

“Disputation on the Holy Scripture”

William Whitaker 1588

- Scriptures are to be set forth before all Christians in their vernacular tongues, so that every individual may be enabled to read them. 1
1. (pg 235) That which is by God prescribed to all, all should do. **God has commanded all to read the scriptures: therefore all are bound to read the scriptures.** [You can't read something that is not in a language with which you are literate.] 5
- **Dt 31:11,12** “You shall read the words of this law in the presence of all Israel, in their hearing, and to all the people collected together.” And lest any of the people should peradventure suppose himself exempted by some special privilege, and discharged from the obligation of this divine command, Moses makes us of a distributive enumeration, naming expressly the women, the children, and all the strangers, and subjoining even their posterity. But why does God will his law to be read before the whole people? The reason is added, “that they may hear, and may learn, and fear Jehovah and observe his precepts.” Now this is of perpetual obligation: therefore the reading of the scripture is always necessary. For if the end and proximate cause of a any law be perpetual, the law itself is to be esteemed perpetual. And the reasons on account of which God willed the scriptures be read are perpetual. 15
 - **Deut 17:19-20** is particularly enjoined upon the king that he should read the scriptures: and the same reasons are added as were given before, and also some peculiar to the king; as that, (pg236) lest his soul should be lifted up with pride, and he should despise his brethren, and departs from precept, “to the right hand or to the left.”
 - **Deut 6:6-9.** This command is proposed to all Israel, and even urged vehemently upon them, that the divine law should be graven upon their hearts; that they should tell them to their sons; that they should speak of them when they sat at home and when they walked by the way, when they lay down and when they rose up; that they should have them, as it were, bound upon their hands, and kept ever before their eyes; finally, that they should be inscribed upon the posts of their houses and upon their doors. From all this we understand that God would have his law most familiarly known to his people. 20
 - In **Jer 36:6-7**, the prophet commands Baruch to read the book which he had written from Jeremiah's dictation, before the whole people; so that they would fall down, pray to Jehovah, and return each man from his evil way. 25
 - **John 5:39** “**search the scriptures**” In this place Jesus addresses not only the persons of learned and erudition, that is, the Scribes and Pharisees, but also the unlearned people and the illiterate vulgar: for not the learned alone, but the unlearned also, seek and desire eternal life. Chrysostom observes that this is not merely a bare and simple reading of the scriptures, but a very diligent investigation. 30
 - **John 20:31** “**These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life through his name.**” Thus we reason from this Passage: without faith there is no life: without the scriptures there is not faith: the scriptures therefore should be set forth before all men. 35
 - **Romans 15:14** “**Whatever things were written were written for our learning,**” says Paul. The Lord therefore willed us to be learned, and this is saving knowledge. He adds, “that we, through patience and comfort of the scripture, might have hope.” Those therefore who are without the scriptures are without comfort and without hope; for all these things are produced by the scriptures. 40
2. (pg 237) **The people should not be deprived of those arms by which they are to be protected against Satan. The scriptures are such arms.** See **Matthew 4.** Thrice he answered him with, “It is written,” and with the third reply he routed him. If Christ defended himself against Satan with the scriptures, how much more needful are the scriptures to us against the same enemy! And it was for this end that Christ used the weapons of Scripture against Satan, that he might afford us an example; for he could have repelled Satan with a single word. We therefore ought to resist Satan in the same manner. It is folly to suppose that Satan can be driven away by bare ceremonies, exorcisms, gesticulations, and outward fopperies. We must fight with arguments drawn from scripture, and the examples of the holy fathers: the scriptures are the only arms which can prevail, or ought to be used against him. ... For without the protection of scripture the people must necessarily fall under all temptations. The apostle Paul, **Eph 6:16**, says that the shield wherewith the fiery darts are to be quenched is faith. Now **faith**, as the same apostle testifies, **Rom 10:17** is “**begotten by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.**” Also our attacks on Satan are to come by the word, for the spiritual sword spoken of in Eph 6 is the word of God. 45
- All who have to contend with Satan ought to read the scriptures, that they may use those arms which are supplied by the scriptures expertly and skillfully against that deadly and most formidable foe. Now Satan 55

wages war against all men without exception. All therefore ought to read the scriptures; and consequently the scriptures ought to be set forth for all people in their own vernacular languages. 1

3. (pg 238) *The scriptures are to be read publicly in such manner as that the people may be able to derive some advantage from them. But they cannot be useful to the people in an unknown tongue:* therefore they should be translated into a language known to the people. See almost the whole chapter of **1 Corinthians 14**. “If I shall come to you,” Paul says, v. 6, “speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you?” as if he had said, “certainly nothing.” And verse 7, he proves by the examples of things without life, as pipe and harp, “which,” says he, “unless they give a distinction in their tones, how shall it be known what is piped or harped?” It behooves our speech to be significant. So he concludes, verse 19, that he would rather speak five words in church with his understanding, so as to instruct others, that “ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.” According to Chrysostom, the reading of what one does not understand cannot profit either others or even the reader himself. 5 10

4. *The Lord commands and requires that the people should be instructed, full of wisdom and knowledge, and perfectly acquainted with the mysteries of salvation.* He often complains of the ignorance of the people [see book of Hosea for example], and commands them to be exercised in his word, that they may thence acquire wisdom and understanding. Therefore the people out to read the scriptures, since without the reading of the scriptures they cannot acquire such knowledge. So they must be translated so they can be read. (pg 239) 15

- **Deut 4:6** God will his people Israel to be so well instructed, so endued with wisdom and knowledge of his law, that foreign nations, when they hear of it, may wonder and exclaim, “Lo a people wise and understanding, a great nation!” 20

- **Col 3:16**, the apostle desires that the word of Christ may dwell abundantly, or copiously, in the Colossians. Jerome comments upon this: “Hence we see that the laity ought to have not only a sufficient, but an abundant knowledge of the scriptures, and also to instruct each other.” Chrysostom adds: “Attend, all ye that are cosmopolitan and have wives and families depending upon you, how he specially commands you to read the scripture; and not merely to read it in a perfunctory manner, but with great diligence.” Thomas Aquinas in his third lecture upon this chapter says “Some are satisfied with a very small portion of the word of God; but the apostle desires we should have much of it” (pg 240). 25 30

- **Col 1:9**, he wishes that they may be filled “with the knowledge of his will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”

- **Col 2:2**, he requires in them “a full assurance of understanding to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God.”

- **2 Cor 8:7**, he says that the Corinthians are abundantly filled “with faith, and utterance, and knowledge.” 35

- **Numbers 2:29**, Moses wishes that all the people were prophets [that is able to speak forth the word of God to their generation as anyone who knows scripture today can do].

- **1 Cor 14:5**, Paul wishes that all might not speak with tongues, but rather that they should prophesy.

- **Phil 1:9**, the same apostle prays that the love of the Philippians may abound more and more, “in knowledge and in all judgment.” 40

- **2 Pet 1:5**, Peter admonishes those to whom he writes that they should add virtue to faith, and to virtue and sanctity of life knowledge.

From these passages we recognize that wisdom, prudence, knowledge and understanding are required in the people of God; and therefore those who are stupid or grossly ignorant of the scripture inflict a grievous injury upon themselves and upon the people they do not permit to have the scriptures in their own language. 45

- (pg 242) From **Psalms 1:2** Nazianzen exhorts all men to the reading of scripture, “And in the law of the Lord he meditates day and night.” And from **Deut 6**, “Yea,” says he, “we should think of God oftener than we breathe.” 50

5. *Christ taught the people in their mother-tongue;* so also the apostles and disciples of Christ, as well when upon the day of Pentecost they published the gospel in a known tongue, as afterwards, when scatters over the whole world, they taught all nations in their own native languages. Hence our conclusion: The holy doctrine of the gospel is not contaminates when preached or taught in the vernacular tongue; therefore, nor is improper to have it written or read in the vernacular tongue... 55

(pg 243) The word should be set forth for the people in their mother tongue, in order that, when it is preached, they may have it in their hands, and so may see whether that which is propounded to them be indeed the word of God, as we read of the Bereans, **Acts 17**; otherwise anyone, at his pleasure, might deliver what he like to the people, and enjoin it upon them as the word of God. Although they do not immediately understand

all they read, yet they do understand much, and will understand more every day, if they persevere in reading. What is today obscure will become clearer tomorrow; what is now unknown, will afterwards, by use and exercise, become better understood... 1

The minister's voice is indeed required, that the people may understand obscure passages, and be excited to the practice and exercise of those duties which they have learned from the word: yet should they not be so ignorant and childish as not to recognize and understand the reading of the scriptures. Such a state of childhood in the people the apostle frequently reprehends, as in **1 Cor 14:20; Eph 4:14; Heb 5:12**; and requires from them senses exercised in scripture. It is not fit, therefore, that the people should always be infants, but in due time they should become men, and "put away childish things," **1 Cor 13:11**. 5

6. (pg 244) Our last argument (not to heap up too many) is drawn from the use and practice of the ancient church. ***It is evident from history and the books of the holy fathers, that the scriptures were translated into all languages***, and that the people were always admonished by their pastors to read them with diligence and assiduity. Hence we draw our conclusion: Formerly the scriptures were extant in vernacular languages, and were also read by the people. Therefore the same is lawful at the present day. 10

Jerome translated the scripture into Dalmatian, Chrysostom into Armenian, Ulphias, a bishop of the Goths, into Gothic; and others into other languages. Jerome, upon Psalm 86 writes thus, "The Lord hath related in the scriptures of the people, the holy scriptures; which are read by all people." (pg 245) Whence it appears that none were prevented from reading them. But why were the scriptures read by all people? Jerome answers in the same place, so "that all might understand." 15

Augustine wrote, "It hath come to pass, that the scripture of God (which is the remedy for such grievous disorders of the human will), proceeding from one language, commodiously fitted for dissemination throughout the globe, and diffused far and wide by the various tongues of its interpreters, hath become known to all people for their salvation; which when they read, they desire nothing else but to find out the thoughts and will of those by whom it was written, and through them the will of God, according to which we believe that such men as they were spoke." We may observe five points from what Augustine wrote: 20

- i) First that the scripture was published in that language from which it might most conveniently be transfused into others.
- ii) Secondly, that in fact it was variously translated.
- iii) Thirdly, that it thus became known to all for salvation.
- iv) Fourthly, that it was read by the people; which is evident from the words, "reading which they desire nothing else." 30
- v) Fifthly, that it was not only read, but understood; which the last words render sufficiently apparent.

Theodoret establishes the same fact in these words: "The Hebrew books were not only translated into the Greek language, but into the Roman tongue also, into the Egyptian, Persian, Indian, Armenian, Scythian, and even Sarmatian, or (to say it at once in one word) into all the languages which nations use up to this day." 35

Origen blames the people in many words for not attending to the scripture in church and meditating upon it at home also. The same author comments upon Isaiah, saying, "Would that we all did that which is written 'Search the scriptures'." He says *all*, not merely the learned, the religious leaders, or the spiritual. (pg 248) Jerome, in his Epistle to Eustochium, exhorts her to the constant reading of the scriptures. Jerome invites all pious women to the reading of the scripture; and he adds that not only Eustochium but **all the sisters sung the Psalms of David**. "*None of the sisters was allowed to remain ignorant of the Psalms, or to fail in learning something from the Holy Scriptures every day.*" Writing to the widow Salvina, he exhorts her to be continually occupied with pious reading. So also he exhorts a matron named Celancia, to make it "her chief care" to know the law of God. Thus of old times, both men and women, whose souls were warmed with any zeal for piety, were occupied in the reading of the scriptures. 40

Theodoret writes, "You may see everywhere these doctrines of ours understood not only by those who are masters in the church and teachers of the people, but by the very cobblers and smiths, weavers and artisans of every kind, yea, and by women too of all classes; not alone those, if there be such, who are acquainted with literature, but by those who work for hire with their needles, by maid-servants and nursery girls. Nor is it only the inhabitants of cities who know these things, but the rustics have almost an equal acquaintance with them; and you will find men who dig the ground, or tend cattle, or plant vegetables, who can dispute of the divine Trinity and the creation of all things, who are better acquainted with human nature than Plato or other philosophers were." 50