

BOOK REVIEW
of
William Whitaker,
Disputations on Holy Scripture,
Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000 [1588].

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

This book by William Whitaker (1547-1595) was available only in Latin from the date of its publication, 1588, until it was translated into English in 1849. Being out of print for quite some time, the English translation was reprinted in 1968. After being out of print again for some time, it has been recently (2000) reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria. I first became aware of this book in 1996, and it being out of print I made a photocopy of the 1968 printing, which I borrowed from the rare books library at Kansas State. It is a pleasure to see it back in print.

One of the *solas* of the Protestant Reformation was *sola scriptura*, the Scriptures Alone. It is true that there is a place for tradition among Protestants inasmuch as we should listen to the historic creeds of the Faith, early Church Fathers, etc., when attempting to properly understand Christian doctrine, knowing that we are not independent of those who have gone before. However, it is also true that the leaders of the Reformation made a strong stand for the authority of the Scriptures, in opposition to what Roman Catholic leaders referred to as the authority of the Church. By the “Church” they clearly meant the Roman Catholic church, and they also made it clear that much that guides the “Church” was unwritten tradition. The position of the Reformers was that all disputes about doctrine must be settled by appeal to the ultimate authority, the Holy Scriptures. This put the Roman Catholics in the awkward position of having, in public debates and in literature, to question the authority of the Scriptures and claiming that the authority of the “Church” and its traditions supersede that of the Scriptures. Whitaker’s book under review is one defense of the Protestant position against that of the Roman Catholics. It is divided into six questions, all of which were brought into question by the Roman Catholics. The first question is concerned with the canonical books. Which books should be included in what we refer to as the Holy Scriptures and which books should not be. Most of the books in our Bible were not in dispute, but rather this section of Whitaker’s book considers the books of what we refer to as the Apocrypha. Whitaker considers each book of the Apocrypha and argues why it should not be considered canonical.

The second question is concerned with the authentic edition of the Scriptures and translations. Whitaker argues for the received editions of the Scriptures in the Hebrew and Greek languages, whereas the Catholics argued for the Latin Vulgate as the authoritative edition. The Catholics also argued that translations into the vernacular are risky and they cannot be trusted, especially if not authorized by the “Church.” A basic position of Protestants is that people should have the Scriptures in their own language in order to obey the commands to study, learn, and meditate upon the Word.

The third question is concerned with the authority of Scripture. This is probably the most basic of the questions, as it is concerned with whether or not an organized church must grant or declare the Scriptures to be authoritative or not. The Catholics say yes. Protestants say that the declared Word, or read Word, accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, carries its own authority.

The fourth question is concerned with the perspicuity of Scriptures. The Roman Catholics claim that the Scriptures are not clear as to its teachings and the “Church” must therefore declare what is taught. Protestants claim that the Scriptures are very clear on all matters of doctrine concerned with salvation, and it is imperative that all who can, read the Scriptures for themselves.

The fifth question is concerned with the interpretation of Scriptures. The Roman Catholics claim that the Scriptures must be interpreted by the “Church” who alone has authority to declare what is taught therein. Protestants claim that any intelligent, informed, believer can, by prayer and study, guided by the Holy Spirit, properly interpret all doctrine needed for salvation.

The sixth and last question is concerned with the perfection of Scripture over against human traditions. Protestants claim that the Scriptures are a complete and perfect rule of faith; Catholics disagree.

The Reformers set out to *reform* the Church, and not to come up with anything novel. As if to stress this point, near the end of the book Whitaker quotes Augustine as follows: “Away with our writings! Let the Book of God come forth: hear Christ teaching: hear Truth speaking.”