

Introduction

Opening Scripture: [Psalm 19:7-14](#).

John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe is often called “the Morning Star of the Reformation.” He died about 130+ years before the Reformation, but his writings and teaching had a huge impact on those reformers who challenged the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Perhaps Wycliffe’s greatest contribution to the Reformation was his teaching that Scripture was the **sole authority** of the church. He wrote, “Holy Scripture is the highest authority for every Christian and the standard of faith and of all human perfection” (translation from *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*).

Because he believed that Scripture was the highest authority, Wycliffe taught that popes, councils, and churches were subject to Scripture and could be corrected by Scripture. **The church did not have authority over Scripture; Scripture had authority over the church.** This teaching contrasted directly with the Roman Catholic teaching that the church’s authority supersedes Scripture’s authority.

Wycliffe also believed that all believers should read Scripture. We take for granted that we **can** read Scripture when we choose. In fact, that probably has led to our neglect of reading Scripture. However, in the 1300s, Scripture was rarely available outside of **Latin**. Those who were trained in Latin (e.g., priests in the Catholic Church) would read Scripture and interpret it for their congregations, but the people could not **read or hear** Scripture in their own language. They could only accept that the priests’ teaching was true.

Significance

If we, the church, are the people of God, then He, not self interest, should shape what we believe, how we live, and how we think. Consider today, *how does God communicate with His people? How does He reveal His will for us? How do we know God? How do we grow in our relationship with God? How do we know truth and error?* **God reveals Himself, His will, truth, and reconciliation (relationship) with Him through Scripture.** We live as God’s people under the authority of Scripture.

Overview of the text

The book of Galatians is a letter written to a group of churches in the first century. [Galatians 1:1-5](#) is the introduction to that letter; it is a greeting. People tend to skim over greetings in these letters of Scripture like they skim over reading genealogies. We want to get past the unimportant details and get to the deep matters. The greetings of these biblical letters are God's word; they **are** the deep matters.

The greeting verses of Galatians (1:1-5) highlight two related doctrines. For one, Paul begins by defending his call as an apostle of Jesus. This is more than a personal defense; it is a **defense of the authority of this entire letter**. Paul was appointed by Christ largely for the purpose of giving us Scripture.

Paul also uses the greeting to introduce the gospel. **The gospel is what is at stake in this letter**. Galatians is written to churches who were in danger of forsaking the truth of the gospel; thereby, forsaking Christ Himself. **This letter teaches that we become the people of God by faith and we live as the people of God by faith.**

These two concepts of inspiration of Scripture and the truth of the gospel are inseparable. *How do we know the gospel?* The gospel is revealed in Scripture. The gospel is **not revealed** by dreams and visions. The gospel is **not revealed** through creation. The gospel is **not revealed** by the church. The church **hears** the gospel by **reading Scripture**; the church **communicates** the gospel by **proclaiming Scripture**.

Consider the following questions as we read [Galatians 1:1-2](#). *How has God given us Scripture, and for what purpose has God given us Scripture?* This passage may not answer those questions fully; we must look at all of Scripture for our theology. But this passage does give us a basis for understanding **how and why God has given us Scripture?**

God's revelation

First, let's consider *how has God given us Scripture?* This letter was written within history, meaning that it had an author, an audience, and a context. Yet, it was written as Scripture, meaning that the Holy Spirit inspired every word. It was written down by men, but it is the word of God.

Authorship

Who wrote the letter of Galatians?* [Galatians 1:1-2](#) "1 **Paul, an **apostle**—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— 2 and all the **brothers** who are with me, To the churches of Galatia:"

The letter was written by **Paul**. *Who was Paul?* The Bible introduces us to Paul in [Acts 7:58-8:3](#). Paul was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, who persecuted the church ([Phil 3:5-6](#)). Paul's Jewish name was Saul; his Greek/Roman name was Paul (He did not convert from Saul to Paul). Paul's goal was to destroy the church ([Gal 1:13](#)). However, Christ, following His resurrection, revealed Himself to Paul, who believed Christ and devoted himself to Him ([Gal 1:12, 16](#); cf. [Acts 9:1-5](#)).

Apostleship

Notice that Paul identifies himself as an **apostle**. *What is an apostle?* In a broad sense, an apostle is someone who is appointed as an official representative. For example, Epaphroditus was called an "apostle" of the church of Philippi ([Phil 2:25](#); most translations say "messenger" or some equivalent). An apostle is more than a messenger. An apostle has the authority of the one who has sent him. Therefore, when Epaphroditus came to Paul in prison, his actions and words were the actions and words of the church at Philippi. When Epaphroditus cared for Paul in prison, the church at Philippi was taking care of Paul ([Phil 2:30](#); [4:18](#)).

Who appointed Paul as an apostle?* [Galatians 1:1](#) "1 Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—" Paul was not appointed by other apostles like Matthias ([Acts 1:23-26](#)) or by a church like Epaphroditus ([Phil 2:30](#)). He was appointed by "Jesus Christ and God the Father." **He represented Christ and was given the authority of Christ. We see this authority displayed by the apostles in the book of Acts in their ability to perform healings and miracles.

The doctrine of **apostolic succession** undermines the authority of Scripture. Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox churches teach that apostolic authority is passed on to later bishops (e.g., the pope). This doctrine is the basis for saying that the church has authority over Scripture.

However, Scripture does not teach apostolic succession. The apostles were appointed by Jesus ([Gal 1:1](#)). One of the essential qualifications of an apostle was personal interaction with Jesus following His resurrection (cf. [Acts 1:21-22](#); [1 Cor 9:1](#)). The apostles were temporary appointments given to establish New Testament Scripture. Once the apostolic period passed, the writing of Scripture was forever ended. There is no revelation beyond the revelation of Jesus through the apostles ([Heb 1:1-2](#); [2:1-4](#)).

Inspiration of Scripture

Why was Paul's apostleship important? Why was it important that he was an apostle of Jesus and the Father, not an apostle of a church? Why did Paul begin this letter expounding on his apostleship? The answer to these questions gets to the heart of our question, **how has God given us Scripture?**

God revealed Scripture through prophets and apostles ([Eph 2:20](#); cf. [Eph 3:5](#)). God appointed these men to write and to guard the canon (collection) of Scripture. Although it was written down by men, **Scripture is not the words of men, it is the word of God.** [2 Timothy 3:16](#) “All Scripture is breathed out by God ...” Notice that this verse refers to “All Scripture,” meaning that **every book** of Scripture is inspired and **every word** of Scripture is inspired. God breathed (inspiration in KJV), means that Scripture comes from the mouth of God through the Holy Spirit (**note about breath and Spirit).

[2 Peter 1:20–21](#) “20 knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. 21 For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Prophecy in these verses refers specifically to the prophecy of Scripture ([2 Pet 1:20](#)). Scripture was not “produced by the will of man,” meaning that the words we read in Scripture did not come from men. Instead, “men spoke from God as they were **carried along by the Holy Spirit**” ([2 Pet 1:21](#)). God revealed Scripture by the Holy Spirit guiding men what to write. One thing we will see in [Galatians 3:16](#) is that God inspired **every letter** of Scripture.

Why is inspiration of Scripture important? First, since the Holy Spirit inspired the words of Scripture, **we can trust that Scripture is without error (inerrant) and incapable of error (infallible).** *Why can we trust that Scripture is infallible?* We trust that Scripture is incapable of error because God is incapable of error. God is omniscient; He knows all things ([1 John 3:20](#); cf. [Psa 139:1-6](#)). God is true; He does not lie ([Num 23:19](#); [Titus 1:2](#); [Heb 6:18](#); [John 17:17](#)). Since God is all knowing, God is true, and Scripture is God’s word, **Scripture is infallible; it contains no error.**

Second, since Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, **Scripture has sole authority in the church and in our lives.** There are two claims that in modern Christianity that attempt to undermine the authority of Scripture. Some claim new revelation from God in **dreams and visions.** The fullness (consummation) of God’s revelation is Scripture. If new revelation (e.g., dreams and visions) **contradicts** Scripture, they are wrong. If new revelation **agrees with** Scripture, they are unnecessary.

This does not mean that the Holy Spirit does not **guide** us. The Holy Spirit guides God’s people into truth ([John 16:23](#); [1 John 2:20-21](#); [1 Cor 2:12-13](#)) and obedience ([Rom 8:13-14](#); [Gal 5:16, 22](#); [Ezek 36:27](#)). However, the **Holy Spirit does not reveal new truth** to us; He guides us by pointing us to Scripture ([John 14:26](#); [Eph 6:17](#)). Scripture warns that we should test the spirits, because not every spirit that “speaks” to us is from God ([1 John 4:1](#)).

Another view that undermines the authority of Scripture is that the church has authority **over** Scripture. Catholicism teaches that the pope is the head of the church and the church has sole authority, including authority over Scripture. However, Christ, not a pope or pastor, is the head of the church. Scripture, the word of Christ, has authority over the church. Pope's err; pastors err; churches err. Scripture alone is inspired, infallible, and authoritative. Churches are **stewards** of the word. Pastors are **stewards** of the word. **Scripture alone is authoritative.**

To the churches

Destination

**To what region was this letter written?* This letter was written to the churches of Galatia. *Where was Galatia?* Galatia is a region of the Roman Empire, north of the Mediterranean Sea ([Acts 16:6](#); [18:23](#)). This region was in between Syria (from where Paul began his missionary journeys) and Asia Minor (where Paul established churches). It is somewhat debated whether this letter is written to cities in Northern Galatia where Paul may have visited on his second missionary journey or Southern Galatia, where Paul visited during his first missionary journey. Of course, it is possible that this letter was written to churches in both regions.

The fact that this letter was written to churches in a particular region shapes how we read Scripture. All Scripture was written in a particular context. When we study Scripture, our initial goal is to understand it within its original context. Scripture was written **for us**, but it was not written **to us**. If we study Scripture initially with our context in mind, we completely dismiss the setting in which it was written. We should never read Scripture without reflection. Scripture shapes our hearts and lives. However, right interpretation should precede right application.

Churches

Notice that this letter was written to the “churches” of Galatia. This is important for a couple of reasons. First, it gives us insight into the nature of the church. In the New Testament, the word church sometimes describes all people of faith (all who are in Christ), not just a local, assembled church. [Acts 9:31](#) “31 So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.” Although we know there are multiple churches in these regions (cf. [Gal 1:22](#)), they are all referred to as “the church” (singular).

Often, though, Scripture refers to multiple churches. This suggests that Scripture primarily (though not exclusively) speaks of local churches. Although we may consider redemption in relation to the entire body of Christ, we should consider **how a church functions** primarily in relation to the local church.

What is a local church? A local church is a body of baptized believers, who have covenanted together in **membership**, regularly **assemble**, share in the **Lord's Supper**, sit under the **teaching** of its pastors, build up one another through loving **accountability**, and fulfill the **Great Commission**.

The church is a family and like all families, the church has visitors. But you are not a part of the church just because you attend church services. We have made a covenant together to submit to the church and its leaders and share one another's burdens. The opposite is true; you are not part of the church just because you have joined. The church assembles. There are exceptions for those who **cannot** assemble with the church, but not for those who **do not** assemble with the church. The church collectively has a responsibility to seek out those who are **identified** as members, but are not actually **living** as members. We should seek them out in love and invite them to return to our fellowship. But those who are unrepentantly separated from the church **should no longer be considered part of the church**.

If you know God through faith in Jesus (cf. next week's sermon) and regularly attend Bethlehem, I would encourage you to become a member. Church membership is not a modern idea; it is shown in Scripture ([Acts 2:41, 47](#); [Matt 18:17](#); [1 Cor 5:11-13](#); [2 Cor 2:6](#)). There is joy in being a part of a local church family. Biblical accountability occurs **only** within the membership of the local church ([1 Cor 5:11-13](#); [Matt 18:17](#)).

Given to the church

The second reason it is important that this letter is written to the church is because, while the apostles were appointed for completing the canon of Scripture, the church was **given** Scripture. Scripture is the authority of the church; therefore, Galatians can be written to these churches with authority. There is an expectation in this letter that the churches of Galatia will read this letter in their assembly and submit to it.

This is why Scripture is the focal-point of our services ([2 Tim 3:14-4:2](#)). We begin our services with Scripture **reading** and prayer because all that we do is a response to Scripture. Church **singing** is not self-centered; it is a response to Scripture. This is why we **preach** Scripture in our services, rather than other programs. Specifically, this is why we preach **expository sermons**, where the main idea of the Scripture shapes the main idea of the sermon; rather than being a time for a pastor to preach on **his** topic. As a church, we desire to submit to the authority and guidance of Scripture, through the help of the Holy Spirit ... because we are Christ's church.

Closing

John Wycliffe

John Wycliffe said that even the plowboy should know Scripture. Scripture was not only for the clergy, the educated, or the elite; Scripture was for every believer. Wycliffe translated (for the first time in history) the entire Bible into English. *How many in the church today intend to go home and read the Bible in Latin?* Perhaps it is better to ask, since we have the Bible in English, *how many of us intend to go home and read it at all?*

Reflection

God reveals Himself, His will, truth, and reconciliation (relationship) with Him through Scripture. Therefore, our response to Scripture is our response to God.

If you do not know God, Scripture reveals God's plan of salvation. Next week, we will continue reading this opening greeting of Galatians. We will specifically look at what Scripture teaches about how you can know God. I encourage you to take seriously Scriptures warnings of rejecting God and Scripture's promise of mercy through Jesus to those who believe.

Church, God has given us Scripture, just as He gave the churches of Galatia as our sole authority. Scripture should shape our assembly. We should read Scripture, sing Scripture, pray Scripture, and preach Scripture. You should hold your pastors accountable for preaching expositional sermons, because Christ, not the pastors, is the head of the church.

Your submission to Scripture should not be limited to when you gather with the church. In your family ... read, sing, and pray Scripture. In your personal life ... read, sing, and pray Scripture. Above all, submit your life to Scripture because it is the word of Christ.

Scripture is God's revelation of Himself and God's authority over the church.

Closing Scripture: [1 Peter 1:22-25](#) "22 Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, 23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; 24 for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, 25 but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you."