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## **Privacy, Please: How Calvin's Christocentric Pneumatology Fortified Protestant Polemics in the Fight for Private Judgment**

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Within the storms of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debate between Catholics and Protestants on church authority, the doctrine of Scripture was a lightning rod that attracted some of the era's most heated invectives and brilliant diatribes. William R. Wittingham, in his introduction to John Jewell's 1570 *A Treatise on Holy Scripture*,<sup>1</sup> surmises with regard to one of its most polemically charged subtopics:

Every corruption which deforms the system of Rome may be traced to the operation of erroneous views upon that subject. The most grievous exertion of the tyranny which the reformers shook off when it could no longer be endured, was the contravention of the principle, that *all need*, and *all may claim of right*, the Scriptures for their own private use. The strongest bulwark of the reformation is the allowance and exercise of that privilege.<sup>2</sup>

Sympathetic to the Catholic side of the controversies, Anthony C. Cotter corroborates this prioritization of extant issues within the doctrine of Scripture:

When the Protestants walked out of the Church, they took the Bible with them. But severing its essential connection with the Church, they made the Bible the sole rule

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<sup>1</sup> John Jewell, *The Apology for the Church of England and Treatise of the Holy Scriptures*, (New York: Henry M. Onderdonk and Co., 1846), xxxvi-xxxvii. This double volume contains what Whittingham calls, "perhaps, when combined, the most complete exhibition of those principles to be found among the writings of the original combatants on their behalf" (ibid., xxxi). Those principles include the sole authority of Scripture and the right of private judgment to ascertain the truth of Scripture. The latter will serve this essay as a prism through which related bibliological matters may be understood. We'll focus our attention not on Jewell (1522-1571), however, but on William Whitaker and William Perkins, for sake of space, and because Whitaker's *Disputation* comes in 1588, twenty six years after the first edition of Jewell's *Apology*. (Jewell's *Treatise* is a posthumous 1583 publication based on a sermon he preached in 1570). Further, we'll examine Whitaker in light of Roman Catholic controversialist Thomas Stapleton, who was occupied early in his career (c.1565) by critical analysis of Jewell's *Apology*. Thus, Whitaker engages Stapleton after the latter has already engaged Jewell. On Stapleton, see Michael Richards, "Thomas Stapleton," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 18, no. 2, (October, 1967), 187-199. On Stapleton and Jewell, see ibid., 190.

<sup>2</sup> Jewell, *Treatise of the Holy Scriptures*, xxvi-vii. Wittingham was the Anglican Bishop of Maryland in 1846 when he wrote his preface to this double volume of Jewell's works. He opines in his preface that there had been much abuse of private interpretation among many of the continental reformers, but that "it is a proud distinction of the English branch of Protestantism that *there* it never was allowed a footing (ibid., xxx).

of faith, urged all to read it and allowed all to interpret it according to their private judgment. They insisted that the Bible by itself was clear enough to be understood and interpreted rightly by all.<sup>3</sup>

Wittingham's statement comports well with the writings of John Calvin and the English Reformers who followed in his theological wake during the era which Richard Muller identifies as "the early orthodox period" (ca.1565-1640).<sup>4</sup> The sentiment simmers throughout both editions of Calvin's *Institutes* and comes to a boiling point in several places, particularly on the issue of "implicit faith," the belief that believers ought to accept something as biblically true based on the unappealable authority of the church.<sup>5</sup> At the earliest stage of his 1536 work, Calvin signaled implicit faith as a pressing matter in itself and an instructive impetus for further discussion in his systematic exposition of the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> In the "Epistle Dedicatory" of the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, addressed to King Francis of France, Calvin complains,

Now look at our adversaries (I speak of the order of priests, at whose nod and will the others treat us hostilely) ... They readily allow themselves and others to ignore, neglect, and despise the true religion, which has been handed down in the Scriptures... They think it of no concern what belief anyone holds or does not hold

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony C. Cotter, "The Obscurity of Scripture," *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, 9, no. 4 (October 1947): 454. Protestants did insist that the Scriptures were perspicuous, but they typically relegated that perspicuity to matters dealing with salvation. Richard Muller writes, "The Reformers uniformly state the clarity of Scripture in all things necessary to salvation." Richard Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 322. Catholic polemicists typically stressed the obscurity of Scripture, which they saw as further evidence for and justification of the ecclesiastical magistracy's primary if not exclusive authority in hermeneutics. Robert Bellarmine was one of Rome's most profound and prolific controversialists; his work significantly informed and shaped the polemical debates on church authority and Scripture. For an excellent overview of his historical significance, particularly regarding hermeneutics, see Christian D. Washburn, "St. Robert Bellarmine on the authoritative interpretation of Sacred Scripture" in *Gregorianum*, 94, no. 1 (2013): 55-73.

<sup>4</sup> Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:442ff.

<sup>5</sup> Matters of implicit faith could involve the great mysteries of the faith in which the whole church confesses the limits of knowledge, matters of ignorance based on a believer's lack of education, or even statements of Scripture which, according to Roman apologists, cannot possibly be acceptable as true sans the ecclesiastical magistracy's approbation of their truthfulness. For example, William Whitaker cites Thomas Stapleton's approval of an earlier Catholic argument that the biblical recounting of the "astounding numbers" in King David's army could not be believed as true unless the church commended it as such. See William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture Against the Papists especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. William Fitzgerald (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 282-283.

<sup>6</sup> English translations have Calvin using the phrase "implicit faith" in another, very different way as well. When Calvin uses it positively, apart from reference to Rome, he means latent faith, the seed of faith based on the words of Christ and brought to fruition in observing the practical realization of those words. Calvin has in mind the resurrection as he writes, "Whence also they are said at length to have believed, when they saw the words of Christ verified by facts; not that their faith then commenced, but the seed of faith, which had been latent, and as it were dead in their hearts, then shot forth with additional vigour. They had therefore a true but an *implicit faith*, because they received Christ with reverence as their only teacher: being taught by him, they were persuaded that he was the author of their salvation; and they believed that he came from heaven. But we need not seek a more familiar proof of this point, than that some portion of unbelief is always mixed with faith in every Christian." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1813), III.ii.4; emphasis added. The Henry Beveridge translation has this phrasing as well. The Battles translation of the 1559 edition was not available to investigate. Calvin points latent faith not to the authority of the church, but to Christ himself by way of his word. See *ibid.*, III.ii.2-7.

regarding God and Christ, if only he submit his mind with implicit faith to the judgment of the church.<sup>7</sup>

Judging the accuracy of Calvin's accusations, clearly expressive of existential suffering, is beyond the scope of this paper. We mean here only to establish the complex of issues at play, the fact that the doctrine of Scripture is central in the polemics on church authority, and further, that the myriad of issues beneath the doctrine of Scripture can, in our necessarily brief analysis, be well represented when viewed through the prism of the Protestant fight for private judgment.

Cotter's comments above conclude with the mention of private judgment. We may infer in the totality of his words the controversies over the *principia* of the faith; of biblical perspicuity vs. obscurity; and of related debates about hermeneutical method. Such controversies continued to burn deep into the seventeenth century, with private judgment remaining a central, incendiary topic.

Petrus Van Mastricht (1630-1706) quotes one of Rome's foremost controversialists, Thomas Stapleton (1535-1598), as saying, "One must not believe God as he speaks in his written word unless the authoritative judgment of the pope stands in between."<sup>8</sup> Later, Van Mastricht summarizes the polemical tension over authority as it applies not only to Scripture itself, but to the controversies of biblical doctrine: "When the Reformed censure the papists because they set up the Roman pontiff for themselves as the supreme judge of controversies, the latter will fling the criticism back and strike at the Reformed, saying that they make every private person, down to the common girl, a judge of controversies."<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the era we're examining, and in an enduring way, major topics in the doctrine of Scripture tended to funnel down together polemically in the direction of the debate over private judgment.

Confusion can occur in the relevant literature over the definitions of and relationship between private judgment and private *interpretation*. The latter is specific and focused on hermeneutics. The former is broader and can encompass the latter in principle. Our concern is the theological basis for the epistemological access of every believer to the assurance that Scripture is God's word, and to the requisite level of doctrinal detail commensurate to salvation.

Despite occasional equivocations within their disputations,<sup>10</sup> certain foundational agreements between Protestants and Catholics solidified a theological framework for productive debate. Most pertinent for us is that both sides held the Bible as truly the word of God, superintended by the Holy Spirit through men. Biblical content was objectively true and knowable *in itself*. Both sides vied for understanding and explication of Scripture and biblical dogma whose truth transcended the "merely human," or as we would say, the merely subjective. In this epistemological milieu, prior to the Kantian turn in the eighteenth century, subjectivity—self as center of knowable truth—

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<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion, 1536 Edition*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 5. To distinguish in the footnotes between Calvin's 1536 and 1559 editions, the former will be listed simply as 1536. All citations from that work are from this Battles translation.

<sup>8</sup> Petrus Van Mastricht, *Theoretical Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 171. Mastricht cites Stapleton as found in the latter's "The authority of the church formally considered," *A Demonstration of the Doctrinal Principia of the Faith*, controversy 4, q. 1, art. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Mastricht, *Theoretical Practical Theology*, 1:174.

<sup>10</sup> Both Robert Bellarmine and William Whitaker appeal to the original authorial intent to discern meaning. The two disagree strongly on the perspicuity of Scripture in general and on the significance and even definition of the "literal sense" of Scripture. See William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture Against the Papists especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. William Fitzgerald (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 386ff.

was a pejorative. Thus, private judgment was for Protestants a trenchant but potentially treacherous assertion in the advance against Catholic concepts of church authority.

As Maastricht's comments indicate, Protestants needed to fend off the accusation that private judgment relegates the objective, scriptural content of the faith to the tyranny of the subjective. The Protestants insisted that councils and popes can and do err, but how did that stipulation not make matters worse for individual believers, the vast majority of whom were far less educated than the Catholic magistracy? Catholic polemicists weaponized these questions in the early orthodox era.

As Catholic teachings on Scripture stressed distance between biblical text and believer, pressing the need for the authoritative ultimacy of the ecclesiastical magistracy, Protestants pushed back along pneumatological lines. Pneumatology connected the seemingly fragmented and further fissuring objective and subjective dimensions of personal faith based on the Scriptures. The Spirit's work bound biblical object and believing subject together, thus legitimizing and securing, among other benefits, private judgment. This Protestant offensive was actuated early, and later tactical deployments were presaged in the prescient work of John Calvin.

As we will see, Calvin's doctrine of Scripture was pervasively pneumatological; further, his pneumatology was essentially Christological. Thus constructed, and as on display in both the 1536 and 1559 editions of *The Institutes*, Calvin's doctrine of Scripture supplied English Protestant polemics against Rome with the theological basis with which to press Protestant distinctives into the subjective aspect of Christian faith with consistency and self-referential integrity in its principle commitment to objective biblical truth. In brief, *Calvin's Christocentric pneumatology propped up and protected Protestant polemical writings on church authority as they engaged the doctrine of Scripture*.

After demonstrating Calvin's theological construct, this essay will show the pneumatological and epistemological contours of his work as it branched out to benefit Protestant polemics, particularly in England. We'll examine William Whitaker's work as an especially instructive example, as well as William Perkins as a significant advancement of the latter on a particularly vulnerable point in the Protestant argument for private judgment.

### **Privacy, Please**

Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* is, methodologically, an explication of the Apostle's Creed.<sup>11</sup> Deep into book IV ("Of the Holy Catholic Church") and twenty-three years after his first edition, Calvin is still challenging "implicit faith." Here, he argues that everyone in the church, regardless of ecclesiastical rank, is subject to judgment by the Scriptures.

Paul certainly had been appointed an apostle to the Corinthians, and yet he declares that he has no dominion over their faith (2 Cor. 1:24). Who will now presume to arrogate a dominion to which the apostle declares that he himself was not competent? But if he had acknowledged ... that every pastor could justly demand implicit faith in whatever he delivered, he never would have laid it down as a rule to the Corinthians, that while two or three prophets spoke, the others

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<sup>11</sup> The methodology of Calvin's *Institutes* expresses his commitment to rule his theology according to historic confessional categories. Calvin's dependence upon biblical exegesis and his biblical-exegetical integrity and fidelity is demonstrated in his exposition of those credal statements and categories. This implicitly demonstrates Calvin's high regard for the church and for church authority in promoting and protecting sound doctrine. Respect for the church and its doctrinal authority was, polemically, an important mitigating factor against Roman Catholic accusations of Protestant denigration of the same. The crux of the conflict, as Whitaker persistently points out in his *Disputation* vis-à-vis the doctrine of Scripture, is over the amount, extent, and kind of authority the church possesses.

should judge ... (1 Cor. 14:29, 30). Thus he spared none, but subjected the authority of all to the censure of the word of God.<sup>12</sup>

Calvin declares the believer's faith bound to Scripture and free from any church leader's demand for implicit faith. The latter assumed the ultimacy of church authority in biblical interpretation and in providing assurance that Scripture was God's word; thus, implicit faith assaulted private judgment. Keith D. Stanglin summarizes Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), a primary and prolific Catholic controversialist: "the church, represented by the Spirit-filled bishops and the pope, must interpret Scripture and make its meaning plain. Bellarmine assumes Scripture's general obscurity and the common believer's general inadequacy to understand it."<sup>13</sup>

The English Reformers countered such claims by appealing to the work of the Spirit within individual believers. In this, they were led by Calvin. In book I of the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin frames the conflict over church authority, fought in the arena of the doctrine of Scripture, in pneumatological terms:<sup>14</sup>

For thus, *with great contempt of the Holy Spirit*, they inquire, Who can assure us that God is the author of them? Who can with certainty affirm, that they have been preserved safe and uncorrupted to the present age? Who can persuade us that *this* book ought to be received with reverence, and *that* expunged from the sacred number, unless all these things were regulated by the decisions of the Church?<sup>15</sup>

Calvin's rhetorical questions concern both the objective and subjective elements of Christian faith. In the 1536 *Institutes*, Calvin defines the former: "The Word of God, therefore, is the object and target of faith at which one ought to aim; and the base to prop and support it, without which it could not even stand."<sup>16</sup> Calvin's inquiries also probe from various angles the subjective dimension of faith *vis-à-vis* the Scriptures. For Calvin, the Catholic position on authority and assurance concerning the Scriptures exists in contempt of the Holy Spirit.

Foreshadowing things to come among other Protestants, Calvin consistently gives a pneumatological answer to each question pertaining to the believer's subjective persuasion and assurance regarding Scripture. As we will see, Calvin's pervasive pneumatological emphasis pertaining to faith's "object and target" gives theological consistency and apologetic integrity to his teaching on its subjective appropriation.

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<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), IV.viii.9. Though this edition is the Beveridge translation, all other citations unless otherwise noted will be the Allen translation.

<sup>13</sup> Cotter observes that Catholic tradition gave several reasons why God made or left the Bible obscure, one of which was "to let all know that the Bible was entrusted primarily to the *magisterium* and was to be read under its guidance ... Leo XIII insists on it ... and derives from it the right of the *magisterium* to interpret the Bible authentically." Cotter, "The Obscurity of Scripture," 463.

<sup>14</sup> From very early on in the 1559 *Institutes*, Calvin clearly charges that Rome's view of its authority was an assault on Scripture: "But there has very generally prevailed a most pernicious error, that the Scriptures have only so much weight as is conceded to them by the suffrages of the Church; as though the eternal and inviolable truth of God depended on the arbitrary will of men." (Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.1.).

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.1. The emphasis is mine in the final question, to show more clearly that its context is canonicity. Canonicity is a substantial issue in the doctrine of Scripture and a vital one for private judgment. Beneath the issue of whether individual believers have the right to and capacity for private interpretation are the fundamental matters about what contents comprise the written word of God and how believers may be certain of such; this relates from another angle to the aforementioned question of how the believer is convinced that Scripture is the word of God. The latter issue is especially vital for Calvin.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 58.

Calvin and the English Reformers who followed in his theological wake saw their position as exalting the Spirit's work in the very places where Rome had supplanted it. The following is an instructive, cogent expression of the positive side of Calvin's pneumatological emphasis as he delineates the Spirit's activity within the believer in relationship to Scripture. Note that the Spirit's subjective work is angled at the believer's assurance of Scripture's objectivity—its divine origin.

They who have been inwardly taught by the Spirit, feel an entire acquiescence in the Scripture, and that it is self-authenticated, carrying with it its own evidence, and ought not to be made the subject of demonstration and arguments from reason; but it obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Spirit. For though it conciliate our reverence by its internal majesty, it never seriously affects us till it is confirmed by the Spirit in our hearts. Therefore, being illuminated by him, we now believe the divine original of the Scripture, not from our own judgment or that of others, but we esteem the certainty, that we have received it from God's own mouth by the ministry of men, to be superior to that of any human judgment, and equal to that of an intuitive perception of God himself in it.<sup>17</sup>

Calvin posits the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit as supremely authoritative in assuring believers that Scripture is from God. Divinely given intuition recognizes divinely inspired authorship. On both the objective and subjective side of faith, and in their coming together, pneumatology is essential, integral, and thus polemically weaponizable.

Richard Muller writes, with reference to the doctrine of Scripture, "What we have in Calvin's doctrine is the simple assertion of the absolute truth of Scripture, its dictation by the Spirit, and the inward testimony of the Spirit guaranteeing the authority of the written Word... We have, in short, the ground—a bit less rigid, less technical, and less insistent on small detail—of the later doctrine."<sup>18</sup> Calvin's pneumatologically driven doctrine of Scripture would equip Protestants to challenge on the highest, holiest grounds what Calvin and they considered to be the importunate incursion of Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authority into the faith and life of believers.

### **The Spirit Bears Witness**

Because Calvin's pneumatology is crucial to his doctrine of Scripture, anything crucial to the former is crucial to the latter. For Calvin, the inextricable relationship between Scripture and Spirit also necessitates the inseparable union between the written word and the word incarnate. The Spirit's work in believers must be understood first and foremost in Christological terms. Thus, there is a Christological foundation for Calvin's doctrine of Scripture. Christology is therefore implicitly present wherever his pneumatology is applied in the polemics we're investigating. Further, as we will see in our conclusion, the Christological aspect of Calvin's pneumatology seals his doctrine of Scripture as self-referentially consistent and polemically cogent against Rome's doctrine of the word of God as defended by Stapleton. Calvin establishes the Christological component of his pneumatology in both editions of his *Institutes*.

The second chapter of the 1536 *Institutes* is a microcosm of the 1559, in that it is arranged according to the Apostle's Creed. In both editions, as he expounds the creedal affirmation "I

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.5.

<sup>18</sup> Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:301. Calvin was not dealing directly with issues pertaining to autographa, which would later be a point of polemical contention as Catholics highlighted copyist errors. Muller notes that Calvin scrupulously detailed such errors in his work, but that in Calvin's purview those particular matters had not yet risen to the level of open polemical debate as they would later with the Reformed orthodox. To the point of our essay, Calvin was not always fighting the same precise fights as those who followed him, but he amply equipped them for their own battles.

believe in the Holy Spirit,” Calvin emphasizes the Spirit’s distinctive work in connection to the redemptive work of Christ. In the 1536, he says, “We are persuaded that there is for us no other guide and leader to the Father than the Holy Spirit, just as there is no other way than Christ; and that there is no grace from God, save through the Holy Spirit. Grace is itself the power and action of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>19</sup> In the 1559, book III, he expositis the same creedal statement.<sup>20</sup> Calvin begins,

We are now to examine how we obtain the enjoyment of those blessings which the Father has conferred on his only begotten Son, not for his own private use, but to enrich the poor and needy. And first it must be remarked, that as long as there is a separation between Christ and us, all that he suffered and performed for the salvation of mankind is useless and unavailing to us. To communicate to us what he received from his Father, he must, therefore, become ours, and dwell within us.<sup>21</sup>

Calvin’s first directly topical, sustained teaching on faith in the Spirit begins in the 1559 edition with the blessedness of Christ as conferred by the Father. The emphasis is immediately Trinitarian, yet Calvin leaves off explicit mention of the Spirit until much later in the lengthy opening paragraph. Everything until that point (and, implicitly, everything after) has to do with Christ. Calvin continues,

whatever he possesses is nothing to us, till we are united to him. But though it be true that we obtain this by faith, yet, since we see that the communication of Christ, offered in the gospel, is not promiscuously embraced by all, reason itself teaches us to proceed further, and to inquire into the secret energy of the Spirit... The sum of all is this—that the Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ efficaciously unites us to himself.<sup>22</sup>

For Calvin, to believe in the Holy Spirit is to be immediately concerned with Christ and his benefits. Pneumatology inevitably yields Christology. Therefore, Calvin’s doctrine of Scripture, with its definitional, all-encompassing pneumatology, is ineluctably Christological.

Having established Calvin’s first principles in his doctrine of Scripture and their integral connection to his own polemics against Catholic church authority, we may see more clearly how English Reformed polemicists in the early orthodox era drew from its theological depth to fortify their own offensives.

### **Once More into the Breach...**

In his historical-theological study of the doctrine of Scripture, John R. Knott traces lines of theological affinity and argumentation among several of the most prominent Protestant Reformers:

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<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1536, 77.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin summarizes book III in his “Argument” section before beginning its detailed work, “This treats of God the Sanctifier, or of the operations of the Holy Spirit towards our salvation, being an accurate exposition of the third part of the Apostles’ Creed.” Notable is the fact that Calvin elaborates here on the expository nature of his work with reference to the creed, something which his readers would already have known from reading the comparatively briefer summary statements in books I and II. What might seem to be a redundancy or an excess of explanation, perhaps suggests instead the particularly pressing importance Calvin attached to dealing accurately and fully with the doctrine of “the Sanctifier,” the Holy Spirit. As this essay demonstrates, pneumatology is crucial to his polemical emphases against Roman church authority vis-à-vis the Scriptures.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 468.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, III.i.1.

Luther argued for Scripture interpreting Scripture; Tyndale followed him. *Whitaker followed Calvin, providing a fuller account of the workings of the Spirit.* His argument rests upon the assumption that one is persuaded of the truth of Scripture by the ‘internal testimony of the Holy Spirit’ (a translation of a key phrase of Calvin’s).<sup>23</sup>

William Whitaker (1548-1595) is noteworthy among early orthodox English Reformers particularly for his *Disputation*,<sup>24</sup> a polemic on church authority pursued via the doctrine of Scripture and aimed substantially against the aforementioned Catholic champions Robert Bellarmine and Thomas Stapleton.<sup>25</sup> Michael Richards notes that for Stapleton, “the problem of authority was his central preoccupation.”<sup>26</sup> His skill impressed Whitaker, who attributed to Stapleton an incisiveness unparalleled among the latter’s Catholic peers. It was Stapleton’s work that prompted Whitaker’s *Disputation*,<sup>27</sup> and the heading for chapter two summarizes well *Disputation*’s central polemical concern: “how much authority, with respect to the scripture, is attributed by the papists and by us to the church.”<sup>28</sup> Whitaker writes, “Of all the popish authors,

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<sup>23</sup> John R. Knott, Jr., *The Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Responses to the Bible* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 34, emphasis mine.

<sup>24</sup> William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture Against the Papists especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. William Fitzgerald (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Not only did Whitaker interact substantially with two of the Catholic Church’s best champions, but he included within his criticisms praise where he felt it was due to them. This praise is particularly noteworthy given Whitaker’s rhetoric against the Jesuits. Bellarmine was a Jesuit, and Stapleton spent a “short interlude” of time when he was fifty laboring among them, according to Michael Richards, “Thomas Stapleton,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 18, no. 2, (October 1967), 191. Stapleton hailed the Jesuits as “blessed and virtuous” servants of God responsible for the Christianizing of many pagan peoples (Richards, “Thomas Stapleton,” 188). Whitaker cast the Jesuits in terms of the plagues described in Revelation for their extraordinary prowess in carrying out the destructive work of the papacy. Whitaker writes in his *Disputation*’s epistle dedicatory, “Amongst these locusts ... none, as we before said, have ever appeared, more keen, or better prepared and equipped for doing mischief, than are the Jesuits at this present day” (Whitaker, *Disputation*, 4). Whitaker’s personal approbation of the two scholars is all the more remarkable given his clearly stated antipathy for the Jesuits. On Bellarmine, though he spends a few pages reciting somewhat incredulously the way Bellarmine was exalted by fellow Catholics (ibid., 5ff), Whitaker praises him as “unquestionably learned, possessed of a happy genius, a penetrating judgment ... who was wont to deal more plainly and honestly than is the custom of the other papists, to press his arguments more home, and to stick more closely to the question” (ibid., 6). Whitaker’s praise of Stapleton is included in the main body of this essay above. The polemics of that day were remarkable in the learnedness evident among the chief combatants, so much so that polemically bitter rivals felt compelled to publicly recognize it.

<sup>26</sup> In particular, Stapleton was concerned to maintain what the Catholic church saw as the proper place of Tradition alongside and in mutual relation with the Scriptures. Richards avers that Stapleton believed Tradition was being obscured in the polemics of the time and the real issue men were forced to decide upon was “Scripture as interpreted by Luther and Calvin and Scripture as interpreted by the contemporary church of Rome. It was, therefore, the authority of the contemporary Church that he was most of all concerned to defend.” See Richards, “Thomas Stapleton,” 192, cf. 187-199.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Richards summarizes the history between Whitaker and Stapleton: “The discussion with Whitaker began in 1588, when Whitaker wrote his *Disputatio de Sacra Scriptura contra hujus temporis Papistas* in reply to the ninth book of Stapleton’s *Demonstratio Methodica*. Some German friends showed him a copy of this work, printed in 1590, and urged him to reply. He was at that moment busy with the move to Louvain, where he had been appointed Regius Professor of Scripture, and it was not until 1592 that he wrote his *Autoritatis Ecclesiae defensio* in reply. Whitaker returned to the fray with a *Duplicatio* in 1594, and in 1596 Stapleton retorted with a *Triplicatio*, published as an appendix to his greatest work, the second extensive study of the problem of doctrinal authority, the *Principiorum fidei doctrinalium relectio scholastica*” (Richards, “Thomas Stapleton,” 194).

<sup>28</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 280.



Stapleton hath treated this question with the greatest acuteness.”<sup>29</sup> Whitaker summarizes and then responds to Stapleton,

He subjoins that the authority of the church respects the scriptures only materially; which he explains to mean, that it is fitting we should obey the judgment of the church, and, on account of its judgment, receive the scripture as sacred. But it would not, says he, be fitting that the truth of scripture, or of other objects of faith ... should only be true on condition of the church’s approving them; but now, says he, the church does not make them true in themselves, but only causes them to be believed as true. Mark ye. The scripture is true in itself, and all the doctrines of scripture are true ... yet they would not have seemed true to us, they would not have been believed, or (to use Stapleton’s expression) *received* by us, unless on account of the church’s approbation. This is the whole mystery of iniquity.<sup>30</sup>

Note Stapleton’s distinction, as Whitaker represents him, between the Scriptures in themselves and the Scriptures as they appear to us. Scripture’s truth is inherent, independent of the church. However, our reception of it as truth depends upon the testimony of the church. Whitaker seems to appreciate Stapleton’s objective/subjective distinction, at least as it upholds Scripture’s objectivity, and especially in comparison to other, more radical Roman Catholics who in Whitaker’s mind more severely denigrated Scripture’s independence from the church.<sup>31</sup> However, Whitaker sees Stapleton’s use of the distinction as demonstrative of the essential, culpable flaw in the Catholic schema. That the subjective side of the dynamic is irrevocably dependent upon the church is “the whole mystery of iniquity.”

Whitaker summarizes the Protestant counterclaim on Scripture: “our belief of their truth is produced by the testimony and suggestion of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> The inward testimony of the Holy Spirit is “a more certain and illustrious testimony ... without which the commendation of the church would have with us no weight or moment.”<sup>33</sup> Recall Calvin’s comment that Scripture “is self-authenticated ... it obtains the credit which it deserves with us by the testimony of the Spirit.... Therefore, being illuminated by him, we now believe the divine original.”<sup>34</sup> Whitaker’s argument clearly echoes Calvin’s. Note further in what is perhaps Whitaker’s most succinct and substantial summary on the topic the tight connection between the objective and subjective aspects of faith as well as the pneumatology on both sides and as the bond between them. The Holy Spirit “makes the Scripture canonical and authentic in itself and makes it appear so *to us*.”<sup>35</sup> As with Calvin, divinely given intuition recognizes divinely inspired authorship.

Whitaker presses further and asserts that without this epistemological bond between object and subject, secured by the Spirit, the integrity of biblical content is threatened, portending disaster for the believer. Owing that he builds here upon arguments “taken from Calvin,”<sup>36</sup> Whitaker

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<sup>29</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 280.

<sup>30</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 281. Whitaker cites Stapleton from *Doctr. Princip. Lib. IX. Cap. 2*.

<sup>31</sup> Both Stapleton and Bellarmine distinguish between the Bible in itself and the Bible as it is to us; it is the latter, these polemicists contend, which is the domain of the ecclesiastical magistracy. Though Whitaker strongly criticizes their use of that “to us” principle, he presents both Bellarmine and Stapleton as relatively moderate here. He mentions another Catholic polemicist, Andradius, and says the latter argues “more perversely” that it is the dignity of the church and not any inherent dignity in the Scriptures which compel belief in them. See Whitaker, *Disputation*, 278.

<sup>32</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 281–282.

<sup>33</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 279.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.5. Allen’s phrase “divine original” seems now not as clear as Beveridge’s rendering, “that the Scriptures are from God.”

<sup>35</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 280, emphasis mine.

<sup>36</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 340.

contends, “if the canon of scripture depend upon the determination of the church, then the authority, verity, and credibility of all the promises of salvation and eternal life contained in scripture depend upon a human judgment.”<sup>37</sup> Whitaker claims that Stapleton calls Calvin’s argument inconsequential because the judgment of the church here is not “merely human, but divine and infallible”<sup>38</sup> (Note the prizing on both sides of judgment that transcends the merely subjective). For sake of argument, Whitaker grants the point but asks rhetorically if Stapleton believes that Scripture’s judgments are also divine. If so, “Why then may we not acquiesce in the judgment of scripture as well as in that of the church? ... For the question is not, whether the judgment of the church be divine in itself, but whence it is that we are assured of its being so ...”<sup>39</sup> Whitaker faults Stapleton for giving no information here and thus failing to prove the real question. “For there is a wide difference between these two propositions; God speaks through the church, and, we cannot be otherwise certain of the scriptures and doctrine of God, but because the church attests them.”<sup>40</sup>

Calvin provides well for Whitaker’s persistent denial that subjective certainty pertaining to the objectively true Scriptures ultimately depends upon the church. Calvin contends that Scripture itself attests to and supplies such certainty. There are, he claims,

manifest signs of God speaking in Scripture, from which it appears that its teaching (*doctrina*) is from heaven; and a little later we shall see that all the books of Sacred Scripture far surpass all other writings. Indeed, if we turn pure eyes and upright senses toward it, the majesty of God will immediately come to view, subdue our bold rejection and compel us to obey.<sup>41</sup>

Scripture evidences and compels belief in its divine objectivity. However, as we’ve seen, the subjective acquiescence to such is dependent upon the Spirit’s internal work. Whitaker precisifies this principle for hermeneutics and applies it to the persuasion that biblical content is truthful.

We say that the Holy Spirit is the supreme interpreter of scripture, because we must be illuminated by the Holy Spirit to be certainly persuaded of the true sense of scripture; otherwise, although we use all means, we can never attain to that full assurance which resides in the minds of the faithful. But this is only an internal persuasion, and concerns only ourselves. As to external persuasion, we say that scripture itself is its own interpreter.<sup>42</sup>

The “means” here are the practical tools of hermeneutics. Without the subjective, illuminating work of the Holy Spirit who is sovereign over Scripture’s meaning, these means cannot provide assurance that one has obtained Scripture’s true meaning. Objectively, however, Scripture serves to interpret itself and is therefore inherently interpretable. An examination of hermeneutical methods is beyond the scope of this paper, but we may note that Whitaker’s goal as *Disputation* engages hermeneutics is, as ever, to divest believers of ultimate dependence upon Roman authority. He writes, “that the interpretation of scripture is tied to any certain see, or succession of men, we absolutely deny.”<sup>43</sup>

Maintaining in their polemics the objective and subjective dynamics of Scripture-based faith in what the Reformed would consider their natural, Spirit-given simultaneity would prove

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<sup>37</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 340.

<sup>38</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 340. Whitaker provides no specific citation here of Stapleton.

<sup>39</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 341.

<sup>40</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 341.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.4.

<sup>42</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 415.

<sup>43</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 415.

problematic. Muller notes Calvin's effort to strike "what Reformed orthodoxy would find to be an increasingly difficult balance between the subjective and inward certainty resting on the Spirit and on faith alone and an external objective certainty resting on evidence."<sup>44</sup> The tensions involving authority and assurance, which we've seen in canonics and noted in hermeneutics, pivoted as well toward private judgment.

### **On Balance**

It was one thing to try to defend the objectivity of the Spirit's internal testimony and illumination in conjunction with Scripture's demonstrative inherent qualities. *Disputation's* sections on hermeneutics attempt to do that. But how could individual believers themselves defend their sense that it was indeed the Spirit who had spoken to them? How much weight, objective probity, should be attributed to one believer's subjective claim regarding his subjective experience of the Spirit?

The more Protestants pressed the point of the Spirit's subjective work within individual believers, the more they began to feel the pressure of those very same principles as Roman polemicists weaponized them in the opposite direction. Pressure increased as Protestants conceded to Rome the point which Rome accused them of denying—the extraordinary significance of church authority. One of *Disputation's* strongest affirmations of church authority reveals the difficulty of weighting that affirmation properly alongside the insistence that the Spirit's internal work is its authoritative superior. He writes,

we concede that against heretics an argument may be taken from the authority and consent of the church, shewing that, since the whole church hath rejected these books, we justly allow them to deserve rejection. For who is there so bold and impudent as not to be greatly moved by the authority of the catholic church? It hath seen and examined these books, *and can judge better of them than any private person, because endowed with a greater and more ample abundance of the Holy Spirit and of judgment*.<sup>45</sup>

Whitaker concedes the validity and value of canonical polemics based on church authority. But the theological basis for this concession is precisely the basis by which he, his Protestant peers, and Calvin before them argued for private interpretation: the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit. It is difficult to discern from Whitaker here whether he fully equates the church's study with the "more ample abundance of the Holy Spirit and of judgment." He seems to mean rather that the church's examination helps to render impudent any dismissal of its authority, and that the strength of the church's determination on these books, superior to that of any private person, is primarily if not exclusively predicated upon its being endowed with greater abundance of both the Spirit and judgment. Whatever Whitaker's intent, the danger for the polemical advocacy of private judgment is evident: the basis upon which private judgment is argued on behalf of every individual believer can be used to demonstrate its deficiencies in light of its use by a better-educated assembly of believers.

Further, noting the context of Whitaker's concession on church authority, it would seem difficult to maintain that such superior judgment would apply only to polemical canonics. Whitaker does not address what seem to be obvious questions along the lines we've suggested. He keeps his focus in this section upon the evaluation of the apocryphal writings as is his stated purpose and maintains his central thesis that while church judgment is of great import, it is not church authority which determines a book's canonicity or lack thereof; that determination is a function of the content and quality of the books, which the church is in an excellent position to judge. Still,

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<sup>44</sup> Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:259.

<sup>45</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 313, emphasis mine.

the question is implicitly put: How can the Protestants, with self-referential consistency, urge the Spirit's subjective work against a Roman ecclesiastical magistracy which may claim the same in its judgments? More pressingly, on what basis may the individual believer protest against such collective judgments, when the latter claim the Spirit's leading and the support of the Scriptures which Protestants hail as authoritatively ultimate?

This tension was well expressed even prior to Calvin's second *Institutes*. Porter recounts a related accusation which Catholic Bishop James Brooks of Gloucester levied in 1555 against the eventually executed Nicholas Ridley:

you must needs be singular and wise in your own conceit, for you bring scripture for the probation of your assertions, and we also bring scriptures; you understand them in one sense, and we in another. How will you know the truth herein? ... you ... rest upon the singularity and wisdom of your own brain'.<sup>46</sup>

Porter avers, "The charge of singularity stung. And the Reformers were anxious to guard the flank." Porter notes Whitaker's sensitivity to the charge with reference to hermeneutics:

We do not say that each individual should acquiesce in that interpretation which his own private spirit frames and dictates to him; for this would be to open a door to fanatical tempers and spirits; but we say that the spirit should be the judge, who speaks openly and expressly in the scriptures, and whom all may hear.<sup>47</sup>

Whitaker affirms private interpretation's basis and the corresponding capacity for such among believers.<sup>48</sup> The Spirit's clear voice in Scripture may be heard by "all."<sup>49</sup> Whitaker (here not cited by Porter) sums up, "We recognize no public judge save scripture, and the Spirit teaching us in scripture."<sup>50</sup> Yet how can this argument successfully combat the charge of mere subjectivity, of singularity? Whitaker felt similar pressure coming from Robert Bellarmine, "the Jesuit."<sup>51</sup> Whitaker complains, "yet this man speaks as if we made the spirit within the judge of others; which should never be done ... we say, You should receive this doctrine because the Holy Spirit in the scriptures hath taught us to think and to believe."<sup>52</sup> Once again Brooks's adversarial reasoning is applicable, because the Catholics could say the same.

Whitaker's *Disputation* never directly addresses singularity. If mindful of it, perhaps Whitaker thought no direct engagement was necessary or germane. What is clear throughout *Disputation*

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<sup>46</sup> H. C. Porter, "The Nose of Wax: Scripture and the Spirit from Erasmus to Milton," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 14 (1964), 165. Porter's only citation information comes in a footnote which reads, "Ridley, P.S., p.283".

<sup>47</sup> Porter, "The Nose of Wax," 166, citing Whitaker, *Disputation*, 433. Porter's edition matches the one cited in this essay.

<sup>48</sup> Recall that for this essay, private interpretation is understood as a subset of private judgment. In the pertinent literature, private interpretation had to do with what the Scriptures say, and private judgment had to do with what the Scriptures are. Protestants insisted that the Spirit's work was definitional and essential for a proper subjective appropriation of both. The issue which drives our investigation is the believer's epistemological access to the Spirit and what verification there may of the personal actuation of that access.

<sup>49</sup> Whitaker distinguishes here between public interpretation of the Scriptures (which seems to indicate preaching or at least the public declaration of the results of interpretation) and private interpretation. He concedes that not all have the former, but that "in private all the faithful, taught by the Holy Ghost, can understand the scriptures and recognize the true sense of scripture." Whitaker, *Disputation*, 433.

<sup>50</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 433

<sup>51</sup> Stapleton is more often than Bellarmine referred to by name in the main body of the work. Usually, Bellarmine is referenced as "the Jesuit."

<sup>52</sup> Whitaker, *Disputation*, 433-434.

is Whitaker's restriction of his polemics to the question of authority. He brings every excursion back to it and he criticizes his opponents for avoiding, misconstruing, or equivocating the proper questions pertaining to it.<sup>53</sup>

*Disputation* concludes with a (typically thorough) expose and critique of Roman Catholic tradition. The lingering epistemological question of assurance against singularity is left to other works. Enter then William Perkins (1558-1602), who raises the question himself.

### **Perking Up**

In his introduction to Perkins's Galatians commentary, John H. Augustine quotes him, "the word of God is no word unto us unless we know it to be so: and we know it to be so, because it was written by the Apostles, who in preaching and writing could not erre."<sup>54</sup> The English Reformers' views on inspiration are beyond the scope of this paper, but note for our purposes the "to us" dynamic which recalls the aforementioned Roman Catholic division of the question between the word as it is and the word as it seems. The English Protestants, following Calvin, found this splicing too sharp because it severed all but the ecclesiastical magistracy from immediate, Spirit-wrought assurance that God's word was such. This severance allowed the exaltation of the magistracy's authority as supreme in all matters Scriptural. Perkins's doctrine of Scripture was consistent with, but not identical to, Calvin's.

Augustine notes that Perkins repeatedly "stresses the authority of the biblical Word enlivened by the Holy Spirit."<sup>55</sup> Quoting Perkins, "God puts his own authoritie into the word which he [Paul] uttered: and he was assisted by the extraordinary, immediate, and infallible assistance of God's spirit."<sup>56</sup> For Perkins, the authority of the product is tied to the infallibility of the process. Typical

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<sup>53</sup> For example, from earlier in this essay, Whitaker writes, "For the question is not, whether the judgment of the church be divine in itself, but whence it is that we are assured of its being so" (Whitaker, *Disputation*, 341). This pattern proves out as Whitaker later, after a discussion of authority from the church fathers, turns to hermeneutics (Whitaker, *Disputation*, 476ff.). He advocates the literal sense, as discovered by seeking the authorial intent of a given passage, as the locus of true meaning. Further, he recommends particular ways of attaining it, means having to do with original language and literary devices, a humanistic move increasingly prevalent among Protestants in that day, and certainly in keeping with Calvin's own tendencies (See Richard C. Gamble, "*Brevitas et facilitas*: Toward an Understanding of Calvin's Hermeneutic," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 47 (1985), 1-17). Whitaker begins the section by reviewing his postulation of the Spirit as hermeneutical sovereign and by commending prayer as the first step toward understanding Scripture aright. He sums up by emphasizing the Spirit's necessary place in the employment of these humanistic means, "for with these means must of necessity be combined the teaching of the Holy Spirit, without which we shall ever expend labour in vain upon the study of the scriptures. It was upon this account that we said, that we should before all things pray that we might, in searching the scripture, hold that way which was most direct, and that the Holy Ghost might always shew us his illumination." (Whitaker, *Disputation*, 475-476).

<sup>54</sup> John H. Augustine, "Authority and Interpretation in Perkins' *Commentary on Galatians*" in William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), xvii-xlvi.

<sup>55</sup> Augustine, "Authority and Interpretation in Perkins," xxxii.

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, "Authority and Interpretation in Perkins," xxxii, quoting Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, 23. Augustine gives a potentially misleading assessment of Perkins's understanding of the subjective reception of Scripture and what it implies about the objective nature of Scripture. Augustine writes, "An important qualification for proper biblical interpretation accompanies Perkins' confidence in expositing Scripture. He claims that the Spirit directed the apostles and prophets in writing the Scripture, and he notes that the Scripture must be enlivened by the faith of the reader in order to become the Word of God" (ibid., xxxi). He then quotes Perkins to substantiate his claim, "the word of God is no word unto us unless we know it to be so: and we know it to be so, because it was written by the Apostles, who in preaching and writing could not erre." Perkins, as cited by Augustine, writes nothing of the enlivening of

of Protestant positioning, pneumatology is central to Perkins's doctrine of Scripture. Further, with Perkins as with Calvin, pneumatology connects tightly to Christology in view of the doctrine of Scripture.<sup>57</sup> The Spirit's infallible guidance of the biblical authors results in sayings and writings which believers are to receive as from Christ himself.

Augustine cites Perkins again,

Here, Paul notably expresses the Authority and Honour of an Apostle, which is to be *heard even as Christ himself*: because in preaching he is the mouth, and in writing the hand of God ... the principall meanes whereby we are assured touching the truth of Scripture, is, that the books of Scripture were penned by men, whose writings, and sayings, we are to receive, even as *from Christ himself*, because they had either Prophetically or Apostolically authoritie, and were immediately taught and inspired in writing<sup>58</sup>

For Perkins, the basis of assurance is the knowledge of Apostolic authorship, one step removed from the text itself. Thus, the pneumatological component of Perkins's doctrine of Scripture, as it applies to assurance, is relatively indirect compared to Calvin's clearly direct emphasis, echoed in Whitaker. For Calvin, the Spirit's authorship of Scripture and the Spirit's assurance of believers are tied immediately to the biblical text. Though Perkins does not tie these elements together as

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the word by the faith of the believer, much less that the word changes in its inherent identity and significance based upon such. Augustine leaves Perkins sounding somewhat like a proto-Barthian. But Perkins's words as cited by Augustine are better read as related to the extant pattern we've seen of framing the issue in terms of Scripture itself compared with and connected to the believer's subjective perception of it.

We've already seen, from Stapleton, the use of the distinction between scripture in itself and scripture *as it appears to us*. "Calvinists like Perkins" (Augustine's own phrase, *ibid.*, xxxv) would deny that the ecclesiastical magistracy was necessary in making the latter align with the former in the mind of the believer; this, for Perkins following Calvin, was the Holy Spirit's work. Thus, Perkins's phrasing, "the word of God is no word *unto us*" (emphasis added) should be understood as hewing to that rhetorical pattern which for neither Catholics or Protestants of the time denied the inherent divinity of Scripture, but rather signaled the distinction between the objective nature and the subjective perception of Scripture. Augustine cites a passage in Perkins which this essay includes in the main body. It's excerpted here as it obviates Augustine's understanding of Perkins's "to us" phrasing. For Perkins, the authority of an Apostle is to be "heard even as Christ himself: because in preaching he is the mouth, *and in writing the hand of God* ... the principall meanes whereby we are assured touching the truth of Scripture, is, that the books of Scripture were penned by men, whose writings, and sayings, we are to receive, even as from Christ himself, because they ... were immediately taught and inspired *in writing*" Augustine, "Authority and Interpretation in Perkins," xxxii-xxxiii, quoting Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, 286, emphasizes mine.

<sup>57</sup> The presence of Christology should be noted in Whitaker as well, as his pneumatology informs his doctrine of Scripture. Whitaker cites St. Augustine's third tractate on the Epistle of John as the latter discusses the preached word and the Spirit's making its reception by the believer efficacious. "The sound of our words strikes the ear; the teacher is within... As far as in me lies, I have spoken to all: but they to whom that unction speaks not internally, they whom the Holy Ghost does not teach internally, go forth uninstructed" (Whitaker, *Disputation*, 453). Whitaker cites Augustine soon again, "The inward master therefore teaches; Christ teaches; his inspiration teaches." Here, pneumatology and Christology are tightly bound together in view of Scripture and its subjective appropriation by the believer.

<sup>58</sup> Augustine, "Authority and Interpretation in Perkins," xxxii-xxxiii, quoting Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians*, 286. Emphasis mine. Perkins places more stress, at least in these citations, on the Spirit-led author than he does on the scriptural product of their work. That the Apostles were "immediately taught and inspired in writing" is discernable, he says, through what Calvin would refer to as the external evidence of Scripture's divinity, an aspect of what we're calling the objective dimension of these issues. See Calvin's comments as cited on page 15 of this essay, coming from Calvin, *Institutes*, I.vii.4.

tightly as Calvin or Whitaker do, their presence in close, necessary proximity to one another contributes to consistency, but prevents identity, among the Reformers on the objective and subjective aspects of biblically based faith.

Perkins's *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* is particularly helpful on the subjective side of these matters, especially in view of the aforementioned epistemological vulnerability of the Protestant position on private judgment. His treatise is, in essence, an exposition of the practicalities of the subjective appropriation of Scriptural truth. In keeping with Calvin and Whitaker on assurance, Perkins touts in *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit as "the argument of all arguments, to settle and resolve the Conscience, and to seal up the certainty of the Word of God."<sup>59</sup> This strong affirmation of the primacy of the Spirit's internal work brings us back to its potential polemical bane. Perkins, though writing pastorally rather than polemically, recognizes the problem.

Perkins asks what would happen "If any shall ask, how this testimony of the Holy Ghost may be obtained, and being obtained, how we may discern it to be the testimony of the Holy Ghost, and not of man."<sup>60</sup> Broadening and formalizing the question for a moment beyond Perkins's immediate concern, we can see that Brooks's criticism is still salient along epistemological lines. It forces the question of how private judgment can transcend "merely human" judgment. Perkins's concern for the same essential issue but along pastoral lines yields particular answers and is itself perhaps a signal of a methodological approach which, for the Protestants, most directly and practically engages the issue.

Precising the epistemological concern and casting it in Perkins's pastoral terms, we may ask, what recourse does the "common," uneducated believer have to be assured of the Spirit's internal work as it relates to Scripture? Perkins gives two ways by which a believer may verify that the subjectively perceived testimony of the Spirit is not in actuality "merely human," a singularity, a byproduct of his own brain.

First, by resigning ourselves to become truly obedient to the doctrine taught—John 7:17. If any man will do my father's will (saith Christ) he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God. Secondly, by praying unto God for his Spirit, to certify our consciences, that the doctrine revealed is the doctrine of God. Ask (saith our Savior Christ) and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find... Mat. 7:7, 8. Again, *Your heavenly father will give the Holy Ghost, to them that desire him, Luke 11:13*. And, "if any man lack wisdom, let him ask it of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and reproacheth no man, and it shall be given him. James 1:7."<sup>61</sup>

Perkins's verifications proceed along practical lines and apply most directly to the assurance that Scripture is the word of God. Much of the *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* discusses the preached Word and how to hear and profit from it. Perkins engages the practical outworking of the internal work of the Holy Spirit and particularizes his pastoral concerns by looking to those who do not seem to profit from faithful preaching. After addressing sinfulness of heart as the first reason why someone might not profit from sound preaching, Perkins continues, "The second sort of causes, are ordinary and usual defects of natural gifts; as of capacity, or concept, of memory, and understanding. For all men have not the like gifts of nature, and therefore all men cannot

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<sup>59</sup> William Perkins, *The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience, Distinguished into Three Books* (New York: De Capo Press, 1972), 232-233.

<sup>60</sup> Perkins, *Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, 233.

<sup>61</sup> Perkins, *Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, 233. Of John 7:17, Luke 11:13, and James 1:7, none but the John reference really answer the question directly. And even the John reference would seem to pertain mostly if not exclusively to texts which contain some at least implicit imperative. The indirectness of apparent application perhaps indicates the state of the question as relatively unexplored.

reap benefit by the word preached.”<sup>62</sup> For those beset by natural impediments, which Perkins reminds readers would be similarly prohibitive in other endeavors in life, he avers that pious affection may compensate for a lack of knowledge. This lack “in such as have natural defects, may be supplied by good affection, if they be not wanting in an honest heart, and careful endeavor of a godly life.”<sup>63</sup>

Perkins lists three specific conditions and provides a summative comfort by which the pious hearts of such believers may be assured before the Lord concerning their subjective connection to his word.<sup>64</sup> They must have some knowledge of the “principal grounds of religion;”<sup>65</sup> they must have a desire to learn; and they must live according to the measure of their knowledge of God’s will. The comfort for such people is “that God in mercy will accept their endeavor, forgive their ignorance, and bear with their infirmities.”<sup>66</sup>

Perkins’s emphasis on the practical outworking of faith typifies the approach of the English Puritans. Brevard Childs notes with admiration Perkins’s stress on practical goals in his exposition. Childs calls this “the hallmark of great Puritan writing.”<sup>67</sup> If we cast this methodological connection of biblical exegesis to personal application in pneumatological terms, which is appropriate given the essential dependence upon pneumatology we’ve demonstrated in the doctrine of Scripture put forth by Calvin and his theological heirs, this methodology expresses another move from objective Spirit-supplied content to its subjective, Spirit-enabled appropriation. And this time, the move comes with the potential for epistemological verification of the believer’s experience: the practical obedience of a pliant heart to that portion of biblical knowledge with which the Spirit has blessed the believer.

Thus, the collective witness from the Protestant theologians we’ve examined affirms at the very least the primary importance, to the exclusion of any posited equal or higher authority, of the internal, subjective work of the Holy Spirit as it relates to assurance. Further, this emphasis provides the ground for Protestant insistence on the believer’s right to private judgment of the Scriptures. However, as we’ve seen in Perkins’s pastoral sensitivity to those not obviously benefiting from preaching, the possession of a right does not guarantee the capacity to exercise it.

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<sup>62</sup> Perkins, *Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, 300.

<sup>63</sup> Perkins, *Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, 301.

<sup>64</sup> Brevard Childs notes regarding Perkins’s commentary writing that while there was not much to suggest a strong philological background, his exposition nonetheless penetrated into the deep theological issues at play and that its ease of movement from Old to New testament accomplished “a kind of biblical theology.” See Brevard S. Childs, “Reflections on the Reissue of William Perkins’ *Commentary on Galatians*” in William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians, with Introductory Essays*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), xv.

<sup>65</sup> Given the Catholic polemical emphasis on its magistracy’s qualifications over and above the “common man” to know and interpret Scripture, this point is probably the point most vulnerable to Roman rejoinder. But it is in keeping with Calvin’s insistence that faith consists, in addition to volitional commitment and heartfelt affection, of knowledge. Joel Beeke notes, “Calvin held that knowledge is foundational to faith.” See Joel R. Beeke, “Appropriating Salvation: The Spirit, Faith and Assurance, and Repentance,” in *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, David W. Hall and Peter L. Lillback, eds. (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), p.277. Further, summing up what we’ve seen firsthand from Calvin, “Faith originates in response to the Word of God. Faith rests firmly upon God’s Word; it always says amen to the Scriptures. Hence assurance must be sought in the Word and flows out of the Word. Assurance is as inseparable from the Word as sunbeams are from the sun,” Beeke, 278.

<sup>66</sup> Perkins, *Treatise of the Cases of Conscience*, 300-301.

<sup>67</sup> Childs, “Reflections on the Reissue of William Perkins’ *Commentary on Galatians*,” xvi.



But nor, Protestants would urge, does lack of the particular capacity justify a denial of the fundamental right.<sup>68</sup>

Perkins, more for the sake of pastoral theology than for polemics, advances pneumatological principles, crucial for Whitaker and Calvin before him, further into the epistemological and practical dimensions of the believer's subjective appropriation of the Spirit's work. Loose ends remain, both with regard to the state of these questions in the era of early orthodoxy, and pertaining to our engagement in particular.

On the former, one could ask how, when removed from the issue of authority, Protestants could maintain any inherent supremacy, and therefore possession of "more of the Spirit" (in Whitaker's words), in their exegesis and consequent dogmatics as compared to that of Rome. Closer to our purposes, we've necessarily left virtually untouched the vital issue of biblical perspicuity and its connection to matters discussed above. Suffice it to say that for the Protestants, the Spirit who authored the Scriptures made the things necessary for salvation clear enough to be perceived even by the "common" believer, a claim which Rome, of course, typically and vigorously denied.<sup>69</sup>

### **Parting Shots**

As we close, we may recall the crucial place of Christology in Calvin's pneumatology and therefore in his doctrine of Scripture. This emphasis, too, prepared Protestants well for polemics against Rome on the doctrine of Scripture. Less along the lines of church authority, Stapleton put forth a doctrine of the word of God directly aimed at the theological discreditation of the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, and which took a severe swipe at Protestant Christology as well.

Typical of the polemics between them, both Catholics and Protestants tried to best one another based on the other's principles. Richards cites Stapleton accordingly: "The word is Christ himself: outside the Scriptures, but not outside Christ; other than the Scriptures, but not other than Christ. Today Christ and Christ alone is the sole foundation of the whole Christian religion which we are to teach, beyond which no other foundation can be laid."<sup>70</sup>

Stapleton cleverly suggests an idolatrous infection of Protestant Christology by Protestant bibliology. Calvin's work prepares Protestants to answer charges that they exalt the written word at the expense of the incarnate word. He shows that while Christ and Scripture are not identical, the exaltation of Scripture is inherently and inevitably the exaltation of Christ. Calvin gets here via his pneumatology.

As we've seen, Calvin's pneumatology is essential to his doctrine of Scripture on both the objective and subjective sides of biblical faith, and its focus as applied to Christian faith is utterly Christocentric. Thus, using Stapleton's own distinction between the word and the word as it seems to us, Calvin's doctrine of Scripture shows us the written word as essentially Christological, and

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<sup>68</sup> This point is indirectly taken up by Whitaker as he seeks to show the foolishness of Rome's insistence on the ultimacy of papal and magisterial authority for the interpretation of Scripture by pointing out the practical impossibility of consulting with said magistracy whenever need arose. Whitaker references Psalm 19, that the heavens declare the glory of God, and comments, "and yet they speak not: the scriptures have a yet more glorious and distinct utterance. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' What? Shall we not know the meaning of these words, unless we consult the pope? And no less plain are all the chief articles of our religion." Whitaker, *Disputation*, 445-446.

<sup>69</sup> Despite disagreement on the fundamental perspicuity vs. obscurity of Scripture, Whitaker notes with appreciation Bellarmine's belief that all necessary dogmas were contained in Scripture, and then he turns that belief against Bellarmine: "However, it is no despicable concession on Bellarmine's part, that he confesses all dogmas simply necessary for all to be contained in scripture: from which we may gather, that no traditions are simply necessary for all persons." Whitaker, *Disputation*, 695.

<sup>70</sup> Richards, "Thomas Stapleton," 196, citing Stapleton, *Opera Omnia*, 1620, i., 513D.

essential for our Christology. Given Calvin's pneumatology, the word written and the word incarnate are epistemologically inseparable in the objective content and subjective appropriation of Christian faith. Calvin's schema shows believer, biblical text, Spirit and Savior in closest proximity, inextricably bound together in the substance and experience of Christian faith.<sup>71</sup>

On the subjective side of the believer's engagement with Scripture, Calvin's schema fosters an objectivity which bolsters the integrity of the Protestant polemic on church authority as it pertains to Scripture. In all matters from the authority of Scripture to the assurance of the believer concerning it, the objective and subjective are brought together by the Spirit's active work. This bringing together befits the mediatorial work of Christ in reconciling believers to God by way of Spirit-wrought faith based on Spirit-inspired human words. As it pertains to the doctrine of Scripture, these are all Spirit-given applications of the blessings poured out on Christ and the consequent benefits which those blessed by the grace of the Spirit enjoy in union with him.

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<sup>71</sup> The inseverable connection between Christ and the Scriptures as Calvin posits it via his pneumatology was poised to serve confessional Reformed Protestants in a particular way well into the Modern era. Richards cites Stapleton discussing the church, "You have there the foundation and support of the Christian religion ... in it you listen to Christ Himself speaking ... you assent to His witness to the truth." (Richards, "Thomas Stapleton," 196, citing Stapleton, *Opera Omnia*, i.515A). Note that for Stapleton, Christ, the Word of God, speaks in the church not through Scripture but through the Christian religion. Stapleton's distancing of Christ from the Scriptures creates the potential for the primacy and even the practical ruling authority of what modern theologians would call the "living word," not Scripture as Christ's word, but Christ using Scripture as and if the church deems necessary, and possibly contrary to the Scriptures as historically and confessionally understood. The voice of Christ becomes subject to what is essentially the private judgment of the collective church, with no objective, unequivocal governance such as the Protestants, and the relative moderates in the Reformation-era Roman Catholic church, appealed to in Scripture. That such is not merely conjecture is confirmed by Richards, who writes of Stapleton's doctrine of the Word of God, "Statements of this kind suggest that modern biblical theology may not be so far ahead of the past as we sometimes imagine" (ibid.). To the extent that principles of modern theology may have changed Roman Catholic theology, particularly bibliology, in ways Bellarmine and Stapleton would have rejected, Rome could perhaps have benefited, ironically, from Calvin's doctrine of Scripture and the closeness he saw between Christ and Scripture.