

WE MUST OBEY GOD RATHER THAN MEN: JAN HUS ON THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN RELATION TO CHURCH AND CONSCIENCE

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Jan Hus (1371–1415) was burned at the stake as a heretic on July 6, 1415, according to the judgment of the Council of Constance (1414–1418), “the greatest gathering of western Christendom in the later Middle Ages.”¹ Over many years leading up to the Council, Hus had been involved in numerous controversies that brought him into conflict with church leaders locally in Prague and, eventually, throughout Christendom. The main issues revolved around Hus’s definition of the church and the implications thereof regarding the limits of ecclesiastical authority. Alongside Hus’s ecclesiology, which provided the occasion for the various specific conflicts, it was Hus’s refusal to unconditionally submit to ecclesiastical judgment that resulted in his execution.²

Hus’s refusal to yield to the Council and abjure the articles brought against him flowed from his unwavering commitment to the priority of obedience to God over all other authorities in accordance with Peter’s words in Acts 5:29, “we must obey God rather than men.”³ For Hus this required, among other things, that wherever any leader, even the pope, taught or commanded anything contrary to Scripture (or the law of Christ more broadly), it was one’s duty to disobey.⁴

¹Thomas A. Fudge, *Jan Hus: Religious Reform and Social Revolution in Bohemia* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 14. Whether or not Hus was justly condemned is a matter of debate (see the discussion in Thomas A. Fudge, *The Trial of Jan Hus: Medieval Heresy and Criminal Procedure* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2013]).

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²Hus entered into controversy with the Roman church over “several prominent issues” that “he deemed erroneous, contrary to scripture, thereby heretical,” including “indulgences, crusade, clerical wickedness and priestly irregularity, simony, and sexual immorality,” the content of some papal bulls and commands to stop preaching (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 109).

³See Ian Christopher Levy, *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 150.

⁴For Hus, the law of Christ (*Lex Christi*) requires absolute obedience. This law includes the Bible and any true command of God for “every true law is the law of God,” even some (but by no means all) of those “found in canon and civil law”

This article investigates Hus's position in this regard, which entails a host of implications regarding the relative authority of Scripture, the church, and/or its teachings (past and/or present), and one's personal judgment.⁵ Hus's position highlights the crisis of authority in his day and thereby illuminates issues that remain crucial and controversial 600 years after Hus's death and nearly 500 years after Luther's sparking of the Reformation at Wittenberg in 1517.

The Non-exclusive Authority of Scripture

Hus affirmed "sacred Scripture" as the "true Word of God" and aimed at adherence to everything that is "contained explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures."⁶ With Augustine, Hus believed that "all truth is contained in the Scriptures"⁷ and "we should regulate our whole life" by the "mirror of Scripture."⁸ Although the precise nuances regarding Hus's theology of Scripture might be disputed,⁹ that Hus held a high view of Scripture and intended to be

(Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 154; cf. Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 46; Lubomír Batka, "Jan Hus' Theology in a Lutheran Context," *LQ* 23.1 [2009]: 15). Thus, just laws are those in keeping with the teachings and life of Christ himself. For Hus, the law of Christ is "the gospel articulated and modeled by Christ and the apostles" and "all law had to be subservient to this law. . . . Nothing could be added or subtracted to that rule" (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 33).

⁵This treatment does not attempt to offer a comprehensive review of Hus's doctrine of Scripture but focuses on Hus's view of the authority of Scripture relative to the church and personal conscience via a close reading of Hus's *De ecclesia* (1413), his collected letters (most of which date from 1412–1415), and Peter of Mladonovice's eyewitness report of the events at Constance (primarily 1414–1415).

⁶John Huss, *The Church*, trans., David S. Schaff (New York: Scriber, 1915), 164, 221. Indeed, for Hus, "every Christian is expected to believe explicitly and implicitly all the truth which the Holy Spirit has put in Scriptures" (*ibid.*, 71).

⁷*Ibid.*, 221. As Ian Levy paraphrases Hus, "All that is necessary for salvation can be found in scripture" (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 154; cf. Johannes Hus, *Magister Johannes Hus Super IV. Sententiarum, Inceptio* 1.7–8, in *Opera Omnia*, 3 vols., ed. Václav Flajšhans and Marie Komínková [Osnabrück, 1966], 2:6–7). Enrico Molnar notes that this was "the *locus communis* of all medieval Biblicists," though Hus allowed for truth outside of the Bible (Enrico Molnar, "Marilius of Padua, Wyclif and Hus," *Anglican Theological Review* 44.1 [1962]: 40).

⁸Huss, *The Church*, 134.

⁹Hus's conception of Scripture is complex, including a broad conception of "eternal scripture" in the mind of God (cf. Augustine's epistemology and Wycliffite realism) beyond the temporal earthly signs of scripture, preeminently the "written codex" of the Bible (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 155; cf. Stephen E. Lahey, "The *Sentences* Commentary of Jan Hus," in *A Companion to Jan Hus*, ed. František Šmahel and Ota Pavlíček [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 135–36). Thus, in some writings, Hus appears to use the term "Scripture" in the broad sense beyond the Bible of God's truth in its entirety. Particularly in his commentary on the *Sentences* (1407–1409), "Hus conceives of

“strictly biblical” is generally not disputed.¹⁰ Thus, in Matthew Spinka’s words, Hus “placed emphasis on the supreme authority of the Scriptures as the norm of faith and practice.”¹¹ Similarly, Ján Liguš summarizes Hus’s view that “the

scripture as synonymous with Truth itself” and “equates [via his conception of the divine ideas] scripture with Christ” such that “scripture has a specifically Christological nature . . . [a]s an emanation of Christ the Word” (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 155–54; cf. *Sententiarum* 1.8, 2:7; Lahey, “The *Sentences*,” 136–37). Thus, for Hus, *sacra scriptura* was, first, “the revelation of Christ,” second “the knowledge of Christ and the teachings about Christ,” and third, “the written, spoken and visual signs which functioned as indicators pointing beyond themselves to revealed Truth” (including “Scripture, preaching, and iconography”). Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 32. According to his realism, “ultimately truth did not exist in the instrument itself but rather beyond the indicator in a realm accessed by faith” (*ibid.*).

Thus, for Hus, “scripture is the highest species of revealed truth.” Yet, “because scripture is eternal wisdom, what is expressed in the Christian Bible can also be expressed in other writings. (Lahey, “The *Sentences*,” 136). Fudge thus explains, “Hus’ definition of scripture [in this sense] was wider than the canon” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 47). Accordingly, even “images that depict Christ’s Passion to the laity may themselves be reckoned as Holy Scripture [i.e., *sacra scriptura*] to those laity,” though “scripture on its highest level—as Eternal Word—never varies” (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 155; see *Sententiarum* 2.3, 2:15). In this way, “Scripture is considered more than simply the written books regarded by the church as holy writ; beyond being the revealed word of God, it is also conceived as the believer’s internal cognition of Christ’s teachings, as well as the vocally expressed repetition of these truths, which can be contained in any language whatsoever” (Lahey, “The *Sentences*,” 136). Fudge posits, further, that “Hus clearly regarded the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard as an alternative form of scripture in terms of authority,” though not equal with the Bible (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 47; cf. *Sententiarum* 1.11, 2:9 wherein Hus states: “In the words of sacred scripture in the *Book of Sentences* [*In quibus verbis sacra scriptura in libro Sententiarum*].”). In this regard, Lahey explains, “Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* contain many truths that correspond to those found in the Bible, and thus contain unmediated divine wisdom. This does not equate the *Sentences* with the Bible, but it does make them scriptural, an expression of the perfect wisdom that defines the Bible” (Lahey, “The *Sentences*,” 136). That is, the Truth is *eternally* in the mind of God (i.e., eternal scripture) and anything that corresponds to this Truth is scriptural and thus part and parcel of *sacra scriptura* (broadly speaking) (cf. Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 155).

At the same time, in most instances the context of Hus’s references to “Scripture” evince his intention to speak of the contents of the Bible (cf. Huss, *The Church*, 71), which he differentiates from other earthly authorities as (among other ways) that which is to be believed and obeyed without exception (cf. Huss, *The Church*, 72). Thus, unless otherwise noted, “Scripture” in this article refers to the contents of the Bible.

¹⁰Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 85. “Hus’s fidelity to scripture” was “unimpeachable” and “lifelong” (*ibid.*, 48–49).

¹¹“The Conciliar Movement and the Council of Constance,” in *John Hus at the Council of Constance*, ed. Matthew Spinka (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), 62. Likewise, David S. Schaff notes that Hus considered the Scriptures as

whole Bible is God's Word and absolutely the only applicable standard for the life of the Church, its traditions, society, proclamation, liturgy, teaching, and pastoral ministry."¹²

Hus's high view of Scripture is evinced by his copious use of the Bible and his commitment to making the Bible available in his people's vernacular.¹³ In *De ecclesia* alone, Hus "quotes the New Testament at least 347 times and the Old Testament 72 times."¹⁴ Hus quoted Scripture far more than he quoted other sources and he possessed "an astonishingly competent knowledge of the Bible and could quote much of it from memory."¹⁵ Approximately, "three quarters of the quotations in his edited sermon collections come from the Scriptures"¹⁶

"the supreme rule of faith and conduct" ("Introduction," in *The Church*, ed. David S. Schaff [New York: Scriber, 1915], xxi, cf. *ibid.*, xii). Similarly, Levy notes that, for Hus, Scripture is "the *primus locus* of all arguments, the one to which all others are reduced. Scripture transcends every human authority" (*Holy Scripture*, 154). Accordingly, Scripture is "supremely authoritative in matters doctrinal" and "the absolute source of all Christian doctrine" (Matthew Spinka, *John Hus' Concept of the Church* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966], 160, 326).

¹²Ján Liguš, "Master Jan Hus—Obedience or Resistance," *EuroJTh* 24.1 (2015): 53. Similarly, Timothy George speaks of Hus's elevation of Scripture as a superior norm for doctrine ("The Reformation Connection," *Christian History* 19.4 [2000]: 35; similarly, see Thomas A. Fudge, "Ansellus Dei' and the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague," *CV* 35.2 [1993]: 147).

¹³Regarding the contents of the Bible, Liguš references Hus's use of the phrase "the Holy Scriptures" as meaning "the Old and New Testament, the biblical canon, as adopted by the early church. Both parts of the Bible are, according to Hus, 'the word of God, in which are contained all the necessary soteriological important objectives of God's commandments and actions'" (Liguš, "Master Jan Hus," 53). Notably, Hus quotes as Scripture writings that Protestants now view as Apocrypha (for examples, see Huss, *The Church*, 168; Letters 78–80, c. June 20, 1415, in *The Letters of John Hus*, trans., Matthew Spinka [Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1972], 173–77).

Further, Hus "vigorously opposed multiple papal bans to read Scripture in the vernacular and promoted Czech translations" and is "often credited with his own translations of the Bible into Czech" (Bohdan Hroboň, "The Kralice Bible: Czech-Mate to the KJV," *Word and World* 31.3 [2011]: 282; cf. Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 14, 48 and František Šmahel, "Instead of Conclusion: Jan Hus as Writer and Author," in *Companion to Jan Hus*, 403).

¹⁴Schaff, "Introduction," xlii. Fudge likewise notes, "*De ecclesia* cited biblical texts well over 400 times (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 39). Schaff notes further that "all Hus's writings abound in Scripture quotations" ("Introduction," xxi).

¹⁵Spinka, *Concept of the Church*, 326. However, "occasionally he failed to do so absolutely accurately" (*ibid.*).

¹⁶Pavel Soukup, "Jan Hus as a Preacher," in *Companion to Jan Hus*, 120. "The majority of the remaining quotes are patristic" and "the rest come from medieval authors and handbooks" with only a very small number from "classical antiquity"

and “all his sermons focus on a correct interpretation of the Scriptures.”¹⁷ Indeed, according to Daniel Didomizio, “Sacred Scripture received an emphasis rarely found in the work of theologians of his time.”¹⁸ David Schaff notes, in this regard, the “charge” against Hus “that more than any heretic before him, he had fortified his heresies by appeals to the sacred volume.”¹⁹

However, Hus’s view regarding the *formal* authority of Scripture does not appear to have been very different from the teaching of the Church in his day.²⁰ At issue, between Hus and his opponents, was not primarily the formal assent to Scripture as the supreme doctrinally authoritative source but where (if anywhere) authority resided when views in the church regarding faith and practice differed. That is, whose interpretation of doctrinal/practical truth should hold sway when there was conflict?

Although Hus did believe in the unreserved authority of Scripture (see discussion below) and refers to Scripture far more than any other source, he also made extensive use of extra-biblical sources, including regular references to church fathers and canon law.²¹ Thus, “Hus, as a good medieval theologian, builds his treatises as commentaries on biblical and patristic sources.”²² Beyond his use of church fathers, Hus was also significantly influenced by John Wyclif

(*ibid.*). In this, “Hus appears to have been in perfect harmony with contemporary practice in terms of using sources” yet compared to the sermon collection of a rival of Hus (Johán of Vodňany, ca. 1393) there is quite a divergence as there “non-biblical citations amount to almost half the total number, with a large portion” from “classical and especially medieval sources” (*ibid.*).

¹⁷Liguš, “Master Jan Hus,” 53. Ivana Noble adds: “In his sermons he helped lay people to form their own judgement based on Scripture, and educated them in the foundations of the Christian faith” (Ivana Noble, “Jan Hus in Ecumenical Discussion,” *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 6.2 [2006]: 6).

¹⁸Daniel Didomizio, “Jan Hus’s *De Ecclesia*, Precursor of Vatican II?” *TS* 60.2 (1999): 251.

¹⁹Schaff, “Introduction,” xxi. This charge was made by Stephen Pálec.

²⁰However, Hus recognized extra-biblical ecclesiastical authorities but did not make them equal with Scripture whereas his opponents tended to elevate the contemporary church’s authority.

²¹In Schaff’s view, in *De ecclesia*, “Huss was concerned first of all to base his views upon plain Scripture, and then to find their confirmation in the pages of the canon law,” specifically Gratian’s *Decretum* (c. 1140), which “attempted to bring into a harmonious code the statements of councils, popes, and eminent Fathers on all manner of questions concerning the government of the church and its usages” and included the spurious “donation of Constantine” (Schaff, “Introduction,” xl, xxxix). Like any other resource, canon law was subject to various interpretations and Hus gave his own interpretations thereof to harmonize it with his views of Scripture wherever he could (see below). Where the two contradicted, however, Hus believed canon law must be set aside.

²²Noble, “Ecumenical Discussion,” 8.

(particularly in *De ecclesia*), though the extent of Hus's dependence on Wyclif is a matter of some dispute.²³

Given his extensive use of extra-biblical sources, numerous scholars have spoken of Hus as an advocate for what Heiko Oberman seminally categorized as Tradition I (the single-source view), as opposed to Tradition II (the two-sources view).²⁴ Tradition I “represents the sufficiency of Holy Scripture as understood by the Fathers and doctors of the Church,” though in “the case of disagreement between these interpreters, Holy Scripture has the final authority.” Tradition II “refers to the written and unwritten part of the apostolic message as approved by the Church” such that “ecclesiastical traditions, including canon law, are invested with the same degree of authority as that of Holy Scripture.”²⁵ According to Matthew Spinka, Hus “upheld the

²³Notably, Hus was adamant that he held “the true [rather than all] opinions propounded by Master John Wyclif . . . not because he taught them but because the Scriptures and infallible reason taught them” (*Historia et Monumenta*, 1, 330, quoted in Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 59; cf. Peter of Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial and Condemnation of Master John Hus in Constance,” in *Hus at the Council of Constance*, 171–72). Further, despite the claims of Johann Loserth that Hus was completely unoriginal and plagiarized Wyclif in *Wyclif and Hus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1884), considerable evidence suggests that Hus did not slavishly follow the views of Wyclif. (He departed, among other ways, from Wyclif's rejection of transubstantiation). Nor did Hus “merely appropriate” Wyclif's “work for himself;” he took approximately “23 percent of his text” in *De ecclesia* “from Wyclif,” much of which “comprises quotations of scripture and the fathers,” yet “rework[s] and applie[s] the material” as “very much his own” (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 157–58; similarly, see Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 104–5; Craig D. Atwood, *The Theology of the Czech Brethren from Hus to Comenius* [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009], 49; see particularly the seminal study of Paul De Vooght, *L'Hérésie de Jean Huss* [Leuven: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1960], particularly 54–64; Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967], 36–37). Notably, Hus shows evidence of being a “competent and erudite theologian” in his own right (František Šmahel, introduction to *A Companion to Jan Hus*, 3; cf. Lahey, “The Sentences,” 132; Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 31–32; Schaff, “Introduction,” xxvii–xxviii).

²⁴Oberman depicts Thomas Bradwardine as “one of the first outspoken representatives of Tradition I” and also includes both Wyclif and Hus in this category, further framing their “battle against curialism” as “at the same time a battle against Tradition II” (Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963], 372–73, 376), cf. idem, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981], 282–83; Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd ed. [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004], 146–47).

²⁵Oberman, *Medieval Theology*, 372–73. Tradition I thus sets forth “the single-source or exegetical tradition of Scripture held together with its interpretation,” and Tradition II, “the two-sources theory which allows for an extra-biblical oral tradition”

supreme authority of the Scriptures as interpreted by the ecumenical councils, Church Fathers” and “reason.”²⁶ Thomas Fudge similarly frames Hus’s view of religious authority as a “complex structure” that demanded consistency with “scripture, tradition, and conscience.”²⁷ In his view, Hus’s “appeal is certainly

(*ibid.*, 371). That is, in Tradition I, “Holy Scripture contains all the truths of faith,” whereas Tradition II holds that “a complementary unwritten tradition is transmitted through the apostles and their successors” (*ibid.*, 366). Thus, “Tradition I holds that Scripture and its interpretations by the doctors of the church are the sole authority, while Tradition II admits canon law and papal pronouncements to equal status” (Lahey, “The *Sentences*,” 136–37).

²⁶Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 62; cf. *ibid.*, 83; *idem*, *Concept of the Church*, 162; Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 30–31. According to Spinka, Hus emphasized particularly (but not exclusively) patristic sources, “Hus acknowledged the authority of the apostolic tradition, of the creeds, the writings of the doctors of the church, particularly of Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, and John Chrysostom. Besides these, he often quoted such theologians of repute as Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Peter Lombard. Moreover, Hus accepted as authoritative the decisions of general councils” wherever he could do so in good conscience (Matthew Spinka, *John Hus and the Czech Reform* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941], 68; cf. Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 31, 60). However, it seems that Hus might have accessed such sources primarily through Gratian (and/or Wyclif).

Notably, however, “Hus’s emphasis on *ratio*,” or reason, “is inseparable from its Christological basis” and thus should not be confused with “the rationalism of the Enlightenment era.” Thus, “Hus’ rational criticism stops at the challenges of the Gospel which he reads from Jesus’ story and which he considers the ultimate arguments which make an impact on one’s reason and conscience by virtue of truth” (Josef Smolík, “Truth in History According to Huss’ Conception,” *Communio Viatorum* 15.2 [1972]: 100). He thus avoids and criticizes the theological hairsplitting of some theological approaches (see František Michálek Bartoš, “Hus’ Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard,” *CV* 3.2 [1960]: 150).

²⁷Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 32; cf. *ibid.*, 29. Elsewhere he explains that “Hus’ matrix of authority was scripture, apostolic tradition, the historic creeds, the writings of the doctors, together with canon law and the councils” (*ibid.*, 31). However, “Hus adhered to a principle of biblical authority” just “never to the exclusion of tradition” (*ibid.*). Cf. Molnar’s view of Hus’s “sources of [theological] authority” via the “matrix, in descending order of value” or “Holy Scriptures in a language understood by the people,” “Apostolic tradition [i.e., the apostles as “witnesses of truth and preachers of the word of God”],” the symbols of the early church, “the Apostles’ Creeds of Nicaea and of Athanasius,” and the “Writings of Church Fathers and Doctors,” accepted as “authoritative insofar as they interpret truths implied in the Scriptures” (“Wyclif and Hus,” 42–43). In this sense, Spinka maintains that Hus “admitted tradition as a source of doctrine, provided it was consonant with Scripture” (*Concept of the Church*, 385).

Yet, the term “tradition(s)” rarely appears in *De ecclesia*. Of only nine instances in Schaff’s translation thereof, five are of the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees (154, 189, 201, 224, 236), one of “human traditions” the “clergy of antichrist” are

to the authority of Scripture, but not to the absolute exclusion of reason, conscience, and tradition.”²⁸ Craig Atwood explains that, while “Hus is famous for his insistence that scripture is the true authority in the church,” he “acknowledged that the church fathers played a key role in clarifying orthodox

“zealously intent” upon but ought not be held (159), one of “evidence of a pope’s defect” when “he put aside the law and a devout profession of the Gospel and give heed to human tradition” (209), one of the “evil” that church leaders “punish more severely for departure from their traditions than they do those who blaspheme against that most excellent faith of Christ” (228), and one positive reference to the “tradition” received from the apostles (227), in reference to 2 Thess 3:6, 10. Hus tends to reference the “saints,” “holy fathers,” and “holy doctors” (notice the common thread of holiness) positively rather than the category of “tradition.”

²⁸Fudge, “Ansellus Dei,” 148. In this regard, Fudge, along with many others, maintains that Hus’s view should not be characterized as “*sola scriptura*,” because the “idea that ‘Scripture is never alone’ [*Scriptura numquam sola*] is abundantly evidenced in Hus’ own approach to authority” (ibid.). That is, “there is never a time in which the naked text of scripture functions apart from all other considerations” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 48). Whereas Hus “subscribed to the notion that scripture constituted the highest source and most important criterion of faith,” Fudge maintains, “this cannot be presented as a doctrine of *sola scriptura*” although “the emphasis is unambiguous” (Thomas A. Fudge, *The Memory and Motivation of Jan Hus, Medieval Priest and Martyr* [Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2013], 26; cf. ibid., 230). Spinka adds that while “Hus did not hold the doctrine of ‘*sola Scriptura*,’” “when the inevitable conflict between the authority of the church and the Scriptures flared up, Hus’s view was unmistakably on the side of the latter” (Spinka, *Czech Reform*, 76; similarly, see idem, *Concept of the Church*, 385; Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 30, 31, 32, 48, 60, 106; cf. Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 154; Molnar, “Wyclif and Hus,” 42). Conversely, McGrath identifies “Wycliffe and Huss” as “early radical proponents of the *sola scriptura* principle” (McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins*, 147).

Of course, these perspectives depend upon one’s definition of *sola Scriptura*. If that phrase is taken in a reductionist sense as excluding all authorities other than the Bible (i.e., “the naked text of scripture,” as Fudge seems to assume) then surely Hus did not hold it. Here, Oberman’s clarification is helpful as he characterizes Hus’s view as “not *sola scriptura* in the sense that it would exclude Tradition understood as the ongoing interpretation of Scripture. The *sola* is restrictive in that the law of God is sovereign and sufficient to determine alone—without ecclesiastical law—all cases that have to be tried by the Church” (Oberman, *Medieval Theology*, 377). Oberman thus recognizes that the *sola* in *sola scriptura* is variously understood by different adherents thereof. Indeed, the meaning and definition of the phrase *sola Scriptura* continues to be a matter of protracted debate (see the discussion in John C. Peckham, “*Sola Scriptura: Reductio ad absurdum?*” *TJ* 35 [2014]: 195–223).

teaching.”²⁹ Nevertheless, as Lubomír Batka puts it, “Scripture plays the decisive role in the dispute about the authority of tradition or canonical law.”³⁰

Indeed, Hus was “charged with elevating the Scriptures to the position of supreme authority and with claiming the right to interpret them according to his own understanding.”³¹ Spinka notes that Hus “indeed elevates the Scriptures above all other doctrinal criteria, but he interprets them according to the expositions of the ecumenical Councils, of the Fathers of the Church, and of reason.”³² However, the fact that Hus’s interpretations made use of, and accorded with, many esteemed Christian sources does not conflict with the charge that he interpreted Scripture “according to his own understanding.” Such extra-biblical sources also require interpretation and might be interpreted differently by Hus than they are interpreted by, for instance, the Council of Constance. Indeed, Hus’s interpretation of Scripture and tradition significantly differed at crucial points from that of his examiners.³³ Here, “Hus accepts [a circumscribed] tradition,” then, “but subordinates it to Scripture.”³⁴

²⁹Atwood, *Czech Brethren*, 62. He adds that Hus’s “argument that early Christianity was normative separated Hus from the reforming cardinals (conciliarists) who maintained that the church of their age” was “superior to the early church” due to progressive revelation (ibid.; similarly, see Fudge, *Memory and Motivation*, 26). Didomizio puts it this way, “Though he demonstrated a familiarity with canon law, Hus insisted that the Scriptures and the early centuries of the Christian community, not later tradition and papal decrees, determine the nature of the Church” (“Jan Hus’s *De Ecclesia*,” 250). While Spinka and Atwood note the importance of the Fathers of the “first five centuries” to Hus (see Atwood, *Czech Brethren*, 62; Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 62; Spinka, *Concept of the Church*, 385), Patapios Hieromonk notes that while Hus “deeply revered the early Church Fathers,” he “was quite willing to invoke more recent doctors like Albert and Aquinas when he thought it would strengthen his case.” As such, “it would be simplistic to say” Hus “espoused a ‘primitivist’ approach to theology” (“*Sub Utraque Specie*: The Arguments of John Hus and Jacobek of Střibro in Defence of Giving Communion to the Laity under Both Kinds,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 53.2 [2002]: 522). On the other hand, Fudge notes that Hus believed: “Poison entered the system of the church in the days of Constantine and the effects of that poisoning continued through the entire body” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 37).

³⁰“Lutheran Context,” 15.

³¹“The Conciliar Movement,” 57.

³²Ibid.

³³For example, Hus “wished to explain the ambiguities or different significance of the expressions in the articles charged against him, that those who had excerpted them had repeatedly twisted them into a sense foreign to him” but he was shouted down. “When, however, he adduced the authority of the holy doctors for certain points and articles, many continued to shout simultaneously, saying that they did not apply or were not to the point” (Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial,” 166; cf. ibid., 197–98).

³⁴Spinka, *Concept of the Church*, 162; so, also, Molnar, “Wyclif and Hus,” 42. Tradition “must in no way contradict Scriptural doctrine” (Spinka, *Concept of the*

In this regard, careful attention to Hus's application of his own definitions of key terms, which differed from the definitions of those same terms by many of his interlocutors, is crucial to understanding what is going on at Constance. For example, Hus can affirm that the "church" has never "erred from the path of apostolic tradition," but by "church" here he means not the visible church on earth but the invisible church of all the predestined (see below).³⁵ In this and a number of other instances, Hus appears to affirm wording that those at the Council would affirm, yet he means it rather differently, thus subtly interpreting canon law or positions of the church fathers in ways that run directly counter to the interpretations of his opponents. Thus, according to Schaff, Hus "did not directly repudiate the authority of church teachers" but "put strange interpretations on some of the statements of canon law," apparently "under the constraint of [ecclesiastical] usage" of such statements "rather than of conviction," manifesting at times his own "mental reservation[s]" relative to canon law.³⁶

In this regard, Hus "did the best he could to explain away" the canon law's "language which taught the high-church views which he distinctly repudiated, and to bring its statements into harmony with the teachings of Scripture he adduced."³⁷ However, he could not always do so. For example, Hus seems to have "absolutely set aside its plain meaning in his exposition of the last clause of the *Unam sanctam* to the effect, that there is no salvation except for those who fully submit to the Roman pontiff."³⁸ Hus, then, seems to have made

Church, 162). In this way, "Hus accepted tradition as the secondary source of dogmatic and canonical authority, but definitely subordinated it to the Scriptures" (Spinka, *Czech Reform*, 68).

³⁵Huss, *The Church*, 61. Thus, Hus could depart from the visible church and/or its leadership and yet endorse "Cyprian's adage 'one cannot have God for one's father if one does not have the church [i.e., the invisible church of the predestined] as one's mother'" (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 35).

³⁶Ibid., xxx, xl. For "Huss, the canon law at times was a heavy load to carry" (ibid.). For instance, he references the *Decretum* statement relative to Constantine's purported conferral of the "grant—*privilegium*—of the Roman church that the pontiffs might have headship in all the earth" and states of it, "out of reverence we cannot deny" it yet goes on to interpret it in such a way that preserves his views (*The Church*, 150). Hus's position thus contradicted the canon law since, as Fudge notes, "There are several allusions in the *Decretum* to the effect that the pope is above all human judgment, including that of a general council" (Thomas A. Fudge, "Infelix Hus: The Rehabilitation of a Medieval Heretic," *Fides et Historia* 30.1 [1998]: 65). Schaff believes: "To have been consistent, Huss would have been obliged to discard Gratian's compilation as Luther did" (Schaff, "Introduction," xl–xli).

³⁷Schaff, "Introduction," xl. Hus's acuity in interpreting statements in a way that tends toward his view should highlight the importance of the locus of interpretation.

³⁸Ibid. In this regard, "Hus makes the Roman pontiff refer to Christ, the supreme

every attempt to accord with the authority of church councils and the fathers without surrendering his individual judgment. It appears that he would agree as far as possible with the proclamations of the church (past and present) without going against his own interpretation and conscience.³⁹

As such, Hus appears to employ a rather nuanced non-isolationist view of the priority and interpretation of Scripture that yet reserved the right and duty of individual judgment. If this is so, the label “Tradition I” appears to be insufficient to get at the crux of Hus’s position regarding the locus and extent of *interpretive* authority.⁴⁰ Hus reserved the right of individual judgment, which limited (without altogether excluding) the authority of the church. Thus, the trajectory of Hus’s thought appears to point away from any position that would require the yielding of individual interpretation to finally *normative* post-apostolic interpretive arbiters (see the discussion below). In this regard, the case of Hus highlights that which remains the crux of the contentious issues relative to the authority of Scripture, church, and individual: the locus and extent of interpretive authority.

Whereas Hus’s *formal* views regarding the authority of Scripture, the Fathers, and canon law appear to have been orthodox, *functionally*, Hus “insisted . . . on the right of private understanding and convictions as to what

Pontiff and Shepherd, but Boniface had no such idea in mind when he issued his arrogant deliverance” (ibid.; cf. Huss, *The Church*, 120–21; Spinka, *Czech Reform*, 68; Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 34).

³⁹At bottom, however, “Bulls published by popes need only be obeyed if they were consistent with scripture and conscience” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 37). Molnar states even more strongly that, whereas “dogmatic papal canons” are purported to be of “infallible character,” Hus “ignored these canons and denied their dogmatic validity, unless they agreed with the Scripture” (“Wyclif and Hus,” 42).

⁴⁰Oberman himself notes that beyond a criticism of the canon lawyers, Hus (along with that of Wyclif and Wessel Gansfort) also “sharply react[s] against the theologian’s practice of building tradition into the ‘silent places’ of Holy Scripture. In its strongest forms this criticism may lead to a deformation of Tradition I,” perhaps standing at “the cradle of what is usually called biblicism” (Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 283). Further, among other things, Tradition 1 is far too broad a category. Within what others label tradition 1, Anthony Lane makes a crucial distinction between the “coincidence view” (i.e., “the teachings of the church, Scripture and tradition coincide”) that appears to have been held by many in the earliest centuries of the church and the ancillary view of the magisterial reformers, which placed tradition in a servant role (Anthony Lane, “Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey,” *VE* 9 [1975]: 39–43; cf. the discussion in Craig D. Allert, “What Are We Trying to Conserve: Evangelicalism and Sola Scriptura,” *EvQ* 76.4 [2004]: 327–48, particularly 332; and the contrasting view of Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* [Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001], 86). Yet, Hus’s view seems to require even further nuance than even Lane’s categorizations provide (see the further discussion and criticism of these categories in Peckham, “*Sola Scriptura*,” 195–99).

the Scriptures taught, rather than on the exclusive right of the Church to their interpretation.⁴¹ The dividing issue between Hus and his opponents, then, was not Hus's high view of Scripture but, rather, the locus and extent of authority in matters of doctrine and practice, particularly relative to the role of the visible church. Whereas Hus assented to considerable authority of the visible church within a properly delimited sphere, he reserved the right of individual interpretation according to one's conscience and appealed to Christ himself as judge.⁴² This adherence to the right of individual interpretation and duty of personal conscience brought him into conflict with various church leaders, both papalists and conciliarists, and finally led to his condemnation at the Council of Constance.⁴³

⁴¹Spinka, "The Conciliar Movement," 62. Regarding the medieval view of Scripture and church authority that was the backdrop of Hus's views, see especially Levy, *Holy Scripture*; Oberman, *Medieval Theology*, 361–93; see, further, Spinka's helpful discussion of the views of three "outstanding conciliarists" (Pierre d'Ailly [1350–1420], Jean Gerson [1363–1429], and Francesco Zabarella [1360–1417]) who influenced the Council of Constance as well as Dietrich of Niem (1340–1418) in "The Conciliar Movement," 12–22. Levy notes that "throughout the Middle Ages" it "is simply taken for granted that scripture is the principal standard of Catholic orthodoxy such that anyone who opposes it is by definition a heretic" (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 2). On the other hand, the problem "was not the authority of scripture itself but rather its authoritative determination" or interpretation (*ibid.*, 1). Whereas "Holy Scripture was always accorded first place," the "conciliar decisions and papal decretals steadily achieved greater authority than patristic texts in matters of scriptural interpretation" (*ibid.*, 49). The forerunners of the Czech reform departed from this trajectory. Regarding these forerunners, see particularly *ibid.*, 150–52; cf. Spinka, "The Conciliar Movement," 22–29; Vilém Herold, "The Spiritual Background of the Czech Reformation: Precursors of Jan Hus," in *Companion to Jan Hus*, 69–95; Atwood, *Czech Brethren*, 21–48. On Hus's opponents in Prague (specifically Stanislaus of Znojmo and Stephen Pálec) see the introductory discussion in Spinka, "The Conciliar Movement," 46–55.

⁴²This contrasted greatly with Stanislaus of Znojmo's view that the "Church possess the teaching authority whereby it alone has the right to define Scriptural doctrine" and the "believer is bound to accept its interpretation instead of resorting to and relying on his own understanding. Thus in effect the Scriptures are subordinated to the Church; consequently the Scriptures "cease to possess supreme authority" (Spinka, "The Conciliar Movement," 47). Similarly, while Stephen Pálec "professed to recognize the Scriptures as inspired by the Holy Spirit," he argued they were "*res inanimata* while the Church possesses the 'living authority' to interpret them" such that "doctrinal tenets" cannot be limited "to the contents of the Scriptures" (*ibid.*, 54).

⁴³Hus consistently applied this principle of individual interpretation "against the entire hierarchy, including the pope, the cardinals, the general Council, whose infallibility he rejected" and "his own theological opponents" (*ibid.*, 62).

The Exceptionless Primacy of Scripture as God's Truth

Hus's view of the primacy of Scripture is epistemologically rooted in "an act of faith" as "trust" such that one can "know" and "adhere firmly and without wavering to the truth as spoken by God," even unto death.⁴⁴ "In this way, every Christian is expected to believe explicitly and implicitly all the truth which the Holy Spirit has put in Scripture."⁴⁵ Conversely, "a man is not bound to believe the sayings of the saints which are apart from Scripture, nor should he believe papal bulls, except insofar as they speak out of Scripture, or insofar as what they say is founded in Scripture simply."⁴⁶

Relative to ecclesiastical sources, then (written and *viva voce*), Scripture holds unquestionable priority, even over "the sayings of the saints." If Hus is consistent, then, while he holds the early fathers of the church in very high regard, even their teachings would be subjected to the test of Scripture. Nevertheless, referencing Augustine, Jerome, Gregory the Great, and Ambrose, Hus "boldly assert[s] that, if in any point these four doctors agree, the pope and his cardinals may not lawfully declare the opposite as the faith of the people."⁴⁷ Hus's position, in this regard, appears to be rooted in his view that these "doctors" tended to accurately handle God's truth, including

⁴⁴Huss, *The Church*, 71.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid. "Papal rulings need only be observed when they conformed to the law of Christ. To rebel against an erring pope was to obey Christ" (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 37; cf. Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 160).

⁴⁷Huss, *The Church*, 149–50. These he considers to issue "judgment . . . by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit" (ibid., 149). He further includes alongside these four, the "other saints, such as John Chrysostom, John of Damascus and Dionysius the Aeropagite, who, taught by the Holy Spirit, illuminated the church of Christ by their knowledge and piety" (ibid., 150). In this regard, Levy notes that "[i]t was widely accepted that the church fathers were inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus possessed a level of insight that later masters could not attain. This does not mean, however, that the fathers were understood to have received 'extra data' that had not been revealed to the apostles" (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 24). Apparently, however, Hus views *these* aforementioned doctors this way *because* he believes them to be excellent interpreters of Scripture taught by the Holy Spirit. This accords with his commitment to the exceptionless authority of Scripture over and against other mediate authorities (as discussed in this section and later in this article). In this regard, Hus could even draw from Gratian's *Decretum*, which "presented a series of passages drawn from Augustine that firmly established the authority of Holy Scripture," including the views that "the scriptures take precedence over the writings of the fathers; no lies are to be found in the canonical scriptures; Holy Scripture is to be preferred over the letters of the bishops; and the commentaries on the scriptures must not be given reverence equal to the scriptures themselves" (ibid., 45). Thus, (as seen in the main text) even Augustine should not be believed except as he "grounded himself in Scripture" (Huss, *The Church*, 154).

relative to the interpretation of Scripture—an evaluation that itself requires interpretation and a corresponding identification of which “doctors” should be so esteemed (see below). However, according to Hus’s commitment to “the truth spoken by God,” at any point he believed they did not accurately handle God’s truth, Hus would be duty-bound to depart from them. Thus, as Fudge puts it, Hus’s was a “Scripture-oriented appeal” wherein “it is not necessary to believe in the sayings of the Fathers nor yet in papal bulls unless they are founded directly in Scripture.”⁴⁸

In this regard, Hus especially appreciated Augustine as “more profitable to the church than many popes, and in matters of doctrine more profitable than all the cardinals.”⁴⁹ This because, according to Hus, Augustine “knew the Scriptures better than” such cardinals “and also defined the nature of the catholic faith better by clearing the church of heretical errors and correcting them.”⁵⁰

At the same time, Hus notes that “the great doctor, Augustine, often asserted of himself that he ought to be believed only so far as he had grounded himself in Scripture.”⁵¹ Accordingly, Hus favorably quotes Augustine’s position regarding the primacy of Scripture over and against extra-biblical writings:

I have learned to give only to those writers, who are now called canonical [i.e. biblical], honor and regard, so that I would not dare to believe that any of them erred in writing. But other writers I will read as far as they seem to excel by sanctity or true doctrine but I will not regard as true what they say because they have felt it to be true, but because they have been able to convince me by other writers, or by canonical or probable reasons, that they do not differ from the truth.⁵²

⁴⁸Fudge, “Ansellus Dei,” 147; cf. Huss, *The Church*, 71.

⁴⁹Huss, *The Church*, 149–50.

⁵⁰Ibid., 150. Here, Hus is attempting to demonstrate that “God may give other successors of the apostles than the pope and cardinals, just as he was able to give others in the place of the pontiffs of the old law, the scribes and the Pharisees with their traditions” (ibid., 154).

⁵¹Ibid. Notably, Hus’s ecclesiology seems to depart from that of Augustine. As Fudge puts it, Hus’s ecclesiology “began in Augustine but deviated from his master in developing his rather negative views of the militant church on earth” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 36). “Augustine seems not to have allowed for the same latitude of obedience as did Hus” (ibid.).

⁵²Augustine, *Ep. ad Hieron., Decretum, Dist. 9:5* (Friedberg, 1:17), quoted in Huss, *The Church*, 132; cf. Augustine, Letter 82 (to Jerome) 1.3. Hus may have only been familiar with this from its context in the *Decretum* from which he quotes it: “Paul De Vooght has shown that Hus almost certainly did not have direct access to Augustine’s original work. Derivative scholarship in the Middle Ages, however, was not unusual” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 30; cf. Paul De Vooght, *Hussiana* [Louvain: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1960], 78–81). Elsewhere, “Hus quotes many other Fathers to prove that conformity with Scripture is essential in all cases dealin with

Hus is not arguing via this reference that only that which is in the Bible should be accepted as true. Just previous to this quotation, Hus lays out his basic Christian epistemology (via appeal to Augustine) that “all truth in the religion of Christ is to be followed and only that is truth which is known by the bodily senses, or discoverable by an infallible intelligence, or made known through revelation,⁵³ or laid down in sacred Scripture.”⁵⁴ There is, then, truth outside of Scripture, while at the same time everything in Scripture should be trusted without exception (see below).

Here (and elsewhere), then, the issue is not whether such extra-biblical resources might be useful and/or authoritative but the relative authority they hold, including interpretatively. If they are subjected to Scripture (and the law of Christ), then they could not themselves set forth the *finally normative* interpretation of Scripture. Further, post-apostolic writings might themselves be variously interpreted (as Hus manifests in his own interpretations thereof). Whereas some would attempt to resolve this crisis of (interpretive) authority by appeal to the pope and his curia or the judgments of authoritative Councils, Hus yields final interpretive authority to neither (see the discussion below), steadfastly reserving the right and duty of individual judgment and personal conscience.

For Hus, whereas “the pope and his curia make mistakes from the ignorance of the truth” and “may deceive and be deceived,” God “cannot deceive or be deceived.”⁵⁵ In parallel, whereas “to holy Scripture exception may not be taken, nor may it be gainsaid” because it is God’s truth, it “is proper at times to take exception to bulls and gainsay them when they either” promote unrighteousness or “implicitly contradict the commands or counsels of God.”⁵⁶ One is thus to have faith in Scripture without exception, whereas faith in ecclesiastical teachings is only “probable” and in some cases must be rejected.⁵⁷

faith” and that Scripture is “supremely authoritative in matters doctrinal” (Spinka, *Concept of the Church*, 160).

⁵³That is, via extra-biblical divine revelation. Yet, of the eight doctors he states, “revelation I do not expect from them, and if it did perchance come to them, we would feel it taught otherwise than Scripture teaches” (Huss, *The Church*, 163). Elsewhere Hus quotes 1 Jn 4:1 regarding testing the spirits (ibid., 222).

⁵⁴Ibid., 131.

⁵⁵Ibid., 71–72. Hus thus contrasts faith in God with faith in erring humans, noting “it can be substantiated that the pope makes mistakes and may be deceived” (ibid., 71).

⁵⁶Ibid., 72.

⁵⁷Ibid., 71–72. For Hus, then, “Scripture plays the decisive role in the dispute about the authority of tradition or canonical law” (Batka, “Lutheran Context,” 15).

The Priority of Spiritual Obedience to God's Truth

For Hus, Scripture derives its authority from God, the supreme and unerring source of truth. The priority of Scripture over and against any merely human (including ecclesiastical) teachings is grounded in his absolute commitment to the priority of spiritual obedience to God's truth. That is, "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).⁵⁸ In this regard, Hus differentiates three spheres of "human obedience"—"spiritual, secular, and ecclesiastical."⁵⁹ First, Spiritual obedience is "due purely according to God's law." Second, "Secular obedience is obedience due according to the secular code." Third, "Ecclesiastical obedience is obedience according to the regulations of the priests of the church aside from the express authority of Scripture."⁶⁰ Spiritual obedience takes precedence over all others. Accordingly, insofar as Scripture consists of God's law, it is incontrovertible by the church and/or its tradition.⁶¹

The visible church has a legitimate sphere of authority circumscribed by the priority of spiritual obedience.⁶² Any commands that depart from God's commands, whether by pope or Councils, should be disobeyed.⁶³ As Hus puts it, "we are bound to obey no prelate . . . except as he commands or counsels Christ's counsels or commands."⁶⁴ Further, should one presiding "command anything or say anything otherwise than in accordance to God's will or what is plainly commanded in Holy Scripture, he shall be regarded as a false witness of God."⁶⁵ Accordingly, Hus explains, "much more are we bound to obey Paul

⁵⁸See *ibid.*, 222. Elsewhere, Hus asks after quoting Acts 5:29 and other Scriptures, "But who could collect all the sayings of the saints who all teach obedience to God rather than to men?" (Letter 17 to John Barbatus and the People of Krumlov, Spring 1411, in *Letters of John Hus*, 53).

⁵⁹Huss, *The Church*, 194.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹Thus, Hus utilized "the Holy Scriptures as the only valid spiritual, moral and social norm for both Church and society" (Liguš, "Master Jan Hus," 50).

⁶²See Huss, *The Church*, 221. "Hus freely admitted that even a wicked prelate must be obeyed if what he demands is not contradicting the Scriptures" (Spinka, "The Conciliar Movement," 77).

⁶³Likewise, commands of the emperor that differ from God's. See Letter 17 to John Barbatus and the People of Krumlov, Spring of 1411, in *Letters of John Hus*, 50–53.

⁶⁴Huss, *The Church*, 222. Hus qualified at Constance that "this obedience would be such only when the priests commanded something without regard for or beyond the express command of the Scriptures and contrary to the law of God" (Mladonovice, "An Account of the Trial," 195–96).

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 194. Here Hus cites Isidore 11:3 (Friedberg, 1:672); cf. Hus's application of Gal 1:8 (via Basil, via the *Decretum*) against "anyone in authority" who "does or commands to do whatever is prohibited by the Lord; or if he disregards or orders to disregard what is written" (Letter 17, Spring of 1411, in *Letters of John Hus*, 52).

and every writer of divine Scripture rather than the Roman pontiff, when it comes to matters indifferent or neutral.”⁶⁶ Thus, “no one should obey man in anything, even the least thing, that opposes itself to the divine commands” for “Peter says: ‘We must obey God rather than men,’ Acts 5:29.”⁶⁷ Whereas ecclesiastical leaders should be obeyed within the limits of their authority, unconditional obedience is due to the commands of God alone.⁶⁸

Adherence to the priority of spiritual obedience, then, requires the usage of individual judgment in order to differentiate divine from merely human commands. “Hus insists that a Christian must discern whether the command is good or evil in accordance with God’s will as revealed in Scripture. When it is found to be contrary to it, the [ecclesiastical] superior must not be obeyed.”⁶⁹ In this regard, Hus refers to Christ’s teaching of recognizing “false prophets by the fact that they do not agree with the true prophets in word or deed.”⁷⁰ That is, “‘Ye shall know them by their fruits,’ Matt 7:16.”⁷¹ Of course, to judge purported leaders “by their fruits” requires interpretation of both spiritual things (including that of Scripture) and of the teachings and actions of those who claim authority. However, while one “may easily recognize the wicked by their outward works [and/or commands] which are contrary to Christ,” the “good cannot be so known because hypocrisy may lurk in them.”⁷² Thus, a consensus of putative Christians could not be *finally* authoritative.⁷³ Individual judgment, then, cannot be *unconditionally* yielded,

⁶⁶Ibid., 222. On this “ground” Hus “repudiates the decree of the Council of Constance forbidding” the use of the “cup in the communion” due to “Church custom” (Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 57).

⁶⁷Huss, *The Church*, 221–22; cf. *ibid.*, 194.

⁶⁸See, e.g., *ibid.*, 205.

⁶⁹Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 61. Similarly, see Schaff, “Introduction,” xxi; cf. Spinka, *Concept of the Church*, 386–87; *idem*, *Czech Reform*, 77.

⁷⁰Letter 27 to the Praguers, c. November 1412, in *Letters of John Hus*, 82; cf. Hus’s exhortation to test the commands of superiors with reference to 1 John 4:1 (Huss, *The Church*, 222).

⁷¹Ibid., 160; cf. Schaff, “Introduction,” xiv; Huss, *The Church*, 47, 133, 160. Thus, “by their fruits ye shall know them! If the hierarchy and the priesthood live in accordance with Christ’s life and teaching, they are to be recognized and obeyed as legitimately holding their offices” (Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 56).

⁷²Huss, *The Church*, 160. For Hus, while one might be disqualified by commanding or committing that which is contrary to Christ, it is “impossible to determine the identity of the elect, evident sinfulness is not the final determination” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 42). Indeed, Hus declared that one could not even be certain of one’s own predestinate status.

⁷³For Hus, “those alone can make a probable estimate of the elected who elect most conformably with the Scriptures, drawing upon revelation” (Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial,” 209–10).

though it should be correctable. The absolute priority of spiritual obedience, therefore, goes hand in hand with the right and duty of individual judgment and personal conscience.

Defining the Limits of Ecclesiastical Authority

Hus's differentiation between erring human authorities and unerring God grounds the absolute priority of obedience to God (spiritual obedience). However, this involves a corresponding duty of individual judgment and conscience, which entails a rejection of the visible church (and its leaders) as finally determinative in favor of one's personal conscience. Accordingly, Hus's views limit the authority of the visible church far beyond what either the papalists or conciliarists of Hus's day would permit.

In this regard, however, while Hus contends that prelates and Councils should be disobeyed if they command otherwise than God commands, Hus also grants that the "church" does not err. Hus can hold both of these points simultaneously without contradiction due to his definition of the church. For Hus, "the holy catholic church is the number of all the predestinate and Christ's mystical body—Christ being himself the head."⁷⁴ As such, the church is "the congregation of all the faithful about to be saved. It is the mystical body of Christ, that is now hidden to us."⁷⁵

For Hus, in other words, the "universal church" is invisible (to use Augustine's terminology), consisting of the predestinate of all ages. Conversely, the visible church, confusingly referred to as the universal church by others, is a mixture of those who are actually part of the saved body of Christ (i.e., the predestinate) and those who are not (the reprobate). This perspective entails considerable limitations on the functional authority of the visible church, whose leaders (and perhaps even the majority of its members) may not belong

⁷⁴Huss, *The Church*, 10. Hus defines the church at three levels, "the militant, dormant, and predestined communities," which might be illustrated as "three concentric circles with the community of the predestined at the center" (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 34). It is essential to notice which of these levels Hus intends when he references the "church." Hus's view contrasted with medieval theology's view "of the church as a visible entity including all of the faithful confirmed by the sacrament of baptism" and "ruled by the pope" and "the priestly hierarchy," both "claiming power directly from God" (ibid.). Fudge helpfully summarizes Hus's ecclesiology in five points: "The true church consisted of the elect. There was one head which was Christ. Authority could not reside in one person because original apostolic authority was shared equally among the disciples of Jesus. The pope was not infallible. All prelates were obliged to obey holy scripture without exception" (ibid., 39).

⁷⁵Hus, *Com. on the Lombard*, 36, quoted by Schaff in Huss, *The Church*, 10 n. 2.

to the predestinate.⁷⁶ As such, “it is impossible to know who is truly of the elect apart from revelation.”⁷⁷

In this regard, Hus contradicts the papalist view by contending that “a pope living [or commanding] contrary to Christ” may be “called by common consent antichrist.”⁷⁸ Indeed, in Hus’s view, popes have obviously erred and a putatively legitimate pope may be illegitimate.⁷⁹ This is highlighted by the fact that, at the time of Hus, three individuals simultaneously claimed to be the legitimate pope (the Great Papal Schism, 1378–1417). Against this background, Hus asked, “By authority of which one [pope] does the Roman curia speak; which one has the fullness of power over every man on earth?”⁸⁰

On the other hand, Hus’s view also conflicts with the conciliarist conception advocated by the Council of Constance, which was aimed at resolving the problem of multiple papal claimants (among other things). The conciliarists held that if a pope were to “abuse or exceed his powers, he may be called to account by the college of cardinals or the general Council. The latter, as representing the *congregatio fidelium*, is the source of all power.”⁸¹ As such, “the supreme hierarchical authority is not concentrated in the pope and the cardinals, but resides in the Church universal,” that is, all Christians everywhere.⁸² On this view, this visible “church stands in the place of God and

⁷⁶As Ota Pavlíček puts it, “the ecclesiastical dignitaries are not necessarily members” of the “real church” (“The Chronology of the Life and Work of Jan Hus,” in *Companion to Jan Hus*, 66).

⁷⁷Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 34–35; so, also *ibid.*, 42; Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 158. That is, “the *true* Christians and the *nominal* Christians” cannot be “identified with absolute certainty” (Batka, “Lutheran Context,” 10; cf. Matt 13). “Inasmuch as the constituency of the true church cannot be determined absolutely, it is sometimes permissible to disobey established authority” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 35).

⁷⁸Huss, *The Church*, 128. He here refers to 1 John 2:22.

⁷⁹See *ibid.*, 221. “Hus considered any doctrine of papal infallibility to be nonsense” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 37).

⁸⁰Huss, *The Church*, 295; cf. Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial,” 213. Didomizio notes in this regard: “Given the circumstances of the era, might not Jan Hus’s apparent rejection of the claimants to the papacy at that time be viewed as theologically and even canonically justified?” (“Jan Hus’s *De Ecclesia*,” 260 n. 64). Indeed, “church historians today are still hard pressed to assess the canonical status of the papacy during that era” (*ibid.*, 260).

⁸¹Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 5. Here, “the pope’s authority is not absolute: he has no right to define dogmas, although he has jurisdiction in legal cases concerning them” (*ibid.*). Although they recognized the pope could err, however, individual laity cannot make this judgment, only “the college of cardinals or a general council” was “in medieval Europe capable of deciding a case involving papal heresy” (*Ibid.*, 143; cf. Noble, “Ecumenical Discussion,” 13).

⁸²Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 5.

mediates the divine authority” such that “obedience to her is equated with obedience to God” and the “highest authority” is “ascribed to a council” such that “there is no possibility of error in the decisions of a council.”⁸³ Indeed, in the declaration *Haec Sancta*, the Council of Constance “affirmed itself the highest spiritual authority on earth which had to be acknowledged and obeyed by all.”⁸⁴ For Hus, conversely, the “Council had authority only to the extent that it remained within the law of Christ.”⁸⁵

Yet, Hus could and did affirm much of what the Council (and canon law) stated regarding the authority of the “church” while meaning something rather different due to his divergent definitions of the “church” and other key terms.⁸⁶ Whereas the conciliarists at the Council of Constance viewed themselves as the rightful representatives of what they considered the “Church universal,” in Hus’s view the Council might be in mortal error since the Council *might* not be representative of what he considered the “Church universal,” the predestinate of all ages.⁸⁷ Indeed, for Hus, the Council had shown itself to be in error: Although they called themselves “the most sacred Council that cannot err,” they “nonetheless did err: by at first adoring [the later declared antipope] John XXIII on bended knees” and then later condemning him.⁸⁸

Hus could, however, assent to the proposition that one should never depart from the “Church universal,” that is the universal body of the faithful (*congregatio fidelium*), but by this he meant (once again) the “mystical body of

⁸³Noble, “Ecumenical Discussion,” 13.

⁸⁴Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 143.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶See Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 69.

⁸⁷Whereas “the conciliarists themselves [also] distinguished between the *congregatio fidelium* and the *Romana ecclesia*,” the “conciliarists regarded the *congregatio fidelium* legalistically and considered themselves as representing it,” claiming “coercive powers over the entire Christendom” (ibid., 68–69). Hus’s view, however, “repudiated the [conciliarist] concept of the Church as a juridical corporation” (ibid., 62).

⁸⁸Letter 81 to Wenceslas of Duba and John of Chlum, c. June 18–21, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 177. This, they did, Hus adds, “although they knew that he was a base murderer, a sodomite, a simoniac, and a heretic” (ibid., 177–78). Thus, the Council deposed (anti)Pope John XXIII as a false pontiff despite having previously recognized him, deposed Benedict XIII and accepted (for the sake of expediency) the resignation of Gregory XII, whom (along with Benedict XIII) the Council of Pisa (1409) had already deposed and declared heretical. Gregory’s resignation was secured in exchange for considering him the legitimate pope who had called the Council (though John XXIII had actually called it). “Therefore Hus rejected the Council [of Constance] as surely as he had rejected John XXIII” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 143). Hus thus describes this “Council which calls itself the most holy, and that cannot err” as “the greatest abomination!” (Letter 91 to All Faithful Czechs, June 26, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 196).

Christ” consisting of the predestinate, which “is now hidden to us.”⁸⁹ Thus, Hus could agree both with the papalist contention that no one should ever depart from the head of the church as well as with the conciliarist statement that no one should ever depart from the church universal while fundamentally disagreeing with both by taking “head” to refer to Christ rather than the pope and “church universal” to refer to the mystical and, thus, invisible body of Christ (i.e., the predestinate of all ages).⁹⁰ In this way, Hus’s position appears to make any finally authoritative appeal to a church leader or ecclesiastical organization functionally impossible. Hus’s position, then, did not permit him to unconditionally surrender judgment to the Council.

*The Primary Issue: Ecclesiastical vs. Individual
Judgment—The Judge of Scripture*

Against this background, it appears that the primary issue of controversy between Hus and his opponents, especially at Constance, was the extent of ecclesiastical authority relative to individual judgment. Years before the Council, Hus was accused by some colleagues in Prague (hereafter, the “eight doctors”) of “leaning too little on the pope and the college of cardinals” and “wishing to have holy Scripture for the only judge in such matters.” He was accused along with some other “Bohemian clergy” who “interpret [Scripture] and wish to have it interpreted according to their own heads, not caring for the interpretation accepted by the community of wise men in the church.”⁹¹ Hus’s various objections to these accusations significantly clarify his views in this regard.

First, Hus objects that it is a lie that “we would not wish to have for our judge God, the apostles, the holy doctors, or the universal church,” while affirming that he would, nevertheless, not “agree in matters of faith unless

⁸⁹Hus, *Com. on the Lombard*, p. 36, quoted by Schaff in Huss, *The Church*, 10 n. 2. Even the phrase “Roman head” could not disambiguate the issue because Hus “assume[d] that the doctors in their writing designate[d] by the Roman church that church of which the Saviour said to Peter: ‘On this rock I will build my church.’” (ibid., 130).

⁹⁰For Hus’s contemporaries, this was quite a claim given that there was “general agreement on the doctrine that the universal church was indefectible and infallible” (Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)* vol. 4 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 101.

⁹¹Huss, *The Church*, 161. The “faculty of theology, represented by eight of its members, drew up a *consilium*, demanding that all must ‘think and believe as the Roman Church does and not otherwise’” (Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 44). These “eight doctors knew of only one word applicable to Huss, the word recant. His case was not arguable. Unquestioning submission was imperative. Rome had spoken: ‘Yield and obey,’ they wrote” (Schaff, “Introduction,” xi).

they ground themselves in Scripture or reason.”⁹² Given Hus’s definition of the “universal church” as the predestinate and the specific delimitation here of the “*holy* doctors” (emphasis mine), Hus affirms that he would accept as judges those whose positions, by definition, would be in agreement with Scripture.⁹³ That is, he accepts as judges those led by the Holy Spirit who will, in fact, “ground themselves in Scripture or reason.” Thus, he asserts, “with God’s help, we do not intend to explain Scripture otherwise than the Holy Spirit requires and than it is explained by the *holy* doctors to whom the Holy Spirit gave understanding.”⁹⁴ Accordingly, Hus extensively uses the teachings of the “doctors” whom he considers “holy,” noting that his opponents have not “dared to charge us with not giving heed to the interpretation of the *holy* doctors” while challenging them to “show which Scripture it is that we expound ill.”⁹⁵

Hus thus rejects isolationist or arbitrary judgment on the one hand while also upholding the right and duty of individual judgment and conscience in accord with the priority of spiritual obedience on the other. In this regard, the faithful follower of God must utilize individual (non-isolationist) judgment to decide where and how far to follow ecclesiastical commands, departing from them whenever they “gainsay” the commands of God—including those of Scripture, which is to be believed without exception. Undoubtedly, Hus considered his views “to be fully in line with Scripture, indeed derived principally from them.”⁹⁶ As such, Hus “did choose his own theological conclusions,” but he did not do so arbitrarily.⁹⁷ At the same time, “Hus clearly

⁹²Huss, *The Church*, 163.

⁹³In this context, one might understand Hus’s statement, “no one would dare to rebel” against the “writings” of the “holy prophets or the apostles or the later saints” (*ibid.*, 297). Read one way, Hus puts the “later saints” on par with the prophets and apostles. However, if such *saints* are limited to those who are indeed *holy* (including faithful exposition of Scripture), Hus’s view here fits with his wider position that doctors only be followed as they accord with Scripture. In this apparently circumscribed sense, “Hus held to the supremacy of the holy doctors of the Christian faith” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 31).

⁹⁴Huss, *The Church*, 163 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 164–63 (emphasis mine). Giving “heed” need not require taking such writings as themselves determinative. It might be that Hus gives them heed because he views (and continues to view) them as “holy” rather than indefeasibly presupposing they are “holy.”

⁹⁶Fudge, “Infoelix Hus,” 71.

⁹⁷Fudge, *Trial of Jan Hus*, 343. Hus’s “views quite obviously were derived from his own study, intuition and disposition” (Fudge, “Infoelix Hus,” 71). In many other instances, Hus’s positions and actions “underscore independence of thought and regard for truth” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 28). In Šmahel’s view, Hus “placed” strong emphasis on “his own conviction” and held “the Truth as the highest moral value” such that

had no compunction about assailing church doctrine [i.e., that of the visible church] and subverting its authority.”⁹⁸

Yet, at this juncture, Hus’s opponents claim that he does not heed “the holy Scripture recorded in Deut. 7:8–12,” which affords judgment to the Levitical priests. In their interpretation thereof, the pope and cardinals correspond to the Levitical priests, rendering “the judgment of God” in “catholic and ecclesiastical” matters.⁹⁹ Hus responds that the claim that he does not heed Scripture is “the biggest lie of all,” for “these doctors ought to know that we turn to sacred Scripture and affirm that it is the true Word of God, which also confirms our judgment.”¹⁰⁰

Further, Hus appeals to the “word of the Lord” in Exodus 23:2, “Thou shalt not follow the multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou acquiesce in the judgment of the many to depart from the truth.”¹⁰¹ Hus thereby contends that religious or “ecclesiastical” authority is granted *under* the authority of God such that one should not obey even that ecclesiastical (or secular) authority if it departs from the law of God. Thus, if one “truly knows that a pope’s command is at variance with Christ’s command or counsel or tends to any hurt of the church, then he ought boldly to resist it lest he become a partaker in crime by consent.”¹⁰² Indeed, Hus adds, “Pilate was not, therefore, excused because he heard the high priests and the magistrates, scribes and elders of the people, for God said: ‘Thou shalt not follow the multitude to do evil’” (Exod 23:2).¹⁰³ Rather, as Hus so often reminds his audience, “we must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).¹⁰⁴

Accordingly, Hus recalls elsewhere, Jesus contradicted some of the priests and other religious leaders of his day, rejecting their “traditions of men.” Likewise, the teachings and commands of those whose “deeds are plain: covetousness, simony, excessive pride and fornication, forsaking and despising the Word of God, praising their own traditions above the law of God” should

his “activities were therefore based on a subjective foundation (though he considered it objective) that influenced not only his preaching activity but also his actions, which led to his eventual excommunication and trial” (Šmahel, introduction, 20).

⁹⁸Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 30.

⁹⁹Huss, *The Church*, 162.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 164.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid., 204–5.

¹⁰³Ibid., 167. As such, he asks, how “can we be bound contrary to that most holy mandate of God to follow the multitude which the doctors gathered together and led to the city hall that they might overcome by fright those whom they were not able to overcome by Scripture or reason?” (ibid., 166).

¹⁰⁴See, for example, Letter 17 to John Barbatus and the People of Krumlov, Spring of 1411, in *Letters of John Hus*, 50–53.

be rejected.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, Hus elsewhere starkly distinguishes between Scripture and ecclesiastical custom, claiming with regard to “the sacrament of the cup of the Lord” that “no Scripture is opposed to it” and “we ought not follow custom, but Christ’s example and truth.”¹⁰⁶

Concluding his argument against the eight doctors, Hus contends that Christ himself “referred the priests” to Scripture as “judge” in John 5:39.¹⁰⁷ Thus, whereas the “doctors wish that the Scriptures be not the judge,” Christ “wish[ed] the Scriptures to judge the Jews which believed not on Christ.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, Hus coherently upholds the right and duty of individual interpretation and personal conscience while appealing to God himself and his “Word,” the “Scriptures,” as judge even over and against duly appointed religious leaders and/or the multitude.

The Heresy of Individual Judgment

Hus’s unwavering commitment to individual judgment and personal conscience led him to appeal directly to the judgment of Christ in numerous instances leading up to, and at, Constance. Prior to the Council, Hus refused a papal bull commanding him to stop preaching and appealed directly to Christ. For Hus, this was a matter of conscience in obedience to God’s command to preach.¹⁰⁹ As he puts it, “I desired in preaching to obey only God rather than the pope or the archbishop and the rest of the satraps opposing the word of God: ‘Go into all the world.’”¹¹⁰ Hus thus asked, “does the bull conform to scripture and the intention of Christ? ‘Definitely not!’” He thus

¹⁰⁵Letter 27 to the Praguers, c. November 1412, in *Letters of John Hus*, 81; cf. *ibid.*, 154–55.

¹⁰⁶Letter 83 to Havlik, the Preacher in Bethlehem, June 21, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 181. For Hus, “faithful Christians should follow the truth of Christ, not human traditions” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 52). See the discussion of this issue in Hieromonk, “*Sub Utraque Specie*,” 503–22. Thus, Schaff comments regarding Hus’s “clear distinction between apostolic commands, as contained in the Scriptures, and papal mandates” that “No bidding is obligatory which is not distinctly based on Scripture” and “where usage and Scripture disagree, usage is to be set aside” (Schaff, “Introduction,” xxii).

¹⁰⁷Huss, *The Church*, 169.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹Hus contends that “if the pope or another superior orders a priest so disposed not to preach [cf. Acts 10], or the rich not to give alms, the subordinate should not obey” (Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial,” 199). He thus “felt justified in his disobedience on the ground that ‘it is meet to obey God rather than man’” (Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 77).

¹¹⁰Letter 17 to John Barbatus and the People of Krumlov, Spring of 1411, in *Letters of John Hus*, 53; cf. Šmahel, introduction, 37–38.

“appealed against the bull.”¹¹¹ Although willing to obey “the commands of the Pope” that “agree with the commands and doctrines of the apostles, and are after the rule of the law of Christ,” he vowed that “if I see anything in them at variance with this, I will not obey, even if you kindle the fire for the burning of my body before my eyes.”¹¹²

Later, throughout the Council, Hus consistently sought instruction and potential correction from the Scriptures while refusing to declare even a single article false “unless they should show its falsity by Scripture.”¹¹³ The Council was adamant that he unconditionally surrender his judgment to that of the Council and abjure the articles brought against him.¹¹⁴ However, Hus maintained that he had never held many of the articles and thus could not abjure them in good conscience, while he defended or clarified other articles.¹¹⁵ In all this, he expressed earnest desire to be faithful to Scripture, saying, “I hope that I may rather choose death than deny the truth which I have learned from the Scriptures or otherwise.”¹¹⁶

Although the Council repeatedly accused him of obstinacy, Hus continually requested instruction from the Scriptures and professed to the end that he would correct any error shown in his writings.¹¹⁷ This was

¹¹¹Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 121.

¹¹²Quoted in John Hus, *The Letters of John Hus: With Introductions and Explanatory Notes*, trans., Herbert B. Workman and R. Martin Pope (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904), 69. By apostolic commands Hus means “the doctrines of the apostles of Christ.”

¹¹³Letter 93 to the Members of the University of Prague, June 26, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 198.

¹¹⁴As Spinka puts it, the “Council ordered him to submit unconditionally and without demur on his part” (“The Conciliar Movement,” 58; see Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial,” 213–17; Letter 91 to All Faithful Czechs, June 26, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 195–97).

¹¹⁵Hus states, “these bishops exhort me to recant and abjure. But I fear to do so, lest I be a liar in the sight of the Lord, and also lest I offend my own conscience and the truth of God” (Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial,” 229–30). He thus pleads that he “be not forced to lie and abjure those articles of which—God and conscience are my witnesses—I know nothing” (*ibid.*, 214; cf. *ibid.*, 170, 214–15).

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹⁷Hus states at Constance “I would rather die than hold a single error” and “on being instructed I have erred in any way, I am ready humbly to be corrected and to make amends” (*ibid.*, 112). Elsewhere, “he declared his readiness to correct” anything erroneous “according to the rule and instruction of the Holy Scriptures” (*ibid.*, 160). Again, “I have ever desired to be shown better and more relevant Scripture than those that I have written and taught. And if they were shown me, I am ready most willingly to recant” (*ibid.*, 224; see further, for example, *ibid.*, 124, 138, 163, 173, 194, 208–9, 224–29). “To the very end Hus claimed that he had never been obstinate but had

not enough for the Council because they claimed the right of absolute interpretation. Indeed, “if the Council determined something was black when in reality it was white, he [Hus] was nonetheless obliged to agree with that higher authority and confess it was black.”¹¹⁸ While Hus “requested that he be provided an explanation by the council and shown how the given articles were mistaken,” the Council was engaged in “*deciding* on issues of faith and *determining* the meanings of teachings and articles.”¹¹⁹ “Such a dispute” over the interpretation of Hus’s articles, then, “was unthinkable” for the Council, which “only demanded Hus’s unconditional obedience.”¹²⁰ Hus’s view that “every believer, with the help of other mediating authorities, can judge for her or himself” explicitly “contradicted the understanding of the highest authority of the church, to which one has to subject even one’s own judgment without reserve.”¹²¹

Such “subjection without reserve was, for Hus, impossible.”¹²² Accordingly, when no satisfactory instruction or correction from Scripture was forthcoming, Hus again rested his final appeal on the judgment of Christ and refused to unconditionally surrender to the Council’s judgment. He

only desired that the council instruct him from the scriptures. If proven wrong he would recant. Sadly, he never received the fair hearing that was his due” (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 174).

¹¹⁸Fudge, *Memory and Motivation*, 55.

¹¹⁹Pavlíček, “The Chronology,” in *Companion to Jan Hus*, 67.

¹²⁰Ibid. (emphasis mine). As Fudge puts it, “There is no evidence the Council attempted to persuade Hus by this methodology. Regardless of what the fathers thought theologically about scripture, in practice they were committed to a theory of conciliar authority as practically more relevant than any text. Therefore, there was no confrontation between judges and the accused over exegetical principles or authoritative interpretations to be decided” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 48; cf. *ibid.*, 45, 242–43). In Hus’s words: “They did not dare to oppose me with Scripture” (Letter 91 to All Faithful Czechs, June 26, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 196).

¹²¹Noble, “Jan Hus in Ecumenical Discussion,” 12–13. Hus set himself as “an equal partner for the Council Fathers” who was “equipped to discuss, on the basis of Scripture and Tradition, what Christ demands of the church” (*ibid.*, 8 n. 12). However, “he was not ready for an enforced subjection to opinions he was not convinced of” (*ibid.*). Whereas the “fathers at Constance required strict obedience to the authority of the conciliar gathering . . . Hus rejected the idea of absolute obedience to ecclesiastical authority” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 32). Spinka sees this as “Hus’ insistence on the right of private understanding and interpretation of Scripture. . . . The believer had the duty of scrutinizing whether the commands of his superior were not contrary to Scripture; if they were, he had to reject them” (Spinka, *Concept of the Church*, 386–87). “In other words, he asserted the right and duty of the individual to hold and declare the truth of which he is convinced. Hus’ age was not ready for such a revolutionary innovation” (*ibid.*, 387).

¹²²Noble, “Jan Hus in Ecumenical Discussion,” 13.

maintained nevertheless: “I detest whatever false sense exists in any of the articles, and I commit it to the correction of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who knows my sincere intention and does not interpret it in a wrong sense which I do not intend.”¹²³ This appeal to Christ, however, is taken by the Council as bypassing their authority.

Hus’s refusal to *unconditionally* surrender his judgment to that of the Council was consistent with his commitment to the priority of spiritual obedience, itself entailing the right and duty of individual judgment.¹²⁴ This, alongside Hus’s definition of the church universal as the invisible body of Christ, required rejection of the *final* authority of any earthly ecclesiastical leader(s) or organization. Indeed, “Hus’s spiritual concept of the true Church implied, in the Council’s view, a denial of the validity and even the reality of the Church militant,” seemingly making “impossible a reliable functioning of the Church militant in the exercise of its administrative and sacerdotal functions.”¹²⁵ The Council, “sensing this irreconcilability,” roundly “condemn[ed] Hus’s views as subversive of its authority and destructive of the very essence of the Church.”¹²⁶ The de facto bypassing of ecclesiastical authority, entailed by

¹²³Letter 93 to the Members of the University of Prague, June 26, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 198, cf. Mladonovice, “An Account of the Trial,” 175, 196–97.

¹²⁴“It is incontrovertible that Hus rejected the idea of absolute obedience to ecclesiastical authority” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 32). For Schaff, Hus’s assertions regarding the limits of ecclesiastical authority, among other things, “make straight in the direction of the rights of private judgment” (Schaff, “Introduction,” xiv).

¹²⁵Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 69. In Spinka’s view, this “was the real charge against Hus, although actually it was never explicitly formulated or included among the final accusations, but only implicitly inferred” (ibid.). Cf. the view of Stanislaus of Znojmo that on Hus’s view “there is no other body on earth where the necessary authority can be found” (quoted in ibid., 47). “Broadly speaking,” it is “true” that “Hus was condemned for his writings about the church.” Yet, “within that larger framework are the specific questions having to do with the authority of scripture, its place in the larger tradition, and the means to judge true and false doctrine” (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 158). In this regard, Hroboň believes that Hus’s “zeal for Scripture, preaching, and liturgy in the vernacular was one of the main reasons behind the trumped-up charges that led to his martyrdom” (“The Kralice Bible,” 282). Conversely, Fudge believes, “Hus’ fidelity to scripture is unimpeachable. That said, it is not an easily defensible thesis to insist Hus suffered condemnation and execution on account of his allegiance to scripture. . . . The issue for the Council was not scripture but Hus’ persistent noncompliance. His sin in their eyes was contumacy. That was an offense they could not abide” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 48).

¹²⁶Spinka, “The Conciliar Movement,” 69. Fudge characterizes this as the “subtle, yet subversive, agenda” of “Hus’ calling into question the medieval assumption of an authoritarian ecclesiastical hierarchy” (Fudge, “Ansellus Dei,” 147). Elsewhere, Fudge comments that Hus’s “theology logically led to revolution” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 34). Spinka adds, “The hidden destructive force of Hus’s spiritual concept

Hus's commitment to spiritual obedience, the Council could not abide.¹²⁷ Indeed, "Hus was faced with only two real possibilities: either yield to the court and recant all of the presented articles, or be condemned."¹²⁸ Pressed to a final decision between unconditional obedience to the Council and abiding by personal conscience, Hus wrote: "God is my witness that the evidence given against me is false In the truth of the gospel I have written, taught, and preached today I will gladly die."¹²⁹

Conclusion: The Trajectory of Hus's Views of Authority

We are now in a better position to understand and assess Hus's position on the authority of Scripture in relation to church authority and individual conscience. A careful reading of Hus's *De ecclesia*, his letters, and reports of the interactions at Constance reveals an internal logic that appears to guide Hus's response to the charges of private judgment and the individual interpretation of Scripture without regard for the community (among others).

As noted earlier, Fudge explains Hus's structure of authority as requiring consonance with "scripture, tradition, and conscience."¹³⁰ Yet, while Hus does recognize each of these as authoritative (though not equally so), the case of Hus evokes the broader issue of the extent of such authorities and how to

of the Church catholic was plainly demonstrated a century later in the Protestant Reformation" (Spinka, "The Conciliar Movement," 69–70).

¹²⁷By placing himself apart from and above the authority of the Council it seemed to that synod that he presented himself superior to all judgment" (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 143). Spinka adds that Hus's "cases of ecclesiastical disobedience involved the right or duty of private judgment as to what is the command of God or of man. It is not surprising that, from the point of view of the Council, which regarded the Church as a juridical corporation, such an exercise of private judgment was intolerable" given that its view required "a veritable ecclesiastical totalitarianism" ("The Conciliar Movement," 77–78).

¹²⁸Pavliček, "The Chronology," in *Companion to Jan Hus*, 67. Fudge believes that Hus's "accusers were already predisposed toward his guilt" and came to Constance "with but two options for Hus: total and complete submission, or the stake" (Fudge, "Infoelix Hus," 71–72).

¹²⁹Quoted in *The Letters of John Hus*, trans., Workman and Pope, 279.

¹³⁰Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 32. Hus was thus prepared to accept the Council's judgment "if it remained consistent with scripture, tradition, and conscience. All the factors were operative and necessary. None could be excluded, and none could function with validity in isolation" (ibid.; cf. Molnar, "Wyclif and Hus," 385). Yet, see the earlier discussion of primarily negative references to "tradition" in *De ecclesia*. Notably, in this regard, for Hus, the common denominator of these authorities was "the law of Christ" (i.e., "the gospel articulated and modeled by Christ and the apostles" to which "all law had to be subservient") and "[n]othing could be added or subtracted to that rule" (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 33).

adjudicate between them. That is, when faced with differing religious and/or theological perspectives, which authority (if any) is proper to adjudicate between them?

The case of Hus highlights a number of potential authorities (under God) including Scripture, the doctors of the church, individual judgment, the pope, a Council, and/or all of the members of the church collectively.¹³¹ For Hus, each of these holds legitimate but not equal authority. Indeed, each of these authorities *might* be gainsaid, except for Scripture alone. According to Hus's conception of the absolute priority of spiritual obedience over ecclesiastical obedience ("we must obey God rather than men"), God's truth—including, but not limited to, the Bible—takes precedence over ecclesiastical teachings and/or commands.

Authoritative appeal to the pope, a council, and/or the "visible" church evokes the questions: Which pope, which council, and/or which (visible) church? Because a pope *might* be antichrist, *unconditional* obedience cannot be given; one must reject any pope's command that contradicts God's law.¹³² Likewise, a Council *might* be in mortal error and the visible church contains a mixture of predestinate and reprobate, the latter of which might "err gravely" (cf. Exod 23:2) such that neither can be *finally* authoritative.¹³³ Whereas obedience in some regards is due to each of these authorities, *unconditional* obedience should not be offered because any of these might be in mortal error. Rather, for Hus, "every believer, with the help of other mediating authorities, can judge for her or himself whether the church is exercising the authority

¹³¹Throughout I use individual judgment to encapsulate the exercise of one's reason, affected by one's experience, leading to particular interpretations and conclusions (i.e., judgments).

¹³²For Hus, Antichrist is one who acted contrary to Christ. The distinction was lost on his detractors (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 38).

¹³³Huss, *The Church*, 168. Would the "universal church" fare any better? It seems not, for on Hus's view the visible church is a mixed "multitude" (cf. Exod 23:2) and might "err gravely" (ibid.). Indeed, "it is possible that the church as a visible entity may be in fact a spiritual whore" (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 35). Thus, "There is no visible authority capable of passing a final ruling whom Hus will recognize" (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 171). Cf. Stephen Pálec's view that "whatever the Roman church has approved in matters of faith must be accepted by everyone" (ibid., 172). Levy notes, however, that the "'Roman church' that he consistently refers to—here in the midst of a papal schism—looks more like a vague abstraction than a functioning court of appeal" (ibid., 173). He believes that the "battle over authoritative sources will never end unless both sides are willing to recognize some final interpretive judgment issued by some unimpeachable (and thus infallible) authority from whom there is no further appeal" (ibid., 171).

of Christ or of the Antichrist.”¹³⁴ As such, the individual must finally choose when to obey and disobey in keeping with the priority of spiritual obedience.

At the same time, individual judgment is not to be employed in isolation or followed without exception. On the contrary, one’s judgment may be corrected, particularly by Scripture and/or the teachings of the *holy* doctors.¹³⁵ However, Scripture stands as primary also over the doctors of the church.¹³⁶ Thus, whereas Hus contends that Scripture is to be believed and obeyed without exception, not all “doctors” of the church were or are indeed *holy*. One must identify which of the doctors are indeed holy and trustworthy guides. This requires individual (yet not isolationist) judgment, including both interpretation of God’s truth (particularly the Scriptures) and evaluation of the life and teachings of any claimant. Yet, while *some* false teachers might be identified by their fruits, others might not be immediately identifiable as such.

Therefore, Hus posits Scripture as authoritative without exception whereas any “doctor” who departs from Scripture should be disobeyed, thereby requiring that the teachings and lives of doctors themselves be put to the test of Scripture.¹³⁷ As Molnar puts it, Hus accepted the writings of “Church Fathers and Doctors” as “authoritative insofar as they interpret truths implied in the Scriptures.”¹³⁸ That is, Fudge adds, whereas Hus’s opponents held that “Tradition, canon law, and scripture were of equal importance,” Hus maintained that “scripture constituted the highest source and most important criterion of

¹³⁴Noble, “Ecumenical Discussion,” 12.

¹³⁵Also, for Hus, one’s individual judgment might be corrected by showing an error of reason, etc.

¹³⁶Notably, Hus “defined heresy in a strictly Augustinian manner to denote contumacious adherence to anything contrary to scripture” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 108). Levy likewise notes that Hus defined heresy as “stubbornly defended erroneous doctrine contrary to the Holy Scriptures” (Hus, *On Simony* [1413], quoted in Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 157).

¹³⁷Recall “one is not bound to believe the sayings of the saints, or the papal bulls, unless they have spoken from scripture or can at least be grounded *implicitly* in scripture” (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 160). Indeed, “it is unlawful to disbelieve or contradict the Holy Scripture. . . . Nobody, says Hus, ought to be believed except to the extent that his words are grounded in scripture” (Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 160; cf. Fudge, “Ansellus Dei,” 147). Thus, Hus “teaches, the Bible is the only infallible norm. This position does not involve a rejection of the doctrinal explanations of the church fathers or the decrees of the councils or the laws of the Church, provided that such explanations, decrees and laws agree with the Word of God. Even that which is merely implied may be accepted, if it be not contrary to the clear instructions of the sacred volume” (W. N. Schwarze, *John Hus, the Martyr of Bohemia: A Study of the Dawn of Protestantism* [London: Revell, 1915], 90).

¹³⁸Molnar, “Wyclif and Hus,” 43.

faith.¹³⁹ Indeed, “scripture functioned as the final court of appeal and truth for Hus,” though “Scripture is never alone and there is never a time in which the naked text of scripture functions apart from all other considerations.”¹⁴⁰

Accordingly, Hus aims at being “strictly biblical.”¹⁴¹ In the words of Levy, “an argument (*locus*) based upon the authority of scripture always takes first place” and “Scripture transcends every human authority” because “we are to seek wisdom from the divine and infallible Author of truth.”¹⁴² Given that one’s individual interpretation of Scripture may itself be in error, however, Hus professes openness to correction by lesser authorities insofar as they can provide a better interpretation of Scripture.¹⁴³ Thus, Hus upholds individual judgment and personal conscience but not “arbitrary judgment.”¹⁴⁴ Accordingly, he writes regarding his own teachings, “if there be anything

¹³⁹Fudge, *Memory and Motivation*, 26. Cf. George’s view that, for Hus, Scripture was to “be the normative rule of faith and conduct for all believers” (George, “The Reformation Connection,” 35). While Hus respected “the tradition of the church,” the “church tradition could not be placed above the written word of God” (ibid.). Molnar adds, Hus “loyally accepted, in addition to Scripture, tradition as well as papal decrees concerning Scripture.” Yet, “He came close to Protestantism by insisting on the authoritative superiority of Scripture over tradition, but remained faithful to the Catholic inclusion of tradition” (Molnar, “Wyclif and Hus,” 42). Thus, Molnar speaks of Hus’s “subordination of tradition to Scripture” (ibid.).

¹⁴⁰Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 48. This contra Paul De Vooght’s view that Hus firstly affirms “the rights of the individual Christian conscience ahead of the interventions of the ecclesiastical authority (be it pontifical acts of sacramental absolution) and, secondly, the exaltation of Christian tradition (the patristic and conciliar tradition and inspired Scripture) as the gold standard to which all Christians, from the Pope to the last of the faithful, has the duty to submit” (De Vooght, *L’Hérésie de Jean Huss*, 280 [my translation]). Fudge contends, rather, that while “Hus made every effort to find traditional moorings for his exegesis and understanding of scripture,” in “the end, it was Hus’ interpretation of scripture . . . that functioned as the basis for his final appeal. Thus, at Constance he demanded to be instructed according to scripture” (Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 48).

¹⁴¹Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 85. Thus, “for Jan Hus the whole Bible is God’s Word and absolutely the only applicable standard for the life of the Church, its traditions, society, proclamation, liturgy, teaching and pastoral ministry” (Liguš, “Master Jan Hus,” 53).

¹⁴²Levy, *Holy Scripture*, 154. For Hus, Scripture cannot be false: “Those who say that scripture can be false simply because they can apply some false meaning to its words are admonished to submit themselves to the literal sense (*sensui litterali*), which the Holy Spirit requires” (ibid., 156).

¹⁴³Thus “whenever he found a better opinion he would gladly and humbly abandon his own; and he added, ‘for I know that what we know is negligible compared to what we do not know, as Themistius says’” (Bartoš, “Hus’ Commentary,” 152; cf. Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 29).

¹⁴⁴See Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 48.

unworthy” therein, “abandon it.”¹⁴⁵ Relative to ecclesiastical authorities and individual judgment, “transcendent authority can never be completely identified with human understanding.”¹⁴⁶

However, this brings us to the pivotal question: Whose interpretation? Even if the question, Which authority? could be satisfactorily answered, the question of whose interpretation would remain. In other words, whatever “source” is adopted as authoritative must *also* be interpreted (including, but not limited to, Scripture). It appears, then, that one cannot bypass individual interpretation and thus cannot avoid judgment according to one’s personal conscience. As such, Hus’s adherence to the right and duty of individual judgment, without being isolationist, appears to be consistent with the internal logic of his commitment to the priority of spiritual obedience, coupled with his view regarding the invisibility of the true church.¹⁴⁷ Accordingly, Hus does not claim his interpretation is infallible but recognizes humbly that “every word of Christ is true; if I do not understand some, I commit it to His grace in the hope that I shall understand it after I die.”¹⁴⁸

Insofar as one shares Hus’s commitment to the maxim “we must obey God rather than men,” and agrees with him that Scripture is the only visible (i.e., identifiable) *mediate* authority that is to be obeyed without exception, it seems to me that one might consistently continue the trajectory of Hus’s position by attempting to methodologically grant priority to the teachings and commands of Scripture above—and, where necessary, against—all other mediate authorities, while guarding against isolationism and upholding the right and duty of individual judgment and adherence to personal conscience. In so doing, we might in the twenty-first century affirm along with Hus that “we must obey God rather than men.”

¹⁴⁵Letter 74 to Lord Henry Skopek of Duba, June 13, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 168. Elsewhere, he exhorts his followers: “if anyone has heard at my preaching or in private anything contrary to the truth of God, or if I have written it anywhere—which, I trust God, there is none of it—that he does not hold it” (Letter 73 to His Friends in Bohemia, June 10, 1415, in *Letters of John Hus*, 165).

¹⁴⁶Fudge, *Religious Reform*, 29.

¹⁴⁷“Obedience to God’s Word has absolute priority in relation to all three states: spiritual, secular and religious” (Liguš, “Master Jan Hus” 55).

¹⁴⁸Hus, *Postilla*, 86, quoted in Spinka, *John Hus’ Concept of the Church*, 326–27. Although he did “on the whole” insist “that Scripture may be comprehended by reason” (*ibid.*, 327).