

It is a familiar assertion of the Roman Catholic Church that Holy Scripture is incapable of deciding doctrinal issues; hence for the establishment and [preservation](#) of unity in teaching the Church needs a visible head (*caput visibile*), a visible [vicar](#) of Christ (*vicarium Christi*), who will determine by virtue of his personal authority the meaning of the Scriptures. Also modern theology, through its denial of the infallible divine authority of Scripture, has been [driven](#) into renouncing the principle of the [Christian](#) Church that Scripture is the *iudex controversiarum*.

Neologists have declared with Zoekler: “With respect to the Bible as normative and judicial authority, the possibility of a merely partial and incomplete settlement of the respective controversy, through the appeal to Scripture, must often be admitted” (*Handbuch*, 2d ed., III, 151). And Volck of Dorpat said, as we heard: “To inquire of Scripture is not so easy a matter” (*op. cit.*, I, 746).

Scripture teaches the contrary. It requires the teachers of the Church, and in particular also all Christians, to make use of Scripture as *iudex controversiarum*. For this direction we have the normative example of Christ. When He was tempted to follow after a false faith, he overcame the devil with His “It is written” and obtained the victory by adducing the pertinent Scripture passages. As for the teachers of the Church, it belongs to their office to stop the mouths of the vain talkers (Titus 1:10-11), not, of course, with the fist or similar carnal weapons (2 Cor. 10:3 ff.), but by “holding fast the faithful Word, as he hath been taught” (Titus 1:9), by “holding fast the form of sound words” which they heard and learned from the Apostles (2 Tim. 1:13). Scripture nowhere recognizes either the Roman position that the Scriptures are entirely unsuited to decide [controversies](#) or the claim of modern theology that Scripture “often fails” as norm of doctrine.

It never fails when wielded by men who are “apt to teach.” And as for the Christians in general, Scripture not only finds that they are competent to judge in matters of [Christian](#) doctrine (John 6:45: “They shall be all taught of God”), but impresses upon them the duty of distinguishing between true and false prophets (Matt. 7:15; Rom. 16:17) and to keep a watchful eye on the ministry of their own teachers (Col. 4:17: “And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it”). And they are to do this not according to the norm of their own thoughts, but are bound to judge, just as their teachers are, by God’s Word (John 8:31–32: “If ye continue in My Word”; 1 Pet. 4:11: “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God”).

To settle a doctrinal controversy, two rules, to which also our old theologians constantly call attention, must be observed. 1) Define exactly the question at issue (*status controversiae*); and 2) when that has been done, let those Scripture passages speak which treat of the controversial point. Then Scripture itself will decide the matter with the greatest clearness and certainty. It will, of course, not force the external acceptance of its decision and [externally](#) stop the mouth of the gainsayer, but it will either inwardly convince and persuade him, as was the case with the servants of the Sanhedrin (John 7:46), or it will confront him who tenaciously clings to his error with the dire possibility of becoming an ἀτοκᾶκρῖτος (Titus 3:11: “knowing that he that is such is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of himself”).

Baier’s statement is to the point: “Though Holy Scripture does not force men by external power to acquiesce in its decision according to the λόγον τὸν ἔζω, or so that they do not raise any objection by external act, nevertheless since the meaning of Scripture as the divine voice is plain, it is certain that the hearts of men will be convinced according to the λόγον τὸν ἔσω, so that they cannot contradict except against the protest of their conscience” (Baier-Walther, I, 186). It is for this reason that Scripture says of Scripture that it speaks, testifies, accuses, judges, concludes under sin, stops the mouth, etc. (John 19:24; Rom. 3:21; John 5:45; 12:48;

Gal. 3:22; Rom. 3:19).

When the Papists raised the objection that Scripture is a “dumb book,” which cannot speak, judge, and decide, our old theologians would answer: Only in the Papacy is the Bible a “dumb book,” because there it is prohibited from speaking (“*Scriptura Sacra non muta nisi in papatu, ubi prohibetur loqui*”). In addition, they put it up to the Roman theologians, who held Scripture to be God’s Word, why the words of Scripture could not make [decisions](#) as well as the words or epistles of the Pope—unless they seriously held that “God’s letter” to mankind (Scripture) had less power than the epistles of the Pope.—With particular vehemence the Roman theologians denounced the Scripture teaching that also “laymen” could and should judge doctrine on the basis of Scripture. They appealed to the Scripture passages which figuratively call the Christians “sheep,” such as John 10:16: “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold,” and particularly to John 21:16-17, where Christ says to Peter: “Feed My sheep.”

Our theologians replied: The Christians are indeed compared to sheep; however, not to foolish sheep, but to wise sheep, that know how to distinguish the voice of Christ from the voice of the stranger and of the pseudo shepherd. John 10:4-5: “When he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him; for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him; for they know not the voice of strangers.” And v. 27: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”

Since Scripture is plain on the point that all doctrinal issues can and should be decided by Scripture, the question arises why doctrinal debates and colloquies so seldom achieve the desired end. The answer is intimated in the beginning of this chapter. If the *status controversiae* either is not at all defined—or as happens still oftener—is again lost sight of, the result is that the two [parties](#) are talking of two different things, and an agreement is out of the question. Nor can an agreement be

reached if the controverted point is not placed in the light of Scripture. This happens when an “interpretation” takes the place of Scripture or passages are quoted which treat of a different doctrine. The latter case is of frequent occurrence.

Thus the proposal has been made that the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper be taken not from the words of institution, but from John 6, or that the doctrine of our eternal election to salvation be taken not from the Scripture passages which treat of election, but from John 8:16; etc. Modern theology even goes so far as to demand that each doctrine be derived from “the whole of Scripture.” This senseless and impossible method, recommended and adopted by the “Reformer of the nineteenth century” (Schleiermacher), is declared to proceed from a “deeper understanding of Scripture,” while the old theologians are said to have cut up Scripture by insisting that each doctrine be taken from the passages in which it is revealed.

It is clear that in all these cases Scripture is not heard at all, but its mouth is stopped by a principle foreign to Scripture, exactly as is done in the Papacy. Any agreement in cases like these is, of course, out of the question. This subject will be taken up again in the chapter “Holy Scripture and Exegesis.”

Tags: [Bible](#), [Theology](#)