

“The Text of the Bible is Stronger”

The Rebirth of Scriptural Authority in the Reformation and its Significance

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It was one thing to criticize the abuse of indulgences with an emphasis on a new mystical, Pauline, Augustinian theology of grace,¹ it was an entirely different thing to challenge the fundamental authority structure of the church. The triumph of Biblical authority over papal, conciliar, and traditional-theological authorities emerged in the Reformation as a great correction to the authoritarian theological-ecclesial order of the late Middle Ages, in which the authority of the Bible was embedded and constrained within a web of various authorities managed by ecclesial officials.² In the Reformation the Bible was elevated above the old frame-

¹ The new Wittenberg theology was deeply infused with Augustinian modes of thought and Pauline theological themes. The significance of these sources is widely recognized in contemporary research on the Reformation. Yet there was also another major stream of intellectual energy in Wittenberg at this time that has received less attention in the secondary literature on the Reformation. The tradition of mystical theology from the late Middle Ages, as especially found in Johannes Tauler's theology and in *Theologia Deutsch*, was very popular in Wittenberg around 1500 and following. See Henrik Otto, *Vor- und frühreformatorische Tauler-Rezeption: Annotationen in Drucken des späten 15. und frühen 16. Jahrhunderts* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), esp. 175 ff. on Luther, Johann Lang, Justus Jonas, Karlstadt and even Eck's reception. This came from the upper-Rhine tradition of neo-Platonic thought, stemming most importantly from Meister Eckhart; see Christine Büchner, *Die Transformation des Einheitsdenkens Meister Eckharts bei Heinrich Seuse und Johannes Tauler* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007); Volker Leppin, *Die christliche Mystik* (Munich: Beck, 2007), esp. 95 ff. on the “Oberrheinische Mystik.”

² In the historical development, in Electoral Saxony for example, the rejection of the papal order resulted in a new synthesis of ecclesial and political power with the prince becoming a miniature pope in his realm. In this sense, that which “triumphed” over the Roman ecclesial order was the power of the princes. Yet the legitimacy required for this rejection of the pope and his authority structure was itself drawn from the Scriptures. The Scriptures, the Bible, the “pure word of God,” as it is called in the preface to the Augsburg Confession, was the foundational authority upon which the princes and their theologians stood in their resistance to the pope and his order. In this sense, it was appeals to the Bible that triumphed over the appeals to papal authority. Only the appeal to the authority of Scripture could justify the actions of the princes – actions that would have been otherwise illegal, heretical or simply impious. Indeed, the Protestant princes and magistrates in the new Protestant realms rejected the pope and suppressed dissenters of all kind, while simultaneously forcefully implementing a normative account of the Christian faith on a new confessional

work of multiple authorities and official-interpretation and was thus used to challenge otherwise absolute human authorities. Those in power in the ecclesial circus were not happy to see this lion escape the cage. Once released from the constraints of the official ecclesial interpreters it could no longer be domesticated. As the Protestant resistance to the abuses of the feudal order established itself in the revolts of the peasants, commoners and their theologians, it too drew upon Biblical authority to legitimize the struggle for freedom. The significance of this fact cannot be over-emphasized: The Bible had become the central tool for legitimizing the struggle for liberation. Its authority was used to resist both the authoritarian papal office and the malaise of the feudal order, as well as, as will be shown, to strengthen the power of the laity in the church. In all these cases, it was arguments that presumed the Bible's supreme authority which went hand in hand with the arguments for liberation. Even the historical-critical exegesis that followed in the modern period was not able to tame the beast. Today appeals to scriptural authority continue to function as a powerful tool of theological-ecclesial reform and resistance in face of every official or *de facto* teaching office, regardless of the ecclesial tradition.

While the Bible has been used for all sorts of arguments – both good and evil – the liberation of thought and the democratization of authority in the Reformation period emphasis on scriptural authority should be viewed, on the whole, as a positive development in Western intellectual history. It was a development toward more critical debate from below and from the middle of society and away from the exclusive exercise of power from above. The rebirth of scriptural authority was a triumph of the human spirit over the paternalism of tradition and authoritarianism. It was also a great leap towards that which we today call the Enlightenment (the fundamental questioning of all traditional authorities, including the Scriptures). Yet the later approaches of the dominant stream of classic Enlightenment thought – the assertion of the sufficiency of human reason without and even in rejection of appeals to revealed authorities – is clearly not found with the authors who promoted the rediscovery of Scriptural authority in the Reformation period. Indeed, most of them would have rejected such a proposition as hubris if they had encountered it in its pure form.

basis. The early modern political orders were never able to stop the debates about the meaning of Scripture, nor the appeals to its authority, even if official confessional statements were imposed on the people from above. Most of the Reformers presented themselves as the true interpreters of the text (which they agreed was the final instance of authority). Only the papal theologians (see below) claimed that the pope, by virtue of his office as vicar of Christ on earth, was the final instance of authority above the Scriptures, through whom the Scriptures become authentic. Clearly, the Reformers (and the princes supporting them) understood themselves to be providing a true interpretation of the Bible, but they did not claim that they were, by virtue of their calling or office, the final instance of authority in matters of faith. In this sense, the triumph of the Reformation was the decentralization of power from an office to a priesthood of all believers, and the simultaneous shift of power from an office to a text.

The rebirth of scriptural authority in the "short Reformation"³ was not the only issue of debate at that time. It was only one part of a larger mix of issues emanating from Wittenberg in the 1510s, with figures such as Johann von Staupitz, Martin Luther and Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. This mix of issues included a criticism of scholastic theology and scholastic methodology, an emphasis on the gospel and the theology of grace, a new focus on scriptural authority and a carefully packaged criticism of the papacy and various problems in the practice of Christianity. Much of this could have come and gone; the ecclesial order could have weathered the heated debate about many of these issues. Yet once the real nature of these initial Wittenberg criticisms was understood for what it really was – not only a debate about indulgences and grace, but also, more fundamentally, a debate about authority – the anti-Wittenberg responses (from Johann Tetzel, Johann Eck and Sylvester Prierias) turned immediately to the greater issue of authority and the parting of the ways began. Authority, and submission to it, was, after all, the glue that held the theological-ecclesial order of Christendom together. It was in the first official Wittenberg response to these rejections of the calls to reform that the old tradition of scriptural primacy was reborn. Karlstadt was the midwife in this rebirth. He wrote this response in the spring of 1518 in his "370 Conclusions in defense of the Scriptures and the Wittenbergers [*370 Conclusiones pro sacris litteris et Wittenbergensibus*]." This document embodied the old theology of the fathers that was now to be reborn in the Reformation. For the first time in the short Reformation, Karlstadt articulated the classic position of Protestant theology on the issue of scriptural authority in doctrinal issues: "The text of the bible is stronger" – stronger than the pope, the councils, the tradition, and the whole church. Luther was initially more reserved about this issue but he soon came around to agree with Karlstadt's position, as is seen in his remarks in the fall of 1518 in Augsburg, and then with all clarity at the Leipzig debate in 1519.

Karlstadt's "370 Conclusions" drove a wedge into the existing fractures of the authority structure of Christendom. The issue of authority and the question of legitimacy were then thrust into the foreground. Karlstadt's position evoked various responses, both affirmative, negative and mediatory. While he was, in fact, only drawing upon older traditions of theology in his claims regarding scriptural authority, this theology had explosive potential in the context of the debates about indulgences and the reach of papal oversight. In this, Karlstadt's rejection of the rejections (in his sharp and juridical postulation of scriptural authority above every authority) was the first document of the Reformation, if the Reformation (or, more precisely, the Protestant Reformation) is understood as a *fundamental rejection of the authority structure of the Rome-centered ecclesial order*. Yet in his "370 Conclusions" Karlstadt still did not reject the pope *per se*. The arguments he put forward

³ See Paul Silas Peterson, *Reformation in the Western World: An Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 32–36.

would essentially lead to this, however, because he identified the central point of the dispute underlying the debates: the issue of authority. From 1518 onward the conflict about the appeal to and use of divine authority became unmanageable, and the parting of the ways began. The consequences of this rejection of the rejections and the corresponding postulation of scriptural authority realized themselves quickly in the following pro-Roman rejections of the Wittenberg rejection of the Roman rejection of the earliest Wittenberg calls to reform. In this dialectical process of criticism and counter-criticism, the once unified ecclesial body of Latin Christendom, which was at this time still theoretically subjected to the oversight of the pope, was torn asunder.

In the wake of the division, the old authority system for administering divine power, with the pope as the supreme authority, was preserved in much of Catholic dominated Europe. In the centuries to come, it reasserted itself with ever greater tenacity in the resistance to Enlightenment thought and later forms of liberalism in the nineteenth century, culminating in the papal authoritarianism of the First Vatican Council.⁴ In Protestantism, on the other hand, the emphasis on scriptural authority maintained itself in traditional Bible centered pietism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or it was essentially rejected in the rationality centered Enlightenment thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century leading up to today, the authority of the Bible has been positively rediscovered in many streams of Catholic theology and even in some papal encyclicals, although the traditional role of the magisterium is still asserted as the guiding power above the Scriptures. In Protestant theological faculties today, scriptural authority remains an issue of highly controversial debate. Most theologians of the liberal Protestant traditions reject (or simply ignore) the traditional doctrinal positions of sixteenth century Protestantism, such as the exclusivity of salvation through Christ, the traditional doctrine of hell, the condemnation of the “fanatics” (Anabaptists, spiritualists, etc.), the emphasis on scriptural authority and, in many cases, the older doctrines of the sacraments (as pastorally administered physical means of the transfer of metaphysical divine grace). Conservative, evangelical, and pietist Protestants continue to defend passionately the older tradition of Biblical authority, and many of the sixteenth century theological positions. Biblical authority substantiates the affirmation of traditional Protestant teaching and also world evangelization (Matthew 28). Yet strong Biblical piety has also been used for other highly problematic agendas, such as the exclusion of women from ministry. As a response to this, progressive evangelicals are seeking to rediscover the status of tradition or to introduce forms of liberal biblical hermeneutics.

⁴ The emphasis on papal authority was reestablished with neo-scholastic theology in the nineteenth century in the context of the debates about Enlightenment thought. On this theme, see my “Der Autoritäre Thomas,” *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 11/2 (2017): 45–52, with reference to secondary literature.

Because of its controversial nature, some historical theologians have sought to underplay the significance of scriptural authority in the Protestant Reformation. Rather than simply rejecting the historical doctrine as misled, many systematic theologians have also tried to reinterpret the meaning of the traditional emphasis on scriptural authority in early Protestant theology. In some cases, this process of reinterpretation results in very creative new doctrines of the Scriptures, yet some of them actually have little to do with the older theologies of the Reformers of the sixteenth century.

The doctrine of the supreme authority of the Scriptures is simple and highly dangerous. It was the theological teaching that enabled the division of Latin Christendom and the formation of new Protestant churches (that understood themselves to be the ancient church). It was the only teaching that could legitimize the rejection of the papal order and the assertion of alternative theologies. It is, furthermore, the teaching that still provides the laity with a means to challenge the clergy in a fundamental way. How did these events unfold? Was it actually a "new" teaching? What is the significance of this teaching in its broader cultural dimensions, and how shall it be understood today? These questions will be addressed below as a differentiated analysis of this theological issue is provided.

1. The Pre-Reformation Background of Scriptural Authority

The new emphasis on the authority of Scripture, as it manifests itself in the various movements of the Protestant Reformation, was the culmination and pluralization of a long process of transformation of the discipline of theology in the late Middle Ages. While the emergence and ascendancy of the Reformation era emphasis on scriptural authority within Protestantism is sometimes presented as the birth of a new idea, it was, in truth, only the restoration of the classic position in a new form. It was new in form but old in content. The church fathers saw Scripture as the supreme authority in doctrinal disputes.⁵ The writings of the apostolic fathers, Barnabas, Clement, Ignatius, Hermas and Polycarp, Diognetus, Papias, Quadratus, as well as the *Didache*, reflect a desire to substantiate theological claims with appeals to Scripture, and usually the Old Testament, with both spiritualistic-allegorical and also historical readings. This first generation of theologians following Christ's own apostles seems to have been made up of primarily Jewish Christians. They were deeply interested in establishing the legitimacy of their faith not on a philosophical or universal intellectual foundation (at least not in the first instance), but rather, in most cases, on an explicitly biblical foundation. As Carolyn Osiek explains: "The best way to describe the relationship to Israel of the earliest Christians is to say that

⁵ For the background of the teaching in the Bible and among the church fathers, see my *Reformation in the Western World*, 78 ff., with sources.

they were part of it. The majority of the first generation were certainly Jews, and the Scriptures were an integral part of their teaching and worship.”⁶ This is the classic tradition of Christian theology and the classic understanding of the nature of the authority of the Scriptures. In this system, the Scriptures are the ultimate (not exclusive) court of appeal in theological dispute.

The most important apologist of the Christian faith in the early generations of Christianity, Justin Martyr, who was born in the early 100s at Flavia Neapolis (Nablus) in Palestine, and who later moved to Rome, understood himself to be defending a tradition that had its foundation in Christ and the apostles. As Eric Osborne writes: “Justin writes within a tradition of Christian teaching (1 *Apol.* 6; 13; 17; 46; 66), which stems from prophets, Christ and apostles (1 *Apol.* 39; 61; 66), having for its guarantee the divine teacher, the word and first born of God (1 *Apol.* 10; 13; 14; *Dial.* 58). This teaching, for all its authority, is not received by blind faith but defended by rational argument (2 *Apol.* 9). The elements of early Christian faith [...] are established by scriptural *testimonia*, interpreted with the actuality of the Qumran Habakkuk commentary, where scripture foretells what is happening in the present.”⁷ Clearly, Justin’s *method* of interpretation was not always shared by the generations of theologians that followed him in the Christian tradition. Yet they almost always agreed with him that scriptural testimony was the foundation upon which theological positions could be established. Many also followed Justin’s view that reason itself supported Biblical theology and was ultimately in harmony with it.

Something similar is found with Augustine. The Augustinian view of this matter was especially important for the Reformers. For example, Augustine wrote to Jerome:

For I confess to your charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings

⁶ Carolyn Osiek, “The Apostolic Fathers,” in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip F. Esler (London: Routledge, 2000), 503–24, here: 504. Regarding ecclesial oversight, Osiek adds: “While in earlier times a collegial group alternately called *episkopoi* (‘overseers’) or *presbyteroi* (‘elders’) governed a local church, here in each of the communities to which Ignatius wrote, as in his own church at Antioch, a single leader called an *episkopos* has emerged, assisted by presbyters and deacons. For the first time, that term can be understood as ‘bishop’ with a meaning roughly equivalent to its meaning today. The notable exception to this pattern was Rome, for neither in *I Clement* nor in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, nor in Ignatius’ *Letter to the Romans*, is there any indication of other than the older style of collegial government there, and it is not until the last part of the second century that there is concrete evidence that the Roman leadership structure has changed.” *Ibid.*, 517.

⁷ Eric Osborne, “The Apologists,” in *The Early Christian World*, vol. 1, ed. Philip F. Esler (London: Routledge, 2000), 525–51, here: 528.

themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason. I believe, my brother, that this is your own opinion as well as mine.⁸

Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen has carefully explained the interrelationship between the two realms of Scripture and reason in Augustine’s thought: “In perception of divine truth, Augustine grants proof of authority, in addition to the authority of Holy Scripture, to human reason; yet, in theological knowledge, the *ratio* [reasoning] is, in his account, not an independent source of knowledge [as many authors of the Enlightenment would assert, PSP] in addition to the authority of Scripture; rather, it [the *ratio*] interfuses, through understanding and arguing, the divine truth to which the authority of Holy Scripture testifies.”⁹ This view of the interrelationship of reason and faith was not dissimilar to Justin’s own understanding of this matter, as addressed above. The Scriptures are divine teaching with supreme authority while reason supports our comprehension of it by taking away obstacles to the truth, clarifying seemingly contradictory claims and harmonizing the whole body of divine truth. This was the old view of the matter that was reborn in the Reformation.

The church of the Middle Ages on many occasions suppressed the use of the Scripture among the laity.¹⁰ The Bible was, of course, a potentially dangerous source of dissent. The countermovement against this authoritarian suppression of the laity’s use of the Scriptures is found with the forerunners of the Reformation, John Wycliffe (ca. 1330–1384) and Jan Hus (ca. 1370–1415). Much later, Johann Tetzel (1465–1519), who drove forward the sale of the indulgences, repeatedly compared Luther’s “heresy” to both of these figures. These forerunners of the Reformation sought to move the Scriptures into the hands of the laity and emphasized, among other things, scriptural authority. For Hus, the Scriptures were the final court of appeal in theological debates.¹¹ The challenge to papal authority on the basis of Scripture was already established in the fourteenth century with William of Ockham (c. 1285–1347).¹² The emphasis on scriptural authority with these theologians fed into the larger debate about authority in the church at the eve of the Reformation. Indeed, “it became evident in the later Middle Ages and more ur-

⁸ Augustine, Letter 82 (to Jerome), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I* (reprint; Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1995), 1:350; PL 23:277. See also Augustine, “On Baptism, Against the Donatists,” bk. 2, ch. 3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I*, 4:427; PL 43:128; CSEL 51.

⁹ Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, *Reformatiorische Prägungen: Studien zur Theologie Martin Luthers und zur Reformationszeit*, ed. Athina Lexutt and Volkmar Ortmann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 41. See also Volker Henning Drecoll, ed., *Augustin Handbuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), esp. 461 ff.

¹⁰ For examples and literature on this, see Peterson, *Reformation in the Western World*, 83 f.

¹¹ Thomas A. Fudge, *The Trial of Jan Hus: Medieval Heresy and Criminal Procedure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 324. Thomas A. Fudge, “Hussite Theology and the Law of God,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*, ed. David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 22–27, here: 25.

¹² William of Ockham, *A Short Discourse on Tyrannical Government*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), bk. 1, ch. 8, p. 13.

gently in the early sixteenth century,” as Gillian R. Evans writes, “that something was wrong with both the doctrine and the practice of authority in the Church in the West.”¹³ The older view of the matter from the Middle Ages – which was essentially new when compared to the classic position addressed above – basically saw the various authorities of divinity (the Scriptures, creeds, canon law, the writings of the church fathers, the decrees of the popes down to the current period) in a harmonic relationship.¹⁴ As G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes writes: “The scholastics did not draw a sharp distinction between Scriptures, tradition, and theology; the three concepts overlapped.”¹⁵ They formed an “organic unity.”¹⁶ Against this idea of an organic unity, the new academic view of the matter, which began to take hold in the later Middle Ages and in the Reformation period with the humanists, was one of potential conflict and even disharmony or contradiction.

Wessel Gansfort (1419–1489) – the “Master of Contradiction” – emphasized “semantic clarity and methodological reasoning,” as was typical of the new theology of the later Middle Ages.¹⁷ This went together with the decline of Aristotelian scholasticism and the rise of nominalism.¹⁸ In the late 1480s (probably in 1489) Gansfort (answering Jacob Hoeck) argued that “the will of the pope and the authority of Scripture have not been established on an equal footing.”¹⁹ In the context of the authoritarian papacy of the Middle Ages this argument was revolutionary. In terms of content, however, it was simply a reassertion of the classic position, which held that the Scriptures were the supreme authority in doctrinal matters.

The new emphasis on scriptural authority is found with many sources in the late Middle Ages. Johann von Staupitz (ca. 1468–1524), who influenced both Luther and Karlstadt, was one of the figures that focused on the Bible. Luther wrote of him in 1540:

¹³ Gillian R. Evans, *Problems of Authority in the Reformation Debates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), ix; regarding the council, see esp. 241–47. See also Helmut Feld, *Die Anfänge der modernen biblischen Hermeneutik in der spätmittelalterlichen Theologie* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1977); Kurt-Victor Selge, *Normen der Christenheit im Streit um Ablaß und Kirchenautorität 1518 bis 1521: 1. Das Jahr 1518* (Heidelberg Univ., Habilitationsschrift, 1968).

¹⁴ Cf. Volker Leppin, “Die Genese des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips: Beobachtungen zu Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Johannes Eck bis zur Leipziger Disputation,” in *Reformativische Theologie und Autoritäten: Studien zur Genese des Schriftprinzips beim jungen Luther*, ed. idem (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 97–139, here: 104.

¹⁵ G. H. M. Posthumus Meyjes, *Jean Gerson, Apostle of Unity: His Church Politics and Ecclesiology* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 335.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See Heiko Oberman, *Masters of the Reformation: The Emergence of a New Intellectual Climate in Europe*, trans. Dennis Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 23–44, here: 40.

¹⁸ See Heiko A. Oberman, *Spätscholastik und Reformation*, vol. 1, *Der Herbst der mittelalterlichen Theologie* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1965), 335 ff., 343.

¹⁹ Wessel Gansfort, “From the Letter in Reply to Jacob Hoeck,” ch. 8, as cited in Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 109. See also Fokke Akkerman et al., eds., *Wessel Gansfort (1419–1489) and Northern Humanism* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

Staupitz was vicar over 30 monasteries. He was the first who restored the Bible to his monasteries [*Is primus restituit biblia suis monasteriis*]; he sought out the greatest talent and dedicated himself to theological study. A fine impetus must have been in this man. He worked hard to establish the University [of Wittenberg]. In his lectures he often cited Doctor Summenhart of Tübingen as saying: "Who will free me from this quarreling theology [sc. scholastic theology]?"²⁰

Statements like these show how the scholastic methods of argument were losing ground, plausibility and appeal against a more scriptural mode of argumentation. Staupitz was a Tübingen theologian before he was a Wittenberger, and in Tübingen he also encountered the new humanist turn to the Scriptures. There were, however, many sources that poured into the new Wittenberg emphasis on scriptural authority, and it took shape in a context of unique and intense argument and counter-argument. The new emphasis on biblical authority, which went together with the decline in popularity of Aristotelian scholasticism, can be found in many sources in the late Middle Ages. Yet the significance of this issue took on a new meaning and a new dynamic altogether in the theological conflict in Wittenberg. One of the most important figures to drive forward this conflict was Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt (1486–1541).

Karlstadt was influenced by Staupitz and Luther. Karlstadt's legal studies, scholastic scholarship, sympathy for humanism, knowledge of Augustine, and his embrace of reforming impulses and laity-oriented theology all encouraged his turn to the theme of scriptural authority.²¹ In 1510 he became a docent at the Faculty of Theology in Wittenberg. In 1512, he became dean of the Faculty. In October of the same year, he granted Luther his doctorate. In August, 1515, he went to Rome where he stayed and studied (at the Sapienza) until April of 1516. In March of 1516 he earned his doctorate in canon and secular law; in the summer he returned to Wittenberg, where he resumed his service as dean. At this time, he also dis-

²⁰ WA TR 5:99; nr. 5374.

²¹ Luther also encountered this emphasis on the Bible while he was in Erfurt with Jodocus Trutfetter. See Thomas Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation: Studien zur Kontextualität der Theologie, Publizistik und Inszenierung Luthers und der reformatorischen Bewegung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 88 ff. WA TR 5:99, no. 5374. Luther held that Staupitz's biblical theology was similar to another Tübingen theologian, Konrad Summenhart. On Karlstadt, see Thomas Kaufmann, "Einleitung in die Kritische Karlstadt-Gesamtausgabe (KGK), Teil I, Bd. 1 und 2," in Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Schriften und Briefe Andreas Bodensteins von Karlstadt: Band 1, Schriften 1507–1518, Teilband 1: 1507–1517*, ed. Thomas Kaufmann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2017), xv–xxi. See also the "Karlstadt-Chronologie bis Ende 1518," in *ibid.*, xxxv–xxxviii. The most recent full compilation of secondary literature on Karlstadt is provided in Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Schriften und Briefe Andreas Bodensteins von Karlstadt: Band 1, Schriften 1507–1518, Teilband 2: 1518*, ed. Thomas Kaufmann et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus, 2017), 1037–1060. See also Ronald J. Sider, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt: The Development of His Thought 1517–1525* (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Ulrich Bubenheimer, *Consonantia theologiae et iurisprudentiae: Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt als Theologe und Jurist zwischen Scholastik und Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977); Martin Keßler, *Das Karlstadt-Bild in der Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

cussed 13 of the condemned theses from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola with a small group. This shows how he was entering the debates about controversial issues after he returned from Rome. In January of 1517 in Leipzig, Karlstadt purchased the new complete edition of Augustine's works,²² and in the following months studied these intensely. As Arnoud S. Q. Visser claims, this edition of Augustine's work "made a big contribution to emancipating Augustine from his ecclesiastical guardians."²³ This was "a crucial advantage for the first generation of Protestant Reformers."²⁴ This certainly holds true for Karlstadt. His study of Augustine in the spring of 1517 clearly transformed his theology. At this time, he was also engaged in theological debate with Luther about Augustine. Luther had already long adopted the new theological approach from Staupitz. Luther also had access to the new edition of Augustine's works from 1515 onward. At this time, Karlstadt was not yet in agreement with the new Augustinian theology that Luther was promoting. On February 6, 1517, Staupitz published in Nuremberg his *Libellus de exsecutione aeternae praedestinationis*. He probably sent a copy of this to Karlstadt with a letter. Karlstadt mentions this "hortatorium epistolium" later in the dedicatory remarks to Staupitz in his commentary on Augustine from 1518.²⁵ After receiving the *Libellus* Karlstadt then soon turned from scholastic theology and embraced the new mystical Augustinianism. The study of Augustine and his reading of Staupitz seem to have been the immediate theological prehistory of his theological transformation, one closely related to his debates with Luther as well. Rather than keeping this to himself in the university context, Karlstadt immediately went public with it. In April of 1517 he posted his 151 theses which promoted the new theology and emphasized scriptural authority. He also purchased Tauler's sermons on the same day. In the summer semester of 1517 he lectured on Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter*. In Karlstadt's preface (dated November 18, 1517) to his own commentary on Augustine, he dedicated the book to Staupitz, "revered father and preeminent master [*Reverendo patri ac precellenti domino Ioanni Stupicio*]."²⁶ Here Karlstadt also gives Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter* the highest praise.²⁷ Probably in January of 1518, Spalatin

²² He acquired Johann Amerbach's edition of the complete works of Augustine, *Prima[decima] pars librorum divi Aurelii Augustini* (Basel, 1505–1506). See Arnoud S. Q. Visser, *Reading Augustine in the Reformation: The Flexibility of Intellectual Authority in Europe 1500–1620* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Luther gained access to this edition two years before Karlstadt, in 1515, *ibid.*, 25. "Karlstadt clashed with Luther over the authenticity of *De vera ac falsa poenitentia*, which Luther declared spurious on the basis of his reading of the anti-Pelagian works." *Ibid.*, 25.

²³ Visser, *Reading Augustine in the Reformation*, 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Nr. 48, "Johann von Staupitz an Andreas Karlstadt [1517, Feb.]," in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/1, 431.

²⁶ Nr. 64, *Pro Divinae gratiae defensione. Sanctissimi Augustini de spiritu et litera, 1517–1518*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 560.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 563: "Inveni illum librum ansam et limen ad totam prestare theologiam/ verum cum scirem docendo me fieri doctorem interpretationem eius publicam subivi."

requested from Karlstadt a suggestion for a theological account of the Bible.²⁸ On January 17, 1518, Karlstadt responded: “I have certainly found Augustine’s excellent book *On the Spirit and the Letter* to be the most learned handle to get to the secret hiding-places of theology. I advise you to read it – and reread it.”²⁹ In 1518 Karlstadt’s commentary on Augustine was published. In the spring of 1518, he then wrote his 370 *Conclusiones*, which were published in May or June, 1518. Karlstadt admired Reuchlin and seems to have sympathized with the group of humanists behind the anti-clerical *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum* (Letters of Obscure Men).³⁰ Karlstadt also purchased some of Erasmus’s works. His intellectual abilities seem to have been formed in a dynamic interplay of various realms, including theology, law and ecclesial-administration.³¹ His criticism of authority is already seen in his 151 theses, which call for more debate about the ultimate source of authority itself.

2. The Calls to Reform: Karlstadt’s 151 Theses and Luther’s 95 Theses

The beginnings of the reestablishment of scriptural authority can already be seen in Karlstadt’s 151 Theses from the spring of 1517, which were strongly influenced by the new theology of grace. The first four theses read, “[1.] The statements of the holy fathers [church fathers] are not to be rejected [2.] unless they have been corrected or retracted [by them]. [3.] If they [the statements] differ from one another, one should not choose what is simply pleasing [4.] but rather that [statement] which is more greatly supported by the divine testimonies [*divinis testimoniis*, the Scriptures] or reason [*ratione*].”³² Karlstadt’s final thesis also returned to this issue of authority: “[151] The fruitful authority of the truth [sc. Scripture] is understood better when it is debated more frequently; and this brings forth the true agree-

²⁸ Kaufmann, “Einleitung in die Kritische Karlstadt-Gesamtausgabe,” xx.

²⁹ Nr. 66, “Andreas Karlstadt an Georg Spalatin, Wittenberg, 1518, 17. Jan.,” in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 728: “Ego profecto librum de Spiritu et litera Augustini doctissimum comperi ansam ad secretiora Theologiae latibula praestantem. Hunc legas atque relegas, consulo.”

³⁰ Kaufmann, “Einleitung in die Kritische Karlstadt-Gesamtausgabe,” xviii. See also Hans Peter Rieger, “Karlstadt als Hebraist an der Universität zu Wittenberg,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 75 (1984): 297–308.

³¹ Kaufmann: “Gegenüber der kurfürstlichen Administration fungierte Karlstadt seit seiner juristischen Promotion offenbar auch als Rechtsberater . . .” Kaufmann, “Einleitung in die Kritische Karlstadt-Gesamtausgabe,” xviii.

³² Karlstadt, [*151 Theses*] *Centum quinquagintaunum conclusiones de natura, lege et gratia, contra scolasticos et usum comunem*, April 26, 1517; the German translation provided by Alejandro Zorzin and Martin Keßler (Herzog-August-Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel) was consulted for this translation. Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/1, 499: “[1.] Dicta sanctorum patrum non sunt neganda. [2.] Nisi essent correcta vel retractata. [3.] Si fuerint diversa non secundum nudum placitum sunt eligenda [...] [4.] Sed ea que divinis testimoniis magis vel ratione iuvantur.” On the early Wittenberg movements, see Irene Dingel, Armin Kohnle, Stefan Rhein and Ernst-Joachim Waschke, eds., *Initia Reformationis: Wittenberg und die frühe Reformation* (Leipzig: EVA, 2017).

ment that one conceals in clear speeches.”³³ As Ulrich Bubenheimer has argued, in the pointed criticism of scholastic theology in the theses Karlstadt “went beyond Luther’s September theses [of 1517].”³⁴ Once the scholastic sources, arguments and methods were rejected, what could then serve as the authority in theological disputes? Karlstadt drew the logical conclusions very quickly in the midst of the theological debates of 1517, with help of Augustine. In these theses from the spring of 1517, Karlstadt strongly encouraged the rediscovery of the classic theological position regarding the unique authority of the Scriptures. While he did not call for a rejection of the teachings of the church fathers, he highlighted the unique status of the Scriptures. The right teaching is the one that “is more greatly supported” by the Scriptures or reason. Karlstadt did not reject the papacy in principle. As the theological development took hold, however, he would eventually emphasize that it too was subordinate to the Scriptures. In this, he drew upon theological authorities from the Middle Ages. The clear sense of oppositional conflict in the theoretical sense between scriptural authority and papal authority (or any other authority in theological or ecclesial matters) is still not established here in the spring of 1517. This would be established by Karlstadt for the first time among the Wittenberg reformers in his response to Tetzel, Eck and Prierias in the spring of 1518. Before the conflict exploded, however, Christoph Scheurl had already sent Karlstadt’s 151 Theses to Eck.³⁵

A few months after Karlstadt’s theses, Luther sent his 95 Theses to his ecclesial superiors. They then quickly reached the public as they were critical both of indulgences and ecclesial hierarchy. Luther’s theses fed into the sense of anti-clericalism and reform controversy. His direct assault on ecclesial practice infuriated his critics. A controversy ensued and the responses to his theses were generated in short time. Yet in Luther’s theses the theme of scriptural authority is not emphasized. While thesis 18 does mention the Scriptures, the 95 Theses are far more concerned with the corruptions surrounding indulgences.³⁶

In March of 1518, Luther published in German a “Sermon on Indulgences and Grace.” Here he attacked the theology behind the abuse of the indulgences. He also emphasized scriptural authority in passing here. He wrote: “No one can defend the position with any passage from Scripture that God’s righteousness desires or demands any punishment or satisfaction from sinners except for their heartfelt

³³ Karlstadt, *151 Theses*, Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/1, 511: “[151] (Ultima) Foecunda veritatis auctoritas sepius discussa. melius cognoscitur. et veram convenienciam parit: quam manifestis sermonibus abscondit.” Here the critical edition refers to Ps. Aug. de ass. B. M. I; PL 40:1143.

³⁴ Ulrich Bubenheimer, “Andreas Rudolff Bodenstein von Karlstadt,” in *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt: 1480–1541; Festschrift der Stadt Karlstadt zum Jubiläumsjahr 1980*, ed. Wolfgang Merklein (Karlstadt, 1980), 5–58, here: 15.

³⁵ Kaufmann, “Einleitung in die Kritische Karlstadt-Gesamtausgabe,” xix.

³⁶ On Luther’s theses and secondary literature on them, see Peterson, *Reformation in the Western World*, 22 ff.

and true contrition or conversion alone.”³⁷ At this time, however, he was not yet prepared to assert publicly that the Scriptures were the exclusive authority superior to the pope, councils, and the entire tradition.

3. The Rejection of the Calls to Reform and the Assertion of Papal Authority: Tetzel, Eck, and Prierias

Luther’s theses were correctly understood as an attack on the papacy. The Archbishop of Mainz, Imperial Elector Albrecht von Brandenburg (1490–1545), presented his view of Luther’s theses and letter in his own letter to his councilors from December 13, 1517, where he calls Luther’s work “poisonous error.”³⁸ Very quickly the debate about indulgences, grace, repentance, and purgatory began to transform into a debate about papal authority. This transition in the debate is seen in Tetzel’s response to Luther in 1518. Tetzel argued that “when anyone gives alms, prays, visits churches, undertakes pilgrimage, fasts, or does other good works that earn indulgences,” these “indulged works are far better and more meritorious” than other works that were not “graced with indulgences.”³⁹ Reflecting the opinion of Rome, Tetzel wrote, “For whoever buys an indulgence takes pity on his soul and makes himself well-pleasing to God thereby.”⁴⁰ Indeed, “for the works that are graced with an indulgence are always better than the same ones accomplished with the same love but without an indulgence.”⁴¹ All this was within the bounds of the preceding debate. In addition to this, however, he added something. He goes on to argue that “the pope and the Holy See, as well as the papal office, do not err in matters that concern the faith.” Furthermore, to reject the teaching about indulgences is to reject the pope who has received “complete authority.”⁴²

The same theme is seen in the Roman response to Luther’s criticism of indulgences from the papal court theologian Sylvester Prierias (1456–1523). His response was written in early 1518 and finished in May. It was probably written “on the basis of a copy of the 95 Theses that the Archbishop of Mainz had prepared and sent to Rome.”⁴³ The debate went directly to the question of authority. Prierias claimed:

³⁷ See Luther, “A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace, 1518,” in *The Annotated Luther, vol. 1, The Roots of Reform*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), 57–66, here: 61f.; See “Ein Sermon von Ablass und Gnade,” in *WA 1:244*.

³⁸ Wilhelm Borth, *Die Luthersache: (Causa Lutheri), 1517–1524; die Anfänge der Reformation als Frage von Politik und Recht* (Lübeck: Matthiesen, 1970), 29 f.

³⁹ Dewey Weiss Kramer, ed. and trans., *Johann Tetzel’s Rebuttal against Luther’s Sermon on Indulgences and Grace* (Atlanta, GA: Pitts Theology Library, 2012), 21.

⁴⁰ Kramer, *Johann Tetzel’s rebuttal*, 26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³ Heiko A. Obermann, “Wittenbergs Zweifrontenkrieg gegen Prierias und Eck. Hintergrund und Entscheidungen des Jahres 1518,” in idem, *Die Reformation: Von Wittenberg nach Genf* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986), 113–43, here: 123. See also Peter Fabisch and Erwin

“Whoever does not hold to the teaching of the Roman church and the pope as the infallible rule of faith [*regula fidei infallibilis*] from which also Holy Scripture derives its power and authority, he is a heretic Whoever says with regard to indulgences that the Roman church cannot do [*non posse facere*] what it is doing, he is a heretic.”⁴⁴ There was only one authority that could be brought up against this authoritarianism: the Scriptures alone.

Similar lines of attack are found with Johann Eck’s (1486–1543) response. Eck wrote his criticism of Luther’s theses and the Wittenberg theology in the spring of 1518, the *Obelisci*. Eck argued that Luther was bringing chaos with his theology, indeed, “confounding the entire order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy [*totum ordinem Hierarchiae ecclesiasticae*].”⁴⁵ Eck holds that Luther was exhibiting “irreverence [*irreverentia*]” towards the papacy.⁴⁶ Eck’s response criticizes Luther for contradicting the pope. Eck writes: “If this is true (the pope says: the treasure of the indulgences is drawn from the merit of Christ), why then has Luther contradicted [*contradixit*] this above?”⁴⁷ Eck writes: “The pope says that all due punishment shall be remitted; why then does Luther suggest that this only applies to the punishment under the pope’s arbitration?”⁴⁸ Indeed, Luther was suggesting things in his theses that were “derogative [*derogativa*] to the head of the churches”, especially if he was referring therein to “papal authority [*autoritatem papalem*].”⁴⁹ It is obvious that he was calling upon Luther to be quiet, to preserve the peace and order, and to submit

Iserloh, “1. Phase des römischen Prozesses gegen Luther: von Luthers Denunziation (Dezember 1517) bis zum Vorabend der Eröffnung des ‘summarischen Prozesses’ (Juni/Oktober 1518) – ein Forschungsbericht,” in *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri (1517–1521)*, ed. idem, vol. 1: *Das Gutachten des Prierias und weitere Schriften gegen Luthers Ablassthesen (1517–1518)* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1988), 19–32, here: 28: “Das Ergebnis, der *Dialogus*, lag spätestens im Mai 1518 [...] vor. Das summarische Urteil des Prierias lautete, Luthers Auffassungen von der kirchlichen Autorität und vom Ablass seien irrig, falsch, vermessend oder häretisch.” Prierias had to delay his scholarly work on Thomas to write his criticism of Luther. Idem, in “Historische Vorbemerkungen,” in *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri*, vol. 1, 33–47, here: 38. On Prierias’s role in the Roman response to Reuchlin, see *ibid.*, 36 f.

⁴⁴ Sylvester Prierias, “*Dialogus de potestate papae*,” in *Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri*, vol. 1, 52–107, here 55 f. Johann Eck had a similar view. Eck argued later that “the power of the church” is “above scripture” (*potestas ecclesiae super scriptura*), for “scripture is not authentic without the church’s authority” (*scriptura non est authentica sine autoritate ecclesiae*). Johannes Eck, *Enchiridion locorum communium adversus Lutherum et alios hostes ecclesiae (1525–1543)*, in *Corpus Catholicorum*, vol. 34, ed. P. Fraenkel (Münster: Aschendorff, 1979), 30, 27. See also Christopher Spehr, *Luther und das Konzil: Zur Entwicklung eines zentralen Themas in der Reformationszeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 39–68.

⁴⁵ Eck: “*Frivola Propositio, totum ordinem Hierarchiae ecclesiasticae coufundens, quae ex multis fundamentis reprobari posset.*” *WA* 1:295.

⁴⁶ Eck: “*At irreverentia in eis ponderanda est summi Pontificis sanetitati.*” *WA* 1:305.

⁴⁷ Eck: “*Si haec vera sunt (Papa dicit, thesaurum Indulgentiarum hauriri ex merito Christi), Cur ergo Lutherus superius contradixit?*” *WA* 1:311.

⁴⁸ Eck: “*Omnem poenam debitam relaxandam dicit Papa, Cur ergo Lutherus invitat ad solas poenas arbitrio Papae impositas? Ita per alias pergas Conclusiones superiores.*” *WA* 1:312.

⁴⁹ Eck: “*Propositio sonat falsa et capitis Ecclesiastici derogativa. Verum, si personas privatas Petri et Papae aspicit, vera est Propositio; Si vero autoritatem papalem attendit, minime est attendenda.*” *WA* 1:312.

to the authority of the pope. Indeed, his final challenges return to themes of order and submission, reminding the rebels that "Scripture teaches and calls to pray for peace and tranquility [*pro pace et tranquillitate*]." ⁵⁰ In such ways, with calls to pious peace and tranquil harmony, the authoritarian rejection of reform was often legitimized, and still is.

4. The Rejection of the Rejections and the Assertion of Scriptural Authority: Karlstadt's 370 *Conclusiones*

As a response to the rejections of reform and as a defense of scriptural authority, Karlstadt took it upon himself to defend the Wittenberg theology and Luther's calls for reform. In fact, Karlstadt named his theses "370 Apologetic Conclusions for the Sacred Scriptures and the Wittenbergers" (*CCCLXX et Apologeticae Conclusiones pro sacris litteris et Wittenbergensibus*). Following the impulse of his 151 Theses, Karlstadt emphasized scriptural authority in his 370 Conclusions, which he wrote in the spring or early summer of 1518. At this time, Karlstadt's 370 Conclusions functioned as a representational position-paper for the new theology in Wittenberg. ⁵¹ In essence, they were a rejection of the rejections of reform, an emphasis on the theology of grace, and an assertion of scriptural authority above papal authority. ⁵² Tetzel's response to Luther was published in the middle of January, 1518. Karlstadt also had Eck's *Obelisci* from the middle of March, 1518, onward. Karlstadt probably learned about Prierias's defense of papal authority through his own contacts in Rome. ⁵³ It seems that Karlstadt worked intensively on the theses in April of 1518. The print sheets of the book, the 370 Conclusions, were already out in mid-May, and the full publication followed shortly thereafter. ⁵⁴ The book also initiated a strong lay reception of Karlstadt's theology. ⁵⁵

Beyond the theological issues, Karlstadt's theses functioned as a defense of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Wittenberg, which he represented as dean and as university rector. ⁵⁶ As Karlstadt shows, the new faculty and university was asserting its autonomy and laying claim upon academic excellence. His Conclusions show that the Wittenbergers were the true voice of the classical tradition of

⁵⁰ Eck: "Christum imitari per tribulationes, perfectionis est. At pro pace et tranquillitate orare, illam petere et querere, sacra Scriptura clamat et docet. Quod et docuit Christus, cum orare debemus: Libera nos a malo. Quod mille autoritatibus Scripturae possem ostendere, nisi in veteri Testamento ubique foret testatissimum." *WA* 1:313 f. In his later articles against Eck, Luther would defend a "rite et recte verurteilten Häretiker." Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation*, 38.

⁵¹ Kaufmann, "Einleitung in die Kritische Karlstadt-Gesamtausgabe," xx.

⁵² Luther and Karlstadt were still close colleagues in 1518. *Ibid.*, xxi.

⁵³ See the editorial notes in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 793.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 792.

⁵⁵ Kaufmann, "Einleitung in die Kritische Karlstadt-Gesamtausgabe," xxi.

⁵⁶ See the editorial notes in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 791 f.

theology. The critics, as he shows, had actually abandoned the tradition which Wittenberg was now upholding.

Before the first thesis, and before the introductory statements (which invite debate about the theses in the summer of 1518), Karlstadt adds a short proverb: “When justly corrected even by a little boy, I shall sing recantation.”⁵⁷ The first thesis is the most important in the long list: “A text of the Bible quoted by an ecclesiastical doctor is stronger and proves more than the statement of the one quoting it.”⁵⁸ This thesis bears within it the entire theological implication of the Protestant understanding of Scripture, which was, of course, only a rediscovery of the classic position. It is not the office, or the person, or a representative of a tradition or school, or the intelligence or elegance of the interpretation which has the highest authority, but the text itself; it bears the supreme authority regardless of the status of the person using the text. Even the “ecclesiastical doctors,” those academic theologians who were responsible for teaching with authority, did not stand above the text. As Hermann Barge has argued regarding Karlstadt’s 370 Conclusions: “In the same unconditionality, the scriptural principle had never been pronounced before this.”⁵⁹ Volker Leppin writes similarly of the 370 Conclusions: “More clearly than Luther, but within the framework of the late Middle Ages, he [Karlstadt] expressed the primacy of the Holy Scriptures.”⁶⁰

Thesis 12 states, “The text of the Bible is to be preferred not only to one or several doctors of the church but even to the authority of the whole church.”⁶¹ The implications of thesis 1 are essentially outlined in this verse. The pope himself was implied in this as well. This thesis again emphasizes the supreme authority of Scripture. It does not stand interconnected within the web of authorities and interpretive instances, it stands above all these instances of interpretation and administration. Here Karlstadt also shows that this teaching is not new. He refers to Augustine to support his claim. For this reason, it is inaccurate to describe this theology as the birth of a new tradition. It was not a *birth* of something new, it was the *rebirth* of

⁵⁷ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 795: “Puerulo legitime docente palinodiam cano.”

⁵⁸ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 796: “Textus Bibliae per ecclesiasticum doctorem allegatus/ plus valet/ ac vehementius urget/ quam dictum allegantis.”

⁵⁹ Hermann Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, vol. 1, *Karlstadt und die Anfänge der Reformation* (Leipzig: Brandstetter, 1905), 118 f.: “In gleicher Unbedingtheit ist das Schriftprinzip niemals vorher ausgesprochen worden.” As cited in Volker Leppin, “Die Genese des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips: Beobachtungen zu Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit Johannes Eck bis zur Leipziger Disputation,” in *Reformatorsche Theologie und Autoritäten: Studien zur Genese des Schriftprinzips beim jungen Luther*, ed. idem (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 97–139, here: 105.

⁶⁰ Leppin, “Die Genese des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips,” 105: “Deutlicher als Luther, aber durchaus innerhalb des spätmittelalterlichen Rahmens sprach er [Karlstadt] dabei den Vorrang der Heiligen Schrift aus.”

⁶¹ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 797 f.: “Textus Biblie: non modo uni/ pluribusve ecclesiae doctoribus/ sed etiam tocius ecclesiae auctoritati/ preferatur.”

the classic tradition, as Paul himself argued: "But what does Scripture say?" (Gal. 4:30). Thesis 14 reiterates the point and emphasizes what is implied in thesis 12 regarding the fundamental limitation of the pope's authority: "a statement of a doctor that is fortified by canonical [biblical] authority is to be believed more than a papal declaration."⁶² Use of the term "canonical" here means "biblical," or of the Biblical canon (not canon law). Karlstadt clarifies this in thesis 355, where he writes: "Augustine does not speak of the doctrines of the scholastics or of human inventions but of canonical, that is, biblical [doctrines]."⁶³

Thus a doctor of theology, when equipped sufficiently, can contradict the pope. Here he establishes the point with the support of a scholastic authority, Jean Gerson (1363–1429). In fact, Karlstadt was pointing to only one side of Gerson's thought.⁶⁴ Immediately following this, however, Karlstadt marginalizes the issue by relegating the whole matter (which questioned the pope's authority) to the purely theoretical realm. He writes in thesis 15: "Which I do not truly believe unless [*nisi*] the Roman Pontifex would be destitute and empty of all authority."⁶⁵ The "unless" here does, however, retract, to a degree, the qualification. Thesis 14 is thus left standing; in the end Scripture (in the hands of a mere doctor) decides, not the pope *qua* pope. Karlstadt's emphasis on scriptural authority may actually go back to his debates in Rome in 1516. Echoes of these earlier debates in Rome are found in both his spring 1517 theses and in the spring 1518 theses.⁶⁶

In thesis 19 the nature of scriptural authority is clarified, for it cannot "deceive" nor can it "be mistaken."⁶⁷ A council, however, as he clarified in thesis 20, can: "Yet a general council can ... deceive and be mistaken out of malice or ignorance."⁶⁸ Here again, Karlstadt draws upon Gerson to support his theology. The erring of a council can happen when it comes to follow "opinion" (thesis 21), and thus loses sight of Scripture.

More on the nature of this authority is offered in thesis 23, which explains that "the preceding theses are only correct if in the statement of the doctor the holy tes-

⁶² Ibid., 798: "Premissa in tantum procedit, quod dicto doctoris auctoritate canonica comunito/ plusquam declarationi pape/ credendum est."

⁶³ Ibid., 854: "sed de canonicis/ hoc est Biblicis."

⁶⁴ On Gerson's view of papal authority, see Posthumus Meyjes, *Jean Gerson, Apostle of Unity*, 269 ff. For Gerson, the ecclesial authorities were the authorized interpreters of Scripture, thus "loyalty to the Scripture" means "above all loyalty to the Church." Ibid., 322. "There is no Scripture or interpretation without the church; and the Church has no authority without the Spirit." On Karlstadt's use of Gerson, see Bubenheimer, *Consonantia theologiae et iurisprudentiae*, 81 f.

⁶⁵ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 798: "Quod non credo verum/ nisi Ro'manus' Pon'tifex' omni auctoritate destitutus et vacuus esset."

⁶⁶ See Ulrich Bubenheimer, *Consonantia theologiae et iurisprudentiae*, 71 f.

⁶⁷ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 799: "Hoc pulchre/ ex eius sexta consideratione/ et prima secundae partis/ deducitur, scilicet quod sacra scrip'tura' nec fallere nec falli potest."

⁶⁸ Ibid., 799: "Concilium autem generale/ iuxta Gersonem et ex malicia et ignorantia/ fallere ac falli potest."

timony according to the literal sense is followed.⁶⁹ Thus only serious academic and literal exegesis can be granted this degree of authority above the papacy, not the eisegetical games of theologians who work in the realm of “opinion.” But what is “literal,” and how can it be distinguished from opinions? As Karlstadt explains in thesis 27, the “literal” is “according to the word or the meaning of the word.”⁷⁰ The textual meaning, the grammatical, exegetical, historical meaning – the humanist understanding of a text – is clearly what Karlstadt is getting at here.⁷¹ Yet he does not abandon intellectual arguments. Although the “literal” reading is the strongest (thesis 45),⁷² as he emphasizes in thesis 46, “it is best to have an abundance of literal and inferred meanings.”⁷³ Karlstadt thus liberated Scripture, to let it speak for itself, without excluding other meanings and arguments.

What does this mean for the debate about indulgences? One must remember that this debate was now – after Tetzel, Eck and Prierias’s responses – entirely wrapped up with the question of papal authority. Does Karlstadt cross the line and reject the pope here? No, clearly, he does not take this route at this time. In thesis 338, he argues that “although nothing can be discovered in the sacred authorities of the scriptures with regard to true penance that it should be bought by the sound of the coin, nevertheless I conclude nothing on indulgences; nor do I approve of the way they are disseminated; but I must condemn it for they esteem and seek after the wealthy spoils of people, and not their souls.”⁷⁴ Thus, just as Luther did in his 95 Theses, Karlstadt now also condemns the *motivations* and *methods* of indulgences (the abuses), and not the practice *per se*. As Bernhard Lohse states regarding Luther’s 95 Theses, “at this time, Luther was not yet ready to reject the practice of indulgences entirely.”⁷⁵ Yet in the very carefully formulated language

⁶⁹ Ibid., 799: “Premissae conclusiones verae sunt/ si dicto doctoris/ testimonium sanctum/ secundum litteralem sententiam suffragaretur.”

⁷⁰ Ibid., 801: “Sed eum/ qui ad verbum seu verbi significationem accipitur/ litteralem dicimus.”

⁷¹ This is reinforced in thesis 39 and 40; see *ibid.*, 802, 803.

⁷² Ibid., 803: “Fortius est argumentum, quod legibile seu literale, vel ad litteram est.”

⁷³ Ibid., 803: “Pulchrum autem est abundare, et literalibus, et colligibilibus rationibus.”

⁷⁴ Ibid., 850: “Quamquam secundum sacras scripturarum auctoritates in veraciter poenitente: quod denariorum sono redimi debeat: comperias nihil, tamen de indulgentiis nihil concludo: nec eas ut divulgantur approbo. Sed improbare teneor, ob id quod opimas hominum exuvias/ non animas hominum diligunt atque pelliciunt/ et iudicium octennio extremum futurum sciunt ac docent quod Christus Apostolorum non esse disseruit.” In Luther’s response to Eck, Luther’s *Asterisci*, he writes: “In this conclusion, as in all the others, I certainly do not claim anything, rather I am disputing [*Ego quidem in ista Conclusionem, sicut in omnibus aliis, nihil statuo sed disputo*].” WA 1:284, on thesis 5; as mentioned in the editorial notes of the Karlstadt edition, see Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 850.

⁷⁵ Bernhard Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und in ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 118: “Luther war damals noch nicht so weit, daß er den Ablass vollkommen verwarf.” Like Luther, who does so in thesis 36 of his 95 theses (cf. *ibid.*), Karlstadt indirectly challenges the institution itself with his theology of grace. Yet here in Karlstadt’s theses, the issue regarding its scriptural foundations is also indirectly addressed. On Feb. 15, 1518, Luther responded to Spalatin’s question regarding his (Luther’s) view

of the thesis cited above, Karlstadt seems to suggest something even more fundamental here than Luther himself was willing to state in his 95 Theses: Scripture teaches *nothing* about this at all. The practice itself is thus built entirely upon a constructed, or inferred, interpretation – an opinion. In the intertextual framework of his 370 Conclusions, this was a critical point, for Karlstadt utterly denigrated the status of this type of argument in the preceding theses. In the context of his many preceding theses, and especially those addressing scriptural authority, Karlstadt was clearly raising the question regarding the scriptural foundation of the practice. He cut out the legs from under the table so it could fall under its own weight, but he did not push on it.

The culmination of these arguments is found in the following statements about the subjection of papal authority to scriptural authority. Thesis 346 states, "where the Lord or his Apostles have clearly set limits, there the Roman Pontifex should not give a new law."⁷⁶ Thesis 348 follows naturally, "If the Roman Pontifex sought to destroy what the apostles and prophets taught, he would prove to be not giving a judgment but rather erring."⁷⁷ Indeed, in thesis 349, again drawing upon established authorities, he continues to explain that "he is a heretic who understands Scripture other than the sense required by the Holy Spirit."⁷⁸ In this context he also criticized the pecuniary motivations in the misinterpretation of Scripture, which was another attack on indulgences.⁷⁹

In terms of his rhetorical strategy, he was essentially using traditional sources of theological authority to establish a point in theology that was no longer reflected in the official ecclesial-theological establishment of the day. He drew upon Augustine

of the indulgences, wherein he writes, among other things, that although Karlstadt did not share his (Luther's) own view exactly (it was probably too radical for Karlstadt initially), he was sure that "Karlstadt held the indulgences to be nothing": "Mihi in Indulgentiis hodie videri non esse nisi animarum illusionem et nihil prorsus utiles esse nisi stertentibus et pigris in via Christ. Et si hanc sententiam non tenet Noster Carls[ta]dius, certum est tamen mihi, quod eas nihil ducit." *WA Br 1*: 146 (Nr. 5); see Bubenheimer, *Consonantia theologiae et iurisprudentiae*, 125. In the same letter, before these remarks, Luther makes it clear that he wants his view of the indulgences to be kept secret, with Spalatin, as that was the issue being debated.

⁷⁶ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 852: "Ubi vero aperte Dominus, vel eius Apostoli diffinierunt, ibi Ro'manus' Pon'tifex' non novam dare legem." This thesis, and 348 is drawn from the *Decretum Gratiani*, c. 25 q. 1, c. 6, see the editorial notes in Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 552.

⁷⁷ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 853: "Si Ro'manus' Pon'tifex' quod docuerunt Apostoli et Prophete: destruere niteretur: non sententiam dare/ sed magis errare convinceretur."

⁷⁸ Karlstadt, *Apologeticae Conclusiones*, in Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 853. See also thesis 356, *ibid.*, 854.

⁷⁹ Thesis 350, *ibid.*, 853: "Hereticus est/ qui alicuius temporalis commodi: utpote pecuniae vel vani honoris: aut defensionis sui erroris/ principatusque sui gratia: novas opiniones: potissimum sacrae Bibliae difformes/ gignit." Those that preach such things, as he explains in thesis 351, are deceiving the laity: "Populus autem simplex: qui huiusmodi predicatoribus credidit/ imaginatione quadam veritatis illusit." *Ibid.*, 853.

and many other authorities to show his colleagues that they were essentially wrong in their understandings of theological authority.

The consequence of this theology was clear for Karlstadt. Karlstadt's response to Eck, from August or September 1518, builds on his criticism of indulgences. He writes: "how wicked [*sceleratum*] it is to play around shamelessly in these matters with the common Christians, for whom Christ died."⁸⁰ He goes on to list many fathers of the church with whom indulgences are not found. Indeed, "opinions should stay opinions"; "let us not make opinions of new theologians equal to the articles of the faith, and the decrees of Christ and Paul." Karlstadt argues that theologians are to "bring forward testimonies out of the sources [*ex fontibus*] without forced and self-made [*apud se natis*] interpretations."⁸¹ Already at this time, in 1518, Karlstadt's theological reflections had been turned to the concern of the laity. Karlstadt asked what the theologians should do – the theologians who do not belong to the common people, those who are "far removed from them" – now that "the laity by becoming wise to the world and reading books and using their common sense [*ingenii sagacitate*]" are "criticizing daily many things in Christianity that they think are wrong." The time had come for the theologians to change their ways and open their eyes: "At last, through our Lord Jesus Christ, open your eyes, theologians! Forget about the scholastic opinions and the childish fighting and turn to the sources of scripture themselves [*ad ... fontes*]!"⁸²

There is a deeper layer to these arguments that was obvious to Karlstadt and his opponents. This focus on the status of the laity – who were now "becoming wise" – and the combined focus on the Scriptures were not original to the Wittenberg theologians. It was common knowledge at this time that the emphasis on the Bible with Hus and Wycliffe was closely related to their pro-laity and anti-clerical agendas. Already at this time, this old theology was in the background of the debates. Wycliffe argued in his *De veritate sacrae scripturae* (1378) that Scripture stands supreme in authority over every other authority. As Craig D. Atwood argues, the Bible became a "revolutionary text" in his hands, and he "set scripture against the church hierarchy in a way that influenced Hus." As Atwood clarifies, "In addition to his distrust of the church as an institution, Wyclif set up an opposition between scripture and the church hierarchy that meant that the laity should have access to the Bible in order to judge church teaching. This perspective led Wyclif to call for and to produce translations of scripture into English."⁸³ This dangerous history of the text of the Bible, scriptural authority, laity-empowerment and anti-clericalism

⁸⁰ Karlstadt, *Contra D. Joannem Eckium*, Karlstadt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 1/2, 878.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 878f.: "Verum opiniones manent opiniones."

⁸² *Ibid.* 879: "Aperite ... oculos vestros o Theologi, et omissis scholasticis opinionibus, omissis puerilibus digladiationibus, ad ipsos scripturarum fontes accedite."

⁸³ Craig D. Atwood, *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 40; see also Kantik Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and Interpretation of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

were all in the background in the Wittenberg debates. They came to the surface as the critics of the Wittenbergers accused them of propagating this "heresy." Clearly, Karlstadt himself was also aware of the dangerous nature of this debate, as was Luther (who distanced himself from Hus at an early stage, before embracing him later). The status of the self-educating laity was thus a side issue in these debates regarding authority, the Bible and church reform. In a sense, theology was being "secularized" with this shift to Biblical authority and laity empowerment.⁸⁴

Karlstadt's remarks from 1518 show that this side issue was being drawn to the center of the debate. This was not new at this time. Around 1500 and leading into the Wittenberg Reformation there were many impulses encouraging the elevation of the status of the laity.⁸⁵ One prominent example of this was the so-called "upper-Rhinian revolutionary" (1509/10), who argued that every "pious Christian" may do the sacred public work of a priest, reading the mass, as long as the person is "Christened by baptism" ("gecrismet mit dem touff"), and presuming the Holy Spirit has established a resolute faith in the Christian.⁸⁶ The culmination of this theological impulse is found in the emphasis on the priesthood of all baptized believers and in the Protestant focus on congregational leadership.

Once Karlstadt's emphasis on scriptural authority made its way into the debates, the nature of the conflict about the Wittenberg theology had fundamentally changed. The rules of the game had been rewritten and the old arguments had

⁸⁴ A parallel can be seen here in the disenchanting effects of new theologies in the Reformation period, especially with regard to the disenchantment of sacred objects. See Euan Cameron, "Words, Matter, and the Reformation: Revisiting the 'Modernity' Question," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 108 (2017): 12–20.

⁸⁵ For an excellent brief introduction into this matter, see Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation*, 507. Kaufmann also draws attention to Leppin's remarks on Tauler's view of the "priestliness" of the *homo interior*. Tauler's theology, and especially his *theologia crucis*, also strongly influenced Karlstadt from at least 1517 onward; this comes to expression in his rejection of the externality of piety in mere external veneration, rather than the focus on the internal bearing of the cross in self-negation, the abandonment of creaturely ties and full ascent into the ground of God. See Hans-Peter Hasse, *Karlstadt und Tauler: Untersuchungen zur Kreuzestheologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verl.-Haus Mohn, 1993), 53 ff. The created spirit thus returns to the uncreated spirit in the internal religious abandonment and not in the external formalities of offices and rituals. This religious experience, as articulated by Tauler and emphasized by Karlstadt, is something that can happen with every Christian, and not only the priests. As Berndt Hamm emphasizes, however, although this new emphasis on the priesthood of all believers in the Wittenberg Reformation was clearly rooted in the mysticism of the late Middle Ages, the rejection of all levels of clerical consecration and the rejection of all the vows of the religious orders show the points of strong discontinuity between the Protestant Reformation and the late Middle Ages. See Berndt Hamm and Michael Welker, *Die Reformation: Potentiale der Freiheit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 13 f. The theme is thus a good example of both the continuity and discontinuity with the late Middle Ages. See Volker Leppin, *Transformationen: Studien zu den Wandlungsprozessen in Theologie und Frömmigkeit zwischen Spätmittelalter und Reformation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 29, 56 f., who sees Tauler's mysticism radicalized in the later Reformation era teaching about the priesthood of all believers, here esp. 57.

⁸⁶ Klaus H. Lauterbach, ed., *Der Oberrheinische Revolutionär: Das Buchli der Hundert Capiteln mit XXXX Statuten* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2009), 282; as cited in Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation*, 507 f.

come to an end. It was no longer possible for the pro-Roman theologians to pull the papal authority card and silence the critics. Papal authority was, in Karlstadt's new game, no longer the final instance of determination, and it could no longer be asserted as such.

5. The Aftermath

As the debates unfolded, Luther was eventually called to a hearing with Cajetan in October 1518, in Augsburg, where he cited Galatians 1:8 and argued, like Karlstadt, that "the pope is not above, but under the word of God."⁸⁷ Like Karlstadt and Hus before him, Luther did not intend to reject the authority of the doctrinal tradition or the church fathers. When these matters come into conflict with one another, however, the Scriptures stand.⁸⁸ The conflict then moved to Leipzig with Eck, Karlstadt, and Luther. At the first day of the debate in Leipzig, Karlstadt claimed, "we desire to assert or to teach nothing without [*nihil sine*] these [Holy Scriptures]."⁸⁹ In this, Karlstadt was clearly asserting the unique authority of the Scriptures in matters of Christian faith. The principle of theology that is expressed *positively* in *sola scriptura* is here expressed *negatively* in Karlstadt's *nihil sine*. The meaning of this was clear to those who heard it: the final authority is Scripture, not the pope or any other authority.⁹⁰

In the theses that Luther drafted for the Leipzig Debate, thesis 13 states, "The very feeble decrees of the Roman pontiffs which have appeared in the last four

⁸⁷ WA 2:11: "cum Papa non super, sed sub verbo dei sit." A summary of this issue is provided by Scott Hendrix, "Luther," in *Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology* (see above), ed. Bagchi and Steinmetz, 39–56, here: 45 f. Gal 1:8: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!"

⁸⁸ Hendrix, "Luther," 46. In August of 1518, Luther had claimed that the pope and councils could err. See his exchange with Prierias, WA 1:656: "quia tam Papa quam concilium potest errare." Regarding the date, see WA 1:645 f.; see also Spehr, *Luther und das Konzil*, 61; Leppin, *Transformationen*, 385.

⁸⁹ To Karlstadt's account of the authority of Scripture at the Leipzig Debate, see his *protestatio* for June 27: "Sacris autem scripturis hunc honorem impendimus, quod nihil sine his aut asserere aut praecipere volumus. In caeteris autem, quae non liquide hinc doceri possunt, solis ecclesiasticis primas damus". WA 59:433. See Leppin's remarks about Karlstadt's theology at the Leipzig Debate in Leppin, *Transformationen*, 378. This is also addressed by Hermann Barge, *Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt*, vol. 1, *Karlstadt und die Anfänge der Reformation* (Leipzig: Brandstetter, 1905), 155. See also Volker Leppin, "Papst, Konzil und Kirchenväter. Die Autoritätsfrage in der Leipziger Disputation," in *Die Leipziger Disputation 1519: 1. Leipziger Arbeitsgespräch zur Reformation*, ed. Markus Hein and Armin Kohnle (Leipzig: EVA, 2011), 117–24. See also Armin Kohnle's essay in the same volume: "Die Leipziger Disputation und ihre Bedeutung für die Reformation" (9–24); as well as Christoph Volkmar's "Von der Wahrnehmung des Neuen: Die Leipziger Disputation in den Augen der Zeitgenossen" (131–42).

⁹⁰ At the Leipzig debate, as Leppin argues, Karlstadt endorsed the "exclusivity of the Scriptures" with regard to binding theological matters. Leppin, *Transformationen*, 378.

hundred years prove that the Roman church is superior to all others. Against them stand the history of eleven hundred years, the text of divine Scripture, and the decree of the Council of Nicaea, the most sacred of all councils."⁹¹ Yet in the preparations for the debate itself, Luther did not follow Karlstadt in this matter of authority immediately, although he did come around to his position later in the course of the debate. In one of his preparation statements for the debate (a *protestatio*) Eck rejected Karlstadt's model of a theoretical conflict between the church (including the papacy, councils and tradition) and the Scriptures. Eck supported the Middle Age harmony model.⁹² Luther did not support Karlstadt's position in the preparation remarks here. He simply claimed that he embraced and followed both Karlstadt and Eck on this matter. As Leppin comments, Luther seems to have wanted to avoid taking positions on this matter in the debate. He left the question open at this time as to whether he was still holding on to his older position, the harmony model, or the new position with Karlstadt, the conflict model.⁹³ Later, however, his position became clear as he moved to Karlstadt's viewpoint. Luther would finally assert that popes and councils could err. For Luther too, the ultimate authority in theology was the Scriptures. He also defended Hus, who was condemned as a heretic by the Council of Constance. It was at the Leipzig Debate that it became clear to Luther, as Leppin argues, that only those arguments that emerge from the Scriptures themselves could be "mandatory," while the authority of the church fathers and councils had only a "supportive and referential function."⁹⁴

Following the thinking of Karlstadt, in 1520 Luther pushed the matter forward in his own rhetorical articulations. He argued that Scripture was like "a first principle [*principium primum*], from which one must begin in order to come to the light and understanding."⁹⁵ Later he also argued: "Scripture alone is the true overlord and master of all writings and doctrines on earth [*sie ist allein der recht lehenherr und meister uber alle schrifft unnd lere auff erden*]."⁹⁶ At the Diet of Worms in April, 1521, Luther then proclaimed – following Karlstadt's arguments – before the ecclesial authorities and Emperor Charles V that Scripture and reason, or rational

⁹¹ LW 31:318. Luther claims that Eck tried to exclude the stenographers from the debate in order that there would be no official record of it. Karlstadt forced Eck to hold to the agreement, however, according to which the debate would be recorded with stenographers (LW 31:319). Already before this, in a letter from the spring of 1518, Luther remarked on the fact that his scholastic teachers taught him that only the canonical books are deserving of "faith" (*fides*), while all others are only deserving of an "opinion/belief/judgment" (*iudicium*). See WA Br 1:171, no. 74, letter to Jodocus Trutfetter, May 9, 1518: "solis canonicis libris deberi fidem." See Lohse, *Luthers Theologie*, 40, 204 f. See Kaufmann, *Der Anfang der Reformation*, 88 ff.

⁹² Cf. WA 59:434; Leppin, "Die Genese des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips," 120.

⁹³ Cf. WA 59:439; Leppin, "Die Genese des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips," 121.

⁹⁴ Leppin, *Transformationen*, 396. Further to the genesis of the emphasis on *sola scriptura*, see idem, 335–97.

⁹⁵ Luther, *Assertio omnium articulorum* (1520); WA 7:97.

⁹⁶ Luther, *Grund und Ursach aller Artikel D. Martin Luthers so durch römische Bulle unrechtlich verdammt sind* (1521); WA 7:317.

argument (still in the pre-Enlightenment sense, of course), were the only absolute authorities for him, not the pope or councils (which could err).⁹⁷

The most impressive articulations of this doctrine (judged on the levels of specificity) are offered later in the many Protestant confessional documents. For example, in the introduction to the *Confessio Augustana* (1530) the teachings of the confession are declared to be “ex scripturis sanctis et puro verbo dei” (“from the Holy Scriptures and the pure word of God”).⁹⁸ This statement did not mean to suggest a dual source of the teachings, as if the Scriptures were one thing and the Word of God was another. It is a rhetorical doubling that increases the weight of the predicate. It suggests that the *Confessio Augustana* itself was to be understood as built upon the Scriptures and thus even the very Word of God, that is, it is not generated by human opinion or authority but by divine authority. Thus the Reformers did not present themselves as arbitrarily postulating doctrines. They rather understood themselves to be following divine authority and not human authorities. They clearly believed that the Scriptures were the word of God (in the non-personal sense) and the ultimate source of doctrine. They understood Jesus Christ to be the Word of God (in the personal sense, following John 1). As Luther would later claim regarding this relationship: “the Holy Scripture is God’s word, written (and as one may say) spelled out and put into letters, just as Christ is the eternal word of God cloaked in humanity The Scripture is written by the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁹

Yet the first such declaration of Protestants is not found in the *Confessio Augustana* of 1530 but in the Twelve Articles of Memmingen of 1525.¹⁰⁰ The twelfth article outlines the authority of Scripture as the basis for the rejection of the abuses of the feudal system. While this emphasis on the authority of the Scriptures was not new in essence, the specificity of its articulation (the form) here and in its various expressions in the Reformation era was clearly unique. This theology was eventually codified in the Formula of Concord of the Lutheran tradition where it says: the “only rule and norm according to which all teachings and all teachers are to be assessed and judged is the Prophetic and Apostolic Scripture, both the Old and the New Testament.”¹⁰¹ As it continues: all other teachings are not “to be put on an

⁹⁷ LW 32:112 f. See Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, 15–18. See also John Brevicoxa’s treatise on this matter in *ibid.*, 67 ff.

⁹⁸ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, vol. 1, ed. Irene Dingel (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 89.

⁹⁹ See Luther, *Bibel- und Bucheinzeichnungen*, to Ps. 22:7, WA 48:31: “Die heilige Schrift ist Gottes wort, geschrieben und (das ich so rede) gebuchstabet und in buchstaben gebildet, Gleich wie Christus ist das ewige Gottes wort, in die menscheit verhullet, Und gleich wie Christus in der Welt gehalten und gehandelt ist, so gehets dem schriftlichen Gottes wort auch . . . die Schrift sey von dem heiligen Geist geschrieben.” Cf. Matt. 16:16.

¹⁰⁰ See “The Twelve Articles of the Upper Swabian Peasants,” in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael G. Baylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 231–38.

¹⁰¹ *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, vol. 1, 1217: Credimus, confitemur et docemus unicum regulam et normam, secundum quam omnia dogmata omnesque doc-

equal level” (“*aequiparanda*”) but rather “wholly subjected to these [Scriptures]” (“*universa illis ita subiicienda*”).¹⁰² Statements like these can only be understood if one grasps the fact, as Bruce Gordon writes, that the Bible was the “lens through which the sixteenth-century world was viewed.”¹⁰³ For traditional and conservative theologians, this is still the case today.¹⁰⁴ The high views of Scripture in these confessions, and in virtually all the other Protestant confessional documents of the sixteenth century, were indeed new in form but they are essentially ancient in content. They represent the classical tradition of Christian theology that almost always understood itself to be a special work built upon the Scriptures.

The arguments based on papal authority had come to an end with this theology. Now there were only two options left: *debate* or *excommunicate*. As most post-Reformation history shows, the latter option was often preferred, especially when the theologians had access to political power. If they did not have access to it, then they had to debate without end. This was precisely the issue for which Karlstadt himself was calling in the spring theses of 1517 at the outset of the short Reformation, and especially in thesis 151 which explicitly called for more debate. While rational debate is the most peaceful and civilized way of dealing with these conflicts in matters of ultimate concern, excommunication (in its various forms) is still a potent tool used to silence criticism.

6. The Contemporary Significance of this Teaching

Regarding the contemporary significance of this teaching, it is important to remember that scriptural authority is a theological concept, one concerned with doctrinal issues (the subject matter of the Christian faith). Scripture is neither a modern science book nor a modern history book, nor a “paper pope.” Scripture’s authority in doctrinal issues must be interpreted by the priesthood of all believers. Congregations can foster this by encouraging Bible study and rational debate at all levels of Christian education. Freedom to think, to challenge and to correct – the freedom of debate – is therefore essential for Christian education. Indeed, we will only know the truth “when it is debated more frequently.”

This is not to suggest that every appeal to Scripture fits within the deeper moral arch of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Like every authority in theology, Scripture can be and has been used for negative purposes. As Emerson B. Powery argues in his impressive summary of the various uses of the Bible in the debates about slave-

tores aestimari et iudicari oporteat, nullam omnino aliam esse quam Prophetica et Apostolica scripta cum Veteris, tum Novi Testamenti.”

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Bruce Gordon, “The Bible in the Reformation,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 108 (2017): 134–142, here: 134.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 141.

ry in the United States: “many have seen the Bible as speaking on both sides of the nation’s greatest moral sin.” Yet, as he continues, “The history of US slavery and the role the Bible played in justifying its continuance and in arguing against its perpetuation should serve as a reminder that the justice of the Bible is not self-authenticating. The Bible does not have agency, except through its inheritors and interpreters.”¹⁰⁵ The Bible could be used on both sides of the debate, but the fact that there could be a debate, and that anyone could call upon the Bible to substantiate their claim, is the true inheritance of the Reformation era rediscovery of scriptural authority and the priesthood of all believers. It encouraged this sense of “agency,” agency to take the Bible, to read it, and to discuss its meaning. In the American context, the specific issue of slavery was ultimately decided, in the broader public consciousness at least, in these long debates. The conclusion of the Civil War clearly brought a triumph of the anti-slavery position. Yet the hearts could only be won over in the North and in the South, before the Civil War and after it, after the long debates proved that which is true: the deeper moral arch of the Judeo-Christian tradition is itself anti-slavery.

While the Scriptures have been used for evil purposes, on the whole the rebirth of the classic position of scriptural authority was itself a thrust of positive liberation in Western history. This is because it enabled the criticism of otherwise absolute authorities, promoted a shift towards the democratization of the exercise of power in the church, and encouraged the broader shift towards the rule of a text (or law) – which is interpreted by many – as opposed to the rule of an office, person or family (rule of the few). Furthermore, it ultimately encouraged reading, study and interpretation, rather than mere obedience to teaching authorities. In this sense, the Reformation encouraged a cultural shift towards information exchange, discussion and debate. As Andrew Pettegree has argued, the Reformation was Europe’s first great “media event” and it led to a “new information culture.”¹⁰⁶ This contribution to the transfer of information and the cultural expectations of reading and being “in the know” was, as he argues, “one of the Reformation’s most profound legacies to the modern age.”¹⁰⁷

Yet how are the new disagreements about the interpretation of the Scriptures to be negotiated? The most peaceful and civilized way is discussion and debate. When debates cannot be resolved in agreement, then individual congregations and ultimately individual Christians must decide which teaching they find to be more convincing, and which is worthy of support and propagation in their congregational life. There will always be a variety of positions represented in Christianity.

¹⁰⁵ See Emerson B. Powery, “The Bible and Slavery in American Life,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in America*, ed. Paul Gutjahr (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 304–18, here: 314.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Pettegree, “The Reformation as a Media Event,” in *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 108 (2017): 126–33, here: 132.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

Attempts to eliminate this plurality are a contradiction of the Christian faith, for as Paul taught: "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions" (Rom. 14:1). In other words, we must find a way to get along even when we disagree with one another. In this, as he continues, the stronger should be flexible and respectful towards the weaker. This last matter follows, of course, from the Jewish and Christian teaching about the priority of love. As Leviticus 19:18 teaches: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (see also Matt. 5:44, 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 6:27; Rom. 13:9–10; 1 Cor. 13; 1 John 1:10; all these are merely extrapolation on this verse from Leviticus).

The high standing of the Scriptures does not free theologians from providing a comprehensive intellectual defense of the intelligibility, coherence, plausibility, and truth of the Christian faith on rational grounds of argumentation, and with a view to historical, philosophical, scientific and interreligious issues. The necessity of this task was first exemplified in Paul's defense of the faith on philosophical grounds (Rom. 1–2; see also Acts 17). Avoiding this challenge and withdrawing into various forms of fideism (accounts of the faith that are unwilling to defend themselves on philosophical grounds) runs the danger of misrepresenting the universality of the Christian faith. As Paul showed, theology can make use of rational argument, for "ever since the creation of the world his [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made" (Rom. 1:20). For "what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness" (Rom. 2:15). The text of the Bible is stronger than the opinion of any theologian, council or pope, but it is not the end of theology. Theological arguments find their ultimate normative foundation in the Scriptures, but theology must show how the convictions of faith can stand on their own in intellectual debate. If they cannot hold their own ground in the arena of rigorous debate, then theologians must ask themselves if these convictions are indeed biblical arguments in the first place. The first Christian theologians, both Paul and Justin Martyr, could not imagine such a scenario in which reason and Biblical faith could ever contradict one another – and modern theologians should follow them. These theologians knew the Bible well and they knew what it taught about the eternal significance of divine wisdom (Prov. 8). Holy wisdom rejoices in the world and delights in humanity. Theologians must prayerfully reconsider their exegesis if they have come to contradict this joyous, human-affirming wisdom.

In summary, liberation from the authoritarianism of the Rome-centered ecclesial order, the struggle for freedom from the abuses of feudalism, and the postulation of the priesthood of all believers were central impulses of what we today call the Reformation, and perhaps the most important elements of the historical legacy of this period, along with the rediscovery of the theology of grace. In all these cases, the fight for freedom, local control, self-rule and the decentralization of the power centers and distribution of power from the few to the many, which

was almost always resisted by those in power, was justified with appeals to the Bible as the supreme authority. The rebirth of scriptural authority in the Reformation was thus one of the most significant events in the modern intellectual history of the Western world and it remains one of the great cornerstones of freedom in the whole world today.