure ad sensum auctoris...*” Cf. i: 184: “*pono ergo, quod dicta scriptura intelligatur primo solum*

authority of Scripture only, which is well summarized by Workman: it is “the right of every man, whether cleric or layman, to examine the Bible for himself.”²⁵⁸ No man has the right to believe what he wants, but every man has the right to understand that what he believes is taught by the authority of “Scripture only.” The authority of the Church is not to tell anyone what to believe, but to show everyone what “Scripture alone” teaches.²⁵⁹ In this way, both the individual and the Church as a whole hold each other accountable for what is taught in “Scripture alone.”

Ives Congar has argued that “Individuals like Wycliffe and Huss were moving toward a position of *scriptura sola* that in effect produced a separation between the Church and Scripture.”²⁶⁰ While this may indeed have been the tendency among some of their followers—a tendency that certainly is present in the 21st century—this assertion seems unjustified, at least in the case of Wycliffe. In fact, the evidence indicates just the opposite. It is very clear that in Wycliffe’s mind there is no proper separation between the Church and Scripture; the two are inseparably bound together. The truth of Scripture and the understanding of the Church as a whole were never meant to occur independently of each other. In words that seem very consistent with what contemporary Roman Catholics like Congar would affirm, Wycliffe points out that,

For all the faith by which it is believed [*fides qua creditur*] sown in mother Church

ad sensum catholicum.” With a touch of humor, Wycliffe then goes on to give an example of “some Catholic fellow, whom we shall call Peter” who understand Scripture according to contrary concepts which are therefore heretical.

²⁵⁸ Workman, ii, 151.

²⁵⁹ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 207: “nam tota fides, qua creditur, seminata in matre ecclesia quoad singula eius membra secundum incitativum sensibile facta est per sonum parvium ecclesie predicantium verbum Cristi...sic quod sonus dispersus in omnem terram per membra ecclesie \, et sensus est quasi formale, ex quibus agregatur una substantia sperandorum. Sive autem induatur sono sive colore vel quocunque alio signo sensibili, manet una fides.” (emphasis added).

²⁶⁰ Congar, *Tradition & Traditions*, 98.

extending to each of her members according to the stirring of the sense accomplished by the sound of the parts of the Church preaching the word of Christ. On the mountain and frequently in other places, he opened his mouth and verbally made the Holy Spirit sound energetically on the day of Pentecost. And so it was that this sound, which spread through the world, is as the beginning and substance of the faith of the Church, and the sense is the formal element out of which is assembled the one substance of things hoped for. And so by the sound or appearance or whatever sensible sign it is clothed, one faith continues to remain.²⁶¹

As far as understanding the word of God for the believer is concerned, the written documents of Scripture play a unique and essential role. Wycliffe makes it very clear that these writings are the only means to that end, for Scripture does not exist in the mind “except through that objective Scripture which it perceives.”²⁶² As we have noted earlier, Christ’s voice is heard everywhere in the text,²⁶³ even if it must be distinguished from voices that are not his. This distinction is made, as indicated above, as individual believers hear the words of Scripture through and with the Church and her ministry. The result is the true Scriptures (“*primo sacra*”) which is “the one common faith of the whole Church.”²⁶⁴ It is important for believers to understand that “every opinion which introduces schism and dissention from faith

²⁶¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 207: “*nam tota fides, qua creditur, seminata in matre ecclesia quoad singula eius membra secundum incitativum sensitile facta est per sonum parvum ecclesie predicantium verbum Christi, qui in monte et sepe alibi aperuit os suum vocaliter et fecit spiritum sanctum in die penthecostes sonare vehementer, sic quod sonus dispersus in omnem terram per membra ecclesie est quasi materiale et originale in fide ecclesie, et sensus est quasi formale, ex quibus agregatur una substancia sperandorum. sive autem induatur sono sive colore vel quocunque alio signo sensibili, manet semper una fides.*” Cf. Congar, *Tradition & Traditions*, 414: “The unanimous verdict of Christian history is that Scripture must be read within the Church, that is to say, within Tradition. Likewise, Tradition or the Church have no complete autonomy in regard to Scripture. To imagine that the Church, at any given moment in its history, could hold as of a faith a point which had *no* stable support in Scripture, would amount to thinking that an article of faith could exist without bearing any relation to the centre of revelation, and thus attributing to the Church and its magisterium a gift equivalent to the charism of revelation, unless we postulate, gratuitously, the existence of an esoteric oral apostolic tradition, for which there exists no evidence whatsoever. It is an express principle of Catholic teaching that the Church can only define what has been revealed; faith can only have to do with what is formally guaranteed by God. In short, Scripture and Tradition are not to be placed side by side as rivals, but always to be combined, and referred each to each.”

²⁶² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 189: “*nam sacra scriptura est agregatum ex codice et sensu vel sententia sacra, quam catholicus habet de illa materiali ut signo.*”

²⁶³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 55: “*constat autem ex fide, quod Christus caput ecclesie loquitur ubilibet in scriptura.*”

in Christ is to be fled because it is erroneous.”²⁶⁵

An Essential Foundation for Establishing the Truth of Scripture²⁶⁶

The point of tension between “only Scripture” and “all the Church” in the establishing of the faith for individual Christians is the issue of interpretation. When the catholicity of the Church is at issue, the natural tendency is to shift power to the Church, but when the uniqueness and integrity of Scripture are being undermined, the need is to emphasize the authority of Scripture. The balance can be maintained only when both individuals and the Church as a whole interpret Scripture correctly. The watershed issue here is an assumption that the sacred Scripture is a document that can be understood by all believers. While the possibility of misunderstanding and heresy always exists, the cause of them is not such that they can only be avoided by the requirement that people simply believe on the basis of the authority of the Church. The authority of the Church is to show believers what Christ says in his Word and then to hold them accountable to that standard. The accountability of the

²⁶⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 189: “*illa enim est primo sacra, in qua omnes catholici comunicant, cum sit una comunis fides toti ecclesie.*” Cf. i: 287: “*quia agretatum ex voce et sensu catholico inscripto in anima est scriptura, quia vol lineatur in aere et sensu inscribitur in mente.*”

²⁶⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 385: “*item omnis opinio, que est inductiva scismatis et dissensionis a fide Cristi, est fugienda tanquam erronea.*”

²⁶⁶ While the material here is derived from all of Wycliffe’s works considered in this summary, a brief outline of most of the points presented can be found in *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 194 ff. This is the third of three ‘fivefolds’ (*quintuplex*) which Wycliffe develops concerning Scripture: “*redeundo ergo ad propositum, notandum quod, sicut quintuplex est scriptura ex sexton capitulo et quintuplex armature pro eius defensione ex octavo capitula, sic quintuple est medium disponens ad sue veritatis noticiam, scilicet codicum scripture correccio, logice scripture instructio, parcium scripture magis collacio, sui devoti dtudentis vertuosa dispositio et primi magistri interna instructio.*” The first of these deals with the five grades or modes of Scripture (i: 107ff) which are summarized above. The second (i: 159 ff.) involve “*quinque genera armorum defensivorum celestis logice, per que potest catholicus iacula et omnes insultus sophistarum evertere incassum nitencium sacre pagine veritatem de virtute sermonis subvertere.*” These are more philosophical in nature and lay a more scholastic foundation for the simpler and more practical points considered here. They are: (1) “*primum est, quod est dare ydeas deo coeternas, que sunt in eo reciones vel exemplari, iuxta que universitas est create...*” (2) “*secunda armature est, quod ex parte rei est universalialia preter signa...*” (3) “*tercia armature est, quod res tam unius speciei quam disparis licet disiterint loco et tempore sunt realiter unum totuna...*” (4) “*quarta armature quasi scutum tutissimum est illa alta methaphisica, que dicit, quod omnia, que fuerunt vel erunt sunt apud deum nedum secundum suum esse intelligibile, sed secundum esse reale, pro tempore suo presenciam...*” (5) “*quinta armature quasi cingulum latum amplectens hec omnia est noticia equivocacionis terminorum scripture, qua cognoscitur non esse contradiccionem in signis equivocis...*”

Church is established in that her teaching must be recognized as the Word of Christ and not merely accepted as such. Essential to this is the assumption that Scripture can be understood by all believers.²⁶⁷

It is the purpose here to summarize the basic principles for arriving at a true understanding of Scripture that Wycliffe appeals to throughout his writings. There are some foundational issues that establish a basis or context for a proper understanding of Scripture. While “Scripture alone” is the basis for the catholic faith, there are certain secondary factors that can be identified in the writings of Wycliffe which serve to shape the boundaries of orthodoxy in relation to the word of Christ. In some cases, these provide for legitimate extrapolations of the written text and in other cases, they serve to limit the interpretation of Scripture in order to keep it within the boundary of the word of Christ. While all of these are subordinate to Scripture itself, they do contribute in some way to orthodoxy.

Reason

The first of these is reason, which combined with a “humble acceptance of the authority of Scripture” and the “witness of the holy doctors” (both to be considered below), is one of three things that establish the “virtuous discipline of Scripture.”²⁶⁸ Because “Holy Scripture throughout is in conformity to reason” it only makes sense that “reason is a necessary witness for grasping the meaning of the Scriptures.”²⁶⁹ In addition to grasping what

²⁶⁷ This is closely related to what was eventually described as the “perspicuity” of Scripture.

²⁶⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 198: “unde solebam dicere, quod virtuosa dispositio discipuli scripture specialiter stat in tribus, scilicet in autoritatis scripture humili acceptance, in sui et rationis conformatione et sanctorum doctorum testificatione.”

²⁶⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 200: “ex quo patet, quod utrobique in scriptura sacra est conformitas rationi et per consequens ratio est testis necessarius ad habendum sententiam scripturarum.” See also, *De Apostasia*, 147: “in scripture, in ratione, in testimonio sancroum vel legum papalium...” Here Wycliffe is challenging his opponents who appeal to this same standard, but it is the conclusion he rejects rather than this three fold standard for truth.

is explicitly taught, reason also allows one to establish what is at least consistent with the Bible.²⁷⁰ It may be the basis for establishing catholic faith,²⁷¹ or it may serve as a restraint on those who erred or would otherwise depart from that faith.”²⁷² Wycliffe would not be refuted except on the basis of Scripture or sound reason.²⁷³

While reason is often mentioned in parallel with Scripture as a basis for Christian faith, there are, however, two important distinctions to keep in mind. First, there is the notion that reason itself is shaped by by “the logic of Scripture” (*logica scripture*), which was a principle that Wycliffe learned from Augustine.²⁷⁴ It is argued that “a familiarity with the knowledge of Scripture is very necessary.”²⁷⁵ The concern here is that the student of Scripture acquire a taste, not simply for the content of Scripture, but for its “form both with regard to logic and eloquence.”²⁷⁶ In contemporary terms this might be described as “having a feel for Scripture” so that it is comfortable and natural rather than “improper and rough” (*indebita et inculta*). Another way to describe this is to have an “appreciation” not only for the message of

²⁷⁰ *Tractus De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 199: “*Nec valet dicere quod posito hoc de facto scriptura sacra...*”

²⁷¹ See *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior*, 273: “*nisi de quanto super ratione se fundaverit vel fide scripture;*”

²⁷² *Polemical Works in Latin*, 190: “*non sit fundabilis in rationibus vel scriptura;*” *De Eucharistia Tractus Maior*, 228: “*non habet evidenciam ex scriptura, ex ratione vel ex testimonio dante fidem...*”; *De Blasphemia*, 10: “*Et quantum ad leges hominum que videntur istis contrarie, patet quod non ligant nisi de quanto in lege Cristi fundate fuerint, consone rationi*” Cf. *Sermons*, iii: 313: “*Statum autem fratrum non plus scio fundare in ratione vel scriptura.*” Cf. *De Eucharistia*, 277: with “*nec rationem nec scripturam sacram...*” an argument is unsubstantiated.

²⁷³ *Polemical Works in Latin*, 256: “*et sic non excepto in ista materia nisi fidem scripture, vel rationem vivacem...*” This challenge would later be echoed by Luther at Worms in 1521 when he responded to the charges leveled against him: “Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the Councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience.” Quoted from Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, *Modern Christianity: The German Reformation* (Saginaw, Michigan: Historical Exegetical ‘Lectronic Publishing, 1996), iii, §55.

²⁷⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 309-310.

²⁷⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 195: “*scilicet logice scripture noticia est valde necessaria.*”

²⁷⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 195: “*forma tam quoad logicam quam quoad eloquenciam.*”

Scripture, but for the way in which it is expressed. Such appreciation finds its climax in the sentiment: “see how much confidence and consolation is in Scripture.”²⁷⁷

The second distinction is that the force of reason is always secondary and subordinate to Scripture itself. As Wycliffe says, “Scripture is preferred, both in certainty and authority, over human reason, as Sacred Scripture is itself the word of the Lord so that it ought to be the highest authority.”²⁷⁸

Holy Fathers

Another secondary factor contributing to the catholic faith is the “holy doctors” (*sancti doctores*).²⁷⁹ Essentially, the same group is also designated by the terms “great doctors” (*praecipui theologi*),²⁸⁰ the “ancient doctors” (*antiques doctores*),²⁸¹ the “ancient fathers” (*antiques patres*),²⁸² the “saints of old” (*sancti priores*),²⁸³ and the “primitive Church” (*ecclesia primitiva*).²⁸⁴ The terminology here indicates Wycliffe’s preference for antiquity²⁸⁵

²⁷⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 196: “*ecce, quanta est confidencia et consolacio in scriptura!*”

²⁷⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 200: “*sed utrobique preferenda est scripture tam certitude quam autoritas rationi humane, cum idem sit scriptura sacra et verbum domini, quod oportet esse summe autoritatis.*” Cf. i: 309: “*sed per omnibus scripturam sacram.*” Here Wycliffe is speaking in contrast to reason and the authority of the ancient doctors.

²⁷⁹ Referenes here are many. The following is just a sampling: *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 201, 309, 385-386, 390; ii: 49, 155; iii: 78; *De Compostione Hominis*, 25; *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 75, 100-101; *De Apostasia*, 68, 70; *De Eucharistia Tractus Miaor*, 116; *De Officio Regis*, 1; *De Civili Dominio*, i: 326; iii: 137, 399; *De Blasphemia*, 135. Sometimes they are referred to simply as the doctors. See *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 105.

²⁸⁰ See *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 137 or “*talium doctorum*.” See *De Apostasia*, 219.

²⁸¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 309; *De Eucharistia*, 288.

²⁸² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 152; or the “*primi patres*”: *De Apostasia*, 203.

²⁸³ *Opus Evangelicum Prima Pars*, 161. Sometimes Wycliffe will refer simply to the “*sancti*.” See *De Eucharistia*, 288.

²⁸⁴ *De Eucharistia*, 297; *De Veritate Sacrae Scripurae*, i: 309.

²⁸⁵ See *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 2. Quantitatively this refers roughly to the “*primi millenarii*.” See *De Apostasia*, 70. Wycliffe also appeals to “*sanctorum de sexton millenario*.” See *De Apostasia*, 79. He viewed the first millennium as the period during which Satan was bound and following which he was released in order to deceive the nations. See *De Eucharistia*, 286.

when the teachers of the Church were characterized by holiness²⁸⁶ as much as by learning. Special attention is given to the “four great doctors” (*de quatuor magnis doctoribus*)²⁸⁷ of whom “Augustine is the most distinguished.”²⁸⁸ It is important for believers to look to such sources of instruction because they “were eager for the right sense of the gospel,”²⁸⁹ so that they could be trusted.²⁹⁰ Once the testimony of the saints, and especially these holy doctors have, through careful examination and prayer for direction, established the proper sense of Scripture it would be an “act of unfaithfulness” (*infidelitatis*) to “discredit or fail to defend it.”²⁹¹ In this regard “the words of the holy doctors...are an authority for us” on the basis of which divisive opinions may be avoided.²⁹² This is especially important when seeking to

²⁸⁶ Wycliffe was that the concern for material things in his day had dulled senses which had been sharper in the primitive church. See *De Eucharista*, 297: “*Scio quidem quod nos qui irreligiose contendimus circa temporalia et signa adinventionis nostre in penam peccati cecati sumus in sensu quem habuit ecclesia primitive...*” Cf. *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 201: “*multo magis crederet catholicus testimonio sanctorum doctorum in causa non deductive propter lucrum.*” Cf. i: 390 where the “four doctors” are commended for “*sanctitas vite aut veritas sentencie.*”

²⁸⁷ *De Eucharistia Tractatus Maior*, 286. They are also referred to as “*sancti quatuor doctores.*” See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 390. Christopher Levy identifies these as Augustine, Ambrose, Jerome and Gregory. See *The Truth of Scripture*, p. 218, Note 60. The list may vary from one place to another. See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 39 where Ambrose, Jerome, Gregory and Bernard are listed along with a reference to “*sanctis eis similibus.*”

²⁸⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 35: “*quia inter omnes doctores scripture sacre citra autores est Augustinus precipuus.*” Wycliffe argues concerning Augustine that “*debemus ergo acceptare testimonium Augustini specialiter propter tria, primo propter testimonium scripture, secundo propter fortitudinem rationis, que consonant dictis suis, et tercio topice propter famam sanctitatis sue ab ecclesia approbate.*”

²⁸⁹ *Opus Evangelicum*, 160: “*Et hic considera quantum sancti priores prophetando recto sensui evangelii studuerunt.*”

²⁹⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 201

²⁹¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 201: “*quia in material fidei, quam tam diligenter examinarunt tam devote pulsantes magistrum optimum pro veritate noscenda. Unde videtur michi signum infidelitatis, postquam probatum est sanctorum testimonio, aliquem esse sensum scripture sacre, illi discredere vel defensionem eius gratis omittere et tamen iudicium humanum ex testimonio hominum mendacium ad unguem prosequi cum omni sollicitudine et labore specialiter in material non tam necessaria ecclesie.*”

²⁹² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 385: “*verba sanctorum doctorum, que nobis autoritas.*” Cf. ii: 155. Here Wycliffe is speaking about the importance of preaching and draws on the principle that in such matters practice must “*confirmanda est secundum leges ecclesie ex scriptura a sanctis doctoribus eliquatas.*” Cf. iii: 78. In defending his teaching, Wycliffe could appeal to “*testimonio scripture sacre, testimonio sanctorum doctorum et legume ecclesie.*”

resolve difficulties.²⁹³ Without the necessity of keeping to the sense, “which the holy doctors draw out in agreement...it would be acceptable to twist Scripture to suit the will of the sinner”—a common practice in that day.²⁹⁴ The emphasis here is a unity, which obviously must enjoy a continuity with the past in order to assure of the leading of the Holy Spirit in the present.²⁹⁵ Wycliffe has such confidence in these ancient authorities that he even encourages Catholics to confidently accept their terminology even when it is not found in the text of Scripture.²⁹⁶

Whatever authority these holy doctors of the early Church may enjoy though, it, like reason, is clearly secondary to that of Scripture. It was even conceded that the greatest of these, Augustine, “is not infallible” but “capable of erring.”²⁹⁷ However trustworthy and useful these secondary authorities may be for preserving catholic faith, there is still the

²⁹³ *De Apostasia*, 203: “*Si autem deficit in penam peccati divina inspiracio, non dedignentur decreta primorum partum consulere.*”

²⁹⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 385-386: “*et cum observacio legis Cristi in laicis sequitur intellectum doctorum sensum scripture exponencium, patet, quod necesse est stare concorditer exposicioni sensuum, quos sancti doctores concorditer elicuerant. Aliter enim liceret extorquere sensum scripture ad votum peccantis, quod hodie incipit in multis.*” See ii: 49: It is heretical “*exponere scripturam sacram aliter, quam spiritus sanctus flagitat, sanctique doctores affirmant concorditer.*” Cf. *De Compostione Hominis*, 25. What Wycliffe identifies here is confidence of the agreement between the sense of Scripture and that of the holy doctors: “*Primo propter sensum scripture et sanctorum doctorum, qui locuntur conformiter.*” Cf. *De Officio Regis*, 1, where an argument is considered “*multipliciter approbata*” based on “*fide scripture canonisata et testimonio sanctorum doctorum.*” Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 137: “*semper studere sanctorum doctorum exposiciones cum concordanciis scripturarum.*”

²⁹⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 152: “*sic enim sumus cum antiquis patribus una spiritus sancti fistula non evagantes per verba a sermonibus dei extranea.*”

²⁹⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 309: “*ulterius pro sductis de novitate vocum est notandum, quod sancti doctores in primitive ecclesia racionabiliter formidabant in material fidei introducere novellas terminus preter scripturam propter veneni formidinem, quod abscondi posse tab hereticis. Verumptamen decto sensu et limitata significacione terminorum ab ecclesia, satis secure potest catholicus uti terminis, licet non fuerint in textu scripture exemplati.*”

²⁹⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, 1: 35: “*hinc dico ut sepius, quod locus a testimonio Augustini non est infallibilis, cum Augustinus sit errabilis.*” Having said this, though, he goes on to say that “*et quantum errors Augustino impositos, quantum ad illa pauca, in quibus intellexi hunc sanctum, non inveni in libris suis non retractatis errorem in logica vel metaphisica*” (pp. 35-36).

encouragement that “we must follow...Scripture above all else,”²⁹⁸ for nothing else offers complete certainty.²⁹⁹ The holy fathers themselves (especially Augustine) prohibit the belief of anything that is not founded in Scripture.³⁰⁰ Ultimately, it is the doctors who are to be judged by what Scripture says rather than that Scripture is to be judged by what the doctors say.³⁰¹ Whenever any element of faith lacks the authority of Scripture it must be rejected.³⁰²

Established Documents

The third category of secondary constraints on the catholic faith might generally be referred to as the written documents or established policies of the Church. Particular examples are the creeds (*symboli*)³⁰³ and laws of the Church (*leges ecclesie*).³⁰⁴ This category is very closely related to the previous one with all of the same conditions and restrictions applying.³⁰⁵ While these sources were not necessarily infallible, Wycliffe could appeal to them in an

²⁹⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 309: “*et sequamur antiquos doctores et sanctos magis probabiles, sed pre omnibus scripturam sacram.*”

²⁹⁹ *De Apostasia*, 219: Wycliffe argues that “*omnes illi possunt decipi atque decipere.*”

³⁰⁰ *De Officio Regis*, 222: Making reference to “*sanctis quattuor doctoribus*” Wycliffe goes on to say, “*Sed ipsi prohibent quod credatur eis nisi de quanto se fundaverint in scriptura, ut sepe patet de beato Augustino.*”

³⁰¹ *De Compositione Hominis*, 25: “*Primo propter sensum scripture et sanctorum doctorum, qui locuntur conformiter.*” Cf. *De Eucharistia*, 46, where it is observed that “*Quantum ad secundum allegatum de autenticacione doctoris, patet quod quilibet doctor est concedendus, sed nullis posterioris doctoris sententia nisi de quanto est fundabilis ex scriptura.*” Cf. 116: “*Cum ergo nec testificacioni Augustini nec Jeronimi nec alicuius sancti debet credi nisi de quanto se fundaverit in scriptura...*” Cf. *De Eucharistia*, 286: “*et licet omnibus istis doctoribus eciam Augustino qui fuit in loyca et theologia precipuus non debemus credere nisi de quanto se fundaverit in scriptura.*”

³⁰² *De Apostasia*, 203: “*et omnino caveant quicquam in fide statuere sine auctoritate scripture.*”

³⁰³ See *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 1. Cf. p. 8 where Wycliffe refers to what is “*in symbolo Athanasii.*”

³⁰⁴ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 155: “*ut material de officio predicandi sit clarior, confirmanda est secundum leges ecclesie ex scriptura a sanctis doctoribus eliquatas;*” iii: 78: “*unde ne errem in detectione istius fallacie, ut testimonio scripture sacre, testimonio sanctorum doctorum et legum ecclesie cavendo a descensu ad accusationem individuum, sed detegendo huiusmodi testimonii generalem sententiam ac relinquendo prepositis iudicibus et populo praxi intendentibus particulare iudicium et legis executionem.*” Cf. *De Blasphemia*, 135, where Wycliffe speaks of those who distort “*fidem scripture, sanctos doctores, et leges ecclesie per suum contrarium.*” They are also referred to as “*ordinaciones ecclesie.*” See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 168.

³⁰⁵ See *De Apostasia*, 219.

argument.³⁰⁶ His preference, again, was with antiquity preferring the laws of the primitive Church to the authority of modern laws.³⁰⁷

Correction of the Manuscripts of Scripture (codicum scripture correccio)

The first means for resolving differences addresses Scripture in its fifth mode, which, though not inerrant, is still a necessary means by which the higher modes are accessed. As Wycliffe says, “it is necessary for the manuscripts, in whatever language they are, to be corrected.”³⁰⁸ Here he appeals to Augustine who taught that “those who are anxious to know the Scripture ought in the first place to use their skill in the correction of text.”³⁰⁹ In an age before the uniformity established by the printing press, this was certainly a necessary consideration “in order that the reader might grasp the opinions of the author.”³¹⁰

Godly Character

There is also a requirement of godly character on the part of the interpreter. The importance of this will be developed further in the next chapter in dealing with the problem of corruption that existed in the Church in Wycliffe’s day. The fourth means to true knowledge is the acquiring of an eager devotion to virtue,³¹¹ without which the disciple of Scripture “would remain a novice in his studies and whatever he said would sound wrong.”³¹² This virtue consists largely in “a humble acceptance of the authority of Scripture” along with a

³⁰⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 78. See previous note.

³⁰⁷ Eg. *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 168: “*tam utiles ecclesie sunt everse, quia certum est, quod ordinationes Cristi et primitive ecclesie sun meliores quam ordinacio modernorum!*”

³⁰⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 195: “*oportet enim codices scripture, in quacunqve ligva fuerint, esse correctos...*”

³⁰⁹ *On Christian Doctrine*, II, 14.

³¹⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 195: “*ut lector concipiat autoris sentenciam.*”

³¹¹ See Note 266.

³¹² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturaw*, i: 198: “*quoad quartum, scilicet virtuosam disposicionem discipuli scripture, patet, quod aliter studium suum foret nocivum et quidquid loqueretur, male sonaret.*”

willingness to conform to the reason of Scripture and the witness of the holy doctors, as described above.³¹³ The first of these involves a conviction that “all Scripture is absolutely true,” without which error inevitably follows.³¹⁴ There is a devotion (*affectus*) that is essential to the comprehension of Scripture.³¹⁵ This is also the chief reason for the appeal to the witness of the holy fathers of the Church who, in contrast to many in Wycliffe’s day, “were not corrupted by greed.” Rather, “in matters of faith they both diligently examined [Scripture] and urgently requested their highest Master that they might obtain true knowledge.”³¹⁶

The Necessity of being taught by God

Finally, it is necessary for the one studying Scripture to be taught by the Holy Spirit, who “opens the sense to him as Christ did to the apostles.”³¹⁷ God is the “foremost teacher” (*primi magistri*) by whom the believer is to be instructed,³¹⁸ and this instruction is “so necessary that it is impossible for anyone to learn anything without the instruction of this foremost wisdom (*sapientia prima*).”³¹⁹ Mere written words “cannot impress knowledge which is of a more excellent quality without being moved by the virtue of that Wisdom.” It should be noted, though, that this divine instruction leads not only to simple apprehension on

³¹³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 198: “unde solebam dicere, quod virtuosa dispositio discipuli scripture specialiter stat in tribus, scilicet in autoritatis scripture humili acceptacione, in sui et rationis conformacione et sanctorum doctorum testificacione.”

³¹⁴ Here Wycliffe follows Augustine. *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 198-199: “debet enim cristianu primo credere, quod ‘tota scriptura sit infringibiliter vera....’”

³¹⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 103: “ut affectus comprehendat scripture sententiam.”

³¹⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 201: “multo magis crederet catholicus testimonio sanctorum doctorum in cause non seductiva propter lucrum, quia in materia fidei, quam tam diligenter examinarunt tam devote pulsantes magistrum optimum pro veritate noscenda.”

³¹⁷ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 403: “Nemo enim sufficit intelligere minimam scripture particulam, nisi Spiritus Sanctus aperuerit sibi sensum, sicut Christus fecit apostolis.”

³¹⁸ See Note 266.

³¹⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 201: “quimten autem, scilicet dei instructio, est medium tam necessarium, quod impossibile est, quemquam aliquid adiscere sine sapientia prima docente.” Wycliffe goes on to say, “patet, quod absolute impossibile est, sensum hominis illuminari ut quidquam cognoscat, nisi per eum primo irradiantem, sicut est impossibile.”

the part of the individual, but also to “unanimity” (*consensus*) and, finally, to contemplation.³²⁰

Hermeneutical Considerations

Another important factor necessary to the establishment of a catholic sense of the words of Scripture is hermeneutics. If individual Christians are to begin with the words of “Scripture alone” and arrive at a common understanding, it is important that there be a common basis for arriving at that understanding. Hermeneutics is essential both for unity, and for an explanation for differences. Wycliffe believes that there are certain principles that render Scripture comprehensible to all believers so that when differences or misunderstandings arise they are the result of “indiscretion or sin against the instruction of the Holy Spirit.”³²¹ While a thorough study of Wycliffe’s hermeneutics is beyond the scope of this paper, the intent here is at least to outline some of the basic principles that he presents as necessary to understanding Scripture correctly.

Scripture to be understood as a whole

The first principle is to consider Scripture as a whole.³²² Wycliffe draws a comparison here with a human being or any other body that derives its beauty from a form. In such a case,

³²⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 204: “*sensibilia enim non habent imprimere scienciam, que est qualitas perfectior nisi in virtute sapiencie moventis primo ad apprehensionem simplicem, secundo ad consensum et tercio ad complacenciam veritatis.*”

³²¹ *Opus Evangelicum Prima Pars*, 17: “*Talia sunt multa dicta de fide scripture et sanctorum testimonio que vere humilitati vel paupertati spiritus possunt alludere. nec dubium quin Christus qui ista docuit habuit summas primicias que ad virtutum excellencias pertinebant. Et sic quandocunque non claret fidelibus scripture notanda diversitas vel codicum incorreccio vel linguarum variancium, indiscrecio vel ex peccato Spiritus Sancti instruccionis defeccio est in causa, quia primus loquens Christus Deus et homo non potest in sensu vel sermone deficere.*”

³²² See Christopher Levy, Introduction to *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, 7. The translator points out that, contrary to the opinion of Workman, this position does not represent a departure from Medieval tradition, but rather is consistent with it. He goes on to argue that “Wycliffe actually fits quite comfortably within the continuum of biblical exegesis stretching from Augustine to Aquinas. This tradition of commenting not only affirmed the subtlety of Scripture’s discourse, but the necessity of reading the sacred text in light of the faith of the Church, whereby the believer is conformed to the sense which has been imprinted by the Spirit in all of its subtlety and range of meaning.”

any number of distinct parts may be marked out which appear deformed by themselves, and “yet when they are connected with the whole they lack the deformity.” He goes on to note that “so it is with the parts of Scripture.”³²³ The integrity of the message is preserved by taking it as a whole and comparing one passage with another.³²⁴ Closely related to this is the notion that “one part of Scripture often explains another” thus encouraging the “frequent reading of the various parts.”³²⁵

The original intent of the author for his first audience

A second principle is that Scripture is to be understood “purely according to the sense of the author,” by which it is understood catholically.³²⁶ This sense of the author, especially with regard to figures of speech, must also be understood as it was received by those to whom it was revealed.³²⁷ Rather than useless contention over words “the sense of the author should be humbly investigated without allowing anything to get in the way. The frequent advice of the doctors is noted that “any sense contrary to the sense intended by the authors ought to be

³²³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 113: “unde sicut in homine et quolibet corpore capiente pulchritudinem a figura est dare quolibet partes quantitativas, que per se forent deformes, et tamen compaginate cum toto carent deformitate, causantes totam pulchritudinem sui integri, sic est de partibus scripturarum.” Wycliffe has been describing how the “sophists” would not charge the whole of Scripture with heresy or impossibility while making such a charge concerning isolated fragments. If this were legitimate, then in the worst case, one could simply take individual words of Scripture and rearrange them to say anything.

³²⁴ See *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 424: “Intelligamus ergo Scripturam sacram in sano sensu et sua integritate, et non est conpossibile quin subsit sibi veritas. Unde multum confert pro distributionibus et negacionibus Scripture intelligendum quoad fiat multarum Scripturarum perfecta collacio, quia una pars docet quomodo in alia intelligenda sit distribucio accomoda.”

³²⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 196: “tercium, scilicet crebra leccio parcium scripture, videtur ex hoc esse necessarium, quod sepe una pars scripture exponit aliam.”

³²⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 183: “item capio scripturam sacram legalem vel prophetiam, que nunc solum intelligatur catholice, pure ad sensum auctoris...” cf. i: 126 where Wycliffe relates the “sensus auctoris” with the “scriptura sacra catholicus” (The actual argument in this place does not establish the point directly, but the connection is clear in Wycliffe’s thinking).

³²⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 15. Here Wycliffe quote Augustine, “omnis enim enunciatio ad illud, quod enunciate, referenda est, omne autem figurative aut factum aut dictum hoc enunciat, quod signat eis, quibus intelligendum prolatum est.”

dismissed.”³²⁸ It is likely here that the reference is to human authors, but what makes their sense significant is that it is intended by God. Scripture is true not so much in terms of human sense, but “in the sense intended by God in the first place.”³²⁹ In a similar manner, it can also be said that “the Holy Spirit himself impresses the sacred sense on Sacred Scripture”³³⁰ and it is this sense intended by the Holy Spirit that is the catholic sense.³³¹ It is not the “material manuscripts” that are of primary concern to the catholic, but the “unalterable testament of God the Father.”³³²

Scripture to be understood literally

A third principle is that the believer is to strive for “evangelical unity” by “always defending the intended literal sense of Scripture.”³³³ This latter phrase, which could be translated “the force of the word” (*virtus sermo*),³³⁴ was understood differently by various individuals. Many of the Medieval scholastics took the concept of literal “literally” and argued on this basis that many of the statements of the Bible and church fathers were false,

³²⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 103: “*est ergo sanctorum sententia, quod verbalis contencio est in doctrina scripture inutilis, cum sensus auctoris sit humiliter indagandus, et quidquid ab intellectu illius sensus regardat, ut affectus comprehendat scripture sententiam, est prudenter abiciendum. ideo sepe consulunt doctores, ut sensui auctoris intendatur dimisso sensu contrario.*” Wycliffe goes on to remind believers “*quod cristiane fidei non dependet super virtute sermonis nostri.*” Later he says, “*item nulla conclusio autenticatur ex scriptura sacra, nisi in quantum allegatur ad sensum auctoris*” (i: 375).

³²⁹ *Opus Evangelicum Liber Tertius*, 78: “*quiescendum et ergo in ista fide quod hec scripura sicut quelibet alia sacra est vera ad sensum quem Deus primo intenderat.*”

³³⁰ *De Eucharistia*, 217: “*Nec sequitur quod quilibet dicens talem sensum dicet scripturam sacram, cum oportet quod ad scripturam sacram Spiritus Sanctus sibi inprimat sensum sacram.*”

³³¹ *Polemical Works in Latin*, 75: “*Secundo argitur pro hac parte, quemcunque sensum catholicum, quem verba pretendunt secundum sensum grammaticalem, primum illum sensum spiritus sanctus per verba sua intelligit, sed sic processum est in istis verbis ewangelii exponendo.*”

³³² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 190: “*de codicibus vero materialibus in ipsa scriptura est catholico modica vis vel cura...testamentum incorrigibile dei patris.* Here Wycliffe compares the true sense of Scripture to a human will in which a son is not prevented from “*contraveniendo vel imponendo sibi significationem extraneam.*”

³³³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 169: “*et hec est quasi incitatorium pedum anime ad tendendum in ewangelicam unitatem et ad defendendum scripturam sepissime de virtute sermonis.*”

³³⁴ Wycliffe also refers to the *sensus litteralem* (See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 39), which in turn can also be described as *ad litteram* (*De Civili Dominio*, 184; *Sermones*, ii: 146.)

even though they knew that false statements were not intended.³³⁵ Wycliffe, following the doctors of the Church, identifies the *sensus literalis*³³⁶ with that *de virtute sermonis* as that intended “primarily” by the Holy Spirit to direct believers to God.³³⁷ It is very important to understand that, for Wycliffe, the literal sense intended by the author was evaluated according to the accepted hermeneutical principles of his day, rather than those of the 21st century. He accepted and understood Scripture according to the traditional four-fold sense:³³⁸ literal,³³⁹ allegorical, tropological³⁴⁰ and anagogical.³⁴¹ The *sensus literalis* is the *sensus catholicus*, both of which correspond to that sense which is “immediately derived from Scripture,”³⁴² and

³³⁵ E. g. See Wycliffe’s discussion, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 15 ff. Revelation 5:5 speaks of Christ as a lion, which is obviously not true on an absolutely literal sense.

³³⁶ Cf. *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 65.

³³⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 119-120: “*quamvis autem quilibet sensus, quem habet litera, possit de virtute sermonis dici congrue literalis, doctores tamen conunter vocant sensum literalem scripture sensum, quem spiritus sanctus primo indidit, ut animus fidelis ascendat in deum.*” It is also the primary sense of the author. See *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 113: “*Unde quamvis auctor scripture intenderit omnes istos sensus, primum tamen principalius, ut sit introitus ad alios consequentes. Et sic Augustinus de virtute sermonis salvat text scripture plus imbrigabiles.*” Wycliffe does recognize that Scripture may also be understood according to others senses extending beyond the primary. See *Sermones*, ii: 146 ff.: “*Hoc evangelium potest intelligi in sensu multiplici, primo ad literam...secundus...*”

³³⁸ See *Ibid.*: “*hec autem scriptura sacra in partibus diversis habet sensum quadruplicem, scilicet literalem, allegoricum, tropologicum et anagogicum.*” This fourfold sense was described according to the following verse: “*litera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.*” Cf. *Sermones*, iii: 170, “*Est enim quadruplex sensus scripture, scilicet ystoricus, allegoricus, moralis vel tropologicus, et anagogicus. Historicus est sensus, primo indicans ystoriam rei geste; triplex autem sensus, mysticus primo indicans quid sit credendum de ecclesia hic pro via; sensus tropologicus sive moralis est sensus indicans qualiter moraliter sit agendum. Sed sensus anagogicus est sensus mysticus indicans quid de triumphante ecclesia sit sperandum, ut ystorice Jerusalem signat civitatem metropolim Judee, allegorice ecclesiam militantem, tropologicam animam fidelem et anagogice ecclesiam triumphantem.*” Cf. *Sermones*, iv: 160, Discussing the four meanings of Jerusalem, “*Et sic (ut communiter dicitur) Jerusalem secundum quadruplicem sensum scripture quator modis intelligitur in scripture. Nam secundum sensum literalem signat civitatem metropolitanam Judee, in cuius templo Christus fecit plurima facta sua, secundum sensum vero tropologicum signat membrum ecclesie conversum in virtutibus ut castello tucius conversatum, tercio vero ad sensum allegoricum signat ecclesiam militantem, ut in textu proposito...Quatro vero ad sensum anagogicum signat ecclesiam que est sursum et secundum Apostolum ad Gal. IV, 22, 23 est ‘libera mater mostra’.*”

³³⁹ This is also referred to as the historical sense (*ystoricus*). See *Sermones*, iii: 170 ff.

³⁴⁰ Also *moralis* (*Ibid.*).

³⁴¹ These last three senses are often identified as “*sensus mysticus.*” (*Ibid.*)

³⁴² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 123: “*sensus literalis est, quod sit sensus catholicus immediate elicitus ex scripture.*” While the literal sense may be historical, allegorical, tropological or anagogical according the purpose intended by the author, Wycliffe does distinguish it from these other three when they are *mediate* vs. *immediate* elicited from Scripture. These other three senses are also described as “*triplex...sensus mysticus*” (See *Sermones*, iii: 170).

“plainly follows the most obvious sense of Scripture.”³⁴³

While Wycliffe does not address this explicitly, the assumption is that these basic principles for interpreting Scripture provide a common basis for deriving a catholic understanding of Scripture. Anyone, then, who understands Scripture according to a sense other than the catholic sense, “understands Scripture falsely...other than he ought to.”³⁴⁴

The Authority of the Church

In order to make a fair assessment of Wycliffe’s views on the authority of the Church versus the authority of Scripture it is essential to make some very important distinctions. First, there is a distinction between the fourteenth century Church and the early Church. If one were to ask the question, “Does Wycliffe argue for the authority of Scripture over that of the Church?” then the answer depends on which Church is under consideration. If one is talking about the early Church, then the authority of that Church and Scripture are inseparably woven together, as indicated above, in the “catholic” faith. When Wycliffe talks about Scripture, his primary concern is the orthodox understanding of the written documents taught and affirmed by the early Church. He would have, like men before him, identified a teaching based on the written text, but contrary to the catholic faith preserved in the Church, as heresy. As we will see in the next chapter, though, there were a number of factors that undermined the credibility of the Church in Wycliffe’s day.

There is also a distinction to be made: is one dealing with the Church *and* Scripture or with the Church *or* Scripture. In the early Church, the former of these was essentially a redundancy. Even in the fourteenth century, it is unlikely that Wycliffe would have

³⁴³ *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 107: “*debeemus plane ex patulo sensu scripture...*”

challenged the authority of the Church as long as Scripture was being taught, especially if that teaching was consistent with the early Church. The Church is the “mother of the faithful” (*mater fidelium*),³⁴⁵ and it is “necessary for the catholic faith to reside within the mother Church as a whole.”³⁴⁶ The correct manuscripts of Scripture are established “according to the sense and authority of the Church.”³⁴⁷ As the spouse of God, “it is proper to honor mother Church.”³⁴⁸ Whatever criticism Wycliffe had concerning the authority of the Church, it was not based on a low view of the Church. It certainly was not meant to encourage individual Christians to feel that they had the freedom or right to interpret Scripture as they pleased. If it comes to a choice between Scripture **or** the Church, though, resulting from the fact that the Church has gone beyond or contrary to Scripture, then there is no question that the believer is to follow Scripture because “sacred Scripture exceeds all human canons in usefulness, authority and subtlety.”³⁴⁹

The Importance of Teachers

The Roman Catholic Church has always emphasized the teachers of the Church as essential to preserving the Catholic faith. Wycliffe would agree, but, like the sixteenth

³⁴⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 15: “*hic dicitur, quod nemo intelligit scripturam sacram false, nisi peccaverit menciendo, quia fallit se ipsum intelligendo aliter, quam debet.*”

³⁴⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, 1: 170. The context here stresses the unity of the church.

³⁴⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 235: “*necesse est in tota matre ecclesia esse fidem catholicam.*” The context here establishes a basis for preserving the faith in face of the fact that sometimes the manuscripts are in error.

³⁴⁷ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 233: “*quantum ad codices oportet capere eos ut correctos ex sensu at auctoritate ecclesie.*”

³⁴⁸ *Sepulchrum Ecclesie Militantis*, 5: “*Sicut enim oportet servire deo qui est caput ecclesie, sic oportet honorare matrem ecclesiam, que est principaliter conjux sua.*”

³⁴⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 268: “*nam verum est, quod sacri canones scripture sacre sunt maxime necessarii et primo omnium adiscendi, cum omnes alie regule sunt deo et ecclesie sue odibiles, nisi de quanto fundantur in scriptura sacra, et, ut patet ex capitulo proximo et fide catholica, scriptura sacra excedit omnes humanos canones in utilitate, in auctoritate et subtilitate.*” As has been stressed, it is very obvious here that Scripture alone is not a different standard than the Catholic faith, but identical with it. Scripture alone is a necessary constraint to preserve the Catholic faith.

century Reformers, he would be more inclined to stress continuity with “faith and virtue.”³⁵⁰ While he was willing to recognize that “every faithful layman is a theologian,” he emphasized the importance of “more learned doctors” in order to confront the errors that dominated the Church at the time.³⁵¹ He lamented the fact that a reduction in theologians had resulted in an increase in heretics.³⁵² The faith would be strengthened, he thought, if all authority were concentrated in the theological faculty.³⁵³

Wycliffe did not seek to undermine the role of the teachers of the Church, but only to insist that those teachers be grounded in Scripture. The “professor of catholic Scripture” has more a “secondary power,” rather than an “authority,” because he is limited to expounding “the sense of the Lord.”³⁵⁴ The appeal to “Scripture alone” was never intended by Wycliffe to be in opposition to the Church, but to guard against those lacking the competence to teach Scripture.³⁵⁵ He gets to the heart of the matter when he says that mere creatures are only witnesses to, and not lords of the truth and are, therefore, not to be believed except to the degree that they are grounded in Scripture.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁰ *De Officio Regis*, 72.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.* “*Quod si obicitur omnem fidelem eciam laicum esse theologum, certum est quod sic sed cum sint hodie tot errors in fide scripture, in tantum quod nostril theology errant in simbolo et oracione dominica, necesse est esse theologos doctores doctiores qui simpliciores illuminant.*”

³⁵² *De Officio Regis*, 73: “*Unde propter defectum et mutacionem theologorum necesse est esse multos hereticos.*”

³⁵³ *De Officio Regis*, 190: “*aut quomodo non foret ad robur fidei quod totum stadium et auctoritas veritatis catholice pure in facultatem theologicam sit collectm?*”

³⁵⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 391: “*ratione cuius professor scripture catholice posset vocare secundam potestatem non auctoritatem, sed vicarium officium ad preconizandum sensum domini.*”

³⁵⁵ *De Eucharistia*, 280-281. It is in such cases that Wycliffe appeals to the “*sensu mistico vel litterali.*”

³⁵⁶ *De Eucharistia*, 282: “*Hic dicitur quod nulli pure creature credendum est nisi ut testi, non ut domino veritatis, in tantum quod Christus venit in mundum humanitus, ut testimonium perhibeat veritati et cum omnis veritas sit in scriptura (ut dicit Augustinus), patet quod nulli creature credendum est nisi de quanto fundaverit se in scriptura; quanto magis nos testes abiecti debemus dolere de errore in falsitate et testificare quantum ex fide scripture sufficimus veritatem et doctor errore nostro humiliter revocare.*”

Summary

While the restraint of “Scripture alone” is necessary to exclude traditions extending outside of the written text, it is not sufficient to establish the orthodox tradition within the text of Scripture. We could say that *sola scriptura* is a necessary but insufficient condition for establishing the faith of the Church. The problem is that the written text standing by itself has ambiguities that lead to misunderstandings and form the basis of heresies. This issue can only be resolved by limiting the interpretation of the written text to the “catholic” understanding of Scripture. Scripture is not what any one individual wants to believe, but what all Christians everywhere have always believed.

The authority of the Church with regard to Scripture is not to impose the “catholic” understanding on believers, but to explain Scripture in light of it. The catholic faith is not what all Christians accept, but what they understand the written text to say. Essential to this is the principle that all Christians are capable of understanding the word of God, which Protestants would later identify as the perspicuity of Scripture. This does not mean that the text will always be clear to the individual studying on his or her own, but that the individual believer is capable of grasping the meaning of Scripture as it is taught by the Church.

If, as Wycliffe argues, Scripture is to be understood as referring not so much to the written text by itself, but to the catholic understanding of that text, then the principle of *sola scriptura* stands as valid by itself. As long as *sola scriptura* is understood to refer to the catholic understanding of the text of “Scripture alone,” then it becomes the proper basis for establishing the Christian faith.

CHAPTER IV

THE CORRUPT CHURCH

In light of the previous chapter, it would be an obvious and significant error to conclude that Wycliffe's view of Scripture was such that it stood in opposition to the authority of the Church. Both the written text of Scripture and the Church's understanding of that text are essential limiting factors in establishing the basis for Christian belief. Wycliffe, and many of the later Reformers who would follow him, did not seek to liberate the authority of Scripture from the authority of the Church. He sought to liberate the authority of Scripture from a corrupted Church centered on the papacy, which had increasingly come to dominate the life of the Church in apparent opposition to Scripture.³⁵⁷ Everything Wycliffe said about Scripture must be understood within the significant context of what he came to see as the overwhelming corruption that dominated the life of the Church in his day.³⁵⁸ It is the purpose of this chapter to provide an overview of Wycliffe's criticism of the fourteenth-century Church.

Wealth, Power and Corruption

One can be confident in the trustworthiness of the writers of Scripture because "their authenticated Scripture resonates entirely of love and none of worldly ambition, conforming

³⁵⁷ Mathew Spinka, *Advocates fo Reform From Wyclif to Erasmus*, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XIV, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 92.

³⁵⁸ Cf. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 4: "When one attempts to sum up the views of late medieval spirituality which have been current during our century a very black picture emerges."

reason entirely to the desire of heavenly things.”³⁵⁹ In contrast to this, Wycliffe condemned the Church of his day because he thought it was “more attached to earthly things,”³⁶⁰ which, in turn contributed to its corruption.³⁶¹ It was “damnably intent upon foreign laws...in order to establish ecclesiastical possessions introduced beyond the gospel.”³⁶² The greed that dominated that age created a blindness that contrasted with the keen sense of the role of poverty and humility in the early Church.³⁶³ The introduction of human laws stood in competition with the laws of Christ and disrupted the peace of the Church.³⁶⁴ It is not that Wycliffe rejects the role of the spiritual leaders of the Church in the “guidance of Christ’s law” in principle, but only when “secular traditions are multiplied more and more and the lifestyles of priests are increasingly perverted by worldliness.”³⁶⁵ He affirms the need for obedience to an Apostolic See resulting from the succession of holy Popes seeking the honor of God and the good of the Church,³⁶⁶ but not to those disregarding Scripture³⁶⁷ and devoted

³⁵⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 241: “*quod efficax eorum scriptura sonat ex integro caritatem et in nullo ambitionem temporalium, sed ex integro desiderium celestium conformiter rationi.*”

³⁶⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 140: “*plus terrenis deditus...*”

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 143; iii: 81: “*ego autem addo, quod, quicumque clericus dimisso officio clericali intendit negotiationi vel servicio seculari, dum est talis, continue peccat mortaliter.*”

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 150: “*que igitur necessitas Christi sacerdotibus, tam dampnabiliter intendere legibus alienis? Non enim prodesset eis nisi ad stabiliendum possessiones ecclesiasticas preter ewangelium introductas.*”

³⁶³ See *De Eucharista*, 297: “*Scio quidem quod nos qui irreligiose contendimus circa temporalia et signa adinventionis nostre in penam peccati cecati sumus in sensu quem habuit ecclesia primitiva...*”

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 151: “*et ut leges humanae multiplicentur, lex Christi, pax ecclesie ac eius multiplicatio retardantur.*”

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 151: “*si traditiones seculares plus multiplicentur, si conversaciones sacerdotales plus ad seculum pervertantur et per consequens regimen legis Christi et suffragium ducum spiritualium subtrahuntur.*” Here he compares the teaches of the church in his day to the Pharisees of Christ’s day. In another place he refers to them as a synagogue of Satan (*sinagoga sathane*) – *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 8.

³⁶⁶ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 390-391: “*Patet secundo quod sedes apostolica, cui Lincolnensis se meminit obedire, est genus sanctorum paparum sibi secedendum, quod proidet ut senit ad honorem Dei prestancius, ecclesie sancte utilius...*”

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 391. Authority is limited “*solum...que Scriptura sacra continet*” and to what is not clearly contrary (*opposita*) to Scripture.

to the things of this world.³⁶⁸

Wycliffe traced this problem back to the Donation of Constantine,³⁶⁹ received by Sylvester,³⁷⁰ which resulted in the endowment of the Church with earthly power and wealth.³⁷¹ It was this preoccupation with the world, seen as having its *terminus a quo* in the Donation,³⁷² that drove the transformation of canon law from being “purely evangelical” to “more vile than the laws of pagans.”³⁷³ The priesthood was ruined by it³⁷⁴ and the Church corrupted by it.³⁷⁵ The Pope, who as the supposed vicar of Christ, should have been an

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 391: “*tradicionibus hominum attendens, professores huius Scripture ac eius studium in se et prepositis eius subditis parvipendit...secundum signum est quod papa at ecclesiastici prepositi deredinguentes conversacionem Christi sint mundo seculariter implicati.*” See *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 398. It is the pope who “*degeneratur perversus ad seculum*” who is “*heresiarcha*” who “*a cunctis fidelibus expellendus et tam dignitae clericatus quam ab occupacione terreni domini deponendus.*” See *De Blasphemia*, 55 where the false Pope is characterized by his attachment to earthly things: “*Et patet quomodo pseudopapa discernitur a fidei. Si enim querit que sua sunt, detrahens subditos suos peccati pondere ad infernum, quis dubitat quin terrenorum cupiditas ipsam faciat anticristum?*”

³⁶⁹ The fact that this document was later discovered to be a forgery only serves to strengthen the complaints that Wycliffe had against it.

³⁷⁰ *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 66. Wycliffe considered it a sin on Sylvester’s part to have received the Donation. See *Sermones*, ii: 37: “*Sed circa hoc eangelium racionabiliter dicitur utrum beatus Silvester qui primus recepit notabilem dotacionem ecclesie in hoc peccaverit.*” Cf. *De Blasphemia*, 61: “*Et si obicitur de silvestro et aliis, non dubium quin in hoc peccat graviter.*” Cf. *De Eucharistia*, 311. He believed that God forbade endowments as such. See *Sermones*, iii: 21: “*Deus tamen prohibuit temporalia adiungi spiritualibus in apostolic et ecclesia primitiva, quia Deus voluit ecclesiam suam rei per spiritualies prelatos et temporalium contemptores.*”

³⁷¹ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 153: “*sed quot lerici post donaconem ecclesie sumpserunt de anathemate pallium cocinium, hoc est seculare dominium.*”

³⁷² See *De Apostasia*, 147: “*Nec Dubium, quin in minori fide de dotacione detestanda, de symonia destruenda...*”

³⁷³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 268: “*lex canonica, que debet esse mere evangelica, occasione dotacionis ecclesie versa est in abiectiorem legem civilem quam leges gentium.*”

³⁷⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 56: “*qui status est iudubitanter pefecior quam status dotacionis, quam Constantantius cum suis instituit nam impossibile est, deum sacerdoti suo deficere...*” See also, *De Officio Regis*, “*Modo atem e contra nituntur clerici plus servire seculo quam Domino, plus ventri quam animo, circueunt vicos iocandi luxuriandi vel excommunicandi gracia, visitant seculares curias transuentes alpes et maria appropriandum eis perpetuo temporalia per suggestiones subdolas atque mendacia et tamen blasfeme garrunt quod non minus debentur eis honores primevi sacerdotibus sanctum ordinem servantibus ministrare et sic sophistice reclamant contra detegentes eorum vicia.*”

³⁷⁵ *Sermones*, i: 178: “*Ex isto evangelio cum introduccione sectarum patet quod ecclesia militans deteriorando procedit, nam in primo gradum quando pure regulabatur ecclesia secundum legem Domini multum crevit, sed dotata ecclesia et multiplicibus tradicionibus deteiorata est privitate simoniaca, ambicione mundana et omissione officii pastoralis, et secundo possessionatis religiosus et plus quam priores clerici mundo affectis plus incorporatur cupiditas, plus venanatur obligatorum communitas et plus subtrahitur regiminis pastoralis assiduitas, et ex hoc maior pars ecclesie per Sergium monachum venatur.*” See also, iv: 173: “*Succevit enim cleri falsitas a tempore dotacionis vocando false ipsum excellenciorum qui plus per dotacionem cesaream a Christi sorte vel ministerio elongatur...Et patet quanta multitudo militancium, quid per agentes, quid*

example of godliness is described by Wycliffe as a “devil hiding in a swamp...having two perverse daughters...hypocrisy and tyranny.”³⁷⁶ This Church, corrupted by wealth, stood in sharp contrast to the purity and humility of the Church that Christ founded.³⁷⁷ As a result, Wycliffe argued that it was the duty of secular rulers to withdraw endowments³⁷⁸—a task they were all too willing to undertake.

While the trend toward worldliness encouraged the disregard for Scripture, that disregard for Scripture encouraged, and even began, the trend toward worldliness.³⁷⁹ Wycliffe could say that “All this evil that so extensively infects christianity arises from ceasing to imitate the sense of Scripture according to the form that Christ instituted.”³⁸⁰ Of all the snares of the devil, “none is greater or more reliable...than that a man depart from the faith by not

per consencientes isto medacio est infecta. Et illud est venenum quod per cautelas diaboli in Christi ecclesia est infusum. Nec dubium quin sit rete suum tocinus dissensionis seminarium, cum nemo pro statu vel dignitate contenderet, si solum laborem et sollicitudinem in ipso more discipulorum Domini obtineret.” See also *De Apostasia*, 44 where Wycliffe encourages that the church be made aware of the evils that have come from endowments: “*Certissimum itaque et notificandum est ecclesie, quod causa omnium istorum est contra religionem Christi cleri dotacio et sectarum provatarum, in quibus seminantur apostate, multiplicacio.*” Cf. *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 178: “*Tercio principaliter arguitur per hoc, quod post dotacionem ecclesie seminate sunt multe iniurie reciproce de possessionibus clericorum...*” See also *De Officio Regis*, 63: “*usque ad dotacionem Cesaream, ad cuis crementm proporcionaliter decrevit possessionata ecclesia in virtute.*”

³⁷⁶ *De Blasphemia*, 54: “*Diabolus autem, latens in paludibus vel locis putridis, habet de clericis et mundi potentibus duas perversas filias, scilicet ypocritas et tyrannos.*”

³⁷⁷ See *De Officio Regis*, 42: “*Non sic autem quando ecclesia stetit in paupertate primeva quam Cristus instituit.*”

³⁷⁸ See *Opus Evangelicum*, i: 5: “*Et hec ratio sepe dictorum quare caritatis regula necessitat dominos seculares abstrahere facultatem temporalium a clericis, per quam se ipsos incendunt culpabiliter ad infernum et deserunt paupertatis evangelice leges quas limitant leges Christi.*” See *De Blasphemia*, 32. This was the first task necessary to reforming the church: “*Quod non erit antequam exonerata fuerit mundi diviciis.*” See also, *De Officio Regis*, 51. The king encouraged to make sure that the clergy of his household were free “*a criminibus notoriis et specialiter symonia.*”

³⁷⁹ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 180: “*defectus igitur fidei scripture est causa prima nequicie.*” See also, *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 75. Wycliffe considered that ungodly living was even worse than bad theology: “*Sicut enim factum bonum plus placet Deo quam nuda verba licet vera, sic opus reprobum scripture sacre contrarium plus displicet Deo quam sermons scripture sacre contrarii, licet fuerint manifesti.*”

³⁸⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 135: “*et totum hoc malum, cristianismum tam ample inficiens, oritur ex defectu imitacionis sensus scripture secundum formam, quam Cristus instituit.*” See also, 184, “*Omne quidem malum hominis oritur ex defectu cultus et intellectus scripture.*” Compare ii: 136: On the other hand the church would have been better off if it had remained true to Scripture alone. “*ex istis quinto colligunt considerantes prudenter statum ecclesie, quod utilius et undique expeditius foret sibi regulari pure lege scripture, quam quod tradiciones humane sunt sic conmixte cum eritatibus ewangelicis, ut sunt modo.*”

fully believing in the opinion of Scripture.”³⁸¹ There was a cycle here in which each fed on the other. Far from seeking to drive a wedge between Scripture and Tradition, Wycliffe sought to expose the wedge of selfish greed that was driving them apart. His concern was not to turn people away from the teachers of the Church, but to demand that they be faithful teachers rather than being driven by greed and preoccupied with human traditions.³⁸²

Human Traditions

The corruption of the Church, by this desire for worldly wealth and power, accompanied a departure from Scripture as the proper authority for the Church, and was paralleled by an increased emphasis on human traditions.³⁸³ This emphasis on human traditions encouraged a further neglect of Scripture,³⁸⁴ made it burdensome,³⁸⁵ and caused it damage.³⁸⁶ It was by this means that “the Devil removed the law of God to a large degree

³⁸¹ *Sermones*, iv: 79: “*Et inter omnes cautelas dyaboli nullam maiorem vel infideliorem considero quam quod homo in fide deficiat non plene credendo sententiis scripturarum.*”

³⁸² See *De Blasphemia*, 22-23: “*Et ad magnam utilitatem ecclesie, Cristus sic locutus est obscure atque equivoce, ut fideles mereantur in sensu scrutinio, et ut ecclesia, detestans leges humanas, cognoscat se specialiter indigere theologis qui interpretentur sibi fideliter legem dei; per illos enim tempore apostolorum, martyrum et sanctorum doctorum crevit ecclesia. Sed post genus theologorum, avaricie deditum, divisum est et conmixtum inter satrapas tradicionis humane; et multiplicatur per sectas dissensio secundum tempus periculosum, quod Cristus et suus apostolus predixerunt.*”

³⁸³ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 130: “*et sic post dotacionem ecclesie multiplicacio, dogmatizacio et apropiacio tradicionis humane, ut diminuit de lege Cristi, diminuit de vera religione populi cristiani; patet ex hoc, quod legis Cristi observacio est per se causa, et e contra, vere pacis quia veri cultus dei, sicut testantur quotlibet scripture.*”

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 131: “*ex istis videtur ulterius, quod legis humane exercitacio, doctrinacio vel institutio faciens ad defectum observancie legis Cristi diminuit effectum huius legis, qui est pax vera et cristiana religio.*” See also *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 400: “*Ex quo patet quod tradicio human retardat ab observancia mandatorum; et cum mandata sint connexa, sequitur quod tradicio humana distrahit ab observancia caritatis.*” See also *Opus Evangelicum*, i: 147: “*Unde pessim videtur signum attestans yllatras atque hereticos quod lex papalis, lex humana sive cesaria que est instrumentum illis clericis ad peccandum habetur in magna reverencia tamquam codex illis maxime preciosus, sed legi Domini decunt Racha.*” See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 131: “*ex istis videtur, ulterius, quod legis humane exercitacio, doctrinacio vel institutio faciens ad defectum observancie legis Cristi diminuit effectm huius legis, qui est pax vera et cristiana religio.*”

³⁸⁵ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 428: “*Item onerare vel perturbare legem Christi est illicitum, sed sic facium adinventiones humane, ergo sunt illicite.*”

³⁸⁶ *Opus Evangelicum*, i: 79: Wycliffe charged those who honor human traditions over God’s law “*scindunt tnicam quam Christus ordinavit inconsultilem.*” He says further that “*hec duo non proficiunt nec edunt utentibus ad honorem, accipiunt partem scripture tanquam partem tunice Domini et super illam investiunt leges humanas et sic militant un deformes.*”

from the Church.”³⁸⁷ Those who appealed to human traditions did so in order to support their own actions and in so doing “sinned mortally.”³⁸⁸

These “human traditions” emerging in the environment of a corrupt Church stood in sharp contrast to the orthodox tradition of the Catholic faith. This is the distinction that Wycliffe intended when he argued that “the true pastures are only sacred Scripture” while “human traditions are deadly pastures” where Christ’s sheep are destroyed.³⁸⁹ It is by these human traditions that Antichrist destroys the liberty of the law of Christ.³⁹⁰ Rather than providing a means to God, they constituted a false God.³⁹¹ The enemy is not tradition *per se*, but only human traditions standing contrary to Scripture³⁹²—“moral traditions founded in Scripture” are worthy of lasting acceptance.³⁹³ Wycliffe often compared these human traditions in his day to the traditions of the Pharisees that Christ exposed as undermining God’s law³⁹⁴ and deceiving God’s people.³⁹⁵ It is only in a situation where the two are at

³⁸⁷ *Sermones*, ii: 348: “*Nec dubito quin in isto trilici vinculo dyabolico lex Dei nimis ab ecclesia est ablata.*”

³⁸⁸ *De Ecclesia*, 51: “*Tercio colligitur quod adulterantes scripturam sacram in ista sententia sunt ypocrite, quos prophetavit apostolus Timotheo periculosos temporibus in ecclesiam successuros. Pro cuius declaracion suppono factum, quomodo moderni ecclesiastici fingunt secundum tradiciones humanas quod nedum licet eis, sed peccarent mortaliter, omittendo prosequi pro defensione matris ecclesie.*”

³⁸⁹ *Sermones* i: 175: “*Et patet quod propter multitudinem errantium de ovili errantes possunt errorem imponere paasantibus in veris pascuis et ipsos tamquam hereticos condemnare. Vera autem pascua sunt solum scripturæ sacre et pascua mortifera sunt tradiciones humane secundum quas mercenarii ruinant diligentius oves suas.*”

³⁹⁰ *Sermones* i: 375: “*Sed per introduccionem scole Antichristi libertas legis Chirsti extinguitur, et ad discendum tradiciones et leges ceremoniales humanas totus homuncionis animus contempta lege Domini occupatur...*”

³⁹¹ *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 55: “*numquid credimus sic prediligendo tradiciones humanas tanquam idolatria sibi constituit deos falsos.*”

³⁹² *Sermones* iv: 80. As such, these human laws “*de facto est lex iniqua.*”

³⁹³ *Sermones* ii: “*Tradiciones autem morales fundatas in scriptura oportet perpetuo remanere.*”

³⁹⁴ Cf. *Sermones*, iv: 172: “*Unde patres legis veteris usque ad tradiciones pahrisaicas ultra quantum nos facinus legem Domini semper singulariter honorarunt, et a tempore quo mixta vel preponderata est lex hominum infidelitatis heresis.*” See also, *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 29: “*tradicio phariseica fuerit legi Dei contraria...*” Cf., *Sermones*, i: 77. These Pharisees were worse than those of the old law: “*Nam regula quam pharisei nostri traderant est aqua peior et gravior quam contenta in ydriis veteris testamenti...Nostre autem tradiciones plus sapiunt lucrum terrenum et spoliacionem populi quam tradiciones pharisaice antiquorum.*”

odds that it is appropriate to charge human traditions with error³⁹⁶ and to affirm “that Christ’s law is infinitely superior to any human laws.”³⁹⁷

In the fourteenth century it was not so much that the clergy established traditions to protect the truth and edify the Church, but that, motivated by greed, they were “plundering the people.”³⁹⁸ Human traditions were contrary to Scripture because they produced a very different kind of fruit. At best “human traditions are unable to reach a blessed condition,” and, at worst, are “repugnant [to it].” Instead, they exalted worldliness and the accumulation of wealth and encouraged the “leprosy of simony.”³⁹⁹

The essential tension between Scripture and tradition, in terms of catholic orthodoxy, is important. Just as it is not proper to appeal to Scripture apart from the catholic understanding of it, so too, what is catholic is not binding unless it is affirmed by Scripture. What Wycliffe challenged was the tendency in his day to appeal to what was “established by the universal Church rather than the authority of Scripture.” It was not the presence of a biblical tradition, but the “exalting of human traditions” that Satan was using to corrupt the Church.⁴⁰⁰ However important the authority of the Church, it has no strength outside of the

³⁹⁵ See *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 14-15: “sic pharisei hodie deludunt populo fallacius in duobus...ideo tam in legis fallacia, quam in vita mendosa deludunt populo; observant tamen antiquum infamen binarium, sed excedunt in fallaci scriptra, cum servant statua nova preter legem Domini plus quam evangelium currunt ad papam daricem sue heresis ad cum scriptis sue voluptati et lucro placentibus dispensandum.”

³⁹⁶ See *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 48: “Secundo patet delictum cleri nostri in hoc puncto per hoc quod tradiciones humanas ut papales vel leges vocate ecclesie poderant super evangelum Jesu Christi...”

³⁹⁷ *Sermones*, iv: 234: “patet quod lex Christi est ifitum melior quam aliqua lex humana.”

³⁹⁸ *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 71: “Unde secundum modum loquendi huius sancti illi sunt principales heretici qui non imprimunt fidem Christi et virtutes morales per doctrinam mitis predicacionis et exempla vite evangelice, sed ars sua consistit in isto quod per tradiciones humanas multiplicant censuras terrificas et per tales coacciones exspoliant populum.”

³⁹⁹ *De Blasphemia*, 7: “patet quod titulus cesareus vel humana tradicio est impertinens beatitudini aut repugnans. Quomodo igitur non patet populo quod papa, propter mndanam exaltacionem et temporalium accumulacionem, tam studiose appetit illum statum? Et patet ex dictis quod tunc ex lepra symonie inficit gregem suum.”

⁴⁰⁰ *De Blasphemia*, 19: “per quos sathan introducitur maiora scelera, ut sunt...tradicionum humanarum exaltacio.”

authority of Christ and his word.⁴⁰¹ The question is not whether the Church has the authority to define Christianity on the basis of Scripture, but whether “a religion of human introduction can excel the religion of the apostles or the law of Christ.”⁴⁰² Wycliffe identifies this as the watershed issue in the controversy of his day when he says that “all the cause of division in the Church is that men emphasize their own traditions for financial gain and diminish or persecute those who labor in the study of theology.”⁴⁰³

“Modern” Traditions

In addition to worldliness, the fourteenth century Church had a problem with modernism. It was the modernists⁴⁰⁴ introducing innovations⁴⁰⁵ who undermined the authority of Scripture⁴⁰⁶ and with whom Wycliffe had his quarrel. He characterized them as being obsessed with metaphysics and an ambition for personal honor⁴⁰⁷ and their theories as “sophistical” and “discordant.”⁴⁰⁸ The “modern Church had fallen to a great degree from the

⁴⁰¹ *De Blasphemia*, 128: “Ideo, opinio glossantis est quod melius dicitur confesionem institutam a quadam universalis ecclesie tradicionem, potius quam ex scripture auctoritate; et illa est obligatoria ut mandatum. Sed videtur quod deus non dedit hoc mandatum in lege completissima quod non obligat cristianum. Item, ecclesia eciam triumphans nichil precipit nisi auctoritate sponsi Cristi; et per consequens, if tradicio ecclesie sit licita, potissime fieret auctoritate scripture, que est verbum domini;”

⁴⁰² *De Officio Regis*, 116: “Quis enim crederet quod leges vel regio introducte humanitus excellenter religionem apostolicam vel legem Cristi...” See also, *Polemical Works*, i: 90: “Cristus noluit suam novam legem graciae for tradicionibus humanis onustatam.” See also, *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 29: “ex doctrina Christi nedum debemus tradicionem hominum preter legem Domini adinventas despiciere sed eas postponentes arguere.”

⁴⁰³ *De Officio Regis*, 257: “Et hec est causa tocus scismatis ecclesie quod homines nimis intendunt tradicionibus propriis propter lucrum, et diminunt vel persecuntur eos qui laborant in theologica facultate.”

⁴⁰⁴ See *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 160-161 where Wycliffe describes his opponents as “moderni” and contrasts their position with “sentencia antiquorum doctorum” whom he considers superior. See also, 166, 223; *De Eucharistia*, 273.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. *Polemical Works*, i: 93: “illis inovantibus...”

⁴⁰⁶ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 43: “modernos doctores nedum ad dicendam, quod scriptura sacra est t plurimum falsa, sed manifestum mendacium.” See also, *De Officio Regis*, 79: “Sed hodie illi qui defendeant scripturam nituntur pervertere hunc ordinem, exigens quod primo oretur.” See also, *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 69: “moderni ignari scripture...”

⁴⁰⁷ See *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 228: “Hic dicitur ut supra quod variacio in metaphisica et honoris extraendi amibcio est in causa.”

⁴⁰⁸ *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 232: “et quomodo iacula sophistica modernorum sunt scuto veritatis infallibilis repellenda, ac eorum descordancia equivoca detegenda.”

religion of the primitive Church” to the point where her teachers were “heretics who either negate the holy Scripture and the entirety of the gospel or impose their own sinister sense.”⁴⁰⁹

Wycliffe made the point that the human traditions that were draining the Church of his day were not true ancient traditions but modern inventions.⁴¹⁰ When he says “that the laws of Christ and the primitive Church are better than modern laws,”⁴¹¹ he is really arguing for, not against, tradition.⁴¹² For example, with regard to the contemporary Church’s position on the sacrament of communion, the modernists could appeal to a “tradition” of *ducentos anos*. But this paled in comparison to the *mille annos* that preceded it in which the position argued by Wycliffe prevailed and when “Christ more illuminated his Church.”⁴¹³

The appeal to “Scripture alone” was not designed to undermine the authority of the Church, but only to limit the growth of Church dogma that introduced innovative ideas and undermined the historic faith of the Church. Wycliffe did not argue that the Church should not be believed when it taught Scripture in terms of the catholic or orthodox faith, but only

⁴⁰⁹ *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 214: “illos hereticos qui vel nearunt scripuram sacram et omnino evangelium vel sibi imposuerunt sensum sinistrum; et cum hodie sit utriusque communiter, patet quantum moderna ecclesia decidit a religione ecclesie primitive.”

⁴¹⁰ Cf. *De Compostione Hominis*, 3: “in qua moderniores doctores tantum exorbitant a scriptura ac sanctis antiquis doctoribus et per consequens a semita veritatis; et modo spissius pullant instancie, quibus acutories moderni videntur illam antiquam sententiam impugnare.”

⁴¹¹ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 168: “ordinaciones Cristi et primitive ecclesie sunt meliores quam ordinacio modernorum.”

⁴¹² Cf., *De Apostasia*, 147-148: “Omnes enim adversarii nesciunt fundare in scriptura, in ratione, in testimonio sanctorum vel legum papalium, quod sacramentum altaris sit accidens; sed, accumulantes mendacium mendacio, concludunt ex isto consequi, quod nimis diu ecclesia stetit in errore.”

⁴¹³ *De Apostasia*, 148: “Nam, ut ipsi arguunt, per istos ducentos anos perseveravit ista sententia in magnis doctoribus, igitur vera; sic evidencius argitur: per mille anos et amplius perseveravit nostra sententia in maioribus doctoribus quando Christus plus illuminavit suam ecclesiam, igitur vera.” Cf. 147: “Nec dubium, quin in minori fide de dotacione detestanda, de symonia destruenda cum similibus diucius erravit ecclesia nostra occidua...Omnes enim adversarii nesciunt fundare in scriptura, in ratione, in testimonio sanctorum vel legum papalium...concludunt ex isto consequi, quod nimis diu ecclesia stetit in errore.” See also, *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 145: where Wycliffe appeals to the “antiqua fide ecclesie” in order to support his view of the sacraments.

that this faith need not be extended to “papal bulls and decisions.”⁴¹⁴

Disregard for Scripture

Pari passu with the growth in worldliness and human traditions was a disregard for, and even hostility toward, Scripture. The Church was filled with adversaries who “destroyed the law of Christ,” and even said that “sacred Scripture, for the most part, is highest heresy and blasphemy.”⁴¹⁵ The Pope “attended to human traditions,” but “gave little weight” to the study of Scripture and those providing instruction based on it.⁴¹⁶ When appeals were made to Scripture it was often for perverse reasons.⁴¹⁷ Wycliffe’s very substantial work *On the Truth of Holy Scripture* was designed to confront the considerable assault he saw taking place on the truthfulness of God’s word, in which many, who called themselves Christians, denied the sense of Scripture in word and deed.⁴¹⁸ There were those who “said in their schools that Sacred Scripture is most false...and thus destroy the authority” of it.⁴¹⁹

Those who defended Scripture in the fourteenth century found themselves objects of

⁴¹⁴ *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 23: “quia si in tali materia solum debet fidelis credere scripture sacre non crederet bullis papalibus vel diffinitioni curie romane...” In particular, “multo magis non crederetur indulgenciis, literis episcopalibus vel literis fraternitatum de suffragio spiritali.”

⁴¹⁵ *De Blasphemia*, 19: “legis Cristi depravacio...dicunt quod scriptura sacra secundm maiorem partem sui est summe heretica et blasphema.”

⁴¹⁶ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 391: “Signum autem defectus pape est, si ipse cm sede apostolica, tradicionibus hominum attendens, professores huius Scripture ac eius studium in se et prepositis eius subditis parvipendit.”

⁴¹⁷ *De Officio Regis*, 79: “Sed hodie illi qui defenderant scripturam nituntur prevertere hunc ordinem, exigentes quod primo oretur.”

⁴¹⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 245. This began with an assault on the manuscripts themselves (the fifth level) working its way up to a rejection of God’s word: “sict enim cristiana religio exorta est a fide et scripture primo modo dicta usque ad scripturam quintam, sic infidelitas nostrorum nominetenus cristianorum incipit a depravacione scripture quinto modo dicte gradatim usque ad negacionem scripture prime, quia multi nostrm, nominetenus cristiani vel dictis vel factis negant scripture sensum.”

⁴¹⁹ *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 38: “ut dicunt in scolis quod scriptura sacra est faltissima; sed oportet eius sensum per suam logicam coaptari; et sic perit scripture sacre auctoritas...”

“persecution and multiple depravations” rather than recipients of praise.⁴²⁰ Wycliffe considered it “one sign, among others, of the profound heresy” in his day, that clergy “grumbled” against preaching that “opened up the sense of Scripture” in a manner that “chastised their vices.”⁴²¹ In contrast, though consistent with this, “the Christian who roused people to fight against the devil according to the faith of Scripture” was labeled and persecuted as a heretic.⁴²² Those in the Wycliffe camp were accused of “disrupting the Church,” but he countered that “what was disturbing the Church was not the preaching of evangelical truth aimed at destroying sin, but the cherishing of sin and obstruction [of truth] so that the law of Scripture was not served.”⁴²³

True Church vs. False Church

In light of the conditions that prevailed in his day, Wycliffe argued for a distinction between a true church and a false church. It was here that he drove his wedge, rather than driving that wedge between the true church and its tradition. When he looked at the error that abounded in the teaching of the leaders of the Church he concluded that it would be “madness” (*demencia*) to view them as representing the “Christian church” (*ecclesia*

⁴²⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 172: “hodie namque, licet quis non fraterne corripiat, sed generaliter predicet, disputando doceat et defendat veritatem scripture, paciatur contumelias, persecuciones et depravaciones multiplices.”

⁴²¹ *De Officio Regis*, 255: “Unde inter alia signa profundioris heresis et defectus spei in precitis est quod clerus remurmuret contra detegentes sensum scripture iuxta quem sensum vitam suam viciosam corrigerent...”

⁴²² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 368: “patet igitur, quod non sequitur: iste cristianus commovet populum ad pugnandum secundum fidem scripture contra diabolum, ergo est hereticus, cum sit signum oppositi.” See also, *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 10: “Per hoc autem inhabiles aspirant ad superiores gradus sacerdotii et impediunt verbum dei predicari in populo; et anelantes ad illud tanquam hereticos persecuntur, et ista persecutio est heresis sue manifestum indicium.” See also, *Opus Evangelicum*, iii: 38: “Tercio principaliter patet quod moderni satrape claudunt hoc regnum celorum per hoc quod sensum huius scripture et professores eius multipliciter persequuntur...”

⁴²³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 366-367: “quarto quoad fructum secte nostre, quo assumitur, nos perturbare ecclesiam et niti separare membra a capite, nitendo destruere privilegia romane ecclesie...ex quo patet, quod non in predicando veritatem evangelicam ad destructionem peccati, sed in fovendo peccata et impediendo, ne lex scripture sevetur, trubatur ecclesia, licet quantumlibet malum pene sequatur ex primo et quantumlibet apparens temporalis prosperitas ex secundo.”

christiana).⁴²⁴ While there is only one “universal or catholic church” (*ecclesia universalis sive catholica*) containing all the predestined,⁴²⁵ Wycliffe also argued that “not all who are identified as part of the Church are catholic or faithful Christians.”⁴²⁶ Worst of all, those most prominently identified with the Church—the clergy—might be least a part of it. Just as the religion at the time of Christ had “deteriorated” into “a synagoge of arrogant Pharisees and avaricious priests” so too, in the fourteenth century, “the Church of Christ was shattered by religious hypocrites and false Popes.” As a result, “it was possible for the Church of Christ, weakened in morals, to reside largely in the laity.”⁴²⁷ What is significant here is that this understanding of the true Church differed very much from papal ecclesiology “which identified Christ’s Church with its clerical institution.”⁴²⁸

Wycliffe’s indictment against the clergy was quite severe and gives us a further indication of the magnitude of the corruption that existed in that day. The clergy were not priests of Christ, but “rather priests of Baal.”⁴²⁹ Perhaps the most radical and telling indictment that Wycliffe made against the Church of his day was that the Pope was Antichrist.

⁴²⁴ *Sermones*, ii: 158: “*que demencia quod tam errantes sunt ecclesia christiana.*” See also *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 270 where Wycliffe appeals to Augustine in order to support the notion that “*quod contraries scripture, eciam dominus papa, quem aliqui figunt dispensare contra illam, non est ut sic cristianus.*”

⁴²⁵ *De Ecclesia*, 7: “*Secunda conclusio sequens ex quiditate matris ecclesie est quod tantum est una, sic quod non multe ecclesie catholice. Demonstratur sic: Eo ipso quod est ecclesia universalis sive catholica, ipsa continet in se omnes predestinatos. Non est possibile quod sit nisi una universalis ecclesia.*”

⁴²⁶ *De Civili Dominio Liber Secundus*, 61: “*Ex istis videtur michi quod non omnes qui nuncupantur partes ecclesie sunt christiani catholici vel fidelies.*” It is for this reason that the Catholic faith is not to be identified with majority opinion. In fact, Wycliffe suggests that it is foolish to accept the popular voice as authoritative and that the majority is often in error. See *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 21-22.

⁴²⁷ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 258: “*sicut ergo in veteri testamento deteriorata est synagoga ex supercilio phariseorum et avaricia sacerdotum, sic possibile est ecclesiam Christi concuti ex ypocrisi religiosorum et fastu pontificum. Sed patet respicienti ad Dei potenciam permissivam et cursum ecclesie et per consequens possibile est ecclesiam Christi pro morula viacionis preeminenter residere in laicis.*”

⁴²⁸ William Farr, *John Wyclif as Legal Reformer in Studies in the History of Christian Thought*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 31.

According to Matthew Spinka, Wycliffe reached this conclusion after 1380.⁴³⁰ The charge was justified because the pope was viewed as fighting Christ's law.⁴³¹ Rather than being vicars of Christ, the popes "were special agents of Antichrist,"⁴³² with all the "sons of wickedness" organized under him."⁴³³ When the Pope "broke the bond by which he ought to serve Christ religiously in his office" he was no longer "an apostle but an apostate."⁴³⁴ It was Wycliffe's assessment that the very nature of the papal office in his day made him the "most likely" candidate to be the "chief vicar of Satan and especially antichrist," having the power to "defraud the Church" and "exalt himself above Christ."⁴³⁵

In addition to condemning the Pope as Antichrist, Wycliffe was also severe in his attacks against the four sects, the Cesarian priests, the monks, the Canons and the friars.⁴³⁶ He maintained that these represented a "defect in the foundation of Christ" and were "a burden to the Church." His opinion was that both Church and state would be stabilized if they were

⁴²⁹ *Speculum Ecclesie Militantis*, 10: "non sunt acerdotes Christi vel pars ejus; ideo ipsis non atinent iste leges, qui pocius sunt sacerdotes baal vel belial."

⁴³⁰ *Advocates for Reform*, 27.

⁴³¹ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 268: "certum est ex fide scripture quod, quicumque secularis vel clericus maxime obviat Cristi legibus, hic est potissimus anticristus, et quecunque peiodus vel annus dimissus fuerit sibi ad suam tyranidem..."

⁴³² *Sermones*, iv: 173: "Nec dubium quin tales non sunt Christi vicarii sed procratores precipui Antichristi." Cf. *De Blasphemia*, 2: "Videtur autem multis ex fide scripure et facto hominum, quod in Curia romana sit radix huius blasfemie, quia homo peccati anticristus insignis loquitur quod summi Cristi vicarius, in vita opere inter mortales sibi simillimus."

⁴³³ *De Civili Dominio Liber Tertius*, 532: "Talis conneccio est hodie in filiis sceleratis, et...capitaliter in Romano pontifice."

⁴³⁴ *De Apostasia*, 1: "postquam ruperit ligam qua religiose debet servire Christo in suo officio, quod on apostolicus sed apostaticus habeatur."

⁴³⁵ *De Blasphemia*, 44: "nullus viator est aprior romano pontifice ut sit vicarius principalis sathane et precipuus anticristus. Patet ex hoc quod ipse potest faciliter fraudare ecclesiam in yppocrisi et omni mendacio. Item, ipse potest plus calide se ipsum sper Crstum extollere."

⁴³⁶ *Sacerdos cesareus, monachus, canonicus atque frater*. See *Polemical Works*, i: 242 ff.

cleaned out.⁴³⁷ Of these, Wycliffe found the friars the most offensive, “seducing many by their clever schemes and especially by their hypocrisy.”⁴³⁸

An intellectual assault against Scripture came from those Wycliffe identifies as *sophists*⁴³⁹ but also characterizes as “infidels” (*infideles*) and “nominal Christians” (*nominetenus cristianorum*).⁴⁴⁰ These scholastics were more interested in “acquiring a reputation for subtilty...than for the glory of God and the benefit of the Church.”⁴⁴¹ They represented an “apostasy” that was “rapidly infecting...theologians.”⁴⁴² They had an “inordinate affection” for logic while “neglecting the glorification of Scripture.”⁴⁴³ Their common strategy was to impose a rigid literalism on the words of Scripture so as to establish a sense that allowed them to reject Scripture as untrue while ignoring the proper sense,⁴⁴⁴ which could be affirmed as catholic truth.⁴⁴⁵ These empty scholastic disputes were one of the major

⁴³⁷ *Polemical Works*, i: 242: “*Quatuor autem secte in Angliam et regna alia introducte, et ise ex defectu fundacionis a Cristo sunt ecclesie onerose et per consequens ad stabilicionem regni et ecclesie expurgande.*”

⁴³⁸ *Polemical Works*, i: 252: “*Quarta autem secta fratrum est multiplex in generibus, in fraudibus et personis, cum ista secta ultima per dyabolum introducta seducat multos per callidiores cautelas et specialiter per ypocrisim...*”

⁴³⁹ *sophists*. See *Sermones*, i: 218, 400; ii: 293; iii: 84; *Opus Evangelicum*, i: 450; iii: 152-153.

⁴⁴⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 245.

⁴⁴¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 99-100: “*plus enim attendit hodiernus disputans, ut acquisico subtilitatis nomine videatur concludi respondenti, quam ut ad dei gloriam et utilitatem ecclesie dei gloria declaratur...plus appetit venam gloriam suam quam honorem dei sui in elucidacione scripture sacre, que est lex Cristi*”

⁴⁴² *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 100: “*videtur michi, quod secundum infamem binarium recedens ab unitate apostatat. Et utinam talis apostasia non tam crebro inficeret nostros theologos!*”

⁴⁴³ *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 98: “*Unde quantum ad priores glosantes dicitur quod affectione inordinata extraneandi in logica, postposita glorificacione scripture.*”

⁴⁴⁴ Wycliffe often uses the term *equivocus* to describe this sense, but he also identifies this as the “literal sense” (*ad litteram*). This is the sense intended by God. The overly literal sense of the sophists is described as *sophistice*. See *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 231-232: “*Ex dicta ergo patet quodammodo qualiter scriptura sacra cum antiquis sanctis doctoribus in materia de Incarnacione Domini ad litteram est sustineanda; et quomodo iacula sophistica modernorum sunt scuto veritatis infallibilis repellenda, ac eorum discordancia equivoca detegenda...*”

⁴⁴⁵ Cf. *De Benedicta Incarnacione*, 116, where Wycliffe discusses the sophistical denial of what he affirmed: “*Unde frequenter, ut colores sapience sophistice minus appareant, obvio eis negando negativas, que ad sensum equivocum satis catholice concedi potuerunt.*”

causes of corruption introduced by Satan to destroy the Church.⁴⁴⁶

The Fallibility of the Church

One significant issue that Wycliffe confronted in relation to the authority of Scripture was the infallibility of the Pope. By his own assessment, the accepted position of that day was that “whoever is Pope is infallible so that whatever he decides or ordains is right.”⁴⁴⁷ In essence, the catholic understanding of Scripture was established by the opinion of one man. When Wycliffe goes on to say concerning the Pope that “he is able to make sacred Scripture heretical and make catholic the opposite of the Christian faith,”⁴⁴⁸ it is quite clear that this is an indictment rather than a hypothesis. His further assessment is that when this happens, the Pope simply is not a Christian,⁴⁴⁹ and that, as a result, the Pope may be in error.⁴⁵⁰ It is not envisioned that this would normally⁴⁵¹ happen as the result of an honest error, but rather out of

⁴⁴⁶ See *De Blasphemia*, 19.

⁴⁴⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 152: “*verbi gracia hodie invalescit opinio legistarum discencium, quod, si quis sit papa, est impeccabilis...*” See also, *De Antichristo*, 181: “*Et modo capitur ut fides, si maior pars cardinalium consentit in electionem istius pape, tunc ipse est proximus vicarius in terris et sequax domini Jesus Cristi. Secundo si ipse quicquam definierit, tunc ipsum ut evangelium est credendum.*”

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, “*et per consequens, si quid arbitratur vel ordinat, tunc est iustum cum epistole sue vel parificantur vel superant autoritate scripture sacre, eo quod non nisi per eum creditur ewangelio. Et sic potest hereticare scripuras sacram et catholicare oppositum fideo cristiane.*”

⁴⁴⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 270: Citing Augustine that anyone who is opposed to Scripture is not a Christian, Wycliffe says, “*iste sanctus sensit, quod contrarius scripture, eciam dominus papa, quem aliqui figunt dispensare contra illam, non est ut sic cristanus.*”

⁴⁵⁰ Wycliffe refers to the notion of papal infallibility as “*nimis hereticum*” (*De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 71). As a result he argues that Popes often err. See *Sepulchrum Ecclesie Militantis*, 25: “*Non enim debemus accipere bullas papales vel generaliter dicta illius curie tanquam fides; cum sunt viatores peccabiles et non generaliter inspirati, et ocularis experientia docet quod sepe sunt decepti at contra veritatis regulam sepe errant.*” See also *De Eucharistia*, 311. It should not be understood, though, that Wycliffe considered every error to imply a lack of genuine Christian faith for he points out that “*Petrus enim erravit*” (*De Officio Regis*, 223).

⁴⁵¹ Wycliffe does point out, though, that even the Apostle Peter sinned. See *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 370: “*Item beatus Petrus, qui fuit apostolus preelectus, gracia et informacione Christi principaliter sibi assistentis dotatus, peccavit tribus vicibus post electionem, consecracionem, et potestatis vicarie commissionem.*”

the motive of “greed in search of financial wealth.”⁴⁵²

Wycliffe’s desire was not to undermine the authority of the Church, but to hold the clergy accountable. Based on “the rule of Scripture...and the notorious behavior of a great many clergy,” it was obvious that they are not willing to discipline themselves.⁴⁵³ The notion that any supposed vicar of Christ should have the unaccountable authority to make his own rules⁴⁵⁴ and establish traditions to support them was preposterous to Wycliffe.⁴⁵⁵ Since such accountability was not coming from the clergy themselves, it would have to come from the laity. It “was necessary according to the laws of the Church that the laity employ their own role by the authority of the head of the Church”⁴⁵⁶ in order to establish accountability. The primary appeal here was to the “secular lords,”⁴⁵⁷ but it is also clear that Wycliffe viewed it as important that the laity in general be aware of the issues involved. He saw it as part of the problem that “our pharisees teach that men ought not to preach or instruct the gospel in the language of the people”⁴⁵⁸ out of fear that it would expose the departure of the Church from Christ.

⁴⁵² See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 384: “*item dominus papa vel alia persona magnificata ad hoc discernendum potest esse ignare sensus scripture et avara in questu pecunie interpretando scripturam ad sensum Cristo contrarium.*”

⁴⁵³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 71: “*set regula scripture, quam supra exposui, et facta nororia multitudinis cleri faciunt mundum clamare, quod prelati non debite castigant se et subditos.*”

⁴⁵⁴ See *De Blasphemia*, 16, where, speaking of the Pope, Wycliffe says, “*nec ipsum regit nec populum secundum regulas legis Cristi.*”

⁴⁵⁵ See *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 263: “*quid, rogo, foret magis suspectum, quam quod ego ossem magnificare potestatem meam ultra nubes dicendo, quod possum tot et tanta facere, palliando hoc ex scriptura et licenciando discipulos tradicionis mee hoc tractare in meis terminis, sed statuendo, quod non liceat theologo extra terminos meos vel limites secundum scripturam sacram quidquam disserere. Hoc enim excederet versuciam Machmeti.*”

⁴⁵⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, iii: 71: “*ideo secundum leges ecclesie necesse est, quod laici adhibeant autoritate capituli ecclesie partes suas...*”

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, “*secularium dominorum.*”

⁴⁵⁸ *Polemical Works*, i: 126: “*Cum satrape et pharisei nostri dicnt, quod homo non debet predicare nec colligere ewangelium in wlgari...*”

Summary

Wycliffe, like the sixteenth century Reformers who would follow in his footsteps with their emphasis on *sola scriptura*, is often accused of driving a wedge between Scripture and the tradition and authority of the Church. This ignores the very important factor that has been briefly surveyed in this chapter. Any discussion of Wycliffe's views of Scripture and tradition must take into consideration his reasonable assessment of the pervasive apostasy of the Church of his day. The established Church of the fourteenth century was preoccupied with wealth and power and characterized by gross decline in morality. Self-serving human traditions had largely displaced Scripture. Modern traditions designed to advance the interests of greedy clergy had eclipsed the purer traditions of the early Church. Scripture was neglected and its truths rejected by those intended to be its advocates. Those who claimed the title of vicar of Christ were better described as antichrists. Much of the Church was characterized by features very different than Christ intended.

In this context it would be naive and irresponsible to suppose that the Church, so separated from the written word of God, could possibly be the voice of God. In a very real sense it was not Wycliffe and his teaching that came between the Church and Scripture, it was apostasy that had driven a wedge between them. It was not Wycliffe's desire to separate the authority of the Church from Scripture, but to eliminate the barrier that had come between them. It was legitimate for the Church to have authority, but that authority was never intended to be without accountability. As such, it was Scripture that provided the standard for accountability. Wycliffe appealed to the secular lords and even to the common people, not to forsake the authority of the Church, but to hold the Church accountable to the authority of God's word.

CHAPTER V

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This chapter will focus on some important practical and pastoral implications that Wycliffe develops from his understanding of the nature of Scripture. In one form or another, these ideas continued to surface in the life of the Church wherever the authority of Scripture was emphasized. To a degree, they represent Wycliffe's legacy, even if those who came after him were not directly influenced by his teaching. An important theme is how the teachings of this great theologian connected with the lives of ordinary people in order to produce a truly catholic faith. Ironically, though, this impulse was seen as a significant threat to merely institutional Christianity.

Every Christian a Theologian

For Wycliffe, it was important for every Christian to be a theologian. This is a theme that he stressed repeatedly and explicitly in his writings. The catholic faith must be the faith of all the Church and that faith is not just mere assent (*fides qua creditur*), but a true grasp (*fides quae creditor*) of what Scripture teaches. Wycliffe argues that “it is necessary for every Christian to be a theologian”⁴⁵⁹ and “it is necessary for every Christian to learn the faith of the Church either through infused knowledge or acquired with this from human understanding, for

⁴⁵⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 233-234: “*omnem cristianum oportet esse theologum...*” i: 378: “*oportet, omnem hominem esse theologm...*”

otherwise he would not be a believer.”⁴⁶⁰ If all theology is to be truly catholic, then it only makes sense that “every catholic must be a theologian.”⁴⁶¹ Because Scripture is the source of all religious duties and all human knowledge, it ought to be studied by everyone.⁴⁶² Suggesting something of the perspicuity of Scripture, it is argued that, as long as it is approached with a “right attitude,” “the truth will descend making itself clear without deception.”⁴⁶³ The Christian is warned that “to ignore Scripture is to ignore Christ.”⁴⁶⁴

This is not to oppose the existence of a special category of individuals who devote themselves more exclusively to the knowledge and love of God. These are most properly identified by the title of “theologian”.⁴⁶⁵ For those, like priests, who enjoy a higher status in the Church, there is a greater need to be theologians. What is “especially” necessary for some,

⁴⁶⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 234: “, quia necesse est, omnem cristianum adiscere fidem ecclesie vel sciencia infusa vel cm hoc sciencia humanitus acquisita. Aliter enim non foret fidelis. Fides autem est summa thelogia.” Cf. ii: 137 where Wycliffe stresses that this is essential to salvation, “patet ex hoc, quod in fide illius scripture necesse est, omnes salvandos salvari.”

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, “oportet, omnem catholicum esse theologum.”

⁴⁶² *De Veitate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 163: “cum igitur omnia ista official oportet regulari per scripturam sacram, patet, quam necessaria est eius noticia...ideo, ut alias dixi, nulla humana sententia est valida, nisi de quanto fundatur in illa...ista autem regula ex fide est lex mandatorum dei, quam primo omnium oportet cognoscere.” i: 109: “Illum librum debet omnis cristianus adiscere, cum sit omnis veritas.” *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 402: “Ex istis tercio sequitur quod omnis homo debet esse theologus et legista, nam omnis debet esse Christianus; quod tamen non potest esse nisi legem mandatorum Dei cognoverit; sequitur quod omnis homo debet cognoscere legem istam: cum ergo omnis homo sit eo perieccior theologus quo perfeccius cognoverit legem Dei, sequitur quod omnis homo debet esse theologus.”

⁴⁶³ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 378: “oportet, omnem hominem esse theologum, habentem primo affectum rectum, et tunc veritas illabitur indeceptibiliter se ostendens.”

⁴⁶⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 169-170: “Cristus est dei vertus et dei sapiencia, quod nullus cristianus potest efficaciter cognoscere, nisi ex sciencia scripturam, igitur omnis cristianus tenetur scripturas cognoscere. Ignorare namque scripturas est ignorare Cristum, cum Cristus sit scriptura, quam debemus cognoscere, et fides, quam debemus credere.” Cf. 184, where Jerome is quoted as saying, “ignorare scripturam sacram est ignorare Cristum et fidem.” Wycliffe also warns that one will either be a scholar of God or the devil, majoring in either faith or unbelief: “Omnem enim himinem oportet esse scolarem Dei sive dyaboli, et rudimentum vel alphabetum a quo oportet in utraque scola incipere est fides vel infidelitas.”

⁴⁶⁵ *De Civili Dominio Liber Primus*, 403: “Licet autem omnis homo debet esse theologus, qui in quacunque arte sua principaliter intenderet Deum cognoscere; tamen ille qui dimissis curis seculi studet Deum diligere, secundum quod est omnia in omnibus, est secundum excellenciam quondam theologus.”

though, is not exclusive to them.⁴⁶⁶ One of the benefits of more learned theologians is not so much to better understand the truth, but to confront the errors that seek to displace it. The more that error abounds (as it did in Wycliffe's day), the more necessary it is to have individuals of greater learning.⁴⁶⁷ Where there is a deficiency of theologians, there often tends to be an abundance of heretics.⁴⁶⁸ Every Christian, including the layman, has a part to play.⁴⁶⁹

There is nothing novel in Wycliffe's teaching here. As Yves Congar points out, it was the practice of the early Church to require candidates for baptism to demonstrate an understanding of the fundamentals of saving faith.⁴⁷⁰ The "tradition" of the Church was not the intellectual property of a select few, but of all believers. While the doctors of the Church rightfully enjoyed a special role in teaching and defending the faith, it was never intended that they have an exclusive knowledge of the faith. The very essence of a "catholic" faith is that it must be grasped by all believers.

In our modern context, we should remember that the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is not

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, "sed sacerdotem, in quantum superior secundum quondam excellenciam." ii: 137: "sexton, sequitur, quod omnes cristiani et precipue sacerdotes atque episcopo tenentur cognoscere primo omnem legem scripture." ii: 137: "sed huiusmodi est elx sacre scripture in comparacione ad quascunque leges alias, igitur illa lex est primo ab omnibus et maxime a sacerdotius addiscenda." ii: 165: "probatum primo per decem autoritates, quod amnes sacerdotes debent esse instructi in lege divina." *De Officio Regis*, 77: "admitti cum omnes cristiani sint secundum plus vel minus theologi."

⁴⁶⁷ *De Officio Regis*, 72: "Quod si obicitur omnem fidelem eciam laicum esse theologum, certum est quod sic: sed cum sint hodie tot errors in fide scripture, in tantum quod nostril theology errant in simbolo et oracione dominica, necesse est esse theologos doctores docciores qui simpliciores illuminent."

⁴⁶⁸ *De Officio Regis*, "Unde propter defectum et mutacionem theologorum necesse est esse multos hereticos."

⁴⁶⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, i: 136-137.

Sicut scriptura sacra est nidus pullorum fidelium, sic eius error est nidus hereticorum, ideo omnes cristiani eciam seculares domini debent scripturam sacram cognoscere atque defendere.

Nec moveat paralogismus ex particularibus factus. Heretici allegant pro se scripturam et querunt adiutorium brachii secularis et sic tu facis, ideo es hereticus. Heretici enim lacerando negant, scripturam sacram esse veram, et non concedendo eam ex integro capiunt eis placitum, quod extorquent ad sensum sinistrum querentes subsidium dominorum secularium in fomentum sui facinoris. e contra autem catholici allegant pro se scripturam sacram, eciam visam ignaris impossibilem, cum acceptant eius autenticam veritatem ex integro ad sensum, quem sancti doctores docuerant, et sic contra hereticos adversantes scripture querunt subsidium brachii secularis, in quo viget plurimum fides ecclesie, eciam intelligendo reccius ac clarius fidem scripture, quam dati mani prepositi."

designed to establish the right of every individual believer to determine the meaning of Scripture for himself or herself. Rather, Scripture requires every believer to accept the role of theologian and correctly understand the catholic truth of “Scripture alone.” Christians who accept the responsibility of becoming theologians contribute to the stability of the catholic faith and to an environment in which it is more difficult for error to take root.

The Necessity of Preaching

Closely related to the importance of every Christian as theologian is an emphasis on the importance of preaching. This is a primary means that God has established for believers to learn their faith. As the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of faith would later read: “The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.”⁴⁷¹ This is consistent with Wycliffe’s understanding that Scripture is more than just words to be read, it is a message to be communicated and explained so that it is clearly understood. As Congar notes, the authorized ministers of the Church “are the organs for the transmission or tradition of the saving message.”⁴⁷² Oberman cautions that the written text of the Holy Scripture must not be separated from the *viva vox evangelii*.⁴⁷³

For Wycliffe, the preaching of the word was a more important pastoral function than

⁴⁷⁰ *Tradition & Traditions*, 244-246.

⁴⁷¹ Question 89.

⁴⁷² *Tradition & Traditions*, 240.

⁴⁷³ *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 286.

the consecration of the sacrament.⁴⁷⁴ In fact, it was more important than any other function in which the priest might engage,⁴⁷⁵ so that without the knowledge of Scripture it would be impossible to fulfil the proper duties of a pastor.⁴⁷⁶ The bishop who neglects preaching is “a hireling deceiving with the voice of a wolf”⁴⁷⁷ and is not truly a bishop.⁴⁷⁸ The true pastor, on the other hand, “feeds the hungry with a serving of holy preaching and then by giving the thirsty to drink by serving up the clear wisdom of Scripture, reading aloud the sacred

⁴⁷⁴ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 156: “*patet secundo, quod predicatio verbi dei est actus solemnior quam confectio sacramenti, cum tantum sit unum recipere verbum dei sicut corpus Christi, igitur multo plus est, populum recipere verbum dei, quam unicam personam recipere corpus Christi.*”

⁴⁷⁵ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 157:

“*dictum autem verbum predicatum est veritas et per onsequens essentialiter deus ipse. ideo eius predicatio est opus dignissimum creature.*

item omnis cristianus debet pre omnibus operi precipuo sibi limitato a deo diligenter intendere, sed illud est opus ewangelizandi iniunctum a domino sacerdoti, ut patet proximo capitulo, igitur sacerdos debet pre omnibus operi illi intendere. non enim debet ociari. minor patet ex hoc, quod illud opus producit propinquissime filios deo.”

Cf. ii: 159-161: (Quoting Archidiaconus) “*substancia sacerdotii est illud, quo sustentatur sacerdocium, et sine quo non rite exercetur sacerdotale officium, cuiusmodi est disciplina divinarum scripturarum.*” ii: 194 where, addressing the requirement that the pastor be able to teach, Wycliffe says, “*patet autem necessitas huius armature ex condicione quarta et septima. in hoc enim consistit summa prudentia ac elemosina, cum secundm hoc committitur sibi regimen ac preeminencia, invasio hostium et exortacio subditorum.*” ii: 197: “*ista ergo scriptura est utilis ad omne officium sacerdotis. unde considerans, quod tempus sue resolucionis instat et periculum immineret ecclesie ex defectu operis ewangelici, animat eum instar Cristi multipliciter ad hoc upus utrobique intendens, quod hoc sit opus sacerdoti precipuum. debet autem in paciencia corporis et anime usque ad mortem corripere et utrobique non resonando maledicciones vel litigia, sed doctrinam.*”

⁴⁷⁶ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 161: “*igitur omnem spiritualem pastorem oportet precipue habere scienciam sacre scripture. cum enim pastor sit nomen officii, patet, quod nec deus potest facere pstorem, nisi pascat.*” Cf. ii: 172-173: It is not a title or monetary compensation that makes a priest, but rather the activity of preaching the law of God (“*non enim nudum nomen in populo constituit presbiterum in tali officio nec nuda oracio vel alia species merendi, quia illud stat...unde quantum ad rationem pastoris captam scriptura sacra patet ex utroque testamento, quod consistit in pastu legis scripture.*”) Cf. *Sermones*, iv: 403 where Christ’s touching the tongue in order to heal the dumb is viewed as a sign of God’s directing prelates to preach (“*Sed sputum Christi quo tetigit linguam muti signat dulcedinem spiritus quo aperit afeccionem ad attente predicandum verbum quod prolatum a Deo audierit.*”). As a result, “*Quoad secundum patet quod liet omnis christianus cui Deus donat potenciam, debet loqui cum fiducia verbum Dei, tamen specialiter spiritualis prepositus.*”

⁴⁷⁷ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 187: (speaking of bishops who neglect preaching) “*et post narrat, quomodo multi recores propter mundanam gloriam obmutescunt, non pastorum, sed mercenariorum voce lupos alliciunt.*”

⁴⁷⁸ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 236: “*si igitur episcopus non predicat, tunc numquam predicat pro aliquo tempore preterito vel futuro, et tunc audacter assero, quod non sit episcopus.*” Cf. *Sermones*, iii: 46 where Wycliffe identifies the first reason for God suspending a prelate, “*si repellant a se scienciam scripture et ewangelizacionem.*”

narratives.”⁴⁷⁹ Wycliffe rejects as *ficticia* the notion that it is not necessary for every clergyman to be personally involved in preaching.⁴⁸⁰ While the preaching of the word is especially important for the priest, it is the “greatest duty” (*maxime*) for all believers.⁴⁸¹

Consistent with this teaching, Wycliffe, himself, made preaching a priority. Philip Schaff pays this tribute to the great English theologian: “Whether we regard Wycliffe’s constant activity in the pulpit, or the impression his sermons made, he must be pronounced by far the most notable of English preachers prior to the Reformation.”⁴⁸² Wycliffe’s emphasis on the importance of preaching also gave rise to a significant preaching movement. Herbert Workman paints a romantically delightful picture of Wycliffe as a “proto-Wesley,”⁴⁸³ beginning as early as 1377, sending out his circuit preachers “Clad in russet robes of undressed wool reaching to their feet...without sandals, purse, or script, a long staff in their hand, dependent for food and shelter on the goodwill of their neighbors, their only possession a few pages from Wyclif’s Bible.”⁴⁸⁴ While many of the details of this movement are uncertain, there is no doubt that these Lollard preachers, as they came to be called, continued

⁴⁷⁹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 211: “*ille autem minat oves per viam, que ducit ad celum, exemplo sancte conversacionis, sanat maculosos per appositionem sacramentalis medicacionis, pascit famelicos per ministracionem sancte predicacionis et demum potat sitibundos per deteccionem sapiencie, scripture apponendo leccionem sacre exposicionis.*”

⁴⁸⁰ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 177: “*secunda ficticia dicit, quod non oportet curatum in persona propria predicare...*”

⁴⁸¹ *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, ii: 147: “*ulterius patet, quod ista sciencia est maxime a fidelibus et specialiter sacerdotibus attendenda ex virtute precepti dominici.*”

⁴⁸² Schaff, *History of the Christian church*, 6, V, §.

⁴⁸³ Shirley sees an element of both Wesley and Ignatius Layola in this founding of the Lollard movement. *Fasciculi Zizaniorum*, “Introduction,” xl.

⁴⁸⁴ Herbert B. Workman, *John Wyclif: A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 203. He estimates the start of this movement by identifying the Lollard preachers with the “poor priests” referred to in some of Wycliffe’s works. It is very likely, though, that this identification is not valid. McFarlane, though, rejecting this early date as based on an incorrect understanding of when Wycliffe rejected transubstantiation, marks the beginning of the preaching movement closer to 1382 and even suggests that it may have been initiated by some of Wycliffe’s disciples at Oxford rather than Wycliffe himself. K. B. McFarlane, *The Origins of Religious Dissent in England* (New York: Collier Books, 1952), 109-110.

to emphasize the importance of preaching until the time of the Reformation.

The Translation of Scripture

The fourteenth century marked the legal adoption of English as the language for England, but the Church continued to use Latin for Scripture and preaching. Wycliffe was convinced that opposition to preaching in the language of the people was motivated by a fear that the people would discover how little like the followers of Christ the institution of the Church had become.⁴⁸⁵ He was also convinced that Scripture could be interpreted even by the most humble of folk, and it was only natural that this should give rise to an impulse toward translating the Bible into vernacular English. There is some debate concerning the role that Wycliffe had in the translation of the Bible into English,⁴⁸⁶ but as Workman suggests, this work “was the outcome of an attitude of mind on the place of the Scriptures in which Wycliffe differed widely from current views.”⁴⁸⁷ It was one of the distinctive features of the followers of Wycliffe that they read from Scripture and preached in English. In our present day, the name of the English reformer is attached to the title of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, a fitting tribute to a man who had such a passion to see God’s word accessible to everyone.

Confronting Error in the Church

As we have already considered, Wycliffe did not deny a legitimate and necessary role for the Church in interpreting Scripture. The interpretation of Scripture should not depart from the catholic faith of the Church. The Church had the authority to hold its members accountable to this standard. What the Church could not do was establish dogma above or

⁴⁸⁵ *Polemical Works*, i: 126: “*Dixit autem quidam, quod hec est ratio, quare hec rudimenta fidei ex ewangelio nollent populo in anglico predicari, quia cum ex fide debent vivere Cristo conformiter et in moribus sequi ipsum, detecia conversacione Cristi pateret luce clarius, quod in vita sunt sibi contrarii et non fideles vel cristiani ab aliis salutandi sed potius superiores discipuli anticristi.*”

⁴⁸⁶ See McFarlane, 99.

outside of Scripture. When this limit was crossed, the Church was capable of error and, when enforcing this error, of exercising illegitimate authority. The, at least potential, fallibility of the Church is a necessary implication of the position of the supreme authority of “Scripture alone.” For Wycliffe, this was not just a theory but a practical reality awaiting a confrontation. The showdown actually came late in Wycliffe’s life over the doctrine of transubstantiation.

There was no shortage of critics of the Church in the fourteenth century. In this regard, John Wycliffe was certainly notable and prolific but hardly unique. Many of his views on Scripture and the Church were shared by others and were a part of the then current debate within the Church. These views would not have earned him the title of heretic, let alone heresiarch. The latter distinction came as a result of his views on the Eucharist – particularly the doctrine of Transubstantiation.⁴⁸⁸ His conclusions here were certainly influenced by his philosophical presuppositions. He was a realist and, therefore, believed that universals had real existence and that accidents could not exist without a subject.⁴⁸⁹ There is also good reason to believe, though, that his rejection of transubstantiation was significantly shaped by his views on Scripture.⁴⁹⁰ It was here that the practical application of his theology of Scripture brought him into direct conflict with the established Church. The significant work on Scripture, *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae*, which has contributed to much of this study, was written during the years 1377-1378. The following year he began to defend his position on the Eucharist, which would ultimately bring against him the charge of heresy. The controversy

⁴⁸⁷ Workman, *A Study of the English Medieval Church*, 149.

⁴⁸⁸ See Maurice Keen, “Wyclif, the Bible, and Transubstantiation,” in *Wyclif in His Times*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1.

⁴⁸⁹ See John Stacey, *John Wyclif and Reform*, 101-104.

⁴⁹⁰ “Wyclif, the Bible and Transubstantiation,” 11.

resulting from this teaching forced him to leave Oxford. He was ill by this time and died of a stroke a few years later in 1384, thereby escaping punishment for his teaching. Charges were brought against him posthumously, though, at the council of Constance in 1415, and the order was given that his books and body be burned. The latter sentence was carried out in the Spring of 1428.

On the particular issue and the principle behind it (that the Church may err), Wycliffe prepared the way for John Huss and Martin Luther who would follow him. It is very important to remember that Wycliffe's legacy is not that individuals can interpret Scripture on their own and independent of the catholic faith of the Church, but that a single individual can hold the Church accountable to the supreme authority of Scripture.⁴⁹¹ Far from undermining the catholic basis of the Christian faith, this seems the only sure means of maintaining it.

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the implications of what is suggested here. Any church or branch of the Church which does not provide a mechanism for self-correction has a *de facto* position of infallibility regardless of its stated theology. This accountability must enable even the least to correct even the greatest so that the voice of the whole Church is allowed to be heard on any issue. Where there is no provision for such self-correction, the inevitable consequence is conflict and often either unnecessary division or persecution.

Summary

The legacy of John Wycliffe is his recovery of Scripture for the Church as a whole. For centuries the Christian faith has been characterized as "catholic" and yet it became

⁴⁹¹ In this Schaff sees Wycliffe as following the example of Athanasius who stood alone against the church of his day. *The History of the Christian Church*, 6, V, §40.

detached from a large portion of the Church. For the average person, Scripture was largely not preached and unavailable in a language that he or she could follow. For many of the faithful, the faith was merely accepted on the authority of a select few, while often lacking understanding and even awareness of the content of that faith. The institutional church often manifested a character inconsistent with that of Christ while maintaining a doctrine unsupported by or contrary to the word of Christ. Wycliffe sought to make the Church accountable by making the Scriptures available to all the faithful. The hope for restoring the catholic faith rested in making it truly catholic.

CHAPTER VI

WYCLIFFE FOR TODAY

John Wycliffe provides an interesting and important perspective on the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. It is clear that he espouses such a doctrine in his teaching on Scripture. Even though he wrote over a hundred years before the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, there is little, if any, that the Reformers would say concerning Scripture that was not anticipated by the “morning star” of the Reformation. What is clear, though, is that Wycliffe’s views on Scripture must be taken whole. The emphasis on Scripture alone must not be separated from the stress that he placed on the proper authority of the Church and the catholic nature of that faith. His challenge to the authority of the Church of his day must not be viewed apart from his understanding of the condition of the fourteenth-century Church.

When Wycliffe’s views on Scripture are understood in the historical context in which they emerged they make a relevant contribution to the debate over Scripture and tradition that continues even in the present. A recent document entitled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Your Word is Truth*⁴⁹² summarizes points of agreement and disagreement between Catholics and Protestants today. A useful way to summarize this current study of Wycliffe would be to allow his views to interact with the above mentioned document. In a very real sense, Wycliffe stands between both groups. He lived prior to the split with Rome and was

⁴⁹² “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Your Word is Truth,” *First Things* 125 (August/September 2002), 38-42.

intimately acquainted with the Roman Church and yet his teachings indicate an obvious concern for issues that Protestants have raised.

With both Evangelicals and Catholics today, Wycliffe would no doubt “affirm the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, as set forth in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.”⁴⁹³ For all the problems that existed in the fourteenth century, it would probably have been difficult for him to understand or appreciate the highly fragmented nature of modern Protestantism. While this current study has not developed a detailed consideration of Wycliffe’s ecclesiology, we have provided some evidence⁴⁹⁴ that Wycliffe would be more sympathetic to an Evangelical understanding of the true nature of the Church. It would have been even more compelling in light of the prevailing corruption of the fourteenth century (with two men claiming to be pope) to challenge the notion that “the Church of Jesus Christ “subsists in” and is most fully and rightfully ordered in the Catholic Church...governed by the bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter.”⁴⁹⁵

He would most certainly encourage Evangelicals “to recognize the need to address the widespread misunderstanding in our community that *sola scriptura*...means *nuda scriptura*.”⁴⁹⁶ As we have shown, Wycliffe is insistent that the “Scripture alone” on which Christians are to base their faith must not be understood apart from the “catholic” faith. The teaching of Scripture must be the faith of all the Church and what is not the faith of all the Church is not the teaching of Scripture. For Wycliffe, “only Scripture” is inseparably united with “all the Church”. It is only when the latter is incorporated in the very definition of Scripture—which

⁴⁹³ “Your Word is Truth,” 39.

⁴⁹⁴ See p. 84.

⁴⁹⁵ “Your Word is Truth,” 39.

is the case for Wycliffe—that the phrase *sola scriptura* can stand by itself. The practical lesson here for modern day Protestants is that, while the doctrine of *sola scriptura* may legitimately stand as the formal principle of the Reformation, it offers absolutely no support for the sectarian division that characterizes the Church today.

While Wycliffe would agree with Catholics that “teaching authority is invested in the Magisterium,” and, perhaps, even concede a place of preeminence for the bishop of Rome, he would, no doubt, remind this Magisterium of the need to exercise that authority in actually teaching people the pure gospel of Scripture. He would also remind this Magisterium that with authority comes accountability. He would be quick to remind both Catholics and Evangelicals that the corrupt church that dominated the landscape of the fourteenth century stands as a reminder and warning of the consequence of a lack of accountability. The doctrine of *sola scriptura* did not emerge simply from a theoretical study of Scripture. It was a practical development necessitated by apostasy that had overwhelmed the Church. It did not involve a change in tradition but rather an application of the old tradition to a new situation. In the same way that Augustine’s emphasis on the authority of the Church must be understood in the context of the heresies that undermined Christian faith in his day, so too, Wycliffe’s emphasis on the authority of Scripture must be understood in the context of apostasy in the Church that undermined Christian faith in his time. The emphasis on “Scripture alone” was not an attempt to undermine the authority of the rightfully appointed teachers of the Church, but to rescue that authority from the abuse that was destroying it, by holding it accountable to Scripture.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. Cf. Tvard, *Holy Writ*, 53. Cf. *Tradition & Traditions*, 401.

It is also reasonable to assume that Wycliffe would welcome a serious discussion of theological issues related to the Eucharist, purgatory, papal infallibility, etc. During his own lifetime he argued against the Roman views related to the Eucharist. He also clearly questioned papal infallibility and there is little doubt that he would take a “Protestant” position on many other issues. It is also likely that Wycliffe would charge the Evangelical Church with errors, and would probably be dismayed to discover the same unwillingness to acknowledge error on the part of those who have been more than willing to point it out in others.

At the same time, Wycliffe’s emphasis on the catholic nature of Christian faith would likely make him critical of the sectarian divisions that prevail throughout much of the Protestant Church today. The divisions plaguing the Church now, which were outlined at the beginning of this study, present us with a problem every bit as serious as that faced by Augustine and Wycliffe. What it calls for is not an abandonment of the legitimate doctrine of *sola scriptura*, but a reconnection of that doctrine with the need for a catholic faith.⁴⁹⁷ This will require recovering the authority of a “catholic” Church while at the same time preserving the authority of Scripture as the word of Christ to his Church and the need for accountability to that message. Wycliffe’s legacy remains intact, but it must be understood clearly in the light of his overall teaching about Scripture and the Church.

Finally, Wycliffe would most heartily agree that “we insist that all Christians should have open access to the Bible, and should be encouraged to read and study the Scriptures, for in them all that is necessary for salvation is set forth so clearly that the simplest believer, no

⁴⁹⁷ Congar’s criticism that “Wycliffe and Huss were moving toward a position of *Scriptura Solo* which in effect produced a separation between church and Scripture.” is unfounded, based on what Wycliffe actually taught. *Tradition & Traditions*, 98. It is likely that Wycliffe would agree with Congar’s statement (p. 391) that “the unanimous thought of the Fathers, and of the theologians of all times, goes on further to affirm that Scripture can be authentically preserved and its true meaning fully understood only in the Church.”

less than the wisest theologian, may arrive at a sufficient understanding of them.”⁴⁹⁸ He would challenge Catholics and remind Evangelicals that “confessing a high doctrine of the nature and place of Scripture is insufficient without a firm commitment to the “intense devotional, disciplined, and prayerful engagement with Scripture.”⁴⁹⁹ His vision and prayer would be that “only Scripture” and “all the Church” be and remain inseparably united together.

⁴⁹⁸ “Your Word is Truth,” 40.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

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