

## Two Ways to Read the Bible in the (Very) Long Reformation

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In the 1630s, William Chillingworth famously and misleadingly claimed that ‘the Bible only is the religion of Protestants’.<sup>1</sup> In one sense this is plainly true: from Luther’s principle of *sola scriptura* onwards, Protestantism in almost all its forms has been self-consciously a religion of the Word. That, however, does not get us very far. Plainly the Bible was and has remained central to Protestant Christianity, but in what way? This question has vexed Protestant theologians since the first generation onwards; this essay does not propose to engage in those arguments, but to tackle the more prosaic historical question. Regardless of what the relationship between Protestantism and the Bible ought ideally to have been, how did it work in practice in believers’ lives?

There are those – serious scholars amongst them – who will argue that Protestantism is defined by being Bible-Christianity: the form of Christianity which finds ultimate authority in unmediated Scripture. Alister McGrath has argued that that is Protestantism’s genius; Brad Gregory, that that is what condemns it to irresolvable chaos.<sup>2</sup> But this is not so. Protestantism is both less and more fluid than this approach suggests. Less so, because in practice it is much less theologically open than *sola scriptura* implies. The Bible is a long, rich, varied and slippery text: an enormous number of religious principles have been deduced from it at different times, only a minority of which are recognisably part of the broad family of faiths we call Protestantism.<sup>3</sup> Protestantism is much less plural than the idea of mere Bible-Christianity might suggest. The doctrinal chaos which Gregory sees in Protestantism is real, and it does proliferate more or less endlessly, but not randomly. The chaos is more fractal in nature: the same patterns recur.

It is a simple matter of fact that *sola fide* was both chronologically and logically prior to *sola scriptura*. Luther arrived at his doctrine of salvation before he accepted that the Church’s Councils cannot authoritatively determine the interpretation of Scripture, and he rejected conciliar authority in 1519 because it clashed with a doctrine of whose truth he was already convinced. For the defenders of traditional religion at the time, this was all too obvious. Erasmus said that Luther and his partisans

are so uncontrollably attached to their own opinion that they cannot bear anything which dissents from it; but they twist whatever they read in the Scriptures into an assertion of an opinion which they have embraced once for all. They are like young men who love a girl so immoderately that they imagine they see their beloved wherever they turn, or, a much better example, like two combatants who, in the heat of a quarrel, turn whatever is at hand into a missile, whether it be a jug or a dish.<sup>4</sup>

That shrewd observation sets the parameters for my argument, which turns on his two similes, the lovers and the brawlers. But it is only fair to observe that the reformers indignantly denied it. ‘This is not Christian teaching,’ Luther insisted, ‘when I bring an opinion to scripture and compel scripture to follow it, but rather on the contrary, when I first have got straight what scripture teaches and then compel my opinion to accord with it.’ Zwingli was vituperative on the same point.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that they defended themselves against the charge of motivated reasoning, but the defence was sincere: what they said felt true to them. Luther did not have a fully-formulated doctrine of the exclusive authority of Scripture before he reached his doctrine of justification, but he certainly reached that doctrine through an intensive encounter with Scripture. He set the pattern which generations of Protestants after him would follow: embracing doctrines which seemed to

them to arise from Scripture, and then using those doctrines as interpretative keys to understand Scripture as a whole.

Hence the second problem with the Bible-Christianity model of Protestantism, which is that it is not just too fluid, but also and at the same time not fluid enough. The question this essay seeks to address is: granted that the Bible was (and is) vital to Protestants, how in fact did they use it?

I will argue that, ever since the beginning of the Reformation, Protestants have used the Bible in Erasmus' two distinct ways: as brawlers and as lovers. Although, as I will suggest briefly at the end, there is a third alternative. My suggestion is that if we view Protestant Biblicism through this division, we will understand better how they read their Bibles and what the consequences of that reading were.

## I. The brawlers

It is often said that Biblical fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon, of late nineteenth-century vintage. This is true, but misleading. Certainly fundamentalism as a sociological phenomenon is modern, and the doctrine of inerrancy as we know it is a modern formulation, but this is nitpicking (indeed, special pleading). Those doctrines' continuity with the early modern world is not imaginary. The reason why early modern theologians thought it was worth parsing the precise wording of particular scriptural passages was because they believed the text to be the literal word of God, dictated verbatim by the Holy Spirit. The fact that they believed this in sophisticated terms does not alter the underlying fact. There are extreme examples like Francis Turretin, professor at the Geneva Academy from 1653-87, who made his name by refusing to yield in the slightest to the new Biblical scholarship. Turretin insisted that the Bible's perfection extended not merely to the lost holograph manuscripts but to the text in its current state. Since God had provided it in the first place, he must also, logically, have providentially preserved it from error and corruption. So he insisted on the validity, for example, of the inflection marks in the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, or the authenticity of the so-called 'Johannine comma', I John 5:7, as a proof-text for the Trinity. Such views are not respectable within academic theology any more, but they are of course still very widely held. For a great many English-speaking Protestants around the world today, the King James Bible – Johannine comma and all – is an inspired translation which is authoritative in its own right, just as the Septuagint and the Vulgate were before it, and much as the 1919 Union Version is seen by many Chinese Protestants today.<sup>6</sup>

Modern scholars have often tried to distinguish between no-surrender doctrines of this kind and the suppler ways in which the original reformers used their Bibles, and they are right to, but only up to a point. Luther and Calvin yield to no-one in their readiness to base substantial theological arguments simply on an appeal to the precise wording of Scripture. No sixteenth-century Protestant doubted that there were correct and incorrect ways to interpret, for example, the words *Hoc est corpus meum*; nor that it mattered profoundly which was which. The early reformers were inheritors of a medieval and patristic tradition which assumed that Scripture was inspired *in toto*. Renaissance humanism's innovation was not to question that, but to question the legitimacy of interpreting Scripture in the various 'higher', allegorical senses unless firmly grounded in the literal sense. There is a persuasive case, which Peter Harrison has made, that this novel insistence on the primary of the literal meant that the literal sense of Scripture was made to carry more weight than it could in the end bear, since some passages were left embarrassingly shorn of any edifying meaning and others were left, fatally, making falsifiable or even patently false claims which were now much harder to

allegorise away.<sup>7</sup> The point to notice, however, is *why* Luther, Calvin, Turretin, modern fundamentalists and many others have adopted positions of this kind.

It is because, as Erasmus observed, combatants in the heat of a quarrel turn whatever is at hand into a missile. Inerrancy is only a means of turbocharging Luther's original gambit at the Diet of Worms in 1521. When ordered to recant, Luther refused to do so on the grounds that his 'conscience was captive to the Word of God'. The only way of releasing his conscience from this captivity was to convince it from Scripture, and Scripture alone, that it was wrong. It was his heroic moment, but the glaring problem with this stance was immediately obvious. It was pointed out there and then by the archbishop of Trier's secretary:

If it were granted that whoever contradicts the councils and the common understanding of the church must be overcome by Scripture passages, we will have nothing in Christianity that is certain or decided.<sup>8</sup>

If each individual conscience is sovereign, then how can Christians ever again agree on anything? If we do not care to embrace his conclusion that Luther was 'completely mad', we can perhaps agree that Luther had found a recipe for doctrinal madness, a problem which Protestants have been wrestling with ever since. What made Luther's position possible, however, was that he was not simply appealing to his own conscience pure and simple. Dr Luther took his stand on the Bible, and made the stirring, empty offer to submit himself to correction by it. The use of Scripture was what made his position credible. But what made it powerful was not that he embraced the Bible. That is hardly unusual for Christians. What was shocking was that he rejected *everything else*. He refused to be constrained by anything outside Scripture, including anyone else's interpretation of Scripture.

Hence the core doctrine, which underpins inerrancies of all kinds, of Scripture's sufficiency. The Lutheran Formula of Concord summed it up in 1577: 'the only rule and standard according to which at once all dogmas and teachers should be esteemed and judged are *nothing else than* the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures.' Article VI of the English Thirty-Nine Articles makes the same point, in an exquisitely phrased double negative: 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be ... thought necessary or requisite to salvation.'

It is a subtle theological point: but it was also a brilliant manoeuvre. In a Christian society which had always revered the Bible, which was in the midst of a scholarly vogue for ancient truths and texts, for a monk and doctor of theology to stand alone and wield the Bible against all the forces of a corrupt establishment was dreadfully persuasive. This was theological populism of the highest order. The cry, 'Scripture alone!', allowed Luther to shrug off every authority the Church could throw at him, while still demonstratively submitting to the highest authority of all. Best of all, the authority to which he was submitting could not openly defy his interpretation. In this sense *sola scriptura* was not only a theological principle. It was also a weapon.

This theme unites all of these doctrines of Biblical authority, from mere sufficiency to hard-edged inerrancy: they are polemical, indeed combat-ready. It is a commonplace that fundamentalisms of all kinds, from Turretin's doomed defence of the Johannine comma through to the present, are defensive: trenches dug against the onslaught of hostile ideas. As such they are easy to mock, but in battle the digging of trenches is sometimes a sensible tactic. If Luther and his contemporaries had not been able to claim to be preaching the pure Gospel – that crucial slogan of the early Reformation – and justify that claim with a barrage of apposite texts, their movement would have been stillborn. Luther turned Scripture into a weapon because he urgently needed weapons. Again: while the ossified Protestant

orthodoxies of the later seventeenth century may be hard to love, we should not underestimate what the no-surrender obstinacy of Turretin and his contemporaries achieved. It was an age when Protestantism was under attack from all sides, from rationalism, mysticism, sectarianism and not least resurgent Catholicism: and it held firm, and lasted long enough to see better days. Even the ferocious stands which twentieth-century Fundamentalism made on some issues – for example, against eugenics in the 1920s – do not all seem as risible in retrospect as they did at the time, and there is a case to be made that it, too, allowed Protestantism to minimise the damage it suffered under a formal cultural bombardment. Still, regardless of whether we like or dislike this polemical strand of Protestantism's relationship to the Bible, it is plainly there. My suggestion, however, is that it is only part of the picture.

## II. The lovers

As scholars of the early reformers have long recognised, Luther, Calvin and their peers also used the Bible in another way.<sup>9</sup> Luther, the least cautious of the reformers, remains the best-known example of this. Luther's idiosyncratic use of the Bible is well-known. His dismissal of the epistle of James as mere straw is often quoted; his reported comment that 'I almost feel like throwing Jimmy into the stove' is less well-known.<sup>10</sup> But he also wanted to expel the book of Esther from the canon; he doubted whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch; he reckoned that the books of Chronicles were less reliable than the books of Kings; he thought that Job was largely fiction, that the prophets had made mistakes, that the numbers in some Old Testament accounts were exaggerated. He argued that Hebrews, Jude and Revelation, like James, were not of apostolic authorship, and sent all four to a relegation zone at the end of his New Testament. He was blatantly favouritist about other books, notably John's gospel and the epistle to the Galatians. No other mainstream reformer was quite so slapdash, but Luther's very brazenness should tell us that this is not mere Humpty-Dumptyism. Luther treated the Bible this way because of his understanding of what the Bible was. In 1530, he advised Bible-readers to

search out and deal with the core of our Christian doctrine, wherever it may be found throughout the Bible. And the core is this: that without any merit, as a gift of God's pure grace in Christ, we attain righteousness, life, and salvation.<sup>11</sup>

That core was the Gospel, and to teach it was the Bible's purpose. Luther's comments about the epistle of James are usually quoted rather selectively: we usually focus on the shocking dismissals, not his praise for the letter's moral teaching. He called the letter 'straw' because, although its moral content was valuable, 'it contains not a syllable about Christ' – which, aside from the formulaic greeting in its first verse, is the literal truth. In fact, Luther's doctrine of Scripture bears a striking parallel to his supposedly idiosyncratic doctrine of the Eucharist: the matrix through which Luther understood both of these gifts to humanity was the great gift, Christ's Incarnation itself. Christ inhabited and became the bread of the sacrament without destroying it, just as he assumed humanity without extinguishing it. Likewise, he wrote, 'the Holy Scripture is God's Word, written, and so to say "in-lettered", just as Christ is the eternal Word of God incarnate in the garment of his humanity'.<sup>12</sup> He even called the Bible 'the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies'.<sup>13</sup> As such its incidental content is almost insignificant.

Compare Calvin on Scripture, who was more measured, but did not fundamentally disagree. He was happy to accept that the creation story in Genesis did not fit the science even of his own day, and to explain that the account was written to fit what its original

readers could understand. He was also untroubled by the textual glitches he found in Scripture. With his inimitable professorial superiority, he could mark down Luke for mistaking the name of a high priest wrong or Paul for writing an almost incomprehensible sentence, and also point out that the New Testament writers were sometimes very sloppy in quoting the Old Testament. He explained this by stating, breezily, that ‘with respect both to words and to other things which do not bear upon the matters in discussion, [the apostles] allow themselves wide freedom’.<sup>14</sup> For Calvin, too, the authority of Scripture was the authority of its core message, not its incidentals. Luther summed this principle up in a slogan on which modern liberal Protestants have gratefully seized: Christ is the lord and king of Scripture.

As Brian Gerrish has recognised, there is a tension here. On the one hand, Luther, Calvin and others argued that Scripture’s value lies wholly in its witness to Christ: that is, the Bible’s authority is bestowed by the revelation it contains. On the other, they argued that, and certainly behaved as if, the Bible was immediately inspired and derived its authority directly from the Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup> They used it polemically, with textual precision: they had to. But as Erasmus recognised, they were also ‘like young men who love a girl so immoderately that they imagine they see their beloved wherever they turn’. They used the text inspirationally, to learn which doctrines are worth defending.

Critically, that lovers’ use – the inspirational use – is primary. This is made plain by what little the Reformers said about a problem which has vexed Protestantism’s defenders from the beginning, namely, on what grounds do they claim that the Bible is authoritative? The very fact of near-silence on such a foundational subject is revealing in itself. Scott Hendrix’s view is that ‘the authority of Scripture for Luther was not like a mathematical theorem which can be proven ... by the use of self-evident axioms. ... Rather ... Luther approached Scripture as we would approach a great work of art.’<sup>16</sup>

Calvin, being a systematician, could not evade the subject, but the passage in the *Institutes* where he asserts the authority of Scripture is one of the most extraordinary in his whole output. In Book I, chapter VII, once he has dispatched the argument that Scripture’s authority derives from the Church, he finally comes to the heart of the question. There are, he accepts, various rational arguments that can be advanced to bolster the claim that the sixty-six books conventionally gathered as the Bible are the Word of God. But none of these arguments is inherently compelling. And so

We ought to seek our conviction in a higher place than human reasons, judgements or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit. ... Scripture is indeed self-authenticating [αὐτόπιστος]. ... We *feel* [sensimus] that the undoubted power of his divine majesty lives and breathes there, ... a *feeling* [sensus] that can be born only of heavenly revelation. I speak of nothing other than what each believer experiences within himself.<sup>17</sup>

And, naturally, what each unbeliever does not experience. This is not weaponised Scripture, with which polemicists can demolish sceptics’ arguments and force them to submit. This is Scripture for lovers, who can talk in rapturous terms of the vision before them but who cannot in the end compel anyone else to see it. At best they can conjure, but, as befits a theologian with such an overwhelming doctrine of divine sovereignty, the matter of whether any one individual’s eyes are opened to see this self-evident truth depends not on their efforts nor on a theologian’s arguments, but on God’s initiative. It is a profoundly predestinarian doctrine of Scripture, and one which is lifted out of the realm of polemics altogether.

### III. The radical witness

These subtleties from the Reformers have been seized upon by liberal Protestants keen to look for historical justification for taking a nonliteralist view of Biblical authority, which is fair enough: but we must accept that these are crumbs of liberal comfort gathered from beneath a vast table groaning with evidence that the early Reformers used the Bible as a proof-text with precise literalism. The significance of the tension which Gerrish and others have detected is not that it was threatening to unravel, but that, until the eighteenth century at least, it remained under control. One of the key theological achievements of magisterial Protestantism – and it was not as easy as in retrospect it looks – was to unite the inspirational and the polemical uses of the Bible, so that they could be starstruck lovers and ferocious brawlers at the same time. For historians, however, this presents a problem. Since polemic leaves behind it a larger and more dramatic paper-trail than inspiration, it is easy to miss the devotional readings of Scripture which continue to underly the polemics. We may presume that when ordinary Protestants read their Bibles they did so more often in the hope of feeling what Calvin called ‘the undoubted power of the divine majesty’ than of shoring up their doctrinal convictions. But of course the two cannot be neatly separated even in private devotion. Which means that, if we are to see that continued inspirational use of Scripture, we need to look at those outside the calm, theologically and textually stable world of the magisterial Protestant churches. The more extreme world of Protestant radicalism provides us with a kind of natural experiment in which the distinct modes of Bible-use are centrifuged apart.

The Anabaptists of the first generation could polemicise with the best of them, famously skewering Lutheran and Reformed theologians for defending infant baptism without Biblical warrant (proof, if it were needed, that theology trumps textualism). Yet they were of course doing the same thing. They had discerned Scripture’s inner meaning and used that inner meaning to interpret the remainder of the text. Many of them argued that that inspirational use was entirely congruent with polemical textual precision, but others were willing to let them part company. The Austrian radical Jörg Haugk, for example, complained that ‘many accept the Scriptures as if they were the essence of divine truth; but they are only a witness to divine truth which must be experienced in the inner being’. Hans Hut insisted that the Bible could only be understood through the Spirit: otherwise, he argued, the text bristled with contradictions, of which he provided a substantial list.<sup>18</sup> Half a century later, the Dutch mystical sect known as the Family of Love were roundly attacked by their orthodox enemies for their manner of using the Bible, an approach which – to outsiders – looked like unjustifiable distortion of the text with allegory to mean whatever they wanted it to. The Familists themselves, however, argued that they used a serious hermeneutical principle, which they called the ‘paterne of Love’, to interpret the text, and claimed indignantly that they were the true heirs of Protestant scripturalism. They had found inspiration in the text, and used that inspiration to interpret the text.<sup>19</sup>

The Familists also used a perennial gambit: they called their opponents the ‘Scripture-Learned’, which was not a compliment. The modest or faux-modest claim to pious simplicity, over against the learned fools who can see everything but the plain truth, is part of Protestantism’s core inheritance from humanism, and was deployed by learned and unlearned alike. Yet it has long had particular value for one kind of Protestant: the believers who reach their convictions inspirationally, who have been inspired by the Spirit (whether through the words of the Bible or not) but who cannot or will not defend those beliefs polemically. Perhaps they cannot stand their ground against the barrage of textual precision which learned, establishment theologians turn on them; perhaps they believe that to engage in such a battle is to turn their backs on larger truths. For such a person, the obvious resort is not simply to

accuse those theologians of being blinded by their own learning, but to accuse them of too subtle and manipulative a relationship with Scripture itself. Christ should be lord of the Scripture, but such theologians make themselves its lords – or so the argument goes. Hence the Familist abuse. Hence, when Luther and other magisterial reformers took their stand on their learning – Luther’s claim to be heard rested in large part on his status as a doctor of theology – their theologically disenfranchised opponents damned them for it. The self-taught Nuremberg Anabaptist Hans Hergot called them ‘Scripture wizards’ who ‘imagine that their wisdom and understanding is so great that it surpasses God’s wisdom’, and who have tried to kidnap the Holy Spirit. The English aphorist Sir John Harington, in the early seventeenth century, made a similar point to diagnose religious hypocrisy: ‘Many great Scriptureans may be found, / That cite Saint *Paul* at euery bench and boord, / And haue Gods word, but haue not God the word.’<sup>20</sup> That newly-coined English word, *scripturian*, was a gift for this sort of argument: like its nineteenth-century near-equivalent *bibliolater*, it was an attack on those who had ceased to be Christians, worshippers of Christ, and had instead become scripturians, idolatrous worshippers of a god of pulped rag and ink.<sup>21</sup> Such people were no longer lovers: they were only brawlers.

It was during the English Revolution, however, that this attack on the learned elite as an anti-Christian priesthood truly entered the Protestant mainstream. Its English prophet was the self-taught Baptist minister Samuel How, who argued, in a pamphlet published weeks before his death in 1640, that ‘there is nothing in all mans wisdom to be any whit helpfull but hurtfull to him in attaining and comprehending the *wisdome* of *God* in *Christ*’. He accepted, rather grudgingly, that translating the Bible into English was worthwhile. But he denied that linguistic or other scholarly skills provided any insight into the true meaning of Scripture, and compared translators to the labourers who built Noah’s ark, who ‘made a place of *safeguard* for *others*, but were *drowned themselves*.’ Only the Spirit could open God’s word to the reader; learning, by contrast, fogged the mind with arrogance, hypocrisy and self-righteousness. It is not exactly impossible for a learned man to be saved, on his view, but we are in camels and eyes of needles territory. When his opponents quoted prooftexts, they only proved him right: he retorted that ‘the *word* is a *Sword* with two edges, which whosoever that is *carnall* meddles with, it will run into his *heart*.’ Brawlers who weaponise Scripture only hurt themselves. But whereas such learned hairsplitters ‘pervert all *Scriptures* to their own *destruction*’, leaving the Bible ‘wrested and wringed like to a *nose of wax* ... simple men and women having the *Spirit of truth* in them, shall rightly know [the *Scriptures*], and *Gods mind* in them for their great *comfort*.’ Notice the contrast. The learned argue; the simple merely *know*, and have left argument behind. How’s principles would not have allowed him to follow Calvin in describing the Word as *αὐτόπιστος*, self-authenticating, but the point is fundamentally the same.<sup>22</sup>

All that in 1640: but How’s work was programmatic for Independents and spiritualists to follow. All the Quakers did was take his position to its logical endpoint, distinguishing between the learned, empty ministers of the Letter, and they themselves who preached the true Word. ‘Not the letter, nor the writing of the Scripture, but the ingrafted Word is able to save your soules’, George Fox preached.<sup>23</sup> But it is important to recognise that the Quakers and their fellow-travellers did not *reject* the Bible. Pick up any early Quaker tract and you will see it is a tissue of Biblical quotation and allusion, and that it bristles with marginal references. To orthodox outrage, they insisted that the true spiritual meaning of the text had been revealed only to them by the inner light that they had received, a meaning which was rooted in Scripture even as it had grown and flowered into the light of the new revelation. This was religion which still Biblically anchored and Biblically inspired: they were still reading the Bible like lovers, but they now found their weapons elsewhere.

One of the most compelling examples of this comes from the so-called Ranter prophet Abiezer Coppe. In his almost hallucinogenic 1649 tract *A Fiery Flying Roll*, Coppe describes an encounter he had with a deformed beggar. He was torn between the prophetic urge to give the man all the money he had – which is what he eventually did – and the sly, self-serving voice of sober good sense, suggesting he give a little but not too much. That sly inner voice made its case by quoting various scriptures on the obligation to care for the poor. Coppe described that voice as ‘the strange woman who, flattereth with her lips, and is subtil of heart’, ‘the Wel-favoured Harlot’ and ‘the holy Scripturian Whore’.<sup>24</sup> That phrase could have been calculated to outrage his contemporaries, but it was not a rejection of the Bible. It was a particular way of using the Bible, in self-justifying and self-satisfied defiance of the bottomless claims of the Holy Spirit, that Coppe called scripturian and whorish. He knew as well as any Bible-reader that there is no better prooftexter than the Devil. The distinction which other Ranters supposedly made between the *history* of Scripture – its dead word – and the *mystery* of Scripture – its living, hidden essence – captures the same point.

Yet if radical figures such as these distinguish sharply between history and mystery, we must not imagine that they are therefore the only ones for whom the mystery was fundamental. The devotional-inspirational use of Scripture is most visible on the fringes, but it was ubiquitous, and periodically swims into view in figures who were rather closer to classic Protestant orthodoxy. John Bunyan, refusing in 1665 to submit to anyone else’s reading of Scripture, wrote:

I honour the Godly, as Christians, but I prefer the BIBLE before them. .... Besides, I am for *drinking Water out of my own Cistern*; what GOD makes mine by evidence of his Word and Spirit, that I dare make bold with.<sup>25</sup>

Against that there is no argument and no appeal. Fox could have said the same. So could Calvin.

#### **IV. The late-modern witness**

A further demonstration of how fundamental this double approach to the Bible is to the Protestant tradition is how persistently it has endured into the modern period and down to the present. Once again, the distinction is most visible in circumstances where pressures of various kinds push the polemical-textual and the devotional-inspirational uses away from one another. This applied, for example, in the nineteenth-century United States: a ferment of Protestant sectarian creativity comparable only to Germany in the 1520s or England in the 1650s, once again fuelled by the persistent Protestant distrust of priesthoods of learning. The result was a flowering of Spirit-led but Scripturally-based sects and movements, of which the prototype was the so-called Christian Connection, an avowedly anti-doctrinal movement which refused to maintain any orthodoxies beyond insisting that no Christian should be tied to ‘catechism, creed, covenant or a superstitious priest’. The founder of a sister movement, the Disciples of Christ, stated that his ambition was

to read the scriptures as though no one had read them before me .... I am as much on my guard against reading them to-day, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever.<sup>26</sup>

Impossible and frankly dangerous in its naivety as this may be, it is hard not to respect its earnest striving for purity.



What brought the devotional-inspirational use of Scripture to a sharp point in nineteenth-century America, however, was the great matter of slavery. Slavery's Protestant defenders deployed an arsenal of proof-texts, and abolitionists who tried to fight back by the same means generally had the worst of it. This led some abolitionists to abandoning Christianity altogether, but others appealed to their own, Spirit-led understanding of the text's true meaning. In this spirit one Presbyterian abolitionist declared that

The whole Bible is opposed to slavery. The sacred volume is one grand scheme of benevolence – beams of love and mercy emanate from every page, while the voice of justice denounces the oppressor, and speaks his awful doom!<sup>27</sup>

Which is either a stirring vision which cuts to the heart of the Bible's message, or an admission that he did not have a textual leg to stand on. However, as we might expect, the clearest evidence of inspirational-devotional uses of Scripture in this context comes from America's Black Protestants, both slave and free: those who were unable to confront the learned theologians on their own terms, but for whom the evils of slavery were not a matter for debate. Consider, for example, a Maryland woman whom we know only as Elizabeth, born a slave and freed aged thirty. She then became a travelling preacher, claiming to have been ordained by God, and even preaching openly against slavery in Virginia – she was not, evidently, short of courage. Her memoir is full of her own immersion in the Bible, but also of her defiance of those who 'clog the true ministry. ... They may have a degree of light in their heads, but evil in their hearts.' On one occasion, she recalled with evident distaste, a 'great scripturian' came to one of her sermons to take notes. Happily, he was overwhelmed by her message instead.<sup>28</sup>

Thereafter our story goes in two distinct directions. The spread of Biblical criticism made some liberal Protestants turn gratefully to inspirational uses of Scripture. Samuel Taylor Coleridge had argued that polemicising Scripture could not in fact settle arguments, but rather led to a proliferation of mutually anathematising sects. It turned the Bible, he wrote, from a 'breathing organism ... into a colossal Memnon's head, a hollow passage for a voice'.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, the Chicago Presbyterian minister David Swing was charged with heresy in 1874 for preaching, amongst other things:

Always distrust any one who rigidly follows the letter of God's word, for thus you will be plunged into a world of discord, and the Bible will lie at your feet a harp, broken, utterly without music for the sad or happy hours of life.<sup>30</sup>

On this view, Protestants could read the Bible *either* as lovers *or* as brawlers. It could be a source of inspiration or a polemical weapon, but not both.

The second, parallel story is found in the Pentecostal, charismatic and 'independent' churches which are the main engine of growth in contemporary global Protestantism. For example, in the early 1990s a pair of researchers conducted an in-depth study of a so-called 'underground church' in an undisclosed region of rural China. They described a community where the Bible was known extremely well, but which was resistant to any notion of theological education. The members of the church sometimes found themselves in theological arguments with other Christians, but when – inevitably – they had trouble sustaining these, they claimed the guidance of the Spirit and closed down the discussion. As the researchers put it:

They like to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit in enlightening the believers on the meaning of the Bible. Very often, they study the Bible, and wait for the Holy Spirit to reveal to them the hidden spiritual meaning of the Scripture. Once they receive such

revelation, they would look for other verses with similar themes and associate these verses to uncover further hidden spiritual lessons.

What these researchers describe is a perennial Protestant way of using the Bible: as a source of inspiration and a channel for the Spirit.<sup>31</sup> The broad Pentecostal-charismatic tradition – whose influence on modern Chinese Protestantism has not been as fully recognised as it should be<sup>32</sup> – certainly affirms the Bible as a touchstone of faith, and uses it as a weapon readily enough. Yet the tradition's openness to the Holy Spirit's continued promptings gives it a means of sidestepping textual stumbling blocks while still affirming faith in the Word, making it easier to read the Bible as a love letter and less necessary to read it as a treatise. The great Pentecostal ecumenist David du Plessis was as loyal to the Bible as anyone could wish, but in a 1986 memoir he reflected that 'as Jesus predicted, I can write a Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit in my lifetime that would eclipse the Acts of the Apostles'.<sup>33</sup> The Bible is the Word of God, but not the last word. This can go further, as demonstrated by the Friday Masowe Church in late 1990s Zimbabwe, whose members proudly described themselves as 'the Christians who don't read the Bible'. As one of their preachers explained in 1999,

Here we don't talk of Bibles. What is the Bible to me? Having it is just trouble. Look, why would you read it? It gets old. Look again. After keeping it for some time it falls apart, the pages come out. . . . We don't talk Bible-talk here. We have a true Bible here.

He indicated his heart.<sup>34</sup>

To class this church as *lovers* of Scripture may seem to be stretching a point. The principal scholar to have studied them, Matthew Engelke, argues that the church's leaders did know their Bibles, and even cited the Bible to prove that although it is the Word of God, 'it is not always relevant to the needs of Africans today'.<sup>35</sup> Squint hard, and this can look not entirely unlike some early Quaker views of the Bible. On the other hand, it is only fair to observe that one of the Masowe church's most prominent leaders became increasingly outspoken in his support for the Zimbabwean government, claimed that Robert Mugabe was 'divinely appointed King of Zimbabwe', and in 2003 was convicted of seven counts of rape and sentenced to thirty-two years in prison. He died in 2011, shortly after having been released early to campaign for the government in that year's election.<sup>36</sup>

That denouement perhaps indicates that we are in new territory. For if most Protestants treat the Bible as lovers or as brawlers, there is a third possibility: simply to jettison it. Some American antislavery campaigners took that route: faced with a mass of proof-texts for slavery, one minister preached on the eve of the Civil War, 'slavery is not to be tried by the Bible, but the Bible by freedom'. One article in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* argued, 'The Bible, if Opposed to Self-Evident Truth, Is Self-Evident Falsehood'.<sup>37</sup> It was not a new idea. Back in the sixteenth century, Faustus Socinus had argued that the doctrine of Christ's satisfaction for sin was so profoundly impossible that 'even if I found it written in the Bible, not once but often, I would still not believe'.<sup>38</sup> There is, perhaps, even an echo of Luther's proclaimed willingness to throw out those parts of the canon which troubled his theological convictions.

Importantly, for all Luther's brusque talk of revising the canon, he never actually did it, merely engaging in a little light reordering. Yet he did enough to spur a twentieth-century admirer to this comment:

It's certain that Luther had no desire to mould humanity to the letter of the Scriptures. He has a whole series of reflections in which he clearly sets himself against the Bible. He recognises that it contains a lot of bad things.<sup>39</sup>

Adolf Hitler was, of course, no Protestant. Yet he was here, as he did elsewhere, channelling pretty accurately the radical Biblical critique produced by the *Deutsche Christen* movement in general and by the so-called *Entjudungsinstitut*, the Dejudaisation Institute, in particular. The Institute's crowning achievement, in its own eyes at least, was *Die Botschaft Gottes*, 'The Message of God', published in 1940: the German Christian version of the Bible. It is rather brief. The entire Old Testament is gone, naturally. The synoptic Gospels are harmonised into a single text, a series of Pauline extracts are stitched together with some material from John's Gospel to form a continuous text, and there is a heavily redacted version of the Acts of the Apostles. In fact, it was quite daring in places, certainly allowing more Jewish elements in the story than Hitler was willing to accept: Jesus' own racial identity is left unspecified, he even quotes a Psalm, and the text does not attempt to hide the fact that Paul was Jewish. Some of the *Deutsche Christen* had argued that the very idea of Scripture was a Jewish perversion: 'whereas the Jews were the first to write out their faith, Jesus never did so.'<sup>40</sup> Still, the point stands. This was a form of Protestantism, if indeed it was still Protestantism, for which the Bible was not an inspiration but a problem, indeed a problem so severe that the only solution was to ditch most of it.

It is an extreme example, but it can be instructive. For it gives the lie to the claim, often made by the brawlers, those who favour textual-polemical uses of Scripture, that freewheeling inspirational readings can take you literally anywhere: there are, it seems, some places at least where the text simply cannot be made to go. But you could equally well argue that this is exactly where untrammelled devotional-inspirational Protestantism leads, to a willingness eventually to let go of its Biblical moorings altogether.

Your instinctive sympathies may be with the lovers or with the brawlers. As historians, however, what we must recognise is that the two have been deeply intertwined in Protestant thought and practice since the Reformation, and have remained so. On the one side, theological arguments advanced in polemical-textual terms have usually – always? – had inspirational-devotional convictions underpinning them. The knotty question of *why* believers care so much about a particular doctrine is one which historians ought to engage with more openly, all the more so because the motivations which give beliefs their emotional force are often not clearly articulated. On the other side, inspirational-devotional convictions have usually ended up resorting to polemical-textual arguments; it is unavoidable if a conviction is to move from being one believer's private experience to having any kind of institutional expression, or to prevent it from veering into wild idiosyncrasy. The Biblical text, in this sense, has served Protestants both as an inspiration and as a guard-rail, regularly renewing their faith while also channeling those renewals and keeping them within boundaries. It is a tricky double-act; it has periodically failed, leaving Protestants either with arid dogmatism, or the kind of chaos in which believers' personal prejudices become determinative, or sometimes both. That much is all too predictable. What is truly remarkable about the history of Protestantism is how often these twin dangers have been avoided.

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<sup>1</sup> William Chillingworth, *The religion of Protestants a safe vway to salvation* (RSTC 5138. Oxford, 1638), 375.

<sup>2</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution* (London, 2007); Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Alec Ryrie, "'Protestant' as a Historical Category" in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6<sup>th</sup> ser. 26 (2016), 59-77.

<sup>4</sup> E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson (eds), *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation. Erasmus: De Libero Arbitrio. Luther: De Servo Arbitrio* (London, 1969), 37.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 88.

<sup>6</sup> Ellie Gebarowski-Shafer, 'The King James Bible as Postcolonial Vulgate' in E. Gebarowski-Shafer, A. Null & A. Ryrie (eds), *Making and Breaking Orthodoxies in the History of Christianity* (forthcoming 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge, 1998), 268.

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- <sup>8</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 32: Career of the Reformer II*, ed George W. Forell (Philadelphia, 1958), 113.
- <sup>9</sup> See in particular Brian A. Gerrish, 'The Word of God and the Words of Scripture: Luther and Calvin on Biblical Authority' in his *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago, 1982); Scott Hendrix, *Tradition and Authority in the Reformation* (Aldershot, 1996), ch. 2; John T. McNeill, 'The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin' in *Church History* 28/2 (1959), 131-146.
- <sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia, 1960), 317.
- <sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works vol 14: Selected Psalms III*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Daniel E. Poellot (St. Louis, 1958), 36.
- <sup>12</sup> Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco, 1979), 78.
- <sup>13</sup> Gerrish, 'The Word of God', 55.
- <sup>14</sup> McNeill, 'The Significance of the Word of God for Calvin', 137-8, 143-4.
- <sup>15</sup> Gerrish, 'The Word of God', 55.
- <sup>16</sup> Hendrix, *Tradition and Authority*, ch. 2 p. 147.
- <sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 78-81 (my emphasis); cf. John Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis* (Geneva, 1559), p. 16. 'Self-authenticating' is perhaps the least inadequate concise English rendering of the Greek αὐτόπιστος; Calvin did not attempt to render it into Latin. As Henk van der Belt's invaluable study of the concept in Reformed theology explains, it has connotations of trustworthiness as well as accuracy, and might be translated more expansively as 'to be trusted because of itself'. Henk van der Belt, *The Authority of Scripture in Reformed Theology: Truth and Trust* (Leiden, 2008), p. 3. Cf. his discussion of how the earlier editions of the *Institutes* made what is, broadly, the same point, but without this specific terminology: pp. 17-21.
- <sup>18</sup> Walter Klaassen, Frank Friesen and Werner O. Packull (eds), *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism* (Kitchener, Ontario, 2001), 19, 24-9.
- <sup>19</sup> Douglas FitzHenry Jones, 'Debating the Literal Sense in England: the Scripture-Learned and the Family of Love' in *Sixteenth Century Journal* vol. 45 no. 4 (2014), 915.
- <sup>20</sup> Klassen, *Sources*, 44; Harington, *The most elegant and witty epigrams of Sir Iohn Harrington, Knight digested into foure bookes* (RSTC 12776. London, 1618), sig. M6v.
- <sup>21</sup> See the fuller discussion of this in Alec Ryrie, 'Scripture, the Spirit and the Meaning of Radicalism in the English Revolution' in Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers, *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform* (Göttingen, 2017), 100-117 at pp. 105-8.
- <sup>22</sup> Samuel How, *The sufficiencie of the spirits teaching, without humane-learning* (RSTC 13855. Amsterdam, 1640), sigs B4v, D1r, E2r, F2r
- <sup>23</sup> George Fox, *A declaration of the difference of the ministers of the word from the ministers of the world; who calls the writings, the word* (Wing F1790. London, 1656), 12.
- <sup>24</sup> Nigel Smith (ed.), *A Collection of Ranter Writings from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* (London, 1983), 102.
- <sup>25</sup> Sears McGee (ed.), *The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan, vol. III. Christian Behaviour. The Holy City. The Resurrection of the Dead* (Oxford, 1987), p. 72.
- <sup>26</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London, 1989), 69-70, 74, 179.
- <sup>27</sup> Douglas Ambrose, 'Religion and Slavery', in Robert L. Paquette and Mark M. Smith, *The Oxford Handbook of Slavery in the Americas* (Oxford, 2010), 393. This entire phenomenon is discussed insightfully in Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (Oxford, 2012).
- <sup>28</sup> *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman* (Philadelphia, 1863), in William L. Andrews (ed.), *Six Women's Slave Narratives* (New York, 1988), esp. 16, 17.
- <sup>29</sup> Anthony John Harding (ed.), *Coleridge's Responses: Selected Writings of Literary Criticism, the Bible and Nature, Vol. II: Coleridge on the Bible* (London, 2007), 172, 177.
- <sup>30</sup> Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, KY, 2001), 276.
- <sup>31</sup> Zhong Min and Chan Kim-Kwong, 'The "Apostolic Church": A Case Study of a House Church in Rural China' in Beatrice Leung and John Young (eds), *Christianity in China: Foundations for Dialogue* (Hong Kong, 1993), 254-5.
- <sup>32</sup> Chen-Yang Kao, 'The Cultural Revolution and the Emergence of Pentecostal-Style Protestantism in China' in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 24:2 (2009), 171-188.
- <sup>33</sup> Joshua R. Ziefle, *David du Plessis and the Assemblies of God: The Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (Leiden, 2013), 105.
- <sup>34</sup> Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley, CA, 2007), 2-3.

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<sup>35</sup> Engelke, *Problem of Presence*, 6-7.

<sup>36</sup> <http://thezimbabwean.co/2011/10/convicted-rapist-madzibaba-godfrey-nzira/> [accessed 2 August 2020].

<sup>37</sup> Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin*, 13, 40, 45, 80; Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and his Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (New York, 1969), 93.

<sup>38</sup> Alan W. Gomes, 'Reason Run Amok? The Protestant Orthodox Charge of Rationalism against Faustus Socinus (with Special Consideration of a 'Smoking Gun' Passage from *De Jesu Christo Servatore*)' in Jordan J. Ballor, David S. Sytsma and Jason Zuidema (eds), *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism* (Leiden, 2013), 554.

<sup>39</sup> *Hitler's Table Talk 1941-1944*, trans. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (London, 1953), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: the German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), esp. 47; Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton and Oxford, 2008).