

# Luther On The Bible

Quotations Selected from Luther's Own Writings by

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## **I.- WHENCE IS THE BIBLE?**

Luther says:

"There is a great difference between the word of God that was sent from heaven and anything that my private devotion may invent. The Holy Scriptures did not grow on earth. 7, 20-94.

"The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue," 2 Sam. 23:2. Here David becomes too strange and too high for my comprehension.... To this text and similar texts St. Peter refers, when he says, "The prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Hence in the (Nicene) Creed we sing regarding the Holy Ghost, "Who spake by the prophets." Thus we ascribe to the Holy Ghost the entire Holy Scriptures.... What a glorious, high-minded pride this is, for one to claim that the Spirit of the Lord speaks by him and that his tongue utters the words of the Holy Ghost! Such a person must indeed be sure of what he says. He is not David, Jesse's son, born in sin, but David, called to be a prophet by the promise of God. Should not he be able to compose lovely psalms, having such a master to teach him and make him his mouthpiece?" 3, 1889.

## **II. - WHAT IS ITS AUTHORITY AND QUALITY?**

Luther says:

"If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." Gal 1:9. Here you have the clearest of texts-a very thunderbolt from heaven - which shows that Paul in a comprehensive statement puts himself, an angel from heaven, the teachers on earth, and whatever other masters there may be, absolutely under the Holy Scriptures. Scripture must be the reigning queen; all must obey her and be subject to her. They must not be her masters, judges, or jurors, but only her witnesses, pupils, and confessors, no matter who they are, whether the pope, or Luther, or Augustine, or Paul, or an angel from heaven. Nor must any other doctrine be proclaimed or listened to in the Church than the pure word of God - that is, the Holy Scriptures. 9, 87.

"When studying the Scriptures, you must reflect that it is God Himself who is speaking to you. Now, since God is the speaker, it does not behoove you wantonly to twist His word to suit your fancy. 3:21.

"The Scriptures are older and possess greater authority than all Councils and Fathers. Moreover, all the angels side with God and the Scriptures.... If age, duration, greatness, multitude (of followers), holiness, are inducements to believing something, why do we believe men who live but a short time rather than God, who is the Oldest, the Greatest, the Holiest, the Mightiest of all? Why do we not believe all the angels, since a single one of them has greater authority than the pope? Why do we not believe the Bible, when one passage of Scripture outweighs all the books in the world? 19, 1734.

"St. Augustine writes to St. Jerome: "I have learned to accord only to those books which are called the Holy Scriptures this honor, that I firmly believe, none of its writers ever erred. All other books I read with a mind not to believe that what they say is true, unless they prove it to be true by the Holy Scriptures or by plain reasons." The Holy Scriptures must be clearer, more easily understood, and more reliable than all other books; for all teachers maintain their teaching by the Scriptures, which they regard as clearer and more reliable than their own teaching; and they wish to see their writings confirmed and explained by the Scriptures. Nobody ever proved a dark statement by one still darker. Hence, necessity compels us to refer the writings of all teachers to the Bible and to obtain its verdict and judgment upon them. For the Bible alone is the true lord and master over all writings on earth. If this is not so, of what use is the Bible? Then let us cast it aside and be content with the books and teachings of men." 15, 1481

### **III. - WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?**

Luther says:

"All the Scriptures, from beginning to end, have for their object, to teach men to know Christ. 3, 18.

"The entire Scripture is full of Christ, the Son of God and Mary. Its sole object is to teach us to know Him as a distinct person, and that through Him we may in eternity behold the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God. The scriptures are ajar to him who has the Son, and in the same proportion as his faith in Christ increases the Scriptures become clearer to him. 3, 1959.

"Beware, ye who are studying, lest you learn backward and forget more than you had learned. That was my experience. When I went to school, I lacked a proper teacher to instruct me in this matter. But you have now been told: see that you remember it: You must get out of the Scriptures the real treasure, the kernel, the strength, the virtue, the juice, and the aroma, viz., the examples of faith and love. To these you must pay close attention. God has written them on the surface; you need not dig deep." 3, 695.

### **IV. - HOW TO GET AT ITS MEANING?**

Luther says:

"The Holy Scriptures are not at the disposition of the Jews, nor of the Gentiles, nor of the angels, much less of the devils, but only of God; He alone spake them and wrote them; He alone may explain and interpret them, whenever that is necessary. 20, 2103.

"You must know that the Scriptures, without any glosses, are the sun and the perfect light from which all teachers receive their light, not conversely. You can observe this when you watch the Fathers: whenever they lay before us their doctrine, they do not trust their own teaching. They are fearful that it might be dark and uncertain. Accordingly, they hurry to the Scriptures and take from it a clear passage with which they illumine their subject, just as when you put a candle in a lantern. Thus Psalm 18:28 says: "Thou wilt light my candle." (Revised Version, 'my lamp.') 18, 1293.

"Let everyone see that he be a simple pupil of the Holy Scriptures; for wise folk do not enter into its meaning; the Scriptures remain sealed to them. St. Augustine bewails his former attempts to rush into Scripture with his unbridled reason. He has studied Scripture nine whole years and had tried to grasp it with his reason. But the more he studied, the less he understood it, until his wasted efforts taught him the lesson that he must put out the eyes of reason, and say: 'What the Scriptures say I shall leave unexplored by my reason, but shall believe with singleness of heart.' If you do this, the Scriptures will become light and clear, while before they were dark to you. That is what St. Gregory means - and I wonder how he hit upon this fine saying: 'Scriptura sancta est fluvius, in quo agnus peditat, et elephas natat' - that is, 'The Holy Scriptures are like a river in which an elephant may swim and be drowned, while a lamb may wade through it as through a shallow brook.' To conclude, reading the Scriptures by the light of your reason is useless. 13, 1909.

"I do not at all admit that you may interpret Scripture in more than one way. I have no respect for your frequent efforts, viz., when you say: 'One may also say thus,' or, 'One may understand this thus,' or, 'One may answer thus,' or, 'According to the literal meaning one may say thus, according to the spiritual meaning one may say thus.' My dear Catharinus, drop this phrase, 'One may.' Your arguments, every one of them, are false and mere subterfuges; yea, they confirm me in my opinion. For it is because of your way of arguing that you are regarded as a man walking on stilts of straw. You want to cast a doubt on everything. This is the way you ought to speak: 'This passage must be understood thus and so, and not otherwise.' You must offer us a firm and simple understanding of Scripture, as I do and have done. That is what it behooves a theologian to do; the other way is that of the sophists. You know that in a debate you must operate only with the literal meaning of the Scriptures, which is uniform throughout the whole Bible. Origen, Jerome, and all who have interpreted Scripture in many ways are of no account in this business. They assert, but they do not prove. 18, 1447.

"You are not proclaiming Christian teaching when you inject a certain meaning into Scripture and twist Scripture to conform to that meaning; on the contrary, you must first clearly grasp the meaning of Scripture and then regulate your thoughts accordingly. 19, 1316.

"It will not do to pluck from Scripture a few words and treat them like a nose of wax that may be formed and turned to suit your fancy, without regard for the connection of the words and their scope. 9, 924.

"If cutting and tearing the Bible to pieces were a great art, what a famous Bible would I produce! Especially if I were to lay my hand on the important passages - Those on which the articles of our faith rest..... My position, then, is this: Considering that our faith is supported by Holy Writ, we must not depart from its words as they read, nor from the order in which they are placed..... Otherwise, what is to become of the Bible? 20, 213.

"Satiety of the study of the Word arises from the presumptive thought that we know it full well. This is an evil that has spread far and wide among the common people of our day. To check this vice, Moses (Deut. 6:7) commands that the coming generations should be diligently taught the law - that is, that they should be daily exercised and trained in the law, although they might know it full well. For ever and anon a new meaning will flash from Scriptures which before was hidden from us, and we shall draw delights from matters which we had formerly neglected and considered unpalatable." 4, 1750.