

The Reformation Study Bible Study Notes

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English Standard Version
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1. The Word of God: Scripture as Revelation

Christianity is the true worship and service of the true God, mankind's Creator and Redeemer. It is a religion that rests on revelation: nobody would know the truth about God, nor be able to relate to Him in a personal way, had God not first acted to make Himself known. But God has so acted, and the sixty-six books of the Bible, thirty-nine written before Christ came and twenty-seven after, are together the record, interpretation, and expression of His self-disclosure. God and godliness are the Bible's uniting themes.

From one standpoint, the Scriptures ("scripture" means "writing") are the faithful testimony of the godly to the God whom they loved and served; from another standpoint, because they were composed through a unique exercise of divine superintendence, called "inspiration," they are God's own testimony and teaching in the human language. The church calls these writings the Word of God because their authorship and contents are both of divine origin.

Decisive assurance that Scripture is from God and consists entirely of His wisdom and truth comes from Jesus Christ and His apostles, who taught in His name. Jesus, God incarnate, viewed His Bible (our Old Testament) as His heavenly Father's written instruction, which He no less than others must obey (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10; 5:17-20; 19:4-6; 26:31, 52-54; Luke 4:16-21; 16:17; 18:31-33; 22:37; 24:25-27, 45-47; John 10:35). Paul described the Old Testament as entirely inspired, or "God-breathed" – a product of God's Spirit, as is the whole creation also (Ps. 33:6; Gen. 1:2)—and written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:15-17). Peter affirms the divine origin of biblical teaching in 2 Pet. 1:21 and 1 Pet. 1:10-12, and so also by his manner of quoting does the writer to the Hebrews (Hebrews. 1:5-13; 3:7; 4:3; 10:5-7, 15-17; cf. Acts 4:25; 28:25-27).

Since the apostles' teaching about Christ is itself revealed truth in God-taught words (1 Cor. 2:12, 13), the church regards the New Testament, which records the apostolic witness, as completing the Scriptures. During the New Testament period itself Peter refers to Paul's letters as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15, 16), and Paul apparently calls Luke's Gospel Scripture in 1 Tim. 5:18 (cf. Luke 10:7).

The idea of written directives from God Himself as a basis for godly living goes back to God's inscribing the Ten Commandments on stone tablets and prompting Moses to write His laws and the history of His dealings with His people (Ex. 32:15, 16; 34:1, 27, 28; Num. 33:2; Deut. 31:9). Digesting and living by this material was always central to true devotion for both leaders and others in Israel (Josh. 1:7, 8; 2 Kin. 17:13; 22:8-13; 1 Chr. 22:12, 13; Neh. 8; Ps. 119), and the principle that all must be governed by the Scripture has passed into Christianity.

What Scripture says, God says; for, in a manner comparable only to the deeper mystery of the Incarnation, the Bible is both fully human and fully divine. So all its manifold contents—histories, prophecies, poems, songs, wisdom writings, sermons, statistics, letters and whatever else—should be received as from God, and all that biblical writers teach should be revered as God's authoritative instruction. Christians should be grateful to God for the gift of His written Word, and conscientious in basing their faith and life entirely and exclusively upon it. (p. 141)

2. Understanding the Word of God

All Christians have a right and duty, not only to learn from the church's heritage of faith, but also to interpret Scripture for themselves. The church of Rome at one time forbid this, alleging that individuals easily misinterpret the Scriptures. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* agrees that "All things in Scripture are not alike in plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all," but it also states clearly the authority of the individual believers to read the Bible for themselves: "not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the

ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding” of the Scriptures. The “ordinary means” include principles of interpretation such as the following.

The Bible is inspired by God, and its words continue to be God’s words, but the Bible is also the product of human writers. Realizing this is essential. No allegorizing or other fanciful method that ignores the original writer’s expressed meaning can be appropriate.

Each book was written, not in code, but in a way that could be understood by the readers to whom it was addressed. This is true even of such books as Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation, that primarily uses symbolism; the main thrust is always clear, even if details are clouded. So when we understand the words used, the historical background, and the cultural conventions of the writer and his readers, we are well on the way to grasping the thoughts that are being conveyed. But a spiritual understanding—that is, discerning the reality of God, His ways with His people, His present will, and one’s own relationship to Him—will not reach us from the text until the veil is removed from our hearts and we are able to share the writer’s own passion for God (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 3:16). We should pray that God’s Spirit would generate this passion in us and show us God in the text. See Ps. 119:18, 19, 26, 27, 33, 34, 73, 125, 144 169; Eph. 1:17-19; 3:16-19.

Each book took its form at a particular time in the process of God’s revelation of grace. That place must be considered when interpreting the text. The psalms, for instance, model the godly heart in every age, but they express its prayers and praises in terms of the realities of the life of grace before the coming of Christ—such as the ceremonial law, the sacrificial system, and the special role of Israel as a theocratic kingdom.

Each book proceeded from the same divine mind, so the teaching of the Bible’s sixty-six books is complementary and consistent. If we cannot yet see this, the fault is in us, not the Scripture. Scripture nowhere contradicts Scripture; rather, one passage explains another. The sound principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture is sometimes called the analogy of Scripture, or the analogy of faith.

Each book exhibits unchanging truth about God, the world, and His will for people, applied to and illustrated by particular situations. The final stage in biblical interpretation is to reapply these truths to our own life-situations; this is the way to discern what God in Scripture is saying to us at this moment. Examples of such reapplication are Josiah’s realization of God’s wrath at Judah’s failure to observe His law (2 Kin. 22:8-13), Jesus’ reasoning from Gen. 2:24 (Matt. 9:4-6), and Paul’s use of Gen. 15:6 and Ps. 32:1, 2 to show the reality of present righteousness by faith (Rom. 4:1-8).

No meaning may be read into or imposed on Scripture that cannot with certainty be read out of Scripture—shown, that is, to be unambiguously expressed by one or more of the human writers.

Careful and prayerful observance of these rules is a mark of every Christian who is “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). (page 844)

3. Omnipresence and Omnipotence

God is present in all places; however, we should not think of Him as filling space, for He has no physical dimensions. It is as spirit that He is everywhere. Although it surpasses the understanding of body-bound creatures like ourselves, God Himself is present everywhere in His majesty and power. Needy souls praying to Him anywhere in the world are in His sight and receive His personal attention. Belief in God’s omnipresence is apparent in Ps. 139:7-10; Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 17:24-28. When Paul speaks of the ascending Christ filling all things (Eph. 4:8), Christ’s availability everywhere in the fullness of His power is certainly part of the meaning. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are omnipresent, though the personal presence of the glorified Son is not physical (in the body).

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). Job testifies that God is omnipotent. He is all-powerful, almighty. God has power to do everything that in His perfect wisdom and goodness He wills to do. Omnipotence does not mean that God can do literally everything; God cannot sin, lie, change His nature or deny the demands of His holy character (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; 2 Tim. 2:13; Hebrews. 6:18; James 1:13, 17). He cannot make a square circle, for the notion of a square circle is self-contradictory; He cannot cease to be God. But all that He wills and promises He can and will do.

Was it excessive for David to say, “I love you, O Lord, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Ps. 18: 1, 2)? Was it excessive for another psalmist to declare, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1)? It would have been a fault to say such things if God were less than omnipresent and omnipotent. But the knowledge of God’s greatness, including His omnipresence and omnipotence, produces great faith and high praise. (p. 1086)

4. The Glory of God

God’s goal is His glory, but this needs careful explanation, for it is easily misunderstood. It points to a purpose, not of divine egoism, but of divine love. Certainly, God asks to be praised for His praiseworthiness and exalted for His greatness and goodness; He asks to be appreciated for what He is. But the glory that is His goal is two-sided, two-stage relationship: on the one side He reveals His glory in acts of generosity, and on the other, His people respond with adoration, giving Him glory with thanksgiving for what they have seen and received. Human beings were made for this reciprocal fellowship of love, and Christ’s redemption makes it possible for those who had fallen. Human nature is fulfilled through seeing God’s glory and returning praise to Him, just as God has pleasure in revealing His goodness to those who receive it (Zeph. 3:14-17).

“Glory” in the Old Testament is associated with value, riches, splendor, and dignity. When Moses asked to see God’s glory, God proclaimed to Moses His name; that is, He revealed to Moses something of His nature, character, and power (Ex. 33:18-34:7; theological note “ ‘This Is My Name’: God’s Self-disclosure” at Ex 3:15). Accompanying the proclamation was an awe-inspiring physical manifestation, a bright cloud like a burning fire (Ex. 24:17). This glory of God’s presence is often called the “Shekinah” or the “Shekinah glory.” It appeared at significant moments as a sign of God’s active presence (Ex. 33:22; 34:5; cf. 16:10; 24:17; 40:34; Lev. 9:23-24; 1 Kin. 8:10-11; Ezek. 1:28; 8:4; 9:3; 10:4; 11:22-23; Matt. 17:5; Luke 2:9; cf. Acts 1:9; 1 Thess. 4:17; Rev. 1:7). New Testament writers proclaim that the glory of God is now revealed in Jesus Christ (John 1:14-18; 2 Cor. 4:3-6; Hebrews. 1:1-3).

God is glorified in the acts of salvation, because they exhibit His incomparable condescension, His inexhaustible love, and His limitless power. “Salvation belongs to the Lord” (Jon. 2:9), and those He saves have contributed nothing to their salvation except their need (Is. 42:8; 48:11). The praise for salvation belongs to no one except God. This is why Reformation theology was so insistent on the principle, “Glory to God alone” (*soli Deo Gloria*), and why we need to maintain that principle with equal zeal today. (p. 1148)

5. God Reigns: Divine Sovereignty

The assertion of God’s absolute sovereignty in creation, providence, and salvation is basic to biblical belief and biblical praise. The vision of God reigning from His throne is recurrent (1 Kin. 22:19; Is. 6:1; Ezek. 1:26; Dan. 7:9; Rev. 4:2; cf. Ps. 11:4; 45:6; 47:8, 9; Hebrews. 12:2; Rev. 3:21). We are constantly told in explicit terms that the Lord (Yahweh) reigns as king, exercising dominion over great and small alike (Ex. 15:18; Ps. 47; 93; 96:10; 97; 99:1-5; 146:10; Prov. 16:33; 21:1; Is. 24:23; 52:7; Dan. 4:34, 35; 5:21-28; 6:26; Matt. 10:29-31). God’s dominion is total: He wills as He chooses, and carries out all that He wills, and none can stay His hand, or thwart His plans. He exercises His rule in the normal course of life, as well as in more remarkable interventions or miracles.

God’s rational creatures, angelic and human, have free agency, that is, the power of personal decision as to what they will do. We would not be moral beings, answerable to God the Judge, if it were not so. Nor would it be possible to distinguish, as Scripture does, between the bad purposes of human agents and the good purposes of God, who sovereignty rules human action as a planned means to His own goals (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 13:26-39). Yet the fact of free agency confronts us with mystery. God’s control over our free actions, actions chosen by ourselves, is as complete as it is over anything else; but how this can be we do not know. Despite this control, God is not, and cannot be, the author of sin. God has conferred responsibility on moral agents for their thoughts, words, and deeds, according to His justice.

Ps. 93 teaches that God's sovereign rule (a) guarantees the stability of the world against all the forces of chaos (vv. 1-4), (b) confirms the trustworthiness of all God's utterances and directives (v. 5), and (c) calls for the worship of His people (v. 5). The whole psalm expresses joy, hope, and confidence in the Almighty. (p. 1221)

6. Regeneration: The New Birth

Regeneration is the act of God alone, in which He renews the human heart, making it alive when it was dead. In regeneration, God acts at the origin and deepest point of the human person. This means that there is no preparation, no preceding disposition in a sinner that requests or contributes to the new life given by God.

Regeneration is necessary because all descendants of Adam and Eve have inherited their sin and are morally unable to do what is good. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that people are by nature dead in trespasses and sins. In this state, they are without God and without hope in the world. Not in response to their merit, but freely and in love, God speaks the word that raises the dead. The classic verses of John 3 that use the language of being "born again" or being "born from above" give the outlines of regeneration their sharpest edge. Jesus says that unless you are born again, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven. Without the grace of God, sinners cannot find the door, let alone force their way in. Elsewhere Jesus said, "Without me, you can do nothing"; and in speaking about salvation, "Without God, nothing is possible."

Jesus showed surprise that Nicodemus was puzzled by the demand to be born again. Nicodemus should have understood from the Old Testament that he was a sinner, and in need of new life; and he must have known the prophets, who promised that God would remove their hearts of flesh and replace them with hearts ready to do God's will. God would raise the dead, give sight to the blind, and preach the good news to those who could not save themselves.

Regeneration is the gift of God's grace. It is the immediate, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit wrought in us. Its effect is to quicken us to spiritual life from spiritual death. It changes the disposition of our souls, inclining our hearts to God. The fruit of regeneration is faith. Regeneration precedes faith.

Infants can be born again, although the faith that they exercise cannot be as visible as that of adults. For many Christians, the moment that they were born again is clearly known; but for others, it may not be, especially if they received new life in childhood. We are responsible to know whether we are spiritually alive, not the time and place we were born again. (p. 1514)

7. The Mission of the Church in the World

"Mission" comes from a Latin word meaning "to send." Jesus commanded His first disciples as representatives to those to follow, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21; cf. 17:18). The mission is still valid: the universal church, including every local congregation and every Christian in it, is sent into the world to fulfill a definite task.

The appointed task has two parts. First and fundamentally, it is the work of worldwide witness, making disciples and planting churches (Matt. 24:14; 28:19, 20; Mark 13:10; Luke 24:47, 48). The church proclaims Jesus Christ everywhere as God incarnate, Lord and Savior, and announces God's invitation to enter life through turning to Christ in repentance and faith (Matt. 22:1-10; Acts 17:30). Paul's ministry as a church-planter and evangelist to all the world, so far as was possible, is a model for carrying out this primary commitment (Rom. 1:14; 15:17-29; 1 Cor. 9:19-23; Col. 1:28, 29).

Second, all Christians are called to do works of mercy and compassion. Relying on God's commandment to love our neighbor, Christians should respond with generosity and compassion to all forms of human need (Matt. 25:34-40; Luke 10:25-37; Rom. 12:20, 21). Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and taught the ignorant (Matt. 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 10:1), and those who are new creatures in Christ must practice the same compassion. In doing so they make credible the gospel they preach, about a Savior whose love transforms sinners into those who love God and other people (Matt. 5:16; cf. 1 Pet. 2:11, 12).

Though Jesus foresaw the mission to the Gentiles (Matt. 24:14; John 10:16; 12:32), His earthly ministry was directed to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, always

went to the Jews first as he preached (Acts 13:42-48; 14:1; 17:1-4, 10; 18:4-7, 19). Because the right of the Jews to hear the gospel first is a matter of divine appointment (Acts 3:26; 13:46; Rom. 1:16), it is important for Christians to continue bearing witness to the Jews. As Paul said, it was from Israel, according to the flesh, that Christ came to be the Savior of the world (Rom. 9:5). (p. 1553)

8. The Atonement

An atonement is a reconciliation of alienated parties, the restoration of a broken relationship. Atonement is accomplished by making amends, blotting out offenses, and giving satisfaction for wrongs done.

According to Scripture every person sins and needs to make atonement, but lacks the power and resources for doing so. We have offended our Creator, whose nature it is to hate sin (Jer. 44:4; Hab. 1:13) and to punish it (Ps. 5:4-6; Rom. 1:18; 2:5-9). Those who have sinned cannot be accepted by and do not have fellowship with God unless atonement is made. Since there is sin in even the best actions of sinful creatures, anything we do in hopes of making amends can only increase our guilt or worsen our situation, for the “sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 15:8). There is no way to establish one’s own righteousness before God (Job 15:14-16; Is. 64:6; Rom. 10:2, 3); it simply cannot be done.

But against this background of human hopelessness, Scripture reveals the grace and mercy of God, who Himself provides the atonement that sin has made necessary. God’s amazing grace is the focus of biblical faith; from Genesis to Revelation it shines out with breathtaking glory.

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He set up as part of the covenant relationship a system of sacrifices that has at its heart the shedding of blood of animals “to make atonement for your souls” (Lev. 17:11). These sacrifices were “typical”; that is, as “types” they pointed forward to something better. Sins were forgiven when sacrifices were faithfully offered, but it was not the blood of animals that blotted out sins (Hebrews. 10:4). It was the blood of the “antitype,” Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross atoned for sins already committed afterwards (Rom. 3:25, 26; 4:3-8; Hebrews. 9:11-15).

According to the New Testament, Christ’s blood was shed as a sacrifice (Rom. 3:25; 5:9; Eph. 1:7; Rev. 1:5). Christ redeemed His people by means of a ransom; His death was the price that freed us from guilt and from enslavement to sin (Rom. 3:24; Gal. 4:4, 5; Col. 1:14). In Christ’s death God reconciled us to Himself, overcoming His own hostility that our sins provoked (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19; Col. 1:20-22). The Cross propitiated God. That is to say, it quenched His wrath against us by expiating our sins, and so removing them from His sight (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). The Cross had this effect because in His suffering Christ assumed our identity and endured the retributive judgment due to us, that is, “the curse of the law” (Gal. 3:13). He suffered as our substitute, with the damning record of our transgressions nailed by God to His cross as the list of crimes for which He died (Col. 2:14; cf. Matt. 27:37; Is. 53:4-6; Luke 22:37). (p. 1617)

9. The Church

The church exists in and through Jesus Christ, and so is a distinctive New Testament reality. At the same time it is continuous with Israel, the seed of Abraham and God’s covenant people. The new covenant under which the church lives (1 Cor. 11:25; Hebrews. 8:7-13) is a new form of the relationship in which God says to His chosen community, “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Jer. 7:23; 31:33; cf. Ex. 6:7).

Under the new covenant, the Old Testament priests, sacrifices, and sanctuary have been superseded by the mediation of Jesus (Hebrews. 1-10). Believers in Christ are the seed of Abraham and the people of God (Gal. 3:29; 1 Peter 2:4-10). Second, the limitation of the old covenant to one nation (Deut. 7:6; Ps. 147:19, 20) is replaced by the inclusion of Christ on equal terms of believers from every nation (Eph. 2; 3; Rev. 5:9, 10). Third, the Spirit is poured out on the church, so that fellowship with Christ (1 John 1:3), ministry from Christ (John 14:18; Eph. 2:17), and foretastes of heaven (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14) become realities in the experience of the church.

The unbelief of most Jews (Rom. 9-11) and the majority of Gentiles in the church is depicted by Paul as God’s breaking off the natural branches of His olive tree (the historical covenant community) and replacing

them with wild olive shoots (Rom. 11:17-24). The covenant does not exclude Jews, and Paul taught that their general rejection of it will one day be reversed (Rom. 11:15, 23-31).

The New Testament teaches that the church is the fulfillment of the Old Testament hopes and patterns, brought about by Jesus Christ. The church is the family and flock of God (John 10:16; Eph. 2:18; 3:15; 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:2-4), His Israel (Gal. 6:16), the body and bride of Christ (Eph. 1:22, 23; 5:23-32; Rev. 19:7; 21:2, 9-27), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16; cf. Eph. 2:19-22).

The church is a single worshipping community, permanently gathered in the true sanctuary, the heavenly Jerusalem (Gal. 4:26; Hebrews. 12:22-24) and the place of God's presence. The church is one, although the worshipping community consists of the church militant—those who are still on earth—and the church triumphant—those who have died and entered glory. On earth, the church appears in its local congregations, each one a microcosm of the local church as a whole. According to Paul the one church universal is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-26; Eph. 1:22, 23; 3:6; 4:4), but so is each local congregation (1 Cor. 12:27; "The Local church" at Rev. 2:1).

The church on earth is one in Christ despite the great number of local congregations and denominations (Eph. 4:3-6). It is holy because it is consecrated to God corporately, as each Christian is individually (Eph. 2:21). It is catholic (meaning "universal") because it is worldwide. Finally, it is apostolic because it is founded on apostolic teaching (Eph. 2:20). All four qualities may be seen in Eph. 2:19-22.

There is a distinction to be drawn between the church as people see it and as God alone sees it. This difference is the historic distinction between the "visible church" and the "invisible church." "Invisible" does not mean that no part of it can be seen, but that its exact boundary is not known to us. Only God knows (2 Tim. 2:19) which members of the earthly congregations are inwardly born again, and so belong to the church as an eternal and spiritual fellowship. Jesus taught that in the organized church there would always be people who seemed to be Christians, not excluding leaders, who were nevertheless not renewed in heart and would be exposed and rejected at the Judgment (Matt. 7:15-23; 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50; 25:1-46). There are not two churches, one visible and another hidden in heaven, but one church only, known perfectly to God and known imperfectly on earth.

The New Testament assumes that all Christians will share in the life of a local congregation, worshipping in the body, accepting its nurture and discipline (Matt. 18:15-20; Gal. 6:1), and sharing its ministry and witness. Christians who refuse to join other believers disobey God and spiritually impoverish themselves (Heb. 10:25). (p. 1709)

10. Gifts and Ministries

The New Testament depicts two broad types of ministry within local churches. While all Christians fulfill informal ministering roles, some help formal and official ministering offices. Paul addressed these official ministers as "overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1), and sometimes referred to the "bishops" (lit. "overseers") as "elders" (Titus 1:5, 7 and notes). The "bishops" or "elders" bore primary responsibility for ruling and teaching the church (1 Tim. 5:17 note), and the "deacons" were apparently especially charged with ministering to the material needs of the believers (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim. 3:8 note; cf. James 2:15, 16).

It is clear, however, that these officers who oversee local churches should not restrict the informal ministries, but rather should facilitate them (Eph. 4:11-13). Conversely those who minister informally should not be defiant or disruptive, but should allow the elders to direct their ministries in ways that are orderly and edifying (i.e., strengthening and upbuilding, 1 Cor. 14:3-5, 12, 26, 40; Hebrews. 13:17). The body of Christ grows to maturity in faith and love as "each part is working properly" (Eph. 4:16) and fulfills its particular form of service as granted by God's grace (Eph. 4:7, 12).

The word "gift" (lit. "donation") appears in connection with spiritual service only in Eph. 4:7, 8. Paul explains the phrase "he gave gifts to man" (Eph. 4:8 note) as the ascended Christ giving to His church persons called to and equipped for the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher (Eph. 4:11 note). Also, through the enabling ministry of these persons, Christ bestows a ministry role on every Christian. Elsewhere (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12-14) Paul calls the divinely given abilities to serve charismata (specific

manifestation of charis, “grace,” 1 Cor. 12:14) and pneumatika (specific demonstrations of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God’s pneuma, 1 Cor. 12:1).

Amid many debated questions regarding spiritual gifts in the New Testament, three certainties stand out. First, a spiritual gift is an ability to express, celebrate, display, and so communicate Christ in a way that builds up and strengthens the faith of other Christians and enlarges the church. Second, spiritual gifts may be broadly classified as either abilities of speech or of loving, practical helpfulness. In Rom. 12:6-8, Paul’s list of gifts alternates between the categories: prophecy, teaching, and exhorting are gifts of speech; serving, giving, leading, and showing mercy are gifts of helpfulness. However much they differ as forms of human activity, all are of equal dignity when one properly uses the gift one has (1 Pet. 4:10, 11). Third, no Christian is without some gift of ministry (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:7). It is every believer’s responsibility to find, develop, and fully use whatever capacities for service God has given. (p. 1711)

11. Music in the Church

Some branches of the Reformed faith, eager to protect the church from the addition of human tradition, impressed by the continuity between Israel and the church, and noticing that the terms “psalms,” “hymns,” and “songs” are used in the Book of Psalms, believe that Paul envisioned only the singing of psalms from the Old Testament in public worship. This restriction appears, however, to miss his point. He piles up the terms to highlight the wide range of musical expression that grateful and heartfelt praise to God calls forth from the body of Christ.

The word “psalms” refers at least to the use of the Old Testament psalter (Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33), but may also refer to fresh compositions for worship (1 Cor. 14:26). The word “spiritual” (Greek pneumatikos) qualifies the potentially secular term “songs” as being taught or led by the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6; 15:44, 45 notes).

Christ’s redemptive work brought an outpouring of hymns of praise from His people, often patterned after the songs of the Old Testament (e.g., Luke 1:46-53, 67-79; 2:14, 29-32). Paul personally employed music within his own worship (Acts 16:25), and it has long been observed that his letters contain portions of early Christian hymns (Eph. 5:14; Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; 1 Tim. 3:16 and notes). Early Christian songs of praise appear also to underlie John 1:1-14; Hebrews. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:18-21; 2:21-25; 3:18-22. The “new songs” of the Book of Revelation are themselves a study in the vibrancy of early Christian worship (Rev. 4:8, 11; 5:9, 10, 12, 13; 7:10, 12; 11:15, 17, 18; 12:10-12; 15:3, 4; 19:1-8; 21:3, 4). (p. 1734)

12. The Authority of Scripture

The Christian principle of biblical authority means that God is the author of the Bible, and has given it to direct the belief and behavior of His people. Our ideas about God and our conduct should be measured, tested, and where necessary corrected and enlarged, by reference to the Bible. Authority is also the right to command. God’s written Word in its truth and wisdom is the way God has chosen to exercise His rule over us, and Scripture is the instrument of Christ’s lordship over the church. the work of the Scripture in the church is illustrated by the seven letters of Revelation (Rev. 2; 3).

The Roman Catholic view of the Bible has compromised its unique authority by combining it with the tradition of the church. Roman Catholics accept the Bible as God-given truth, but insist that it is incomplete without the official interpretation of the church as it is led by the Spirit. In the past, giving the church authority over the Bible has led to discouraging or prohibiting ordinary Christians from reading it. At the present time, the Roman Catholic church encourages all Christians to read the Bible.

Many Protestants regard the Bible as having its unique authority in its subject matter, or in the experience and insights of the human authors. The central assumption is that the Bible remains fundamentally a human book and not a divine revelation. The Bible is a guide for their religious experience, but it is not clearly distinguished from other sources, such as political movements and social forces. All too often, the Bible is displaced by voices that oppose it.

Historic Protestantism accepts the Scripture as the only written revelation of God. It is inspired, or “breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), distinguishing it from all other words. As a result, the Scriptures are infallible and true in all that they affirm. They are sufficient, containing everything that is necessary to know for salvation and eternal life. They are clear, so that a person without special preparation can understand what God requires without the intervention of an official interpreter.

The canonical Scripture is the voice of God in the world. It has authority, or right to command, corresponding to its divine Author. For this reason, we submit our thoughts and moral standards to the Bible. It was through the recognition that the Bible cannot be subject to any person or group, however, exalted, that the Reformers freed their consciences from human traditions and authorities. (p. 1765)

13. Faith and Works

Faith is the means or instrument by which a person is saved. Christians are justified before God by faith (Rom. 3:26; 4:1-5; Gal. 2:16), and by faith they live their lives (2 Cor. 5:7) and sustain their hope (Hebrews. 10:35-12:3).

Faith cannot be defined in subjective terms, as a feeling or optimistic decision. Neither is it a passive orthodoxy. Faith is a response, directed toward an object and defined by what is believed. Christian faith is trust in the eternal God and His promises secured by Jesus Christ. It is called forth by the gospel as the gospel is made understandable through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. Christian faith is a personal act, involving the mind, heart, and will, just as it is directed to a personal God, and not an idol or an idea.

It is usual to analyze faith as involving three steps: knowledge, agreement, and trust. First is knowledge, or acquaintance with the content of the gospel; second is agreement, or recognition that the gospel is true; and third is trust, the essential step of committing the self to God. These steps go together in the sense that there can be Christian faith only when the gospel is known and its truth is accepted (Rom. 10:14). Calvin defined faith as “a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor towards us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds and sealed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (Calvin, Institutes III.2.7).

Through faith we receive Christ, who satisfied the law on our behalf. In this way we are justified through faith alone, without doing the works of the law. But since faith unites us with Christ, it cannot be lifeless. Directed toward God and resting in Him it is active, “Working through love” (Gal. 5:6), seeking to do all the “good works, which God prepared beforehand” for us (Eph. 2:10). Justification is by faith alone, but justifying faith can never be alone.

When James says that faith without works is dead, he is describing a faith that knows the gospel and even agrees with it, but has fallen short of trust in God. Failure to grow, develop, and bear the fruits of God in Christ has never been received. The answer for those with such a faith is not to save themselves by establishing a righteousness of their own, as if they could create faith by their own efforts, but to call on the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:13). God alone can save those for whom it is otherwise impossible (Mark 10:27). Paul shows that good works cannot break this impossibility; James shows that the faith required is faith that rests in the living God.

Even when we have believed, the good works we do are never perfect. They are acceptable to God only because of the mercy of Christ (Rom. 7:13-20; Gal. 5:17). We express our love for God through doing what pleases Him, and He in His kindness promises to reward us for what we do (Phil. 3:12-14; 2 Tim. 4:7, 8). In this we are not making God our debtor, any more than when we first believed in Him. As Augustine noted, God in rewarding us is graciously crowning His own gracious gifts. (p. 1804)

14. Pastors and Pastoral Care

The apostles told all Christians to watch over each other with loving care and prayer (Gal. 6:1, 2; Hebrews. 12:15, 16; 1 John 3:16-18; 5:16), but they also appointed in each congregation guardians, called “elders” (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), who would look after the people as shepherds look after sheep (Acts 20:28-31; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), leading them by example (1 Pet. 5:3) away from all that is harmful into all that is good. By virtue

of their role, the elders (presbyters) are also called “shepherds” (“pastors,” Eph. 4:11) and “overseers” (Acts 20:28, cf. v. 17; Titus 1:7, cf. v. 5), and are spoken of in other terms that express leadership (1 Thess. 5:12; Hebrews. 13:7, 17, 24). The congregation, for its part, is to acknowledge the God-given authority of its leaders and to follow their lead (Hebrews. 13:17).

This pattern is already present in the Old Testament, where God is the shepherd of Israel (Ps. 80:1) and kings, prophets, priests, and elders (local rulers) are called to act as His agents in an under-shepherd role (Num. 11:24-30; Deut. 27:1; Ezra 5:5; 6:14; 10:8; Ps. 77:20; Jer. 23:1-4; Ezek. 34; Zech. 11:16, 17). In the New Testament, Jesus the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-30) is also the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), and the elders are His subordinates. The apostle Peter calls himself and “elder” under Christ (1 Pet. 5:1), remembering perhaps that shepherding was the specific task Jesus gave him when restoring him to ministry (John 21:15-17).

Some but not all elders teach (1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:9; Hebrews. 13:7), and Eph. 4:11-16 says that Christ gave the church “pastors and teachers” to equip everyone for service through the discovery and development of each person’s spiritual gifts (vv. 15-16). In the congregational leadership envisaged by the apostles, there may have been teachers who were not elders, as well as elders who did not teach, and also those who both ruled and taught.

The pastoral role of elders demands mature and stable Christian character, and a well-ordered personal life (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The elder who serves faithfully will be rewarded (Hebrews. 13:17; 1 Pet. 5:4; cf. 1 Tim. 4:7, 8). (p. 1816)

15. The Local Church

Each local church is a manifestation of the one universal church, and will embody the nature of that church as the Father’s regenerate family, Christ’s ministering body, and a fellowship sustained by the Holy Spirit. In the course of separating from the Roman Catholic church, the Reformers needed to be sure about what were the marks of a true church. From Scripture, they found the answer in terms of two criteria.

1. The faithful preaching of the Word of God: This means that the church teaches the Christian gospel according to the Scripture. Any group that denies the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the sin-bearing Atonement, or justification by faith alone, is like the separatists of earlier times who denials of the Incarnation (1 John 4:1-3) caused John to say, “they were not of us” (1 John 2:19).

2. The right use of the sacraments: This criterion means that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are used and explained as setting forth the gospel of faith in Christ. Turning these sacraments into superstitions that take away the sufficiency of faith in Christ undercuts the identity of the church, like anything else that obstructs faith in Christ. One purpose of baptism is to mark those who are received into the visible church. The Lord’s Supper confirms for the faithful their membership in the church and their community with each other and with Christ.

Christians have found other marks of identity alongside these minimal two. Luther specified the keys of discipline (Matt. 16:19), an authorized ministry (Acts 14:23; 20:28), public worship (Hebrews. 10:25), and suffering under the cross (Acts 14:22; 20:29). The Reformed churches specified a functioning system of discipline, often called discipline the third mark of the visible church (Titus 1:13; 2:15; 3:10). Charismatics point to the active ministry of every member as a mark of a true church (Eph. 4:7-16).

These additional marks are not, however, essential in the way that they first two are. A church that lacks the additional marks is seriously deficient, but it would not be true to say that it is no church at all. (p. 1850)