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# A Novel Doctrine? An Evaluation of *Sola Scriptura* in Patristic and Medieval Thought

Robert T. Leonard

A Thesis in the Field of History

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Abstract

This thesis examines the question of historical continuity between the sixteenth century Protestant Reformers and patristic/medieval theologians relative to the doctrine of *sola scriptura.* This principle, that the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were the highest and final authority for matters of the Christian faith, became one of the major points of conflict between Roman Catholics and the emerging Protestant movement. This study will evaluate primary source material spanning the patristic period to the late Middle Ages to determine if *sola scripture* was a novel invention of Martin Luther and his fellow Protestants, or if it had been a known and accepted principle prior to the Reformation. It will be argued that although the doctrine became a source of controversy during the Reformation, it was in fact an established and little contested principle throughout the preceding fifteen hundred years.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Kevin Madigan of Harvard Divinity School for his ongoing support over the past several years. Professor Madigan has been of invaluable help and encouragement in the completion of this thesis. I would also like to acknowledge and thank fellow students Daniel Coronado and Leonard Lane for their friendship and engagement. Finally, I wish to thank my beautiful and gifted wife Kimberly for her limitless patience and love throughout this process.

Frontispiece[1]



[1] Emile Delperée, Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms, Public Domain.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ..... iv

Frontispiece ..... v

Chapter 1 Introduction: Why *Sola Scriptura*? ..... 9

Chapter 2 Definitions of Terms ..... 14

Chapter 3 Overview of Historiography ..... 19

Heiko A Oberman ..... 19

Oberman's Allies ..... 23

An Eastern Orthodox Perspective ..... 27

Opponents of Oberman ..... 28

Chapter 3 Historical Background ..... 33

The Reformation and the Council of Trent ..... 33

What Did the Reformers Believe? ..... 35

Martin Luther ..... 37

Philip Melanchthon ..... 38

John Calvin ..... 39

Views of the Reformers - Conclusion ..... 42

Chapter 4 The Early Patristic Period ..... 44

Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202) ..... 44

Clement of Alexandria (153-217) ..... 49

Tertullian of Carthage (155-220) ..... 52

Origen of Alexandria (185-254) ..... 55

Basil the Great of Caesarea (330-79) ..... 58
Patristics – Conclusion ..... 62
Chapter 5 Augustine of Hippo (354-430) ..... 64
Augustine's Understanding of the Canonical Scriptures ..... 64
Augustine's Understanding of Tradition ..... 74
St. Augustine: Conclusion ..... 79
Chapter 6 The Middle Ages ..... 80
Vincent of Lérins (d. 450) ..... 81
Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) ..... 83
Peter Abelard (1079-1142) ..... 88
Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141) ..... 91
John Duns Scotus (1266-1308) ..... 94
Three Popes ..... 96
Leo I (the Great) (400-461): ..... 96
Gregory the Great (540-604): ..... 97
John XXII (1244-1334) ..... 97
The Middle Ages – Conclusion ..... 99
Chapter 7 Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) ..... 102
The Relationship Between Reason and the Scriptures ..... 102
Interpreting the Scriptures ..... 105
The Unique Authority of the Canonical Scriptures ..... 106
Non-Canonical Tradition ..... 108
Church and Scripture ..... 111

Aquinas – Conclusion ..... 114
Chapter 8 Conclusions ..... 116
The Unique Place of Scripture ..... 117
Unwritten Apostolic Tradition ..... 118
Scripture and Papal Authority ..... 119
Bibliography ..... 121

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Why *Sola Scriptura*?

> There are many seeming contradictions and even obscurities in the innumerable writings of the church fathers…Doubtless the father might err; even Peter, the prince of the apostles, fell into error. The fathers did not themselves believe that they were always right. Augustine found himself mistaken in some cases…he warns his admirers not to look upon his letters as they would upon the scriptures…All writing belonging to this class are to be read with full freedom to criticize, and with no obligation to accept unquestioningly…But an explicit exception must be made in the case of the Old and New Testaments. In the scriptures, when anything strikes us as absurd, we may not say that the writer erred, but that the scribe made a blunder in copying manuscripts, or that there is an error in interpretation, or that the passage is not understood. The fathers make a very careful distinction between the Scriptures and later works. They advocate a discriminating, not to say suspicious, use of the writings of their own contemporaries.[2]

- Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non*

On first glance, the above passage could reasonably be ascribed to Martin Luther. The 16th century reformer drew a sharp distinction between the canonical scriptures and all other sources of doctrinal authority. *Sola scriptura,*[3] Luther's belief that the canonical writings of the Old and New Testaments were the final authorities for matters of faith, became one of the decisive factors leading to the Protestant Reformation.[4] The passage

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[2] Peter Abelard, "Sic et Non," in *Readings in European History, 2 Vols., Vol. I: From the Breaking up of the Roman Empire to the Protestant Revolt*, ed. James Harvey Robinson (Boston: Ginn & Co, 1904-06), 450-51, accessed March 1, 2021. https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/1120abelard.asp.

[3] "Scripture Alone"

[4] Luther's writings, and those of the other magisterial Reformers will be examined in this thesis to arrive at an understanding of *sola scriptura* at the time of the Reformation. As a starting point, see: Martin Luther, *Before the Diet of Worms,* accessed August 8, 2022. https://www.bartleby.com/268/7/8.html.

cited, however, is not a product of Martin Luther's pen. It is instead attributed to the scholastic theologian Peter Abelard, who lived 400 years prior to the Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation upended the medieval order—theologically, socially, and politically--and introduced a division among Western Christians that prevails to this day. *Sola scriptura* was likely the most divisive aspect of Luther's teaching. His arguments for *sola fide* and *sola gratia* (salvation by *faith alone* and through *grace alone*), though at odds with late medieval Catholicism, did not carry the same societal and political implications. If the scriptures were the final religious authority, the institutional Catholic Church would lose much of its influence and power, which at the time of the Reformation was considerable. The resulting fallout was predictable.[5] The Protestant Reformation represented a fundamental change in the world view of the Middle Ages, one which would help usher in the modern era in Europe.

The Roman Catholic Church convened the Council of Trent (1545-63) as its formal response to the Reformation. The council found *sola scriptura* to be a novelty, an aberration from what had been previously taught and believed. The Council of Trent held that certain extra-biblical traditions had an equal standing with the canonical scriptures. These traditions were uniquely preserved within the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, the church recognized two equal sources for establishing doctrine - scripture and "tradition."[6]

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[5] The consequences of the Reformation have been the subject of debate; however, it is probably safe to say that the Reformation significantly contributed to the Thirty Years War, the demise of the Holy Roman Empire, the emergence of nation sates, the rise of secularism and the French and American revolutions. For examples of studies addressing the impact of the Reformation see:
Bridget Heal, and Ole Peter Grell, *The Impact of the European Reformation: Princes, Clergy and People*, (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), and Peter C. Messer, William Harrison Taylor, Bryan A Banks, David Bebbington, Rick Kennedy, Gideon Mailer, Rebecca K McCoy, S. Scott Rohrer, Anderson R Rouse, and S. Spencer Wells, *Revolution as Reformation: Protestant Faith in the Age of Revolutions*, *1688-1832*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2021).

[6] Some parts of the argument hinge on what is meant by "tradition." This point will be further investigated.

The two sources, so the Council argued, had been the church's historical position since its earliest days.[7]

There has been a good deal of criticism from both the advocates and detractors of *sola scriptura* against those holding the opposing view. These debates have tended to make theological considerations and denominational rivalries their primary concerns, with less emphasis on the doctrine's historicity.[8] There is, however, some scholarship approaching the problem from a historical (or at least a combined historical/ theological) perspective.

Probably the most important study is Heiko A. Oberman's essay "Quo Vadis Petre?"[9], first published in 1963. For Oberman, the Reformation era conflict was not "Scripture vs Tradition," but "rather the clash between two concepts of tradition."[10] To the early church "tradition" was synonymous with the scriptures but evolved over time to mean an additional non-canonical, and to Roman Catholics, equally authoritative source of doctrine. According to Oberman, *sola scriptura* was an established principle until late in the Middle Ages.[11] Opposing scholars understand tradition as a second and separate source of doctrine, present and acknowledged from the earliest days of the church, and thus see little historical precedent for *sola scriptura* prior to the Reformation.[12] This issue

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[7] See: "General Council of Trent: Fourth Session," in *Papal Encyclicals Online*, accessed July 20, 2022. https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/fourthsession.htm.http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ENG0432/_PB.HTM.

[8] Such can be found at the very onset, for example in Luther's debates with Desiderius Erasmus. See: *Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther, Discourse on Free Will* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

[9] Heiko A. Oberman, The Dawn of the Reformation: *Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 269-296.

[10] Oberman, 270.

[11] Other writers who have supported Heiko Oberman include Alistair McGrath and Keith Mathison. See Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987); Keith A Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura (*Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001).

[12] See Georges Henri Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1978); Phillip Blosser, "What are the Philosophical and Practical Problems of Sola Scriptura?" in *Not by Scripture Alone:*

is foundational to the ongoing debate between Catholics and Protestants, influencing nearly all areas of contested doctrine, from the role of the pope, to purgatory, to the immaculate conception of Mary.

In this thesis, I will examine the question of historical continuity between the Reformation's understanding of *sola scriptura* and that of prior eras. Was *sola scriptura* a novel idea invented by Martin Luther, or had it been the church's de facto position for many years? As the Reformation progressed, it eventually produced several different versions of the doctrine. Here, I will focus on that view held by the magisterial Reformers.[13] Undoubtedly, this topic lends itself to a polemical approach, which I will seek to avoid. It is therefore vital to understand the *historical* claims for and against this doctrine. The question addressed will not be "Is *sola scriptura* the correct doctrinal principle?" but rather "Is *sola scriptura* grounded historically in the earliest and most authoritative theological sources?"[14] To answer this question, I will examine a representative sampling of major Christian thinkers throughout the patristic and medieval eras.

A review of primary sources supports the argument that the principle (though not the term) *sola scriptura*, or something quite like it, was in practice the default position well up to the later Middle Ages. From very early on, the canonical scriptures were accorded a preeminent standing above all other sources of doctrinal authority, including unwritten apostolic traditions, the writings of the patriarchs, and even the rulings of

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*A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*., ed. Robert A Sungenis (Santa Barbara, CA Queenship Pub. Co., 1997); Peter M. J. Stravinskas, "What is Catholicism's Official Doctrine on Scripture and Tradition?" in *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*., ed. Robert A Sungenis (Santa Barbara, CA Queenship Pub. Co., 1997).

[13] The views of the more radical Reformers, such as the Anabaptists will not be within the thesis scope.

[14] It should be noted that the doctrine's historicity, or lack thereof, does not conclusively prove, or disprove, its' overall validity. That larger question is outside the scope of this thesis.

ecumenical councils. The church saw itself as the custodian of the canon, but also subject to the canon. This primacy of scripture was assumed, not debated.[15] It would therefore be invoked but not challenged, as it would be challenged during the Reformation.

[15] For an example of such an assumption see: Pope John XXII, "Quum inter nonnullos, (1323) in *Codex Iuris Canonicus*, ed. B. Tauchnitz (Leipzig:1879), accessed March 19, 2021, https://www.franciscan-archive.org/bullarium/qinn-e.html. Pope John is here arguing against an earlier ruling that Jesus and the apostles did not own any personal property. John does not invoke his own authority as pope, instead appealing solely to the teaching of scripture. This, of course, does not imply that other distinctively Protestant doctrines were necessarily established practices prior to the Reformation.

## Chapter 2

## Definitions of Terms

*Canon*: (from the Greek, κανών, meaning measuring rod): Those books of the Old and New Testaments that came to be officially received by the Christian church, and considered to be divinely inspired writings.[16]

*Catholicity*: Relating to the whole, comprehensive. Used by Ignatius of Antioch to distinguish between the whole church, where Christ is, and the partial or local church, where the bishop appears. Also used to suggest authentic or orthodox faith, consensus of belief and universality.[17]

*Council of Trent*: The official response of the Roman Catholic Church to the Reformation and the theological questions it raised.[18]

*Canon Law*: The body of rules or laws imposed by ecclesiastical authority in matters of faith, morals, and discipline. Initially derived from church councils, the Canon Law also included other sources such as the decrees of bishops and papal letters.[19]

*Donatism*: A Christian separatist movement arising in 4th century North Africa. The Donatist held that sacraments where invalid if dispensed by an unworthy minister.[20]

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[16] F.L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd ed, rev. / edited by E.A. Livingstone (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed February 28, 2022, https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780192802903.001.0001/acref-9780192802903.

[17] Erwin Fahlbusch and G. W. Bromiley, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Leiden, Netherlands: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Brill, 1999), accessed March 1, 2002. https://referenceworks-brillonline-com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/browse/encyclopedia-of-christianity.

[18] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.

[19] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

[20] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

*Ecumenical Councils*: Gatherings of church representatives for the purpose of discussing matters of faith and order, reaching decisions, and issuing decrees. The Eastern Orthodox Churches recognize only the seven councils of the fourth to eighth centuries as ecumenical. The Roman Catholic Church, however, also views as ecumenical any medieval and modern councils that have been convened under papal approval.[21] Most Protestants tend to accept the early councils and reject the later.

*Filioque:* (Latin, *and the Son*): A phrase added to the Nicene-Constantinople Creed, whereby the Holy Spirt was defined as proceeding from both the Father and Son. In the original Creed, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone.

*Formal Sufficiency of Scripture*: (Contrasted with the *Material Sufficiency of scripture*). Generally held to be the authority, or the means by which the scriptures are interpreted. For example, the post Council of Trent Catholic Church held that the only valid interpretive authority is the Roman Catholic magisterium.[22]

*Glossa*: A brief comment added to explain a text, often used in Biblical and Patristic exegesis.[23]

*Gnostics and Gnosticism*: (from the Greek γνῶσις, meaning knowledge): A religious movement which in its Christian form arose in the second century. A dualistic philosophy that pitted spirit (good) against matter (evil). Considered a heresy by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and Reformation-Era Protestant Christians alike.[24]

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[21] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.
[22] Kevin J Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 115, Kindle.
[23] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.
[24] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

*Heresy*: The formal denial or doubt of any defined doctrine of the Christian faith, especially where an official doctrinal position of the Roman Catholic Church is rejected.[25]

*Hermeneutic*s: The methodology of exegesis. Exegesis is the explanation of a text, particularly of sacred writings, in accordance with pre-defined rules. Hermeneutics is the methodology for devising exegetical rules and procedures.[26]

*Kerygma*: Proclamation, what is heralded aloud. Used in this study in the sense of the apostolic preaching about Jesus to the first generation of Christians.[27]

*Montanism*: 2nd Century eschatological movement predicting an immanent outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Founded by Montanus of Phrygia, who claimed prophetic inspiration. Montanism was noted for ascetism and severity of discipline.[28]

*Magisterial Reformers*: Martin Luther and the associated early Protestant Reformers (such as Philp Melanchthon), who endorsed moderate and orderly reforms, and worked in conjunction with secular rulers. Contrasted with the so-called Radical Reformers who advocated more extreme doctrinal changes and societal departures from the medieval order.[29]

*Magisterium* (Roman Catholic): The official teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church.[30]

*Marcionism*: Movement formed by Marcion of Pontus in the mid-2nd century. Marcionites embraced only certain portions of New Testament, and rejected the Old in its

[25] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[26] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[27] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.
[28] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[29] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.
[30] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.

entirety. The Marcionites maintained that God's sole attribute was love, to the complete exclusion of law or justice. Similar to the Gnostics, they held to a dualism between the evil *Demiurge* (the creator of the material world) and the good God of Jesus.[31]

*Material Sufficiency of Scripture*: The principle that the scriptures contain within themselves all things necessary for salvation, everything needed to live the Christian life.[32]

*Papal Bull*: Deeds, edicts, and orders issued from a Roman Catholic pope.[33]

*Patristic Period*: (from the Latin *patres*, meaning fathers) Encompasses the period between the end of the first century and the end of the 8th century in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. The study of Patristics deals with the writings of these early church fathers.[34]

*Regula Fidei* (Rule of Faith): Overview formulations of the Christian faith, circulated in the second century, and intended to help distinguish orthodox belief form heresy. The wording of these statements varied but were held to have been descended from apostolic times and to have faithfully reflected the teachings of the New Testament.[35] This is a nuanced that term that is not whose precise definition is not always agreed upon.

*Scholasticism*: A teaching methodology prevalent in European universities from the eleventh to the sixteenth century. A series of apparently contradictory statements

[31] Cross, *The Oxford Distortionary of the Christian Church*.
[32] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel,* 114.
[33] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity.*
[34] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[35] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

were drawn from ancient texts. These would then be subjected to logical analyses which would reveal their underlying agreement.[36]

*Sola Fide* and *Sola Gratia*: The doctrines, advanced by Protestant Reformers such as Martin Lither and John Calvin, that one is justified (made right) before God by God's grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*). This justification is apart from human effort or cooperation. Opposed by the Council of Trent, which ruled that one's justification requires their cooperation with God.[37]

*Sola Scriptura*: Principle of the Protestant Reformation advocating that the canonical scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, are the primary and only absolute source of true doctrine.[38]

*Subjectivism*: The individual interpretation of scripture, apart from any historical or corporate considerations.[39]

[36] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[37] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[38] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.
[39] Fahlbusch, *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*.

## Chapter 3

## Overview of Historiography

The merits of *sola scriptura* as a doctrinal principle have been heavily debated by theologians, with the primary division between Catholic and Protestant scholars. We must, of course, recognize that these branches of Christianity have been in varying degrees estranged since the Reformation. They are, in a sense, *competitors*. Therefore, these studies tend to have as a goal the advancement of a particular denomination's doctrinal position. Therefore, the focus of this section will be largely limited to these authors' historical, rather than theological arguments.

### Heiko A Oberman

In his influential essay *Quo Vadis Petre?* Heiko Oberman assesses what he believes are two conflicting understandings of the term "tradition." [40] Oberman argues that from its earliest days, the Christian church understood tradition essentially to mean the scriptures themselves. Other Protestant writers, such as Alistair McGrath and Keith Mathison have agreed.[41] Roman Catholics, such as George Henri Tavard[42] have suggested an alternative assessment: tradition has always included both scripture and

[40] Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 269-296.
[41]McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* and Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*.
[42] Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*.

certain other sources (written and unwritten), all of which have always been viewed as equally authoritative.

Since Oberman lays down much of the foundation taken up by other writers, his views will be considered in some detail. According to Oberman, the early church saw no essential distinction between tradition and scripture. Tradition is not an additional source of doctrine. Rather, tradition was understood as "either the process by which the scriptures were handed down, or the canonical scriptures themselves. This implies the explicit denial of extra-scriptural tradition."[43] Oberman suggests that a disparity exists between what he identifies as "Tradition I" and "Tradition II." Tradition I is "the single exegetical tradition of interpreted scripture," that is, the scriptures themselves, and their historically agreed upon interpretation. Oberman understands Tradition II as "the *two-source theory* which allows for an extra-biblical oral tradition." According to this principle, teachings exist that are not found in scripture but have an authority equal to scripture. Oberman believes the two-source principle became the formally accepted position of the Roman Catholic Church during and following the Reformation. He offers evidence for this view by analyzing the work of early church theologians, briefly reviewed here.

Oberman argues that Irenaeus (130-202) held to "an unbroken continuation of the preached kerygma into Holy Scripture."[44] "The Rule of Faith" (*regula fidei*)[45] is

[43] Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 271.
[44] Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 270-280
[45] There are differing views on what constitutes the *regula fidei.* F.F. Bruce provides a concise definition that summarizes the Protestant (Olbermann's) understanding: "Before the word `canon' came to be used in the sense of 'list', it was used in another sense by the church-in the phrase `the rule of faith' or 'the rule of truth'.' In the earlier Christian centuries this was a summary of Christian teaching, believed to reproduce what the apostles themselves taught, by which any system of doctrine offered for Christian acceptance, or any interpretation of biblical writings, was to be assessed. But when once the limits of holy scripture came

faithfully preserved by the apostolic Church and has found multiform expression in the canonical books." The written records of the apostles' teaching "constitute the foundation and cornerstone of the faith." Oberman rejects arguments for the precedence of the church over the canonical scriptures, noting that: "In Irenaeus' understanding of the relation of Christ, the Apostles and the canonical writings, there is no place for a so-called creation of the canon by the church. The act of the Church is an act of acknowledgement, of conserving and receiving of the rule of faith which now in manifold form expresses a series of historical acts of God."

In Tertullian (155-220), Oberman finds a strong distinction made between the "tradition of God, preserved in the canon and the traditions of man."[46] There has been from the very earliest a unified, reciprocal relationship between the church and scriptures; the scriptures as the foundation of the church and the church as the preserver and transmitter of the scriptures, to the exclusion of non-canonical sources of authority. Oberman believes this view prevailed as late as the fourteenth century. However, in the fourth and fifth centuries, this organic unity of church and scripture began to show signs of unravelling.

Basil the Great (330-370), first suggested that "the Christian owes equal respect and obedience to the written and unwritten ecclesiastical traditions, whether they are contained in the canonical writings or in the secret oral traditions handed down by the Apostles." The church canonists, of the late medieval period would appeal to Basil for support. For these, the canon law stood upon the "two pillars of scripture and tradition."

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to be generally agreed upon, holy scripture itself came to be regarded as the rule of faith. See F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 68-69, Kindle.

[46] Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 272, 274.

Like Basil, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) would be recalled in the later Middle Ages, and according, to Oberman, reinterpreted.[47]

Oberman assesses the *Commonitory* (early 5th century) of Vincent of Lérins, as another possible influence in the development of Tradition II. Vincent's principal thesis was that the church must believe "that which has been believed everywhere, always and by everyone," Oberman does not think that this allows for an authoritative non-canonical tradition. He argues that Vincent intended the church's role as an interpretive one, a means of preservation and a guard against change. Vincent did not want this interpretation to become an additional source of revelation.[48]

Moving to the later Middle Ages, Oberman again notes the role of the canon lawyer. At issue was how to resolve questions not addressed in scripture. With their emphasis on precise, practical regulations this was a greater concern for the canonists than the theologians. Oberman maintains that there had long been appeals to what the scriptures said *implicitly,* but that over time, this idea came to mean what the scriptures said *silently*. These silent utterances were then equated with non-canonical church teaching (defined as Tradition II) and given equal weight with Tradition I[49].

Matin Luther's forerunners, John Wycliff and John Huss opposed Tradition II, and in particular, the practice of using tradition to fill in the gaps where the scriptures were silent. They did not reject the church's role in preserving and transmitting the scriptures. Luther's intention was to show inconsistencies between scripture and papal decisions, yet he still received those papal pronouncements he believed to be consistent

[47] Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation,* 277.
[48] Oberman, 279.
[49] Oberman, 283.

with scripture as secondarily authoritative. According to Oberman, the Council of Trent formalized and finalized Tradition II as the Roman Catholic Church's official position: "The Council of Trent clearly admits that not all doctrinal truths are to be found in scripture."[50] This, for Oberman, is the final historical break point between Tradition I and Tradition II.

## Oberman's Allies

Other writers have also addressed the historical trajectory of *sola scriptura*. These will be briefly surveyed, starting with those who are in general agreement with Oberman. Oxford theologian J.N.D. Kelly finds a strong contrast between extra-canonical tradition and scripture in the early church. Looking at the second and third century Gnostic movement, Kelly notes that the Gnostics appealed to tradition while Irenaeus's defense of orthodoxy was founded on scripture. Kelly recognizes that in some sense, Irenaeus did invoke tradition in his defense against the Gnostics, but that was the public tradition of interpreted scripture (available to all) vs. the private tradition (secret knowledge) of the Gnostics. Kelly believes Tertullian likewise perceived scripture and tradition as a unified whole and not separate sources: "the apostolic, evangelical or Catholic tradition stood for the faith delivered by the apostles, and he (Tertullian) never contrasted tradition, so understood, with scripture."[51]

Another Oxford professor, Alister E McGrath, holds views very similar to Oberman and goes perhaps a bit further:

> One of the most enduring stereotypes of the relation between the Reformation and the late medieval period is that the latter is characterized

[50] Oberman, 288.
[51] J.N.D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (London: A & C Black, 1958), 38-39.

> by an appeal to both scripture and tradition as theological sources. Whereas the former appealed to Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) …influential though his stereotype has been…it is becoming increasingly clear that it cannot stand up to critical examination. The medieval period in general was characterized by its general conviction that Scripture was the sole material base of Christian theology, thus forcing us to reconsider what, if anything, was distinctive concerning the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura.*[52]

McGrath argues that from the Patristic era to well into the Middle Ages, "all truths that were in any sense necessary to salvation were those given publicly and directly in scripture, or that could be directly inferred from that same scripture."[53] McGrath, however, disagrees with Oberman on the role of the canonists in moving from Tradition I to Tradition II. This is not what the canonists were trying to do. Rather, they understood divine revelation as consisting solely of scripture and distinguished this from human law, which was related to discipline within the church, and was transitory. It was for this only, not doctrinal content, that the canon lawyers recognized a second source.

In *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (2001), Keith A. Mathison revisits and expands upon Oberman's thesis. Although this work is unquestionably polemical[54] in tone, Mathison does provide a fairly extensive historical analysis, concluding that *sola scriptura* (as understood as Tradition I) was the de-facto position of the early and medieval church. According to Mathison, Scripture and tradition were not mutually exclusive notions in the mind of the early fathers. The concept of tradition, when used by these fathers, is simply used to designate the body of doctrine which was committed to

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[52]Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 137.

[53] McGrath, *Intellectual Origins*, 138.

[54] Mathison's book is essentially a theological debate, primarily with Roman Catholicism. For example: "…Roman Catholic accounts fall out of perfectionism and rationalistic commitments that are alien to the earthiness of biblical reality. Submitting to an infallible magisterium requires relatively little faith...," Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scripture*, 11. Although he does have a theological axe to grind, Mathison nevertheless offers a historical case worth exploring.

the church by the Lord and his apostles, whether through verbal or written communication. The body of doctrine, however, was essentially identical, regardless of how it was communicated.[55]

Along with Irenaeus and Tertullian, Mathison cites several other early church fathers. Both Clement (150-215) and Hippolytus (170-236) recognized the importance of the church as interpreter and the rule of faith as the hermeneutical context, but the scriptures themselves are the only source of divine knowledge. Mathison holds that Cyprian (200-258), and Athanasius (296-373) were also adherents of Tradition I. Particularly relevant is his assessment of the conflict between Cyprian and Pope Steven, where Cyprian explicitly criticizes Steven for preferring "human tradition to divine ordinance." Like Oberman, Mathison considers the fourth and fifth centuries as the beginning period of transition. He cites Gregory of Nyssa (335-394) and John Chrysostom (347- 407) as key intermediaries, in addition to Basil. Mathison sees Augustine as somewhat unresolved in his views: The bishop of Hippo seems to assert the supremacy of scripture, yet also proposes doctrine from extra-scriptural sources.[56]

Mathison provides a good overview of the Middle Ages leading up to the eve of the Reformation. He references the growing importance and worldliness of the Roman Catholic papacy, the influence of canon lawyers, Scholasticism, and Renaissance Humanism as all facilitating the advancement of Tradition II. He suggests that William of Ockham (1280-1349) was likely the first theologian officially and unambiguously to have "embrace[d] a two-source theory of revelation."[57]

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[55] Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 21.
[56] Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 30, 39-40.
[57] Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 81.

Along with Tradition I and Tradition II, Mathison considers two additional categories. These are intended to further distinguish what he believes are the more extreme poles. "Tradition 0" grew out of the later, more radical manifestations of the Reformation, such as the Anabaptists. Here the interpretive role of the church is rejected entirely: "there is no sense in which tradition of any kind has any authority. The individual believer needs only the Holy Spirt and the scripture." According to Mathison, such is the state in which much of modern American Protestantism finds itself. This is an important distinction. Since Tradition 0 is not representative of Luther's views, examples of its rejection in the primary sources should not be reckoned as a rejection of *sola scriptura*. Finally, "Tradition III" arose from the Roman Catholic Church's developing reaction to the Reformation, and in Mathison's mind, is the prevailing position of the Roman Catholic Church today. Tradition III moves the Roman Catholic Church from a two-source model (Tradition II), back to a one-source model, "but that source is different from the one confessed by the apostolic church. Rather than scripture (and/ or tradition), the single source of revelation is the present Roman Magisterium."[58]

Kevin J. Vanhoozer holds convictions that are similar to those of Oberman and Mathison. Vanhoozer cites Sylvester Prierias' response to Luther's Ninety-Five Theses: "Whoever does not hold fast to the teachings of the Roman Church and of the Pope as the infallible rule of faith, *from which even Holy Scripture draws its strength and authority*, is a heretic."[59] This quote helps focus the question at hand: Has this, in fact, been the mainstream view throughout the centuries leading up to the Reformation? Vanhoozer also considers Vincent of Lérins, and concludes that Vincent was concerned with formal

[58] Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 134, 152.
[59] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel,* 111-112.

sufficiency when he formulated his own "canon," that is, Vincent's rule that "we ought to believe that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all men." In Vanhoozer's judgement, The Roman Catholic Church has misinterpreted this statement as one of *cultural* catholicity. He offers an alternative *canonical* catholicity, "in which agreement with the Scriptures, and churches that affirm the supreme authority of the Scriptures, is more important than agreement with Rome."[60]

## An Eastern Orthodox Perspective

Although this conflict has been primarily between Western Roman Catholics and Protestants, the Eastern Orthodox Church provides another perspective. The Eastern church does not accept *sola scriptura*, yet also does not submit to the Catholic hierarchy. The issue has been addressed by Eastern Orthodox thinkers to a degree, but they may define terms differently and ask different questions than their Western counterparts. Scholars writing from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, such as Georges Florovsky, provide some measure of support for Oberman. Florovsky notes that in the early church, "tradition was, in fact, the authentic interpretation of scripture," and "the authority of the scripture was sovereign and supreme." He agrees with Oberman's assessment of Vincent of Lérins, noting that for Vincent, "Scripture was the only primary and ultimate canon of Christian truth." In describing the "rule of faith that governed the interpretation of scripture, Florovsky argues that the *Regula* was not an "Extraneous authority which could be imposed on the Holy Write. It was the same *Apostolic Preaching* that was written down in the books of the New Testament. That is, the rule is <u>not</u> a standard to which the

[60] Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel, 146.* Note that Vanhoozer is here attempting to make a theological, as much as an historical case.

scriptures are themselves subject. “It must be kept in mind that the main, if not also the only, manual of faith and doctrine was, in the Ancient Church, precisely the Holy Writ.”[61] Other Eastern Orthodox writers hold a strongly opposing views. For example, Clark Carlton states that “The principle by which the Reformers sought to return to the purity of the early Church was itself unknown to the early Church. The idea of *sola scriptura* was an invention of the sixteenth century.”[62]

## Opponents of Oberman

Roman Catholic scholars depart from Oberman and his supporters’ understanding of the historic roles of scripture and tradition in several ways. George Henri Tavard sees both scriptural and extra-scriptural authorities as part of a unified whole in the early church. The early church did not draw a sharp distinction between the canonical books and other authoritative sources such as the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon and the works of the church fathers. “In other words, the scriptural chasm spreads, to a certain extent, outside of the inspired writers and reached to many post-apostolic men.” Tavard observes that the church in defining the canon, “did not do so to establish a source of faith. Rather, they tried to regulate a liturgical practice.” He also points out that as late as the fourth century, the term “scripture” encompassed certain post-apostolic writings that were not included in the New Testament.[63]

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[61] Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont: Nordland Publishing Co.), 75, 82,102, accessed February 12, 2021. https://www.bulgarian-orthodox-church.org/rr/lode/florovsky1.pdf.

[62] Clark Carlton, *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church* (Salisbury, MA: Regina, 1997), 90.

[63] Georges Henri Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1978), 5,6,7.

Patrick Madrid argues the doctrine of sola *scriptura* is "unhistorical, unbiblical, unworkable."[64] Madrid looks at some of the same source material as Oberman, but interprets it differently: According to Madrid:

> The fact is, the writings of the church fathers and the councils, both regional and ecumenical, reveal that *sola scriptura* was completely alien to the thought and life of the early church. Mind you, the early church placed an exceedingly great emphasis on the importance and authority of scripture to guide and govern the life of the church, and scripture was employed constantly by the fathers in their doctrinal treatises and pastoral directives. But scripture was never regarded (or used) by the church fathers as "something that stands alone, self-sufficient and entirely independent of Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium."[65]

The wording Madrid uses in the above quotation is instructive. Oberman would agree that, historically, Scripture does not "stand alone," but would insist it stands *above* "Sacred Tradition and the Magisterium." Madrid provides a nuanced view of the distinction between formal and material sufficiency.[66] He argues in favor of material sufficiency, that is, that the scriptures contain all the material of divine revelation. On this he would agree with Oberman. Yet according to Madrid, a correct interpretation of scripture requires "recourse to (the Church's) living tradition- i.e., the infallible interpretation of the apostolic depositum fidei. And this interpretation is guaranteed by an infallible Magisterium. Formal sufficiency is then rejected: "Formal sufficiency means that all revelation necessary for the Church to possess is presented formally in the pages of Scripture, with nothing else needed-no Tradition or Magisterium."[67] Madrid interprets the patristic sources through the lens of this distinction.

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[64] Patrick Madrid, "Sola Scriptura: A Blueprint for Anarchy," Catholic Dossier, Mar-Apr. 1996, accessed February 27, 2022. https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=9872.
[65] Madrid, *Sola Scriptura.*
[66] The difference between formal and material sufficiency is not, strictly speaking, directly related to the question of historicity. But the meaning of these terms can influence how the various scholars interpret the intent of primary source writings.
[67] Madrid, *Sola Scriptura*.

Joseph Gallegos likewise covers much of the same material as Oberman and Mathison but reaches different conclusions. He writes, "According to the Fathers… in order to obtain a proper and full understanding of the Scriptures, one must do so within the Church and her unerring tradition."[68] Gallegos provides extensive quotations from the fathers, all of which, on face value, appear to support *sola scriptura,* and some of which are utilized to that end by Oberman. These, he believes, have been taken wildly out of context by Protestant apologists. The quoted passages "speak highly and eloquently on the authority of Sacred Scripture while downplaying or even ignoring passages from those same Fathers who speak just as highly about the authority of Tradition and the Church."[69] Gallegos goes on to argue that the apostolic deposit contains all teaching received from Christ and the apostles without distinction between the apostolic writings (the canon) and the apostolic traditions (unwritten). This then suggests a second source apart from the written scriptures. Gallegos appeals to the fathers' approval of things handed down, though not necessarily part of the canon.[70] This is a robust study, with many examples given. However, it is not always clear what version of *sola scriptura* Gallegos is opposing. Much of his arguments seem to be directed against Tradition 0.

Phillip Blosser also sees *sola scriptura* as historically unsupported. He argues that the doctrine had "no defenders for the first thirteen centuries of the Church." However, Blosser again seems to be criticizing Tradition 0: "*Sola Scriptura* assumes no ultimate

[68] Joseph Gallegos, "What Did the Church Fathers Teach Concerning Scripture, Tradition and Church Authority?" in *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*., ed. Robert A Sungenis (Santa Barbara, CA Queenship Pub. Co., 1997), 390.
[69] Gallegos, *What Did the Church Fathers Teach*, 394.
[70] Gallegos, *What Did the Church Fathers Teach*, 395-6.

need for the larger context of the Church's tradition and teaching." The following quote from Blosser underscores the importance of unambiguously defining terms in this debate.

> It is no great task to find a Church Father who affirms that Scripture is uniquely and divinely inspired, and uniquely authoritative as the supreme written record of the material deposit of faith. The Church grants that. The real task is to find a Church Father who affirms that the whole content of God's revelation for the ongoing instruction of the Church was committed solely to Scripture without residue so that it serves in that capacity as a text, apart from the larger sacred tradition and ongoing community memory of which it is part.[71]

While Oberman would undoubtedly agree with the first sentence in this quote, he would likely have great difficulty with Blosser's term "without residue," which implies additional, equally authoritative, material outside of the canon.

Fr. Peter Stravinskas suggests that the Roman Catholic understanding of scripture and tradition is rooted in the interplay between the Jewish scriptures and the rabbinical teaching. In Judaism, there was an essential unity between the canonical Law and Prophets, and the other oral and written traditions. The Christian church held this same position form the very beginning; it was the uncontested view until the Reformation. Stravinskas provides a historical approach similar to Oberman's but again, comes to the opposite conclusion. For Stravinskas, "The Patristic writers (e.g., Irenaeus and Tertullian) saw so intimate a union between Scripture and Tradition that they were virtually indistinguishable from one another."[72] Stravinskas is here using "tradition" in Oberman's sense of "Tradition II." He then addresses the thought of Thomas Aquinas, suggesting

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[71] Blosser, *What are the Philosophical and Practical Problems of Sola Scriptura?,* 66, 74,78.
[72] Peter M. J. Stravinskas, "What is Catholicism's Official Doctrine on Scripture and Tradition?" in *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*., ed. Robert A Sungenis (Santa Barbara, CA Queenship Pub. Co., 1997), 373.

that for Thomas "sacred doctrine… includes both Scripture and the theology which grew up around it under the impulse of the Fathers and Doctors."[73]

While considering similar historical evidence, Oberman's critics tend to see in it two distinct and equally respected sources: the written scriptures and, unwritten, orally preserved apostolic traditions. The early church recognized these unwritten sources as equally foundational for the establishment of doctrine, and indeed, the term "scripture" was sometimes understood to include these traditions. Additionally, the written scriptures were always dependent upon the teaching office of the church for their correct interpretation. The canonical writings, in isolation, are thus not fully adequate. The institutional Roman Catholic Church is therefore the highest authority, as both custodian of the unwritten traditions and the only rightful interpreter of the written canon. As may be seen, some of this debate turns on how exactly the doctrine of *sola scriptura* is understood. We will therefore next consider what the Reformers originally had in mind.

[73] Stravinskas, *What is Catholicism's Official Doctrine on Scripture and Tradition?* 373.

# Chapter 3

## Historical Background

### The Reformation and the Council of Trent

To help set this study within its historical context, I will begin with a very brief overview of the Protestant Reformation. In 1517, Martin Luther a, German theologian and monk of the Augustinian order, launched a protest against what he deemed to be the corruption of the Roman Catholic papacy and the late medieval church's abandonment of foundational Christian principals. Luther's primary trigger was the Catholic church's practice of the sale of indulgences. He also took issue with what he believed were the novel doctrines of clerical celibacy, transubstantiation and the increasing sovereignty of the pope. According to Luther, these doctrines found no basis in the canonical scriptures, and were thus unsound and unwarranted. Luther found political support from the Germanic princes of Saxony, Brandenburg and Brunswick, as well as the kings of Sweden and Denmark. Luther's' cause was picked up in Switzerland by Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, and later extended into France, the Netherlands, and Scotland. The Protestant Reformation was a contributing factor to a series of continent-wide wars in Europe and precipitated a division within Western Christianity[74] that prevails to this day.[75]

[74] The Western and Eastern branches of Christianity had previously split in 1054, into the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, respectively.
[75] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church.*

The Council of Trent was convened over multiple sessions from 1545-63 by the Roman Catholic Church. Although primarily focused on addressing the Protestant controversies, the Council also encompassed a response to organic reform movements within the Church.[76] Of central importance to this discussion is Session 4 (1546) of the Council. Here it was determined that both scripture and tradition were equal sources of truth, and the Roman Catholic Church was the only valid interpreter of scripture:

> The sacred and holy, ecumenical, and general Synod of Trent…always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church; which (Gospel)…as the fountain of all, both saving truth, and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the *written books, and the unwritten traditions* which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand; (the Synod) following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament–seeing that one God is the author of both –*as also the said traditions*, as well those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession.
>
> Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, It decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall, –in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, –wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, –*whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scriptures*, –hath held and doth hold...[77]

At Trent, the church thus defined "tradition" as the unwritten recollections of the sayings of Christ and the apostles, transmitted and preserved throughout the ages. These unwritten records are of equal worth with the written scripture; indeed, both have been dictated by the Holy Ghost. Additionally, only "holy mother Church," (meaning the

[76] Cross, The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church.
[77] Papal Encyclicals Online, "General Council of Trent: Fourth Session," accessed July 20, 2022, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/fourth-session.htm.

Roman Catholic Church) has the right of scriptural interpretation. This interpretive authority belongs not to the "Church" as an ontological entity comprised of all Christians, but uniquely to the Roman Catholic Church, to the exclusion of Protestant Christians, and, presumably, also to the Eastern Orthodox. The logical consequence of this is the elevation of Rome's authority above that of the scriptures themselves. An appeal to the scriptures against any position taken by the Church of Rome is ultimately void, since Rome, as the only valid custodian of those same scriptures, decides their meaning.

## What Did the Reformers Believe?

How exactly did the Protestant Reformers understand the role of scripture? In his recent study, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, James R. Payton provides some helpful clarifications. Payton believes that modern Protestants are misinformed as to what the Reformers actually taught. A simplistic "scripture good, tradition bad" notion has become so common that it has even tainted a recent version of scripture, translated for and widely used in the larger evangelical church community."[78] According to Peyton, Luther's commitment to *sola scriptura* was rooted in his belief in *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. All of scripture contains both law, which demonstrates the need for grace, and also God's offer of that grace. Luther largely dismissed scholastic theology because he found much of it to be at odds with this principle. His reaction to the church fathers was mixed; they did not plainly and forcefully champion justification by faith. Only the scriptures clearly and unambiguously have this as their focus, "all scripture proclaims *sola fide*…thus scripture stands supreme, without any equal as religious authority."

[78] James R. Peyton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2010), 133, Kindle.

For Peyton, the crucial issue in Luther's understanding, is whether "scripture is the *solitary* authority, or whether is it the only *unquestioned* authority (thereby allowing that subordinate authorities might exist)." Peyton notes that Luther did not patently reject the church fathers, the creeds or the ecumenical councils. But he did see these sources as subject to the canonical writings: For Luther, the scriptures were the *norma normans*, "the norm that norms." The councils, writings of the fathers and other components of church tradition are the *normae normatae* or "normed norms" – valuable, but only to the degree that they conform with scripture. Peyton concludes, "*Sola scriptura* thus meant for Luther that scripture was the only unquestioned religious authority. It did not mean that scripture was the only authority- as has often been assumed or misunderstood in subsequent Protestantism."

In addition to Luther, Peyton reviews the other magisterial Reformers, concluding that they very much shared Luther's assessment. Philip Melanchthon believed Luther "has done nothing else than to call us back to Scripture and also to the fathers who came the closest to the meaning of Scripture." He claimed that the scholiastic theologians of the time, not Luther, were in conflict with the fathers. Ulrich Zwingli stood on similar ground:

> There is no doubt that Zwingli read the Bible through the grid of patristic exegesis. For Ulrich Zwingli, *sola scriptura* meant that only Scripture is unquestioned as a religious authority, but beneath it stand the subordinate religious authorities of the church fathers, the ancient creeds and the doctrinal decrees for the ecumenical councils.

Likewise, also John Calvin "held fervently to *sola scriptura*. He also embraced their recognition of a subordinate authority inhering in the ancient creeds, the doctrinal decrees of the ecumenical councils and the church fathers." Thus, *sola scriptura* was

adopted by all the early Reformers, not as the only authority but as the supreme authority. They did not intend it as license for individual interpretation.

> *Sola scriptura* has also been misused by some to defend the right of private judgment, as if this assertion of the Reformation legitimized a freedom to come to one's own conclusions on religious matters. Seen in context, such a claim has little to do with the Reformation and far more to do with the freewheeling independence of post-Enlightenment individualism. [79]

Martin Luther

An evaluation of the Reformers' writings suggests that Peyton's view is largely correct. For example, Luther frequently appeals to St. Augustine.[80] In his Commentary on Genesis, Luther cites the "opinions of the fathers" on the nature of angels, a question on which the scriptures are not fully explicit:

> Hence it is that Christ says concerning the devil, that he "abode not in the truth," (John 8:44). On these grounds the holy fathers supposed that a battle or sedition arose between the angels, some of those beings taking the part of some very beautiful angel, who exalted himself above all the rest on account of certain superior gifts bestowed upon him. These things are very probable nor are they at variance with that which Christ here affirms by the Evangelist John, that the devil "abode not in the truth;" nor are they inconsistent with that which Jude also affirms in his epistle…[81]

This passage helps illustrate Luther's understandings of the tension between canonical and non-canonical writings. The scriptures are primary. Luther values the opinion of the fathers, an opinion that is here an expansion upon which has already been stated in scripture explicitly. Yet the fathers' teachings are probable, but not certain. Of great importance is his mention that these doctrines do not contradict the canon; if they

[79] Peyton, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, 136, 138, 147.
[80] For examples of Luther's citing Augustine, see Martin Luther, *The Collected Works of Martin Luther*, C.M. Jacobs, trans. (E-artnow, 2018), 99, 109, 137, 284, 507, Kindle.
[81] Luther, *Collected Works*, 1062.

did, they would not be open to consideration. Additionally, Luther respects the ecumenical church councils and the creeds. For example, the Council Nicaea, (in contrast to Rome) is the source of correct ecclesiastical practices.[82] In his *Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ*, Luther calls on the Athanasian Creed in defense of Christ's uncreated nature.[83]

Philip Melanchthon

Phillip Melanchthon (1497-1560) helped popularize and systematize Luther's thought. Melanchthon, perhaps more hostile to non-canonically derived doctrine than Luther, [84] nevertheless appeals to both scripture and the opinion of church fathers, in this case, Augustine:

> Now the Pelagians are said to have denied the existence of original sin. Augustine has refuted this teaching of theirs in several learned works. In fact, Augustine's argument against the Pelagians is so supremely excellent that almost all his other works seem rather dull in comparison. We will cite some passages from Scripture that testify to the existence of original sin. Nothing could be more clearly articulated than Ephesians 2:3.[85]

Again, in his criticism of scholastic theology, Melanchthon, cites not just scripture, but specifically Augustine's *interpretation* of scripture to make his case:

> Yet the sophists are ignorant of the tropes and figures used in Holy Scripture, and so they throw the passage from Zechariah in our faces, where the Lord says, "Turn to me and I will turn to you" [Zechariah 1:3]. But this does not mean that the beginning of repentance resides in us. Moreover, Augustine has explained the meaning of this passage in more than one place.[86]

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[82] Luther, *Collected Works*, 369.
[83] Luther, Collected Works, 703.
[84] For examples see: Phillip Melanchthon, *Commonplaces*, trans. Christian Preus (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2014), 1586, 1636, Kindle.
[85] Melanchthon, *Commonplaces*, 865.
[86] Melanchthon, *Commonplaces*, 4459.

Yet those church fathers who (in Melanchthon's judgement) are not faithful expositors of scripture, particularly Origen and Jerome, receive scant praise.[87] Phillip Melanchthon then, by no means dispenses with the interpretive tradition of the fathers, but subordinates that tradition to the canon.

John Calvin

John Calvin (1509-1564), wrote extensively on the relationship between the canonical scriptures, the church fathers, and the councils. Despite adamantly adhering to the scriptures' absolute supremacy[88] and inerrancy[89], Calvin also frequently invoked the church fathers in support of reformation doctrines. In this passage from the *Institutes*, Calvin effectively encapsulates the magisterial Reformers balance, insisting on the sovereignty of scripture, while respecting the teachings of the ancients:

> It is a calumny to represent us as opposed to the Fathers (I mean the ancient writers of a purer age), as if the Fathers were supporters of their impiety. Were the contest to be decided by such authority (to speak in the most moderate terms), the better part of the victory would be ours. While there is much that is admirable and wise in the writings of those Fathers, and while in some things it has fared with them as with ordinary men; these pious sons, forsooth, with the peculiar acuteness of intellect, and judgment, and soul, which belongs to them, adore only their slips and errors, while those things which are well said they either overlook, or disguise, or corrupt; so that it may be truly said their only care has been to gather dross among gold. Then, with dishonest clamor, they assail us as enemies and despisers of the Fathers. So far are we from despising them, that if this were the proper place, it would give us no trouble to support the greater part of the doctrines which we now hold by their suffrages.[90]

Calvin here claims the following:

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[87] See Melanchthon, *Commonplaces*, 454, 3133.
[88]See, in particular, chapters, chapters 6-9 of John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Houston, TX: V Solas Press: 2021), Kindle.
[89] See Calvin, *Institutes*, 157, 592.
[90] Calvin, *Institutes,* 18.

1. He does not oppose the fathers.
2. If the church fathers were his only source, Calvin is confident that their writings would uphold the Reformers' (not Rome's) principles.
3. Much of the fathers' writings are of great value, yet they are not inerrant.

For Calvin, the church fathers are an important and respected source of doctrine, indeed their agreement with Calvin provides compelling confirmation of his own views. They are, however, unlike the scriptures, liable to error.[91]

Calvin was favorably disposed to the ecumenical church councils, provided that that the councils' findings were consistent with scripture. He deems the most ancient councils (such as Constantinople and Chalcedon) as the most informed by scripture and therefore quite reliable. That being the case, he believes these councils support the Reformers' teachings:

> In attributing less to councils than my opponents demand, it is not because I have any fear that councils are favorable to their cause and adverse to ours. For as we are amply provided by the word of the Lord with the means of proving our doctrine and overthrowing the whole Papacy, and thus have no great need of other aid, so, if the case required it, ancient councils furnish us in a great measure with what might be sufficient for both purposes.[92]

And also,

> In this way, councils would be duly respected, and yet the highest place would be given to Scripture, everything being brought to it as a test. Thus, those ancient Councils of Nice, Constantinople, the first of Ephesus, Chalcedon, and the like, which were held for refuting errors, we willingly embrace, and reverence as sacred, in so far as relates to doctrines of faith, for they contain nothing but the pure and genuine interpretation of

[91] There are many other similar favorable refences to the church fathers in Calvin. See *Institutes*, 134, 1247, 1266, 1269.
[92] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1342.

> Scripture, which the holy Fathers with spiritual prudence adopted to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen.[93]

Similarly, the creeds are valuable condensations of scriptural truth:

> The chief thing to be attended to in the (Apostles') Creed is, that it furnishes us with a full and every way complete summary of faith, containing nothing but what has been derived from the infallible word of God.[94]

At the same time, the Councils were not infallible, even the best councils erred, and only those councilor statements supported by scripture must be accepted:

> Councils have authority only in so far as accordant with Scripture… Councils of Nice, Constantinople, and Ephesus. Subsequent Councils more impure, and to be received with limitation…Those agreeing with divine truth to be received. Those at variance with it to be rejected. This confirmed by the example of the Council of Constantinople and the Council of Nice; also, of the Council of Chalcedon, and second Council of Ephesus.[95]

Calvin thus consistently affirms the canon as the primary source and the final authority. Secondary sources such as the testimony of the church fathers, the creeds and the early church councils, may be genuine avenues of incite and wisdom. Indeed, the church fathers are well regarded as interpreters of scripture. Yet these are all subject to examination and verification, the scriptures being the measuring rod. These sources should only be discarded if they fail the test of scriptural conformity, but discardable they are.

Calvin also addressees the role of the church in scriptural interpretation. He argues that the church has no warrant to develop new doctrine, apart from what has already been revealed in scripture.[96] Ye he by no means advocates for the private,

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[93] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1347.
[94] Calvin, *Institutes*, 592.
[95] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1341.
[96] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1351.

individual interpretation of scripture. Calvin very much supports the practice of assembling councils of diverse bishops to resolve disputed points, citing as examples the controversies of Arius and Eunomius.[97] However, as already discussed, Calvin does not hold councils as inerrant and argues that conciliar interpretations have been the source of much anti-scriptural doctrine.[98] Further, Calvin holds that the Roman Catholic Church's present claim to interpretative authority is an intentional pretext. The church, says Calvin, seeks to define doctrine in whatever way it wishes, regardless of canonical warrant, and to the exclusion of dissenting voices.[99] Thus Calvin, while not promoting the individualistic interpretation of scripture by unlearned persons, will not abide "interpretations" by the church which are contrary to the clear meaning of scripture.[100] Calvin's point is that the "church" is the proper interpreter of scripture, but the *Roman Catholic* Church has not faithfully done so, and thus abdicated that role.[101]

Views of the Reformers - Conclusion

In summary, *sola scriptura* did not mean the complete abandonment of secondary authorities. The magisterial Reformers did not wish to deny or ignore wisdom from the past. The early church councils were accepted and esteemed. The church fathers, particularly Augustine, were cited and appealed to. The role of the church, including that of bishops, as the interpreter of scripture was not denied. But the Reformers insisted on three propositions: First, none of these secondary authorities however respected, were

[97] Calvin, *Institutes*, 1352.
[98] Such as purgatory, the intercession of saints and auricular confession. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1353.
[99] Calvin, Institutes, 1353.
[100] Other examples of what Calvin believes to be misinterpretations include the offering of the cup to priests alone and prohibitions on clerical marriage.
[101] This then gets at a larger, but related question: What is the definition of "the church"? Catholics and Protestants answer this differently.

equal to scripture. Where there was conflict, all other claimants must defer to the canon. Second, all of the secondary sources could and did go astray. The canonical scriptures alone were free from potential or actual error. Third, the church, though the right and proper interpreter of scripture, was not infallible in its interpretation and was itself subject to the scriptures. The question then may then be framed as follows: Did mainstream patristic and medieval thinkers substantially agree with the Reformers on these points?

# Chapter 4

## The Early Patristic Period

The Patristic period extended from the end of the Apostolic Age (late 1st- early 2nd century) to the 8th century. During this time Christianity won acceptance within the Roman Empire and would become a (if not the) major cultural influence in the development of Europe. This section will survey a selection of theologians from the earlier Patristic period, up to about the late 4th century, a time characterized by the development of essential Christian doctrines. Major theological controversies arose during these years, which were formally addressed by Ecumenical Councils such as those held at Nicaea and Chalcedon. The following chapter will then be devoted solely to Augustine of Hippo, arguably the most influential patristic thinker in the Western church.

### Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202)

Dating from the 2nd century, St. Irenaeus is far removed temporally form the Reformation era conflicts. However, his context is not dissimilar. Much like Martin Luther, Irenaeus was concerned with doctrinal purity. Irenaeus likewise frequently appealed to the scriptures in his disputations with advocates of the Gnostic movement. Gnosticism was a dualistic philosophy that juxtaposed the material world (evil) with the spiritual (good). It may have existed in a less developed form prior to the emergence of Christianity, but by Irenaeus' time, Gnosticism had become a heterodox Christian sect. Irenaeus contrasts Gnosticism's pagan origin (or at least pagan influence) with the

canonical Christian scriptures. His major work, *Against Heresies*, is largely a critique of Gnosticism. To this we will now turn.

> But we holding the rule of Faith, i.e., that there is one God Almighty, Who created all things by His Word, and adapted them, and made all out of not being to be as the Scripture saith, *For by the Word of the Lord the Heavens were established, and all the power of them by the breath of His mouth*: and again, *All things were made by Him, and without Him was nothing made*.[102]

At issue in this passage is the Gnostic understanding of creation. The Gnostics held that the material world was the creation of the *Demiurge*, a primordial power, ultimately derived from, but opposed to, the transcendent "Divine Being."[103] In his response, Irenaeus makes refence to the rule of faith which teaches that God in fact created all things out of nothing. Here the *rule* is grounded in scripture, which Irenaeus then quotes. This implies that he understood the rule of faith to be either a summary of scripture, or scripture itself. There is no contemplation of the rule of faith as an independent source of doctrine, derived apart for scripture.

Salvation, so the Gnostics taught, entailed one's liberation from the material world. Though imprisoned within the imperfect material creation, there were some who retained a residual divine spark from the wholly spiritual divine being. By accessing secret knowledge (*gnosis*), these fortunate few could escape the bondage of the material world to enjoy a purely spiritual and perfect existence, united with the divine being. Jesus (whose physical form was illusionary) came to provide this *gnosis*, which was passed on

[102] Irenaeus, *Five Books of St Irenaeus Bishop of Lyons: Against Heresies with the Fragments that Remain of His Other Wo*rks. Trans. John Keble (Oxford: James Parker & Co., 1872), 31, Kindle.
[103] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

to the apostles, and then to Gnostic teachers, such as Marcion and Valentinus.[104] This *gnosis*, as a source of divine revelation, is a major theme taken up by Irenaeus:

> And if we cannot discover solutions of all the questions which are raised in Scripture, yet let us not be seeking out another God, besides Him Who is. For this is very great impiety. But such things we ought to leave to God, Who made us also, being aware, as the very truth is, that the Scriptures indeed are perfect, as uttered by God's Word and His Spirit…[105]

Irenaeus argues that the Gnostic promotion of secret knowledge is contrary to the principle of reliance upon the scriptures. Those things not resolvable from scripture ought to set aside and left to God. Rather than seeking an additional, non-scriptural fount of information, one should be content with understanding those things the scriptures do reveal, and comfortable with the mysteries of those they do not. Again, Irenaeus has no additional apostolic source, apart from the scriptures in mind. Similarly, Irenaeus, returns to the sufficiency of scripture in this discussion of the means of creation:

> And if we say the same again of the substance also of matter, we shall not err: viz., that God produced it. For we have learned from the Scriptures that God holds the ruling place over all. But whence or how He produced it, neither hath any Scripture set forth, nor ought we to indulge in fancying, forming infinite conjectures about God, according to our own opinions: but this knowledge must be left to God.[106]

His point is plainly stated. Knowledge of those things which are left undisclosed by scripture ought not to be sought out. This is inconsistent with the acceptance of an equally valid extra- biblical tradition. If Irenaeus believed such a tradition to be authoritative, he would be expected to consider it- either drawing upon it, or conceding that (like scripture) the tradition does not contain an answer to this question.

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[104] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[105] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 69.
[106] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 71.

Irenaeus sees an indissoluble relationship between the scriptures and their source - the apostles and the apostolic preaching. It is from this deposit of faith that heresies are to be resisted:

> Do thou then remember what we have said in the two former books; and adding the present thereunto, thou wilt have from us the fullest reply to all the Heretics, and with confidence and all earnestness wilt resist them, on behalf of the only true and life-giving Faith; which the Church hath received from the Apostles, and dispenses to her sons. For indeed the Lord of all gave to His Apostles the power of the Gospel; and by them we have known the Truth, i.e., the teaching of the Son of God…For by no others have we known the method of our salvation, than those by whom the Gospel came to us: which was both in the first place preached by them, and afterwards by the will of God handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.[107]

This passage is crucial to our understanding of Irenaeus' thought. Here again the context is a diatribe against heretical teachings (those of Valentinus). The true faith is that received from the apostles. The canonical scriptures are rooted in the preaching of the apostles. That preaching, likewise has been preserved and transmitted through the scriptures. The essential apostolic witness is contained in the scriptures themselves and not within a second unwritten tradition. It is to this historical and recorded apostolic witness to which Irenaeus appeals.

Irenaeus *does*, however, seem to recognize a tradition that is in some sense distinct from scripture. Continuing his argument from the previous passage:

> For when they are convicted out of the Scriptures, they betake themselves even to accusation of the Scriptures, as being incorrect, not coming of authority, diversely expressed, and such as that the truth cannot be found out of them by persons ignorant of Tradition. For, say they, it was not delivered in writing, but in speech…And thin wisdom each one of them affirms to coincide with his own fiction forsooth, invented of himself: so that the Truth by their account may well enough be now in Valentinus, now again in Marcion…But when on the other hand we challenge them to that Tradition, which is of the Apostles, which is guarded by the

[107] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 80.

> successions of Presbyters in the Churches, they oppose Tradition, saying that themselves, being wiser not only than Presbyters, but even than Apostles, have discovered the genuine Truth. For "the Apostles," they say, "intermingled with the words of the Savior the things of the Law: and not only the Apostles, but the Lord also Himself framed His discourses, now as from the Creator, now as from the middle state, now again from the highest: while themselves know the hidden mystery without doubt, stain, or admixture:" which surely is most shameless blasphemy towards their Maker. It results therefore, that they agree neither with Scriptures nor with Tradition. [108]

Irenaeus' argument proceeds in this way: The gnostic teachers have been proven wrong by scripture. Their response has been to denigrate scripture as unreliable and non-authoritative. To what then do the Gnostics turn? They turn to unwritten tradition "not delivered in writing, but in speech." But this is not the same as "that tradition, which is of the Apostles." To Irenaeus there are two types of tradition: one, followed by the Gnostics, is entirely subjective and has no apostolic source. The other, the "tradition of the Apostles," while not itself the equivalent of scripture, is rooted in scripture. Scripture and tradition are not separate sources, each providing unique information. They are instead seen as a unified whole. Irenaeus uses similar language to describe the Gnostic claims against both. To disbelieve one is to disbelieve the other. It would be inconceivable to Irenaeus that tradition, so understood, could be in conflict with or over-rule scripture. Nor does Irenaeus attempt to prove his argument from tradition *apart* from scripture.

In his debates with the Gnostics, St. Irenaeus of Lyons appeals principally to the written scriptures. He frequently contrasts the objective scriptures, publicly available, with supposed private and secret revelations. He is quite critical of attempts to seek knowledge of spiritual matters outside of the scriptures. Indeed, this is the major failing of the gnostic teachers. Though Irenaeus does not precisely define what tradition consists

[108] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 80-81.

of, it is not presented as a source independent from scripture.[109] It is therefore difficult to envision Irenaeus as a proponent of Tradition II. Rather, he would likely agree with Oberman's formulation of Tradition I, seeing the scriptures themselves, and their historically verified interpretation as a unified whole, not necessarily to the complete exclusion of orally transmitted material, but surely as the final arbiter of doctrine.

## Clement of Alexandria (153-217)

Clement addressed late 2nd century pagan challenges to Christianity, arguing against the immorality he found within contemporary Greek religion. He borrowed and re-imagined some notions from both Platonic philosophy and Gnosticism, but was not himself a Gnostic. Clement introduced the idea of *deification*, the Christian's goal of attaining oneness with God.[110] This belief would become quite important within Eastern Christianity, though less so in the West.

Chapter XVI, book VII of Clement's *Stromata*, entitled "Scripture: The Criteria by Which Truth and Heresy are Distinguished," opens with these words: "But those who are ready to toil in the most excellent pursuits, will not desist from the search after truth, till they get the demonstration from the scriptures themselves."[111] The scriptures are thus of primary importance at the very least. In the following passage, Clement elevates their authority to a position of unique preeminence:

> He, then, who of himself believes the Scripture and the voice of the Lord, which by the Lord acts to the benefiting of men, is rightly regarded faithful. Certainly, we use it as a criterion in the discovery of things. What

[109] Irenaeus frequently connects the word "tradition" with the apostles, and that which was received from them.
[110] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[111] Clement of Alexandria, *The Complete Works of Clement of Alexandria*, trans. by Philip Schaff (Patristic Publishing, 2020), 15223, Kindle.

> is subjected to criticism is not believed till it is so subjected; so that what needs criticism cannot be a first principle. Therefore, as is reasonable, grasping by faith the indemonstrable first principle, and receiving in abundance, from the first principle itself, demonstrations in reference to the first principle, we are by the voice of the Lord trained up to the knowledge of the truth.[112]

Notice the language Clement uses to describe the scriptures. He points out that truths believed by virtue of their withstanding criticism are not themselves first principals. First principles, of necessity, are not subject to criticism. The scriptures are the first principle and must be accepted as such by faith. If that is the case, there can be no non-scriptural source, however esteemed, that can challenge the scriptures' primacy. The scriptures are above criticism; therefore, the role of the church must be to submit itself to the scriptures, not stand in judgment over them.

Continuing from the same passage, Clement further presses his case:

> For we may not give our adhesion to men on a bare statement by them, who might equally state the opposite. But if it is not enough merely to state the opinion, but if what is stated must be confirmed, we do not wait for the testimony of men, but we establish the matter that is in question by the voice of the Lord, which is the surest of all demonstrations, or rather is the only demonstration; in which knowledge those who have merely tasted the Scriptures are believers; while those who, having advanced further, and become correct expounders of the truth, are Gnostics.[113]

As mentioned, Clement borrows certain terms and ideas from Gnosticism. The "Gnostics," in this context, can be understood as a descriptive for these Christians who have advanced greatly in their knowledge of the faith.[114] For Clement, the "voice of the Lord" is not just the surest but the *only* source of truth. The context equates the Lord's voice with the scriptures. Additionally, Clement style of argumentation is to provide "a

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[112] Clement of Alexandria, *Complete Works*, 15255.
[113] Clement of Alexandria, *Complete Works*, 15260.
[114] That is, those adhering to orthodox Christianity, not Christian Gnosticism. Advanced Gnostic practitioners were believed to ascend to a higher spiritual level. He is describing orthodox Christians in that sense.

complete exposition of the scriptures *from the scriptures themselves*"[115] (not by any external magisterial authority). By contrast, heretics according to Irenaeus, do not quote scripture contextually or in its entirety.[116] Such heresies that result may be "overturned by our clearly showing that they are opposed to the scriptures."[117]

Clement does recognize some of type of extra-canonical tradition, but in no sense does he consider it equal to scripture. As an example:

> They say in the traditions that Matthew the apostle constantly said, that "if the neighbors of an elect man sin, the elect man has sinned. For had he conducted himself as the Word prescribes, his neighbor also would have been filled with such reverence for the life he led as not to sin."[118]

The mere fact that this axiom, associated with the Apostle Mathew, is known, does not guarantee its historical veracity. It may be authentic, and if so (or perhaps even if not), has teaching value. Yet even if this is a genuine apostolic utterance, there is no suggestion that it should be considered as ultimately binding. It is treated more as a helpful proverbial saying.

Clement holds the scriptures to be absolutely unique in their authority. They are not accountable to external sources or entities for confirmation. They only authority they are subject to is their own. As such, the church, though the custodian of the scriptures, is their vassal, not their master. Finally, there is no need for an infallible teaching magisterium to explain scripture, as this final passage demonstrates:

> And to those who thus ask questions, in the Scriptures, there is given from God (that at which they aim) the gift of the God-given knowledge, by way of comprehension, through the true illumination of logical investigation.[119]

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[115] Clement of Alexandria, *Complete Works,* 15264.
[116] Clement of Alexandria, *Complete Works*, 15264
[117] Clement of Alexandria, *Complete Works*, 15276.
[118] Clement of Alexandria, *Complete Works*, 15075.
[119] Clement of Alexandria, *Complete Works*, 15494.

## Tertullian of Carthage (155-220)

Over the course of a tumultuous career, Tertullian progressed from paganism to Christianity, eventually embracing Montanism, and finally founding his own sect.[120] Controversial, but still highly influential in the Latin Christian church, Tertullian argued against paganism, Gnosticism and (initially), Montanism. Despite his later Montanist sympathies, Tertullian held that only the one true church, defined by its historically verifiable succession of bishops, had the authority to interpret scripture. [121]

Tertullian does make a case for the existence of unwritten yet normative traditional customs. As examples, Tertullian suggests methods of performing baptisms, receiving the Eucharist and other liturgical practices:

> And how long shall we draw the saw to and fro through this line, when we have an ancient practice, which by anticipation has made for us the state, i.e., of the question? If no passage of Scripture has prescribed it, assuredly custom, which without doubt flowed from tradition, has confirmed it. For how can anything come into use, if it has not first been handed down? Even in pleading tradition, written authority, you say, must be demanded. Let us inquire, therefore, whether tradition, unless it be written, should not be admitted…To deal with this matter briefly, I shall begin with baptism…
>
> … If, for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them, custom as their strengthener, and faith as their observer. That reason will support tradition, and custom, and faith, you will either yourself perceive, or learn from someone who has.[122]

Though Tertullian clearly supports the validity of extra-scriptural tradition, two important points must be recognized. First, the examples he gives concern issues of ceremonial propriety and not doctrine (such as the timing of the entering the water during baptism,

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[120] Tertullian, *The Complete Works of Tertullian,* trans. Philip Schaff (Toronto: Public Domain, 2016), 41, Kindle.
[121] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[122] Tertullian, *Complete Works*, 2538-2557.

the number of immersions therein, and the time of day for receiving the Eucharist). More importantly, no directives for these things are found in scripture. Tertullian is not arguing that these traditions have a standing equal to scripture. The traditions are deferred to precisely because scripture is silent on these matters. By contrast, when addressing truly doctrinal matters, Tertullian is careful to remain within the boundaries of the written word:

> I revere the fullness of His Scripture, in which He manifests to me both the Creator and the creation. In the gospel, moreover, I discover a Minister and Witness of the Creator, even His Word. [ John 1:3] But whether all things were made out of any underlying Matter, I have as yet failed anywhere to find. Where such a statement is written, Hermogenes' shop must tell us. If it is nowhere written, then let it fear the woe which impends on all who add to or take away from the written word.[123]

Wishing to contrast the essentials of orthodox faith with heretical teachings, Tertullian provides a concise definition of the rule of faith.

> Now, with regard to this rule of faith— that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend— it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and , under the name of God, was seen in diverse manners by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh. This rule, as it will be proved, was taught by Christ, and raises among ourselves no other

[123] Tertullian, *Complete Works*, 14389.

> questions than those which heresies introduce, and which make men heretics.[124]

The entire contents of Tertullian's rule of faith are taken from the canonical scriptures. There may be additional oral traditions of the apostles not recorded in scripture, but none of these finds their way into the rule. Indeed, departing from this essential summary of scripture is, for Tertullian, the defining mark of heterodoxy. Heretics, when they do appeal to scripture, in some case add to it and in others subtract, in accordance with their own agendas.[125]

It must be acknowledged; Tertullian believed that only the visible apostolic church, that is the church which could trace its historic descent via apostolic succession, was the only valid possessor and interpreter of scripture.

> But even if a discussion from the Scriptures should not turn out in such a way as to place both sides on a par, (yet) the natural order of things would require that this point should be first proposed, which is now the only one which we must discuss: With whom lies that very faith to which the Scriptures belong. From what and through whom, and when, and to whom, has been handed down that rule, by which men become Christians? For wherever it shall be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith shall be, there will likewise be the true Scriptures and expositions thereof, and all the Christian traditions… Christ first delivered the Faith. The Apostles spread It; They founded churches as the depositories thereof. That Faith, therefore, is apostolic, which descended from the Apostles, through Apostolic Churches…All doctrine (is) true which comes through the Church from the Apostles, who were taught by God through Christ. All opinion which has no such divine origin and Apostolic tradition to show, is ipso facto false.[126]

According to Tertullian, even when heretics attempt to argue from the scriptures, they are ineligible to do so, since they are not in the line of churches founded by the Apostles. They therefor do not rightly possess the scriptures. This, on the surface, sounds

[124] Tertullian, *Complete Works*, 7096-7108.
[125] Tertullian, *Complete Works*, 7150.
[126] Tertullian, *Complete Works*, 7167-7190.

compatible with the Council of Trent's findings. Tertullian's context, however, is different from Trent's. As we have seen, the Gnostics appealed to new, private revelation, as did the Montanists. There was no conflict in Tertullian's' time that pitted the authority of the apostolically continuous church primarily against that of the scriptures. In the controversies Tertullian addressed, the apostolic churches adhered to the rule of faith, derived from the scriptures. He considered his rivals to be neither apostolic in succession nor scriptural in doctrine. Tertullian is not seeking to place the church's interpretive authority above scripture, rather he is demonstrating the error of his opponents from two different angles. They were both scripturally unsound and historically discontinuous.

## Origen of Alexandria (185-254)

Like Tertullian, Origen was a controversial figure, holding to some ideas that would be rejected by both mainstream Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.[127] Yet, he was intensely committed, suffering torture for his faith and at one point actively seeking out martyrdom. Origen very frequently appeals to the scriptures in defense of his arguments, particularly in his conflicts with the Marcionites.[128] Influenced by Neo-Platonism, Origen saw two aspects to reality, the immediate and physical, contrasted with the spiritual and mystical. He understood scripture as having a threefold meaning, the literal, the moral and the allegorical.[129]

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[127] Such as the eternality of creation and universal salvation.
[128] For examples see: Origen, *The Complete Works of Origen* (New Delhi: Delhi Open Books, 2021), 36, 65, 116, 137, Kindle.
[129] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. In this section, it will be argued that Origen held scripture to be the supreme authority and source of faith, similar to the Reformers. There is no claim that he shared their interpretive methodology.

Although his interpretive framework was quite different from that of the Reformers, Origen clearly held a similarly high view of scripture:

> Now, that to Him belongs a Son, is a statement not made by us only; although it may seem a sufficiently marvelous and incredible assertion to those who have a reputation as philosophers among Greeks and Barbarians, by some of whom, however, an idea of His existence seems to have been entertained…We, however, in conformity with our belief in that doctrine, which we assuredly hold to be divinely inspired, believe that it is possible in no other way to explain and bring within the reach of human knowledge this higher and diviner reason as the Son of God, than by means of those Scriptures alone which were inspired by the Holy Spirit, i.e., the Gospels and Epistles, and the law and the prophets, according to the declaration of Christ Himself.[130]

This quote is taken from Origen's *De Principiis*. The context is Origen's recognition that professing Christians differ on both major and minor points of doctrine. He thus desires to build a foundation of sound theology, beginning with essentials, in this case the second person of the Trinity. Here Origen insists that knowledge of the Son may only be truly gleaned from the written scriptures. It must be acknowledged that what precisely the canon should contain was, in some sense, still a matter of debate at this time. However, the accepted writings were, in the main, agreed upon.[131] Here, Origen enumerates the scriptures as the gospels and the epistles (New Testament) and the law and the prophets (Old Testament).

Interestingly, Joseph Gallegos, sees in the preface of this same work, evidence for Tradition II. Quoting an earlier passage from *De Principiis*:

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[130] Origen, "De Principiis," in *The Complete Works of Origen* (New Delhi: Delhi Open Books, 2021), 48, Kindle.

[131] For example, see the Muratorian Canon (later 2nd century) which lists the books of Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Revelation, all of Paul's Epistles, and all of the General Epistles with the exception of James, 1st and 2nd Peter and Hebrews. The Gospel of Mathew is likely also included, as the beginning of the canon has not been preserved and it refers to Luke and John as the third and fourth Gospels. The canon also includes two works later excluded, the Apocalypse of John and the Wisdom of Solomon. See: Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, trans., *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 30.

> Since many, however, of those who profess to believe in Christ differ from each other, not only in small and trifling matters, but also on subjects of the highest importance, as, e.g., regarding God, or the Lord Jesus Christ, or the Holy Spirit; and not only regarding these, but also regarding others which are created existences, viz., the powers and the holy virtues; it seems on that account necessary first of all to fix a definite limit and to lay down an unmistakable rule regarding each one of these, and then to pass to the investigation of other points. For as we ceased to seek for truth (notwithstanding the professions of many among Greeks and Barbarians to make it known) among all who claimed it for erroneous opinions, after we had come to believe that Christ was the Son of God, and were persuaded that we must learn it from Himself; so, seeing there are many who think they hold the opinions of Christ, and yet some of these think differently from their predecessors, yet as the teaching of the Church, transmitted in orderly succession from the apostles, and remaining in the Churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and tradition.[132]

Gallegos is of course correct when he argues that "this faith is transmitted and preserved though orderly succession of the apostles."[133] Origen certainly believed this, and like Tertullian, recognized that heresy was both a break from the scriptures and from the apostolic church. However, as the first quote demonstrates, the content of that faith is the scriptures themselves. The task of the church is again that of preserving and passing that faith on, not defining it apart from the scriptures. As we have seen with the other patristic writers, Origen defines false teaching as that which is contrary to scripture:

> With respect to those, indeed, who teach differently regarding Christ from what the rule of Scripture allows, it is no idle task to ascertain whether it is from a treacherous purpose that these opposing powers, in their struggles to prevent a belief in Christ, have devised certain fabulous and impious doctrines; or whether, on hearing the word of Christ, and not being able to cast it forth from the secrecy of their conscience, nor yet to retain it pure and holy, they have, by means of vessels that were convenient to their use, and, so to speak, through their prophets, introduced various errors contrary to the rule of Christian truth.[134]

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[132] Origen, *Complete Works*, 262.
[133] Gallegos, *What Did the Church Fathers Teach*, 417.
[134] Origen, *Complete Works*, 13-14.

The scriptures thus set forth the boundaries for orthodox teaching. Outside of them is the realm of "fabulous and impious doctrines."

## Basil the Great of Caesarea (330-79)

One of the three Cappadocian Fathers (along with Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa), Basil is known for his defense of Catholic Christianity against the Arian movement.[135] Arianism denied the full divinity of the Son. Only the Father possesses a truly eternal nature, the Son, though the pinnacle of all creation, nevertheless remained a created being and therefore not fully divine in the same sense as the Father. Similarly, Arianism did not recognize the person of the Holy Spirit as holding an equal standing with the Father. Though condemned at the council of Nicaea, this influential movement persisted for some time, particularly in western Europe.[136] Here, we will consider *On the Holy Spirt*, Basil's major treatise against Arianism.

It is immediately evident that Basil places greater emphasis on non-scriptural tradition than have the other writers thus far considered. He frequently appeals to tradition as a distinct source of doctrine:

> Let us examine now our general ideas about the Holy Spirit, those that are gathered about him for us from the Scriptures together with those that we have received from the non-scriptural tradition of the fathers.[137]

Basil goes on to provide examples of the many names and descriptions of the Holy Spirit, and of the various actions of the Spirit, as cited in scripture. From these, he derives additional characteristics of the Spirit not explicitly stated in scripture, yet reasonably

[135] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[136] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[137] Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 37, Kindle.

inferred therefrom. Yet, despite appealing to non-scriptural tradition in his introduction, Basil does not reference any *specific* traditions to support his arguments for the Holy Spirt.

Let us consider another example:

> But in truth it is the faith that is the object of their war, and their intention, shared by all who oppose and hate sound teaching, is to throw down the foundation of faith in Christ by dashing apostolic tradition to the ground and to obliterate it. On account of this, like true debtors they cry out for proofs from the Scriptures and dismiss the non-scriptural witness of the fathers as worthless. But we will not shrink from the truth or surrender the battle out of cowardice. For if the Lord has handed on as a necessary and saving dogma that the Holy Spirit is ranked with the Father, and if it does not seem so to them who instead divide and separate him [from the Father] and relegate him to a subservient nature—if all this is the case, then how is it not true that they make their own blasphemy more authoritative than the law of the Master?[138]

Basil appears to be accusing his opponents of employing *sola scriptura*, demanding exclusively scriptural proofs and "dismissing the non-scriptural witness of the fathers as worthless," a practice he clearly views negatively. However, there may be something more subtle at play here. The non-scriptural witness of the fathers, which "the Lord handed on" that is referred to, is the doctrine of the co-equal divine nature of the Father and the Holy Spirit. This doctrine, though not explicitly stated in the scriptures, may be inferred from them. Basil, in fact, conducts such an exercise himself earlier in this work, citing specific scriptures to define the person of the Holy Spirt.[139] And again, Basil does not provide any examples of the extra- scriptural tradition from whence his understanding of the Spirt is derived. "Tradition," in this instance, is thus not necessarily an external

[138] Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 39.
[139] Basil, *On the Holy Spirt*, 37.

deposit of material separate from the scriptures. It may instead be the historic and accepted interpretation of scripture itself.

The following passage offers the strongest evidence thus far that Basil subscribed to Tradition II:

> Of the dogmas and proclamations that are guarded in the Church, we hold some from the teaching of the Scriptures, and others we have received in mystery as the teachings of the tradition of the apostles. Both hold the same power with respect to true religion. No one would deny these points, at least no one who has even a little experience of ecclesiastical institutions. For if we attempt to reject non-scriptural customs as insignificant, we would, unaware, lose the very vital parts of the Gospel, and even more, we would establish the proclamation merely in name. For instance, I will mention the first and most common—who has learned through the Scriptures that those who hope in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ are marked with the sign of the cross? What sort of scriptural text teaches us to turn to the East for prayer? Which saint has left us a scriptural account of the words of the epiclesis at the manifestation of the bread of the Eucharist and the cup of blessing? We are not satisfied with the [Eucharistic] words that the Apostle or the Gospel mentions, but we add other words before and after theirs, since we have received non-scriptural teaching that these words have great power in regard to the mystery. We bless the water of baptism and the oil of chrism in addition to the very one who is to be baptized. By what Scriptures? Is it not by the secret and mystical tradition? But why? What scriptural authority teaches the anointing itself of oil? Where does a man being immersed three times come from? How much of the baptismal ritual is for the renunciation of Satan and his angels, and what scriptural text does it come from? Does it not come from this secret and unspoken teaching, which our fathers guarded…? [140]

Basil's case can be summarized as follows:

- The church holds to dogmas derived from both the scriptures and non-scriptural apostolic teachings.
- Both sources are equally authoritative.
- There is an aspect of the mysterious with respect to the unwritten traditions.

[140] Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 79.

- If the unwritten apostolic traditions are rejected, essential components of the Gospels will be lost.

While some of the examples of tradition Basil provides are largely ceremonial, and thus arguably secondary, to insist that is the absolute limit of his intention is to overstate the case. In this passage, Basil clearly has in mind an essential secondary source of doctrine.

Finally, Basil provides a reason for the existence of this tradition:

> In the same way, the apostles and fathers ordained from the first the matters of the Church and guarded the solemnity of the mysteries in secrecy and silence, for what is made known for a public and casual hearing is no mystery at all. This is the reason for non-scriptural traditions, that knowledge of dogmas not be neglected or despised by the many because of familiarity.[141]

For Basil, the very fact that the traditions are unrecorded and not available to all affords them a quality of mystery and therefore a special prestige. Basil sees a danger that the profundities of God's revelation might become commonplace and thus lose their sense of the sublime. Appealing to St. Paul's first epistle to Timothy, Basil sees in the non-scriptural traditions "so great a power for the mystery of true region." [142]

Heiko Oberman has suggested that Basil was the first true advocate of Tradition II.[143] Although Basil does insist on tradition's crucial importance, he does not employ it to supersede scripture. There is no question of setting tradition against scripture as an alternative. Rather, Basil seems to understand tradition as an equal but complementary source, addressing matters upon which the scripture itself is silent. The Council of Trent formally opened the way for *opposing* scripture with tradition, if not in its literal wording,

[141] Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 80.
[142] Basil, *On the Holy Spirt*, 81.
[143] Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 277.

at least in intent. While Basil has surely embraced a two-source theory, he falls somewhat short of Trent's formulation. Basil provides a further insight into the early church's understand of non-canonical tradition. Since it had no written record tradition remains, to a degree, mysterious. It consisted of beliefs and practices that had been adopted at some earlier point, but not formally recorded. It is authoritative but not fully explicit. It is in some sense hidden. Therefore, Basil can make references to those things prescribed by tradition, but does not, and cannot cite it objectively and specifically in the same manner as scripture.

## Patristics – Conclusion

The evidence gleaned from the early Patristic period points to an overall consensus understanding of scripture as the supreme source of authority. It is frequently and, with the exception of Basil, almost exclusively appealed to in debates with various contentious movements. Irenaeus contrasts the objective, publicly available revelation of the scriptures with the secret and subjective teachings of the Gnostics. For Irenaeus, the scriptures provide all the revelation that is needed; it is unwise to seek additional divine knowledge outside of them. Clement views the scriptures as foundational, not subject to outside verification, itself the basic and ungoverned standard. Tertullian, while empathizing the importance of the apostolically continuous church, insisted upon a rule of faith entirely derived from the scriptures. He considered movements outside of the apostolic succession heretical because, unlike the apostolic churches, they failed to conform to this rule of faith. Likewise, Origen understood the written scriptures as establishing the borders of Orthodoxy. Though these figures acknowledged the existence of additional, doctrinally relevant information not preserved within the canon, this

material was generally not held to enjoy equal status with scripture. While Basil may be an exception, he did not go as far as to set unwritten tradition against scripture. Rather, Basil understood tradition to comprise authoritative revealed truths not addressed in the canonical writings. Additionally, the value Basil places on the numinous nature of tradition seems to run counter to Irenaeus' warnings against seeking arcane knowledge, and puts him outside of the patristic mainstream. In summary, the patristic writers surveyed, in large part, world have likely agreed with the Protestant Reformers.

# Chapter 5

## Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

### Augustine's Understanding of the Canonical Scriptures

> This Mediator, having spoken what He judged sufficient first by the prophets, then by His own lips, and afterwards by the apostles, has besides produced the Scripture which is called canonical, which has paramount authority, and to which we yield assent in all matters of which we ought not to be ignorant, and yet cannot know of ourselves.[144]

The quote above is taken from St. Augustine's *City of God* and effectively captures the bishop of Hippo's understanding of sacred scripture. Here he makes three notable points: First, the "Mediator" refers to the Holy Spirt as evidenced by the chapter title from whence this passage is found ("On the Authority of the Canonical Scriptures Composed by the Divine Spirit).[145] Although making use of human secondary agents (prophets and apostles), the Spirit directed and oversaw the production of the Scriptures. Second, given their divine superintendence, Augustine considers these writings to be of "paramount authority," that is nothing supersedes or equals them. Third, this divine authority is unique to those writings that are part of the accepted Canon. Fourth, they contain all essential truths, truths which cannot be perceived through other means. Finally, the normative practice, says Augustine, is to concede to this authority.

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[144] Augustine of Hippo, "City of God," in *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Omaha, NE.: 2019), 2623, Kindle.
[145] Augustine, "City of God," 2623.

Given Augustine's influence on both Aquinas and Luther, his views are particularly pertinent and will be addressed in some detail. The following quote is from Augustine's *Letter to Jerome (LXXXII)*, one of several contentious letters between the two. Here Augustine is considering the proper approach to theological discourse:

> For I confess to your Charity that I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the Ms. is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it. As to all other writings, in reading them, however great the superiority of the authors to myself in sanctity and learning, I do not accept their teaching as true on the mere ground of the opinion being held by them; but only because they have succeeded in convincing my judgment of its truth either by means of these canonical writings themselves, or by arguments addressed to my reason.[146]

Saint Augustine points out that only the scriptures are reliably infallible. This is in contrast to other authoritative writings, including those authored by thinkers of greater standing than Augustine himself.[147] Indeed, such writings are themselves subject to verification from the scriptures. Augustine acknowledges that it is possible for scriptural claims to contradict his own innate sense of what is true, yet such confusion is due either to a manuscript or translational error, or a lack of comprehension on Augustine's part. Additionally, Augustine points out that Jerome, likewise holds (or perhaps should hold) this same opinion about his own writings, and that Augustine would consider him arrogant to do otherwise. There is neither appeal to the church as interpreter, nor recognition of an extra-scriptural apostolic tradition with equal status to the canonical works.

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[146] Augustine of Hippo, "Letters of Saint Augustine, LXXXII, Letter to Jerome" in *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Omaha, NE.: 2019), 1008, Kindle.
[147] Perhaps meant sarcastically.

In the same letter, Augustine speaks to the custom of fasting on the seventh day of the week, practiced by churches in the West (notably Rome), but not by those in the East:

> But why may I not say regarding these institutions of the old economy, that they are neither good nor bad…Do you prefer to say of this practice, that it is a thing indifferent in itself, but commendable in him who conforms with it, not as a dissembler, but from a seemly desire for the fellowship and deference for the feelings of others? No precept, however, concerning this practice is given to Christians in the canonical books. How much more, then, may I shrink from pronouncing that to be bad which I cannot deny to be of divine institution![148]

Here the context is the means of justification. Augustine notes that people are not justified by fasting, yet fasting was instituted by God. However, since the specifics of fasting are not addressed in the scriptures, Augustine refuses to rule on how it is to be conducted.[149] There is no appeal to an unwritten apostolic tradition. If Augustine believed such an oral tradition existed and was authoritative, he would likely have referenced it, even if only to mention that the tradition did not address this issue of fasting. There is also no petition to the church for an official verdict. The individual churches are themselves in disagreement, something that Augustine does not seem to be surprised by. Lacking a canonical pronouncement, Christians may thus act with liberty.

Augustine next takes up the question of St. Paul's rebuke of St. Peter as recorded in Pauls' Letter to the Galatians (2:11-14). Jerome has claimed that Paul's accusation against Peter must be untrue, since, according to Jerome, it is intolerable to believe that Peter acted wrongly. Augustine disputes this. Peter's supposed faultless character (presumed by Jerome) does not invalidate what is clearly stated in scripture. Augustine argues that one must believe that the passage in Galatians accurately recounts what did in

[148] Augustine, *Letter to Jerome*, 1016-18.
[149] This question concerns fasting mandates for the New Testament Christian Church only. Augustine is not here considering Old Testament fasting requirements for the nation of Israel.

fact occur, that is, Peter's refusal to eat with Gentile Christians. In an earlier latter,[150] Jerome had defended his position by appealing to those authorities who agreed with him and challenged Augustine to find similar support. Jerome makes the case that Augustine is not following the example that Augustine's own interpretation of the Peter/ Paul dispute mandates. Will Augustine, like Peter, receive correction from others in humility; in this case those authorities who agree with Jerome? The Bishop of Hippo points out that the veracity of some of Jerome's advocates is suspect, yet the main thrust of his response is that regardless of who believes what, the scriptures are the decisive source of truth:

> However, if you inquire or recall to memory the opinion of our Ambrose, and also of our Cyprian, on the point in question, you will perhaps find that I also have not been without some whose footsteps I follow in that which I have maintained. At the same time, as I have said already, it is to the canonical Scriptures alone that I am bound to yield such implicit subjection as to follow their teaching, without admitting the slightest suspicion that in them any mistake or any statement intended to mislead could find a place.[151]

In his *Letter to Vincentius*, Augustine draws a distinction between the canonical scriptures and non-canonical writings:

> … Wherefore, my brother, refrain from gathering together against divine testimonies so many, so perspicuous, and so unchallenged, the calumnies which may be found in the writings of bishops either of our communion, as Hilary, or of the undivided Church itself in the age preceding the schism of Donatus, as Cyprian or Agrippinus; because, in the first place, this class of writings must be, so far as authority is concerned, distinguished from the canon of Scripture. For they are not read by us as if a testimony brought forward from them was such that it would be unlawful to hold any different opinion, for it may be that the opinions which they held were different from those to which truth demands our assent.[152]

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[150] Augustine, *Letters, LXXV Letter from Jerome*," 957-982.
[151] Augustine, *Letter to Jerome*, 1028.
[152] Augustine, *Letters, XCIII, Letter to Vincentius,* 1137.

Here the comparison is between the "divine testimonies," and the opinions of individual bishops, who (in Augustine's mind) were often wrong. Augustine disagreed with Agrippinus[153] and Cyprian[154] on the matter of rebaptizing heretics. Yet Augustine does not appeal to the church to settle this disagreement. One must be wary of bishops from even the "undivided Church itself." These do not guarantee orthodoxy. By contrast, only the canonical scriptures *must* be believed.

Augustine here again insists that the works of all non-canonical authors, including his own, are not to be received at the level of scripture:

> For the reasonings of any men whatsoever, even though they be Catholics, and of high reputation, are not to be treated by us in the same way as the canonical Scriptures are treated. We are at liberty, without doing any violence to the respect which these men deserve, to condemn and reject anything in their writings, if perchance we shall find that they have entertained opinions differing from that which others or we ourselves have, by the divine help, discovered to be the truth. I deal thus with the writings of others, and I wish my intelligent readers to deal thus with mine.[155]

Unlike the scriptures, these writings can, and indeed should, be rejected if they are found to be contain errors. How may such errors be discerned? Augustine does not appeal to the teaching authority of the church, but rather to "divine help" provided to individuals. The context of this quote is the question of whether or not God, in His essential nature, possess a material a body. In support of God's immateriality, Augustine has cited well established theologians such as Jerome, Ambrose, Athanasius and Gregory. Yet it is these

[153] John Joseph A 'Becket, "Agrippinus," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907, accessed July 17, 2022. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01232a.htm.
[154] A 'Becket, "St Cyprian of Carthage," in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04583b.htm.
[155] Augustine, "*Letters, CXLVIII, Instructions to the Holy Bother Fortunatianus*, 1450.

luminaries whose claims may be rejected if they are found to be at odds with those of scripture.

While drawing a clear distinction between the scriptures and the works of the church fathers, Augustine nevertheless recognized the role that the fathers played in preserving and transmitting the scriptures. Speaking to the apocryphal writings:

> Let us omit, then, the fables of those scriptures which are called apocryphal, because their obscure origin was unknown to the fathers from whom the authority of the true Scriptures has been transmitted to us by a most certain and well-ascertained succession.[156]

The church fathers, and by extension the church itself, surely have an important responsibility. But the proper role is the scriptures custodian, not their judge. And again, the other "scriptures," those which have been deemed by the church (in this its rightful custodial role) as outside of the canon are not considered authoritative.

Augustine's own writings must be subjected to the same scrutiny as the works of others. In evaluating non-canonical literature, the reader should avoid two extremes: The unwillingness to correct Augustine and the refusal to be corrected by Augustine. In both cases the scriptures, and not Augustine, are the standard of measure:

> Do not be willing to yield to my writings as to the canonical Scriptures; but in these, when thou hast discovered even what thou didst not previously believe, believe it unhesitatingly; while in those, unless thou hast understood with certainty what thou didst not before hold as certain, be unwilling to hold it fast…Do not be willing to amend my writings by thine own opinion or disputation, but from the divine text, or by unanswerable reason.[157]

The scriptures must simply be believed. This includes the acceptance of things newly gleaned that were previously dis-believed. Augustine's writings are to be received

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[156] Augustine, *City of God*, 2939.
[157] Augustine of Hippo, "The Doctrinal Treatises of Saint Augustine," in *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Omaha, NE.: 2019), 4074, Kindle.

conditionally. One may revise Augustine's work, provided that revision is based on scriptural considerations and not personal preferences.

In his writings addressing the Manichean controversy, Augustine again evaluates the authority of the scriptures vs. that of church leaders:

> As regards our writings, which are not a rule of faith or practice, but only a help to edification, we may suppose that they contain some things falling short of the truth in obscure and recondite matters, and that these mistakes may or may not be corrected in subsequent treatises. For we are of those of whom the apostle says: "And if ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you." Such writings are read with the right of judgment, and without any obligation to believe. In order to leave room for such profitable discussions of difficult questions, there is a distinct boundary line separating all productions subsequent to apostolic times from the authoritative canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The authority of these books has come down to us from the apostles through the successions of bishops and the extension of the Church, and, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind. If we are perplexed by an apparent contradiction in Scripture, it is not allowable to say, the author of this book is mistaken; but either the manuscript is faulty, or the translation is wrong, or you have not understood. In the innumerable books that have been written latterly we may sometimes find the same truth as in Scripture, but there is not the same authority. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself. In other books the reader may form his own opinion, and perhaps, from not understanding the writer, may differ from him, and may pronounce in favor of what pleases him, or against what he dislikes. In such cases, a man is at liberty to withhold his belief, unless there is some clear demonstration or some canonical authority to show that the doctrine or statement either must or may be true. But in consequence of the distinctive peculiarity of the sacred writings, we are bound to receive as true whatever the canon shows to have been said by even one prophet, or apostle, or evangelist.[158]

The context of here is Augustine's rebuttal of a claim made by Faustus concerning St. Paul. Faustus contended that although Paul had initially held to the doctrine of Christ's incarnation, Paul later reversed his position and forsook this doctrine. Paul's writings

[158] Augustine of Hippo, "Writings in Connection with the Manichaean Controversy," in *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Omaha, NE.: 2019), 6074-6075, Kindle.

were thus, according to Faustus, inconsistent. In his reply, Augustine makes several points crucial to this discussion:

1. "Our" writings, those of Augustine and his peers, are not themselves a "rule of faith or practice." They may be helpful but are by no means the substance of the Christian faith.
4. These writings may contain errors, which are subject to future revision by others. No one is required to accept these writings
5. The demarcation is between ALL writings produced "subsequent to apostolic times," and the canonical scriptures which were completed at the end of the Apostolic Age. In other words, everything that follows after the New Testament is in an entirely different category. Only the books of the Old and New Testaments hold "a position of lofty supremacy," and require the "submission of every faithful and pious mind."
6. Augustine, by specifying the "authoritative books of the Old and New Testament" by necessity excludes all other things, not only later written works, but also any orally preserved apostolic traditions. It is the canonical books themselves and not oral traditions that have "come down to us from the apostles through the successions of bishops and the extension of the Church."
7. The role of the church is again therefore, preservative. The church is the means by which the scriptures were transmitted throughout history.
8. The "innumerable books" written after those authored by the apostles may well agree with scripture, but even when they do, this agreement does not elevate them to the same plane as the canonical works.

This second class of literature may be freely subjected to one's individual judgement. In contrast, "we are bound to receive as true whatever the canon shows to have been said by even one prophet, or apostle, or evangelist." Thus, only what is written in the canon itself, not later writings, not unwritten apostolic traditions handed down from New Testament times, is uniquely authoritative.

Continuing his argument with Faustus, Augustine turns to the descent of Joseph and Mary from the line of King David:

> We believe that Mary, as well as Joseph, was of the family of David, because we believe the Scriptures, which assert both that Christ was of the seed of David after the flesh, and that His mother was the Virgin Mary, He having no human father… Therefore, whoever denies the relationship of Mary to David, evidently opposes the pre-eminent authority of these passages of Scripture; and to maintain this opposition he must bring evidence in support of his statement from writings acknowledged by the Church as canonical and catholic, not from any writings he pleases. In the matters of which we are now treating, only the canonical writings have any weight with us; for they only are received and acknowledged by the Church spread over all the world, which is itself a fulfillment of the prophecies regarding it contained in these writings.[159]

Here again we have a clear statement of the superiority of the canonical scriptures over other potential sources for establishing doctrine; "…only the canonical writings have any weight with us." There is no mention here of any additional oral tradition outside of the canon. Once more, Augustine points out the essential role of the church in acknowledging those writings that are part of the canon. Acknowledgement of that which is canonical does not presume the ability to either overrule or infallibly interpret the canon.

[159] Augustine, *Writings in Connection with the Manichaean Controversy*, 6431.

Looking now to the Donatists' attempted to appeal to Cyprian, Augustine returns to the familiar theme of scripture's absolute supremacy: Cyprian's authority cannot be claimed over that of scripture, indeed that is not what Cyprian himself did. Scripture supersedes everything:

> But who can fail to be aware that the sacred canon of Scripture, both of the Old and New Testament, is confined within its own limits, and that it stands so absolutely in a superior position to all later letters of the bishops, that about it we can hold no manner of doubt or disputation whether what is confessedly contained in it is right and true; but that all the letters of bishops which have been written, or are being written, since the closing of the canon, are liable to be refuted if there be anything contained in them which strays from the truth, either by the discourse of someone who happens to be wiser in the matter than themselves, or by the weightier authority and more learned experience of other bishops, by the authority of Councils; and further, that the Councils themselves, which are held in the several districts and provinces, must yield, beyond all possibility of doubt, to the authority of plenary Councils which are formed for the whole Christian world; and that even of the plenary Councils, the earlier are often corrected by those which follow them.[160]

If the "sacred canon of scripture, both the Old and New Testament is contained within its own limits," then there is no warrant for an equally esteemed unwritten tradition. Scripture supersedes all other sources. The authority of bishops is limited and their pronouncements can be, and have been, reversed. Augustine then raises the stakes further. Even universal church councils are not sacrosanct. Such councils may err, and the earlier may be corrected by the later. Only the Old and New Testaments are absolutely inviolable and not subject to challenge.

In his defense of the essentiality of God's grace, Augustine is critical of Pelagius' dependence on extra-canonical authors:

> Accordingly, with respect also to the passages which he has adduced, — not indeed from the canonical Scriptures, but out of certain treatises of

[160] Augustine of Hippo, "Writings in Connection with the Donatist Controversy," in *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Omaha, NE.: 2019), 6741-6742, Kindle.

> catholic writers…Especially as in writings of such authors I feel myself free to use my own judgment (owing unhesitating assent to nothing but the canonical Scriptures) …[161]

It could be argued that this quote offers little real proof for the supremacy of scripture. The catholic writers Pelagius invokes are not particularly compelling. They are either unnamed, or offer findings that in Augustine's opinion, support nether his own nor Pelagius' position. However, the bishop of Hippo is equally un-swayed by Pelagius' appeal to Ambrose of Milan:

> Observe the sort as well as the amount of the praises which he (Pelagius) bestows; nevertheless, however holy and learned he (Ambrose) is, he is not to be compared to the authority of the canonical Scripture.[162]

Bishop Ambrose, a highly influential figure in Augustine's life, and foundational in his conversion, is not to be put on the same level as the canonical scriptures. It is thereof difficult to imagine any authority Augustine would deem equal to scripture.

## Augustine's Understanding of Tradition

The examples above offer persuasive evidence of Augustine's unequivocal deference to scripture. Time and again he submits to the written canon. What then does tradition mean to Augustine, and what is its proper role? In the following passage, Augustine seeks the source for the church's understanding of the sacraments:

> The Christians of Carthage have an excellent name for the sacraments, when they say that baptism is nothing else than "salvation," and the sacrament of the body of Christ nothing else than "life." Whence, however, was this derived, but from that primitive, as I suppose, and apostolic tradition, by which the Churches of Christ maintain it to be an inherent principle, that without baptism and partaking of the supper of the Lord it is impossible for any man to attain either to the kingdom of God or

[161] Augustine of Hippo, "A Treatise on Nature and Grace," in *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Omaha, NE.: 2019), 8139, Kindle.
[162] Augustine, *A Treatise on Nature and Grace*, 8443.

> to salvation and everlasting life? So much also does Scripture testify, according to the words which we already quoted. For wherein does their opinion, who designate baptism by the term salvation, differ from what is written: "He saved us by the washing of regeneration?" (Tit. 3: 5.) or from Peter's statement: "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us?" (1 Pet. 3: 21.)[163]

Tradition and scripture in this case are in complete agreement, if not essentially one and the same thing. There is little here to suggest an apostolic source that is not also found in the written canon. There is no contemplation of pitting tradition against scripture as a discrete source of truth.

In the following passage, Augustine does indeed acknowledge a reliance on a tradition that is separate from the written canon. Such tradition could take the form of either un-recorded apostolic directives, or the pronouncements of church-wide councils:

> As to those other things which we hold on the authority, not of Scripture, but of tradition, and which are observed throughout the whole world, it may be understood that they are held as approved and instituted either by the apostles themselves, or by plenary Councils, whose authority in the Church is most useful, e.g. the annual commemoration, by special solemnities, of the Lord's passion, resurrection, and ascension, and of the descent of the Holy Spirit from heaven, and whatever else is in like manner observed by the whole Church wherever it has been established.[164]

Joseph Gallegos, in the compendium *Not by Scripture Alone,* suggests that this passage gives evidence that "Augustine determines apostolic truth on the basis of ecumenical faith rather than on the basis of scripture alone."[165] This interpretation, however, is problematic in several ways. The context of this quotation is the "light burden" appointed to Christians, starting with those things "prescribed in the canonical Scriptures."[166] Augustine enumerates such scripturally derived essentials as baptism, communion and

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[163] Augustine of Hippo, "A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants," in *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. Philip Schaff (Omaha, NE.: 2019), 7707, Kindle.
[164] Augustine, *Letters, Letter LIV, Replies to Questions of Januarius*, 854.
[165] Gallegos, *What Did the Church Fathers Teach*, 457.
[166] Augustine, *Replies to Questions of Januarius*, 853.

the doctrine of the Trinity, before moving on to "those other things' which may be gleaned from tradition. These are here limited to dates of special church observances, which are clearly not doctrinal matters. More importantly, the role of scripture is plainly primary, with tradition employed for those things the scripture is silent on. Augustine describes the authority of plenary councils as "most useful," a favorable assessment to be sure, but far more limited that that accorded to scripture in the many examples above. And we have already seen Augustine does not consider such councils free from the possibility of error. The fact that tradition may include some things "approved and instituted by the apostles themselves," does not imply the equality of those things with scripture, which as has been shown, Augustine sets uniquely apart. There is nothing here to suggest that Augustine views scripture and tradition on the same level.

Quoting a text from Augustine's anti-Donatist writings, Gallegos argues that Augustine did in fact appeal to unwritten traditions for the purpose of establishing church doctrines.[167] A more extensive portion of this same quote is given below, which helps to contextualize Augustine's argument:

> For this question of baptism had not been as yet completely worked out, but yet the Church observed the most wholesome custom of correcting what was wrong, not repeating what was already given, even in the case of schismatics and heretics: she healed the wounded part, but did not meddle with what was whole. And this custom, coming, I suppose, from apostolical tradition (like many other things which are held to have been handed down under their actual sanction, because they are preserved throughout the whole Church, though they are not found either in their letters, or in the Councils of their successors), —this most wholesome custom, I say, according to the holy Cyprian, began to be what is called amended by his predecessor Agrippinus. But, according to the teaching which springs from a more careful investigation into the truth, which, after great doubt and fluctuation, was brought at last to the decision of a plenary

[167] Gallegos, *What Did the Church Fathers Teach*, 455.

> Council, we ought to believe that it rather began to be corrupted than to receive correction at the hands of Agrippinus.[168]

The relevant question here is neither whether an unwritten apostolic tradition exists, nor whether such a tradition, if it does exist, applies to doctrinal matters. At issue, rather, is the status of such tradition compared to scripture. There is nothing in the Reformers' conception of *sola scriptura* that eschews *any* appeal to tradition. On the question at hand (the re-baptism of heretics), the scriptures are silent, so there would no expectation that Augustine would seek a resolution from the canon. There is certainly nothing here that implies tradition is on an equal plane with scripture. Even more problematic for Gallegos' arguments, the tradition in question was at some point subject to corruption. This contrasts with the scriptures themselves, which, as we have seen, Augustine considered to be inviolable.

A similar example, again found in Augustine's writings on the Donatist controversy:

> For if none have baptism who entertain false views about God, it has been proved sufficiently, in my opinion, that this may happen even within the Church. The apostles, indeed, gave no injunctions on the point; but the custom, which is opposed to Cyprian, may be supposed to have had its origin in apostolic tradition, just as there are many things which are observed by the whole Church, and therefore are fairly held to have been enjoined by the apostles, which yet are not mentioned in their writings.[169]

Interpreting this passage as invalidating the unique and preeminent authority of scripture[170] is, again, an argument from silence. Augustine's very point is that there is no written apostolic source that address this question of baptism. What is more, he is

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[168] Augustine, *Writings in Connection with the Donatist Controversy*, 6754-5.
[169] Augustine, *Writings in Connection with the Donatist Controversy*, 6934.
[170] Robert Sungenis, ed. *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Pub. Co., 1997), 497.

claiming possible,[171] *not certain,* apostolic origin for the custom "opposed to Cyprian," as well as for the "many things observed by the whole church."[172] The contrast in the passage above is between Cyprian's own opinion, and a widespread belief and practice that may have been instituted by the apostles. Absent an authoritative canonical answer, it is eminently reasonable to favor the historic and accepted tradition. This of course, is not the same thing as equating such a tradition with scripture.

Another instance of Augustine's use of tradition may be found in his *Doctrinal Treatises.* This again, according to Joseph Gallegos, is an example of tradition and scripture's equivalency.[173] Here Augustine is considering the length of time between the crucifixion and the resurrection, and the number of intervening days:

> But those reasons which I have here given, I have either gathered from the authority of the church, according to the tradition of our forefathers, or from the testimony of the divine Scriptures, or from the nature itself of numbers and of similitudes. No sober person will decide against reason, no Christian against the Scriptures, no peaceable person against the church.[174]

Here we have three sources of knowledge: reason, the authority of the church (rooted in the tradition of the fathers), and scripture. Augustine clearly has in mind three *separate* things, for surely reason and the scriptures are not one and the same. In this case, then, scripture and tradition are also not the same. But the doctrine of *sola scriptura* does not claim that tradition and reason are not means of knowledge acquisition, only that

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[171] As we have seen, Augustine considered scripture to be unique. Even if the apostolic origin of a non-canonical ordinance were undeniably certain, that in itself would not elevate it to the level of the canon.
[172] By its very nature this unwritten apostolic tradition was ambiguous. Unlike the canonical scriptures, it could not be precisely determined what the oral tradition. This is not to say that the New Testament canon was always unanimously agree upon. Yet it was known what books were under consideration and what teachings they contained. Augustine's wording in the above quotation illustrates the uncertainly with which he views the unwritten tradition in comparison to the canon.
[173] Gallegos, *What Did the Church Fathers Teach*, 442.
[174] Augustine, Doctrinal Treatises, 4130.

scripture has the final say. The fact that other sources are recognized does not make them equal.

## St. Augustine: Conclusion

From the examples above, it may be seen that Augustine considers the canonical scriptures to be unique and primary. Only the scriptures are inerrant. The opinions of bishops and theologians, however learned and esteemed, are not on a par with scripture. The unanimous consensus of the church itself, in the form of councilor decisions, are not free from potential error. Augustine acknowledges the existence of an unwritten apostolic tradition that is not contained within the canon. However, he does not grant to this the prestige of the canon itself.

Augustine judges all of these things to be valuable, yet he also insists on their limitations. All are to be measured against the scriptures. The church councils provide useful distillations of scriptural truths, and have been helpful in interpreting difficult scriptural teachings, but councils are not infallible and are subject to future correction. The un-written teachings of the apostles offer guidance where scripture is silent but lack both the certainty of content and primary authority of scripture. Where the canonical writings do address a particular subject, Augustine believes any unwritten tradition to agree. Neither the oral tradition nor the decisions of councils are ever set against scripture as an alternative source of truth. In these things Augustine of Hippo is in remarkable agreement with the Reformers

# Chapter 6

## The Middle Ages

Much overlap exists between the Patristic period and the early Middle Ages, and the line of demarcation between these periods is difficult to define absolutely. For our purposes, Augustine will be treated as the last of the patristics. We will begin this survey of the Middle Ages with Vincent of Lérins, roughly contemporary with Augustine. We will then transition to the later medieval period, starting with Anslem of Canterbury,[175] before concluding with selections from three medieval popes. A subsequent chapter will be devoted exclusively to Thomas Aquinas, the most influential of medieval thinkers.

During the Middle Ages a Christianized version of the Roman Empire persisted in the Greek speaking East. In the Latin West, the former empire would merge with previously pagan European peoples into an amalgam of church and state known as Christendom. During this period the major Eastern and Western branches of Christianity would drift apart, culturally and ecclesiastically, arriving at a decisive and final fracture in 1054. The East would retain its collegiate patriarchal structure, while in the West, the Roman papacy would rise to a position of great prominence and authority. This East/ West schism, resulting in a very clear separation between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, will become of importance to this discussion.

[175] For the sake of brevity, writers from the so called "Dark Ages," such as the Venerable Bede and Isadore of Seville, will not be included in the scoop of this study.

## Vincent of Lérins (d. 450)

A monastic, noted as the author of the Vincentian Canon,[176] little additional autobiographical information is available for Vincent of Lérins. In his major work, *The Commonitory*, he examines the relationship between the canonical scriptures and the Catholic Church:

> Lord helping, fortify our own belief in two ways; first, by the authority of the Divine Law, and then, by the Tradition of the Catholic Church. But here someone perhaps will ask, Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation? For this reason, -- because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters.[177]

For Vincent, the canon is entirely adequate. There is no additional non-canonical revelation that is necessary. It is thus martially sufficient. Yet he is also arguing against formal sufficiency. The scriptures may be interpreted in a multitude of ways, and the Catholic Church is needed as an arbiter, a means of resolving these conflicting interpretations. Elsewhere, however, Vincent seems to stress the perspicuity of scripture:

> The Donatists affected great strictness of life, and ignoring the plain declarations of Scripture, and notably the prophetic representations contained in our Lord's parables of the Tares, the Draw-net, and others, they held that no church could be a true church which endured the presence of evil men in its society.[178]

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[176] A test for of orthodox belief defined by "What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[177] Vincent of Lérins, *The Commonitory*, trans C. A. Heurtley (Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), 370-378, Kindle.
[178] Vincent, *The Commonitory*, 423-427.

Here the meaning of scripture is clear and self-evident. It is the schismatic Donatist movement that fails to recognize this. So, the meaning of the scriptures is in one sense plain and self-evident, yet they also require interpretation.

Vincent surely sees the church as that interpreter, but not grant to it the power overruling scriptures plain meaning. Nor may the church invent new doctrines not derived from scripture. Here, he is addressing a passage in St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians,[179] in which Paul admonishes his readers to reject any truth claims not rooted in the original apostolic gospel:

> Why does he say "Though we"? why not rather "though I"? He means, "though Peter, though Andrew, though John, in a word, though the whole company of apostles, preach unto you other than we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." Tremendous severity! He spares neither himself nor his fellow apostles, so he may preserve unaltered the faith which was at first delivered. Nay, this is not all. He goes on "Even though an angel from heaven preach unto you any other Gospel than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed." It was not enough for the preservation of the faith once delivered to have referred to man; he must needs comprehend angels also.[180]

Vincent's understanding of this passage is crucial. St. Paul is arguing that even if the preacher of "any other Gospel," is himself, another apostle (or an angel), let that preacher be accursed. In other words, it is the gospel message itself that is absolutely primary and inviolate. Following Paul, Vincent thus does not believe the teaching authority of the church stands above scripture, but rather is itself subject to scripture. The church's role is to call its hearers back to the original gospel message as preserved in the scriptures.[181]

In the following passage, Vincent offers this critique of Origen:

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[179] Galatians 1:8, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed," *RSV*.
[180] Vincent, *The Commonitory*, 578-582.
[181] Interestingly, the context of Paul's letter to the Galatians, concerns another Reformation era controversy. Paul's is unfavorably contrasting the belief in justification by good works, with his own doctrine of justification by faith.

> Hence it came to pass, that this Origen, such and so great as he was, wantonly abusing the grace of God, rashly following the bent of his own genius, and placing overmuch confidence in himself, making light account of the ancient simplicity of the Christian religion, presuming that he knew more than all the world besides, despising the traditions of the Church and the determinations of the ancients, and interpreting certain passages of Scripture in a novel way, deserved for himself the warning given to the Church of God, as applicable in his case as in that of others. [182]

Again, the context is that of novelty. Origen's error is interpreting scripture in a novel way. Scripture is to be interpreted in its "ancient simplicity;" the way it has always been understood. It is in this sense that Vincentian Canon speaks of that "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all," the originally understood, universally accepted and historically preserved meaning of scripture. This comprehensive statement is not intended to include unwritten apostolic tradition.

## Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Among the most influential of medieval theologians, Anslem sought to defend the Christian faith on rational grounds. His ontological argument for the existence of God is well known.[183] Since Anselm tended to appeal to reason more than either the scriptures or patristic authority, he offers another lens through which to view this debate.

> Some of my brethren have often and earnestly asked me to write down, as a kind of model meditation, some of the things I have said, in everyday language, on the subject of meditating upon the essence of the divine; and on some other subjects bound up with such meditation. They specified (on the basis more of their wishes than of the task's feasibility or my capacity) the following form for this written meditation: nothing whatsoever to be argued on the basis of the authority of Scripture, but the constraints of reason concisely to prove, and the clarity of truth clearly to show, in the

[182] Vincent, *The Commonitory*, 896-900.
[183] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

> plain style, with everyday arguments, and down-to-earth dialectic, the conclusions of distinct investigations.[184]

In the passage above, Anslem sets the grounds rules for argumentation. In accordance with the request, he will employ rational analysis rather than deferring simply to the authority of scripture. Here Anslem is not discounting scripture, nor is he making scripture subject to human reason. Rather, he is consenting to a demand: He will demonstrate the rational validity of beliefs derived from scripture. Also, of interest here is what is missing. No appeal is made to the teaching authority of the church.

In this next quotation, Anslem expounds upon the proper role of reason:

> For a human wisdom trusting in itself can more swiftly pluck out its trumpets by pressing against them than it can roll such a stone by leaning on it. For some beginners, in presuming to rise to the loftiest questions about faith, typically produce trumpets, as it were, of knowledge trusting in itself. They do not know that if persons think they know something, they do not yet know, before they have spiritual wings through solidity of faith, how they should know it. And so it happens that when beginners foolishly try to ascend intellectually to those things that first need the ladder of faith (as Scripture says: 'Unless you have believed, you will not understand'), they sink into many kinds of errors by reason of the deficiency of their intellect.[185]

Following Augustine, Anslem argues that faith has precedence over reason. Reason may be employed to gain insight and understanding, but is itself inadequate apart from faith. Anslem does not here directly address the source of such faith, but it may be inferred that he has scripture in mind. There is no mention in the opening quote of magisterial teaching or extra-biblical tradition; the contest is between reason and scripture. From this we may conclude that belief in scripture supersedes reason.

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[184] Anselm of Canterbury, "Letter to Archbishop Lanfranc," in *Anslem of Canterbury: The Major Works,* ed. Brain Davies and Gillian Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 5, Kindle.
[185] Anselm of Canterbury, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *The Major Works,* 235.

Here, Anslem explains his purpose in debating theological controversies through the aid of logical reasoning:

> As reported to me, the individual who asserts that the three persons are like three angels or three souls argues: 'Pagans defend their law; Jews defend theirs. Therefore, we Christians should also defend our faith.' Let us hear how these Christians should defend their faith. 'If,' he says, 'the three persons are only one thing, and there are not three things, each intrinsically distinct, like three angels or three souls, so that they are none the less completely one and the same in will and power, then the Father and the Holy Spirit became flesh with the Son.' See what these people say, how such Christians defend their faith! Surely either they intend to profess three gods, or they do not understand what they are saying. But if they profess three Gods, they are not Christians. And if they affirm what they do not understand, they should not believe it. The authority of Sacred Scripture is not a sufficient response to such persons, since they either do not believe in Scripture or interpret it in a perverse sense.[186]

In this example, the context is the subtle distinctions between the three persons within the Trinity. Anslem believes that the orthodox understanding of the triune nature of God[187] is authoritatively taught within scripture. Yet scripture is of no avail if it is not believed or is deliberately misunderstood. Thus, Anslem has no recourse but to provide a logical (not scriptural) argument in favor of the orthodox position, which he then goes on to do in great detail.

Elsewhere, Anslem clearly states that the authority of scripture takes precedence over human reason:

> But remember with what stipulation I have undertaken to reply to your questioning: namely that, if I say anything which is not confirmed by a greater authority—even if I may seem to be proving it logically—it is not to be accepted as having any validity beyond the fact that it seems to me for the moment to be so, until God reveals to me something in any way better. For I am sure that, if I say anything which is undoubtedly

[186] Anselm of Canterbury, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *The Major Works, 238.*
[187] As formalized by the Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.

> contradictory to Holy Scripture, it is wrong; and, if I become aware of such a contradiction, I do not wish to hold to that opinion.[188]
>
> For if at times we assert by a process of reasoning a conclusion which we cannot explicitly cite from the sayings of Scripture or demonstrate from the bare wording, still it is by using Scripture that we know in the following way whether the affirmation should be accepted or rejected. If the conclusion is reached by straightforward reasoning and Scripture in no way contradicts it, then by the very fact that it does not deny what is inferred on the basis of reason, that conclusion is accepted as authorized by Scripture. But if Scripture indubitably opposes our understanding, even though our reasoning appears to us to be impregnable, still it ought not to be believed to be substantiated by any truth at all. It is when Sacred Scripture either clearly affirms or in no wise denies it, that it gives support to the authority of any reasoned conclusion.[189]

The proceeding passages demonstrate that scripture and reason are entirely unequal. Reason has value; in gaining greater insight and understanding into that which is already believed on the authority or scripture, and in refuting those who reject scripture. Additionally, reason may lead to certain truths that the scripture is silent upon. However, reason is always subordinate to scripture, and can in no way overrule it. A conclusion that is contradicted by scripture must not be accepted, no matter how rational the argument for it may appear.

In this final selection from St. Anslem, we will consider his argument for the double procession of the Holy Spirt- from both the Father and the Son. The Western and Eastern and churches had split during Anslem's lifetime. In addition to cultural, political and linguistic estrangement, the question of the *filioque* was a major doctrinal point of contention. At the Third Council of Toledo (589), the Western church added the phrase "and the son," to the Nicene – Constantinopolitan (381) creedal formulation "the Holy

[188] Anselm of Canterbury, "Why God Became Man," in *The Major Works*, 298.
[189] Anselm of Canterbury, "de Concordia," in *The Major Works*, 460.

Spirt ...who proceeds from the Father." The Eastern churches vehemently opposed this addition.[190] Anselm addresses this controversy as follows:

> But from what do those titles have this sense, or where do we read in Sacred Scripture that, when we read Spirit of God or Spirit of the Lord, we do not understand the titles to regard the Father and the Son? Or what do we find from which such follows? For the Greeks may say: 'When we call the Holy Spirit the Spirit of the Father, we understand this in two ways, that the Holy Spirit is from the Father, and that he is given by the Father, while the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son only because the Holy Spirit is given by the Son.' If they so say, I ask from what source they know this. And if they say that no authentic page of Scripture says this, nor does it follow from what is written there, why do they, because they do not read the words in Scripture, censure us when we say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son, since we understand that such procession necessarily follows from the things that they read and profess?[191]

The scriptures do not directly identify from whom the Spirt proceeds. Both Anslem and his Eastern opponents appear to acknowledge this. According to Anselm, the Greeks' rejection of the *filioque* is due to their drawing an incorrect inference from scripture. The crucial point here is that Anselm argues from scripture and reason exclusively. The Roman Papacy had strongly asserted its authority by excommunicating the Eastern Patriarch Michael Cerularius, partly due to his denunciation of the filioque. Yet Anselm makes no appeal to the Western church's interpretive authority to resolve the issue. If Anslem believed that the institutional Western church held the exclusive interpretive mandate, he likely would have invoked it here. Indeed, as a result of the 1054 schism, the identity of "The Church" became itself a matter of controversy, as it did again at the time of the Reformation.

[190] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[191] Anselm of Canterbury, *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, in Major Works, 424-425.

## Peter Abelard (1079-1142)

Peter Abelard is perhaps best known for his tragic medieval romance with Heloise. However, he was also a notable teacher and theologian. Often controversial, Abelard was condemned as a heretic, though he was restored to communion prior to his death. Although Abelard wrote sparingly on the topic, he provides much insight into the place of scripture in the medieval period.

In the first passage below, Abelard expresses a foundational Reformation principle, the clarity of scripture:

> It chanced, moreover, that one day, after the exposition of certain texts, we scholars were jesting among ourselves, and one of them, seeking to draw me out, asked me what I thought of the lectures on the Books of Scripture. I, who had as yet studied only the sciences, replied that following such lectures seemed to me most useful in so far as the salvation of the soul was concerned, but that it appeared quite extraordinary to me that educated persons should not be able to understand the sacred books simply by studying them themselves, together with the glosses thereon, and without the aid of any teacher. Most of those who were present mocked at me, and asked whether I myself could do as I had said, or whether I would dare to undertake it. I answered that if they wished, I was ready to try it. Forthwith they cried out and jeered all the more. "Well and good," said they; "we agree to the test. Pick out and give us an exposition of some doubtful passage in the Scriptures, so that we can put this boast of yours to the proof." …However, this lecture gave such satisfaction to all those who heard it that they spread its praises abroad with notable enthusiasm, and thus compelled me to continue my interpretation of the sacred text.[192]

> Let, therefore, wretched men cease to impute, with blasphemous perverseness, the darkness and obscurity of their own heart to the all-clear Scriptures of God.[193]

The second quotation is from Matin Luther's *Bondage of the Will*. Luther is saying that the scriptures are inherently clear. When they are misunderstood, the fault lies with the

[192] Abelard, Peter Abelard, *Historia Calamitatum*, trans. Henry Adams Bellows (New York: MacMillian, 1922), accessed October 22, 2022, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/abelard-histcal.asp.
[193] Luther, *Collected Works*, 72.

reader. Abelard, though more moderate in is tone, is essentially claiming the same thing, the scriptures can be readily understood, and do not require expert instruction. Abelard does refer to the *glossae*, the accumulated commentary of scholars added to the biblical text over time. However, Abelard's point remains, even if such commentary is helpful, the scriptures are fundamentally clear to the to the lay person. There is no suggestion here that only the official interpretation of the Catholic Church is valid. Abelard is mocked by his audience not because he is not acting under formal church authority, but because he is unlearned and inexperienced in biblical interpretation. When Abelard successfully expounds upon scripture, he praised by his hearers. No relevance is given to whether Abelard's interpretation aligns with that of the church.

Peter Abelard draws a distinction between the canonical writings and their authors. The apostles and prophets were not themselves inerrant in all things:

> Indeed it is established that the prophets themselves at one time or another have lacked the gift of prophecy and offered from their habit of prophecy some false statements, derived from their own spirit, while believing that they were in possession of the Spirit of prophecy; and this was permitted to happen to them so as to preserve their humility, so that in this way they might recognize more truly what sorts of things come from the Spirit of God and what sorts from their own spirit, and recognize that when they possessed the Spirit of prophecy they had it as a gift from the Spirit Who cannot lie or be mistaken…And it did not shame even the very chief of the apostles, who shone so greatly with miracles and with the gifts of divine grace after that special effusion of the Holy Spirit promised by God, who taught his students the entire truth –- it did not shame him to abandon a harmful untruth, when up to that point he had fallen into a not insignificant error concerning circumcision and the observance of certain ancient rites, and when he had been earnestly, wholesomely and publicly corrected by his fellow apostle Paul.[194]
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> When it is clear that even the prophets and apostles themselves were not complete strangers to error, what is so surprising, then, if among such

[194] Peter Abelard, *Prologue to Sic et Non*, ed. Blanche B Boyer and Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), accessed October 26, 2022, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/abelard-sicetnon-prologue.asp.

> manifold writings of the Holy Fathers some things seem to be handed down or written erroneously, for the reason given above?[195]

The dichotomy is between those statements made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirt, "who cannot lie or be mistaken," and those originating with the apostles or prophets themselves. Abelard has in mind the passage from Galatians, which Augustine previously addressed, where Peter is corrected by Paul. If even Peter could fall into error (which Peter himself did not deny), then how much more so could the church fathers. And if the fathers, then also their successors up to Abelard's time.

What then is absolutely reliable and authorities? Abelard provides the same answer as Augustine:

> Whence even the teacher Augustine, cited above, in Book One of his Retractions: "It is written," he says, "you do not avoid sin by loquacity." And also "The apostle James says (James 1:19), 'Let every man be swift to hear but slow to speak'.'" And " (James 3:2) 'For in many things we all offend. If anyone does not offend in word, he is a perfect man.' I do not claim this perfection for myself even now, when I am an old man – how much less when as a young man I began to write." And in the prologue to Book Three of the On the Trinity (proem 2): "Do not defer to my writings as if they were canonical scriptures, but whatever you would find in the canonical scriptures that you did not believe, believe steadfastly... "Nor ought we to regard the arguments of anyone, no matter how Catholic and well-regarded, in the way we regard the canonical scriptures [196]
>
> …with the exception of the apostles whatever else is said afterwards is separate, and does not possess authority afterward. Therefore, however holy someone may be who lived after the apostles, and however well-spoken, he does not possess authority.[197]

Following Augustine, Abelard believed the canonical scriptures alone authoritative. Therefore, no subsequent authority, including the Roman Catholic Church enjoys equal status. Abelard has stated that the infallibility of the apostles is limited.

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[195] Abelard, *Prologue to Sic et Non*.
[196] Abelard, *Prologue to Sic et Non*.
[197] Abelard, *Prologue to Sic et Non*.

What then is it limited to? Cleary, Abelard has the scriptures in mind as the sole deposit of apostolic inerrancy. Therefore, any extra-canonical traditions that may exist, even those rightly attributed to the apostles, are not inerrant and are of secondary standing.

Peter Abelard's understanding of scripture is remarkably similar to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. A provocative and often quarrelsome figure, Abelard would likely have been taken to task for his views on scripture, had they been controversial. Abelard was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Sens in 1140. However, the charges against him appear to be directed at other aspects of his teaching.[198] The council perceived heterodoxies in Abelard's understanding of Trinitarian issues, Christological issues, the relationship of sin, grace and human ignorance and on the potential limits of Gods' power. It was for these areas of irregularity that Abelard was suspected of Arian, Nestorian and Pelagian sympathies.[199] There is no indication that Abelard's beliefs about the role and status of scripture were seen as unorthodox.

## Hugh of St. Victor (1096-1141)

A member of the St. Victor's abbey in Paris, and influenced by Augustine, Hugh wrote extensively in the areas of theology, grammar and geometry. He authored many biblical commentaries, placing high value on a literal hermeneutic. His most focused discussion on the nature and role of scripture may be found in *On the Sacred Scripture and Its Authors*:

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[198] The manuscript evidence for the Council of Sens has been the subject of some debate: See Constant Mews, "The Lists of Heresies Imputed to Peter Abelard," R*evue Bénédictine 95* (1985): 73-111. Accessed November 3, 2022. https://www-brepolsonline-net.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/toc/rb/95/1-2.

[199] See "The Council of Sens 1140 or 1141- The Errors of Peter Abelard," *Biblia Clerus*, http://www.clerus.org/bibliaclerusonline/en/dwy.htm#bj5.

> Those writings then, in which there is no truth without the contagion of error and by which the soul is not restored to the true knowledge or love of God are never worthy to be called "sacred." Only that scripture is rightly called "sacred" that is inspired by the Spirt of God …Whatever is taught in it is truth…[200]

Hugh begins by drawing a distinction between the scriptures and all other classes of writings. These include poetry, philosophy and scientific treatises. All of these offer value, yet all are subject to error. Only the scriptures are divinely inspired and thus exclusively inerrant. Hugh then goes on to point out the unique content of the scriptures:

> Sacred scripture is distinguished from the other writings both in its subject matter and in its mode of discourse…For all other writings have as their subject matter the works of creation, whereas it is clear the Sacred Scripture deals with the works of restoration. This is the first difference, the subject matter that they treat. Additionally, if other writings teach some truth, it is not without the taint of error, and if they commend some goodness, it is either mixed with malice so that it is not pure, or it is without the knowledge and love of God so that it is not perfect.[201]

Hugh classifies all writings into one of two subject categories; those of *creation* and those of *restoration*, corresponding to the two foundational works of God. Creation is the act of God by which that which did not exist came into being. Restoration is the divine act by which that which was damaged is restored. Only the scriptures address God's restorative work. By contrast, all other types of writings, (such as scientific literature) are limited to the created order. God's work in restoration is "more excellent than the former,"[202] and thus the sublimity and gravitas of the scriptures exceeds all other writings. Hugh then again emphasizes the impossibly of inerrancy in other writings. Even those that teach a degree of truth do so imperfectly, lacking purity of purpose and a full knowledge of God.

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[200] Hugh of Saint Victor, "On the Sacred Scripture and Its Authors," in *Victorine Texts in Translation: Interpretation of Scripture Theory*, ed. Franklin T. Harkins and Frans van Liere (New York: New City Press, 201), 213.
[201] Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacred Scripture,* 214.
[202] Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacred Scripture*, 214.

Having defined the scripture's essential nature and worth, Hugh turns to the relationship between scripture and the writings of church fathers:

> All of Sacred Scripture is contained in two testaments, namely the Old and the New Testament…(the) writings of the Fathers are not included in the text of the Sacred Scriptures, just as in the Old Testament there are some books that not included in the canon but are still read.[203]

> Hence the holy Fathers, taught by the Holy Spirt, accepted only four authoritative Gospels…Paul wrote fourteen letters... there are seven canonical letters…Luke…wrote his Gospel to Theophilus, to whom he also dedicated his Acts of the Apostles…John the Apostle wrote the Apocalypse…These are the writers of the sacred books, who speaking by the Holy Spirit, wrote down for our instruction the precepts and rule of living. Besides these there are other volumes that are called apocryphal…Their origin is obscure and the holy fathers do not tell us by whom they were written. There is some truth in them, but because of their many errors they nevertheless have no canonical authority.[204]

Hugh draws a similar distinction between the canon and the writings of the church fathers that he did between the scriptures and secular works; the latter are subject to error and are thus of lessor authority. The sacred scriptures are clearly limited to only those works include within the canon. Hugh recognizes the existence of apocryphal works, of which there is no clear record of authorship. These are not wholly reliable. Thus, any additional apostolic traditions, even if believed to be genuine, are not to be considered equivalent to scripture. It is important to recognize that the Hugh understood the composition of the canon to be itself a divine work; the fathers were taught by "the Holy Spirt," when they selected the books for inclusion. This, again, is in contrast to the fathers' personal writings, which were not held to be divinely superintended.

[203] Hugh of Saint Victor, *On the Sacred Scripture,* 219.
[204] Hugh of Saint Victor, On the Sacred Scripture, 222.

## John Duns Scotus (1266-1308)

John Duns Scotus, a Franciscan theologian and philosopher, studied at Oxford and received his doctorate from the University of Paris. His work included treatises on the tension between Augustinian and Aristotelian thought (particularly the nature of human freedom) and on the causal argument for God's existence.[205] For Scotus' views on the scriptures, we will turn to his final work, the *Ordinatio*:

> The question is whether it was necessary for man in this present state that some special doctrine, namely one which he could not reach by the natural light of the intellect, be supernaturally inspired…The second concerns the genus of the formal cause of the same, and it is: whether the supernatural knowledge necessary for the wayfarer is sufficiently handed down in Sacred Scripture.[206]

Scotus' first line of argument may be understood as follows: Is supernatural revelation necessary? If so, is this necessary supernatural knowledge found within scripture? Addressing the first first question, Scotus rejects the view of philosophers who hold that no supernatural information is required and that all necessary knowledge may be acquired via natural means. To answer the second, Scotus begins by invoking Augustine:

> Again, Augustine, City of God XI ch.3, speaking of Christ says: "Having spoken first through the prophets, then through himself, afterwards through the apostles, as much as he judged sufficient, he established a Scripture, which is called canonical, of the most eminent authority.[207]
>
> Having established, then, against heretics that the doctrine of the Canon is true, one must see second whether it is necessary and sufficient to the wayfarer for attaining his end. I say that the Canon hands on what is the end of man in particular, that it is the vision and enjoyment of God, and this as far as concerns the circumstances of its desirability; to wit, that it will be possessed after the resurrection by man immortal in soul as well as

[205] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.
[206] John Duns Scotus, *The Ordinatio of Blessed John Duns Scotus: Volume 1, On Revelation and Theology*, (United States: Militant Thomist Press, 2022, 6 (1), 50 (95).
[207] Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, 54 (106).

> in body, endlessly. The Canon also determines the things necessary for the end, and that these are sufficient because commanded, "If thou wilt enter into life," says our Lord, Matthew 19.17, "keep the commandments," about which there is the statement in Exodus 20.1-17; explication is given also of these, as to what to believe and what to do, in diverse places of Scripture. The properties too of immaterial substances are handed on in the Canon, to the extent it is possible and useful for the wayfarer to know them.[208]

Following Augustine, Scotus holds that the canonical scriptures have been established by God, sufficient unto themselves and of the highest authority. Like Hugh of St. Victor, Scotus sees the scriptures as unique among all writings in its content, that is the, "end of man." It contains all that is necessary and sufficient for "the wayfarer." This being the case, there is no additional non-canonical source that is needed, nor any that is equally authoritative.

This assessment of scripture's exclusivity is more emphatically stated in the following passage:

> About our theology I say that is not about all things, because, just as the theology of the blessed has a limit, so also does ours, from the will of God revealing. But the limit fixed by the divine will as to general revelation is the things that are in divine Scripture, because – as is contained in the last chapter of Revelation – "he who adds to these things, to him will God add the plagues that are set down in this book." Therefore, our knowledge is de facto only of the things contained in Scripture and of the things that can be elicited from them.[209]

Relative to theological inquiry, there is no place for any source apart from the scriptures. All that God intends to be known is contained within scriptures- those things directly stated and those logically derived from them. To John Duns Scotus, a non-canonical tradition is not only inferior to scripture, but adds no value at all. Indeed, seeking

[208] Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, 64 (120).
[209] Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, 101 (204).

theological truth from non-canonical sources is to be strictly avoided. This is perhaps the strongest reaction against extra-scriptural tradition we have seen so far.

## Three Popes

Given the importance that the role of the church hierarchy, and in particular that of the pope, would take on during the Reformation, we will briefly consider three examples of scripture's place according to the medieval papacy. The following passages will demonstrate that Luther's insistence on the supremacy of scipture would not have been considered outside of mainstream thinking among medieval popes.

Leo I (the Great) (400-461):

> I venture with the greater confidence to appeal to your Grace on behalf of the mystery of man's salvation, not to allow any one in vain and presumptuous craftiness to inquire what must be held, as if it were uncertain. And although we may not in a single word dissent from the teaching of the Gospels and Apostles, nor entertain any opinion on the Divine Scriptures different to what the blessed Apostles and our Fathers learnt and taught, now in these latter days unlearned and blasphemous inquiries are set on foot, which of old the Holy Spirit crushed by the disciples of the Truth, so soon as the devil aroused them in hearts which were suited to his purpose.[210]

The context here is that of the influence of heterodox teachings in the stability of the Roman Empire. For Pope Leo, there is no question as to the source of truth. It is the scriptures, as historically interpreted by the church fathers. These must be unfailingly adhered to. Leo's assessment sounds very like Heiko Oberman's definition of Tradition I.

[210] *Leo I, Letters and Sermons of Pope St. Leo I (The Great),* trans Charles Lett Feltoe (Veritas Splendor Publications, 2012), 211, Kindle.

Gregory the Great (540-604):

> Very many, though indeed of the Jewish religion, resident in this province, and from time to time travelling for various matters of business to the regions of Massilia, have apprized us, that many of the Jews settled in those parts have been brought to the font of baptism more by force than by preaching. Now, I consider the intention in such cases to be worthy of praise, and allow that it proceeds from the love of our Lord. But I fear lest this same intention, unless adequate enforcement from Holy Scripture accompany it, should either have no profitable result, or even (which God forbid) the loss of the souls which we wish to save should further ensue.[211]

Here, Pope Gregory is addressing the use of compulsion in the conversion of Jews. What is interesting is that Gregory appears to approve of this practice personally, at least in theory. However, he subordinates his own judgment to that of the scriptures, which he rightly recognizes do not sanction forced conversions. Gregory believes that acting contrary to the scriptures may well bring about very negative results. Thus, we find a medieval pope, who relies not on his own authority as pope, but rather defers to that of the canonical writings.

John XXII (1244-1334)

In his 1323 papal bull, *Quum inter nonnullos*, Pope John XXII addressed the split within the Franciscan order between the "Spirituals," those who believed that their poverty should be absolute, and the more moderate position of those who allowed for property ownership in accordance with practical needs. Pope John rejected the prior ruling of Pope Nicholas III, which had upheld the idea that Jesus and the apostles owned nothing at all personally.[212] Since John's opinion is especially pertinent to this discussion, we will examine it in greater detail than those of his predecessors:

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[211] Gregory the Great, *Saint Gregory the Great Collection* (Aeterna Press, 2016), 1148-1149, Kindle.
[212] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

> The opinion, which asserts, that Christ and His disciples had nothing, and in regard to those things, which they did have, they had no right, is erroneous and heretical. This extravagant [opinion] is indeed striking, and has profound implications, which have been drawn from the founts of sacred scripture. If one diligently inspects the preceding extravagant [opinion] and the one [which] follows [it], he would say, in my opinion, that it has been assigned this apt designation [i.e., heretical]. Since among not a few scholarly men it often happens that there is called into doubt, whether to affirm pertinaciously, that Our Redeemer and Lord Jesus Christ and His Apostles did not have anything individually, nor even in common, is to be censured as heretical, diverse and opposite things being opined concerning it, We, desiring to put an end to this contest, after [having taken] the counsel of our brothers [the cardinals] by this perpetual edict do declare that a pertinacious assertion of this kind, when sacred scriptures, which assert in very many places that they had not a few things, expressly contradict it, and when it supposes openly that the same sacred scripture, through which certainly the articles of orthodox faith are proven in regards to the aforesaid things, contains the ferment of falsehood, and consequently, as much as regards these things, emptying all faith in them, it renders the Catholic Faith doubtful and uncertain, taking away its demonstration, is respectively to be censured erroneous and heretical. [213]
>
> We may draw the following relevant points from John's ruling:

1. The claim that Jesus and the apostles owned absolutely nothing is to be considered heretical, since the scriptures clearly contradict this claim.
2. This claim, if accepted, would call into question the reliability of the scriptures.
3. If the scriptures are not completely reliable, the church itself has no standing.

John appeals to the scriptures, and not his own authority as pope. In 1279, Nicolas III had issued *Exiit Qui Seminat*,[214] which upheld the strict prohibitions on property ownership of the Spiritual Franciscans. John has no qualms about

[213] John XXII, "Quum Inter Nonnullos." in *Codex Iuris Canonicis*, ed. B. Tauchnitz (Leipzig, 1879), accessed October 22, 2022, https://franciscan-archive.org/index2.html.
[214] Nicholas III, *Exiit Qui Seminat* (Soriano, Italy, 1279), accessed November 16, 2022, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/nichol03/exiit-e.htm.

reversing the opinion of a previous pope. Going further, he considers the inerrant scriptures to be foundational to the faith itself, without which the faith is "Doubtful and uncertain."

A year later, Pope John delivered *Quia Quorundam*,[215] in which he would re-affirm his earlier position on Franciscan poverty, while at the same time claiming that his detractors had misread Nicholas III's opinion. John was likely concerned about what his earlier reversal implied about papal authority, and was perhaps spurned on in this by his critics. He therefor attempted to re-interpret *Exiit Qui Seminat* to demonstrate that he and Nicholas were actually of the same mindset, and the proponents of the Spiritual position were the dissenters against what was essentially a unified papal position. The substance of his argument against the Spirituals is again based on scripture.

## The Middle Ages – Conclusion

In the Middle Ages we largely find a continuation of the patristic paradigm. The scriptures are the only inerrant source of doctrine, superseding all other claimants. Vincent of Lérins believed the canonical scriptures to be lacking in nothing. Anselm applied human reason to the scriptures, but did not hold the scriptures subject to reason. Rather, reason could offer insight in areas where the scripture was silent, or greater understanding of things scripture disclosed. Yet any conclusion reached via reason was automatically wrong if it was contrary to scripture. Peter Abelard held that only the canonical books themselves, and not the personal actions, opinions or sayings of the

[215] John XXII, "Quia Quorundam." in *Codex Iuris Canonicis*, ed. B. Tauchnitz (Leipzig, 1879), https://franciscan-archive.org/index2.html.

apostles were authoritative. He thus eliminated any consideration of non-canonical tradition as equal to scripture. Hugh of St. Victor considered the scriptures as absolutely unique in their content. While Hugh acknowledged the existence of apocryphal writings, these, unlike the canonical books, contained errors and were not wholly reliable. John Duns Scotus argued that nothing of the divine can be known (or should be sought) other than what is found in scripture.

Regarding the proper interpretation of scripture, we find much common ground with Oberman's Tradition I. The scriptures are to be understood in the way they have been from the earliest times. Vincent believed the role of the institutional church is to continually reinforce the original gospel message (which it is itself subject to) and to guard against novelties. Anslem did not regard the interpretive authority of the Roman Catholic Church as an adequate response to the Eastern Orthodox. Peter Abelard believed that scripture needed no specially empowered interpreter, its meaning was sufficiently clear to ordinary educated people. Pope Leo had a few similar to that of Vincent of Lérins. Pope Gregory believed that the scriptures should govern all decisions and actions, regardless of what might seem right to the pope. John XXII was willing to overturn a former papal decree if it was found to be in conflict with scripture. Thus, we find that the value accorded the accepted interpretation of scripture is due to the historical continuity of that interpretation, and not in a particular authority unique to the Roman Catholic Church. The church was itself subject to the scriptures and their historic interpretation. And even if it were true that the church held dominion over scripture, Rome's assertion to that dominion could not be sustained after 1054. Following the East West schism, there

were two claimants for the status of the “True Church,” and the more ancient of these were in the East.

# Chapter 7

## Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

The great Dominican theologian and philosopher St Thomas Aquinas is widely considered the most significant Christian thinker of the Middle Ages. His writings were a major influence at the Council of Trent,[216] yet he is also well regarded by many Protestants.[217] Aquinas authored biblical commentaries, theological discourses and expositions on Greek philosophers, his philosophical thought largely following Aristotelianism. Aquinas held that some knowledge of God could be obtained through reason (though imperfectly), but that other aspects of God's nature such as the Trinity and the Incarnation could only be known from divine revelation. Thomas systemized theology, most famously in his *Summa Theologica*, whose three parts treat God and creation, the human person, and the work of Christ.[218]

### The Relationship Between Reason and the Scriptures

Aquinas is as equally renowned for his contributions to philosophy as he is for theological treatises. His writings are permeated with a tension between divine revelation and rational argument. We will therefore begin by considering this relationship between revelation and reason:

> I answer that, It was Origen's opinion that every will of the creature can by reason of free-will be inclined to good and evil…Such a statement

[216] Charles J. Callan, "The Bible in the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas," in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (January 1947): 33. https://www-jstor-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/43719949?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents (accessed May, 3 2018).
[217] See: Manfred Svensson and David Van Drunen, *Aquinas Among the Protestants* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018).
[218] Cross, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.

> deprives angels and saints of true beatitude, because everlasting stability is of the very nature of true beatitude; hence it is termed "life everlasting." It is also contrary to the authority of Sacred Scripture, which declares that demons and wicked men shall be sent "into everlasting punishment," and the good brought "into everlasting life." Consequently, such an opinion must be considered erroneous.[219]

Here Aquinas takes exception to Origen's teaching on libertarian free will. Like Augustine, Aquinas believed that the church fathers could indeed err. Aquinas Demonstrates the logical flaw in Origen's position. According to Origen, the nature of free will is such that all creatures may embrace either good or evil. If this were true, however, it would preclude the ultimate blessedness of Angels and redeemed humanity, since it would allow for the ongoing possibility of evil. While he applies logic to show the futility of Origen's views, his ultimate appeal is to scripture. Since Origen's opinion contradicts scripture, it is, of necessity, wrong.

Reason may compliment structure, but it cannot override scripture. If a particular truth is revealed in scripture, it must be accepted, regardless of its conformity to human understanding. Consider the following:

> On the contrary, It is written (Gen. 1:7): "(God) divided the waters that were under the firmament, from those that were above the firmament." I answer with Augustine that, "These words of Scripture have more authority than the most exalted human intellect. Hence, whatever these waters are, and whatever their mode of existence, we cannot for a moment doubt that they are there."[220]

In this example from the book of Genesis, it is unknown (and may be unknowable), what precisely the waters above the firmament are. Yet since their existence is documented in scripture, it must be believed. Human reason can never supersede divine revelation. A failure to fully penetrate the mysteries of divine revelation, does not justify subordinating

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[219] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Claremont: Coyote Canyon Press, 2010), 839-840, Kindle.
[220] Aquinas, *Summa,* 887-888.

that revelation to the human intellect. The scriptures stand as a judge over human wisdom.

What then is the correct relationship between reason and scripture? In the passage below, Aquinas demonstrate the proper interaction between the two:

> The Church celebrates the feast of our Lady's Nativity. Now the Church does not celebrate feasts except of those who are holy. Therefore, even in her birth the Blessed Virgin was holy. Therefore, she was sanctified in the womb. I answer that, nothing is handed down in the canonical Scriptures concerning the sanctification of the Blessed Mary as to her being sanctified in the womb; indeed, they do not even mention her birth. But as Augustine, in his tractate on the Assumption of the Virgin, argues with reason, since her body was assumed into heaven, and yet Scripture does not relate this; so it may be reasonably argued that she was sanctified in the womb. For it is reasonable to believe that she, who brought forth "the Only-Begotten of the Father full of grace and truth," received greater privileges of grace than all others: hence we read (Luke 1:28) that the angel addressed her in the words: "Hail full of grace!" Moreover, it is to be observed that it was granted, by way of privilege, to others, to be sanctified in the womb; for instance, to Jeremias, to whom it was said (Jer. 1:5): "Before thou camest forth out of the womb, I sanctified thee"; and again, to John the Baptist, of whom it is written (Luke 1:15): "He shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's womb." It is therefore with reason that we believe the Blessed Virgin to have been sanctified before her birth from the womb.[221]

First, Aquinas acknowledges that the doctrine of Mary's sinless birth is not found in scripture. By Thomas' reckoning, the canon neither confirms nor denies this belief. As may be inferred from the previous passage, Aquinas would disallow the Immaculate Conception from consideration if he believed the scriptures precluded it. Since, in his view, they do not, he is free to employ human reason as a secondary avenue of knowledge. He is thus able to establish validity for this doctrine. In this Aquinas is much like Anslem. Reason is useful for filling in gaps where the scriptures are silent, and in

[221] Aquinas, *Summa,* 5579-5580.

drawing out implications that are not directly stated. But this does not imply that reason is equal to revelation.

## Interpreting the Scriptures

Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively on interpretive methodologies. He recognized several hermeneutical variations, including the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical scriptural interpretations.[222] This was not the approach taken by the Reformers, who were distrustful of allegory and whose emphasis was upon scripture's historical and literal interpretation. However, as we shall see, Thomas, while acknowledging the other interpretive frameworks, conferred the highest priority upon the literal.

The following passages demonstrate the importance Aquinas places on literal interpretation:

> Thus, in Holy Writ no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one--the literal--from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory, as Augustine says (Epis. 48). Nevertheless, nothing of Holy Scripture perishes on account of this, since nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward by the Scripture in its literal sense.[223]

> When Scripture speaks of God's arm, the literal sense is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member, namely operative power. Hence it is plain that nothing false can ever underlie the literal sense of Holy Writ.[224]

The literal sense of scripture is foundational. The other interpretive senses are dependent upon the literal. Crucially, only the literal sense can be the basis for argument, and it is thus the literal interpretation, and not the others, that is the proper basis of doctrinal

[222] Aquinas, *Summa,* 44.
[223] Aquinas, *Summa,* 45.
[224] Aquinas, *Summa*, 46.

positions. Indeed, the other interpretive methods are not even strictly necessary, since everything that they express obliquely is also expressed directly through the literal interpretation. The literal sense underlies and pervades all other senses. When Old Testament writers refer to God's "arm,"[225] the literal sense is that of God's great power. The poetic descriptive is secondary and non-essential. Aquinas' understanding of scripture's inerrancy applies specifically to its literal sense.

## The Unique Authority of the Canonical Scriptures

Aquinas generally holds to an Augustinian view of the canon's preeminent authority. Quoting Augustine:

> "Only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them. But other authors I so read as not to deem everything in their works to be true, merely on account of their having so thought and written, whatever may have been their holiness and learning."[226]

It is important to point out that by Aquinas' time, even more so than Augustine's, the role and authority of the Roman pope was well developed and highly esteemed. Yet Aquinas does not make an exception among the "other authors" for papal rulings and decrees. Rather, he repeats Augustine's claim that the canonical scriptures are *exclusively* inerrant.

Throughout the *Summa*, Aquinas frequently employs the phrases "Suffices the authority of Scripture,"[227] and "On the contrary stands the authority of scripture."[228] These assertions typically represent Thomas' final word on disputed matters. The

[225] For example, Job 40:9, Psalms 77:15.
[226] Aquinas, *Summa*, 41-42.
[227] Examples: Aquinas, *Summa,* 907, 914, 918.
[228] Examples: Aquinas, *Summa*, 4388, 4394, 4399, 4401.

scriptures are the final court of appeal and must be believed. Indeed, the Christian faith is entirely dependent on the scriptures:

> It is unlawful to hold that any false assertion is contained either in the Gospel or in any canonical Scripture, or that the writers thereof have told untruths, because faith would be deprived of its certitude which is based on the authority of Holy Writ.[229]

And similarly:

> Further, just as our faith receives its surety from Scripture, so were the disciples assured of their faith in the Resurrection by Christ appearing to them. But, as Augustine says in an Epistle to Jerome (xxviii), if but one untruth be admitted into the Sacred Scripture, the whole authority of the Scriptures is weakened.[230]

If the canonical writings were not wholly true and reliable, the "faith would be deprived of its certitude." Aquinas does not contemplate any other source of certitude- not the teaching authority of the Roman magisterium and not extra-biblical oral traditions. He thus follows Augustine – the scriptures are essential, unique and inerrant.

Likewise, In the following passage from his *Commentary on the Gospel of John,* Aquinas clearly asserts both the sufficiency and primacy of scripture:

> Now John states that his Gospel is true, and he speaks in the person of the entire Church which received it: "My mouth will utter truth" (Pr 8:7). We should note that although many have written about Catholic truth, there is a difference among them: those who wrote the canonical scriptures, such as the evangelists and apostles and the like, so constantly and firmly affirm this truth that it cannot be doubted. Thus John says, we know that his testimony is true: "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:9). The reason for this is that only the canonical scriptures are the standard of faith.[231]

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[229] Aquinas, *Summa*, 4306-4307.
[230] Aquinas, *Summa,* 5991.
[231] Thomas Aquinas, Thomas and Fabian R. Larcher and James A. Weisheipl and Daniel A. Keating et. al. *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Chapters 13-21* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), accessed December 1, 2022, http://muse.jhu.edu.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/chapter/734276.

Since “only the canonical scriptures are the standard of faith,” there would appear to be no warrant for competing sources, including oral traditions and papal rulings. We shall see however, that Aquinas’s understanding of the relationship between the scriptures, un-written apostolic traditions, and the church is more nuanced than a simple “either/ or.”

## Non-Canonical Tradition

It cannot be denied that Thomas Aquinas recognized an extra -biblical tradition of the apostles. To fully grasp his views on tradition, we will look at several excerpts from the *Summa* in some detail:

> Human institutions observed in the sacraments are not essential to the sacrament; but belong to the solemnity which is added to the sacraments in order to arouse devotion and reverence in the recipients. But those things that are essential to the sacrament, are instituted by Christ Himself, Who is God and man. And though they are not all handed down by the Scriptures, yet the Church holds them from the intimate tradition of the apostles, according to the saying of the Apostle (1 Cor. 11:34): "The rest I will set in order when I come."[232]
>
> The Apostles, led by the inward instinct of the Holy Ghost, handed down to the churches certain instructions which they did not put in writing, but which have been ordained, in accordance with the observance of the Church as practiced by the faithful as time went on.[233]

The following summary of Aquinas’ thought may be drawn from these passages:

1. The apostles received certain instructions, which were not committed to writing, but which have been preserved within the church from the apostles’ time to the present.
2. The apostle derived this information from an inward leading of the Holy Spirit.
3. These traditions are separate from the canon.

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[232] Aquinas, *Summa*, 6107.
[233] Aquinas, *Summa,* 5563.

4. They are authoritative for church practices.

Does St, Thomas' understanding differ from that of the Council of Trent? As we have seen, Trent assigned tradition an eminence equal to scripture, "as the fountain of all, both saving truth and moral discipline."[234] Likewise, according to Trent's formulation, both the written scripture and the unwritten traditions were divinely authored, "as having been dictated by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost."[235] The wording of the council document allows no distinction in authority, value, honor, or divine origin between the written and the unwritten. The unwritten tradition is essentially treated as an additional canonical book.[236] Trent thus seems to be going a good deal further than Aquinas. As has been seen with earlier theologians, Aquinas appeals to tradition specifically in those instances where scripture is silent. There is no indication that the content of tradition is essential in the way that scripture is. Aquinas does not speak of tradition's inerrancy. Only the canonical scriptures, and not tradition, are the "standard of faith," therefore Aquinas cannot view tradition in the same sense as the Council of Trent. Tradition is a supplemental source, but not an equal one. It is held in high regard, but does not rise to the summit of scripture. Aquinas does not consider them to be one in the same. He would not argue a doctrinal point from tradition if it was already addressed in scripture.

The following text helps further clarify the place of tradition:

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[234] Papal Encyclicals Online*, General Council of Trent: Fourth Session.*
[235] Papal Encyclicals Online, *General Council of Trent: Fourth Session*.
[236] "But if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church, and as they are contained in the old Latin vulgate edition; and knowingly and deliberately contemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema." Papal Encyclicals Online, *General Council of Trent: Fourth Session*.

> The Evangelists did not intend to hand down the forms of the sacraments, which in the primitive Church had to be kept concealed…Nevertheless, nearly all these words can be culled from various passages of the Scriptures. Because the words, "This is the chalice," are found in Luke 22:20, and 1 Cor. 11:25, while Matthew says in chapter 26:28: "This is My blood of the New Testament, which shall be shed for many unto the remission of sins." The words added, namely, "eternal" and "mystery of faith," were handed down to the Church by the apostles, who received them from our Lord, according to 1 Cor. 11:23: "I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you."[237]

Here Aquinas is discussing the forms of the sacraments, the way they are presented and received. First, the essential structure of the Eucharistic presentation is taken verbatim from the scriptures. The additional words are, according to Aquinas, drawn from unwritten apostolic tradition. Aquinas' intention here is not to demonstrate the equality if tradition with scripture, but rather to show the validity of each aspect of the sacrament. Even those parts of the sacrament's presentation that are not derived directly from scripture have a connection to the apostles, via the handed down tradition. This is not the same thing as equating that tradition with scripture. The scripture remains primary, and once the scriptural evidenced has been exhausted, it is then fitting to appeal to tradition. This is much like Thomas' understanding of the relationship between scripture and reason.

[237] Aquinas, *Summa,* 6394.

## Church and Scripture

Thomas held a high view of the Roman papacy and its authority.[238] However, he nevertheless subordinated the pope to scripture:

> In answer to the second objection, the Pope, as we have already shown, does not, by giving to religious the privilege of preaching or hearing confessions, act contrary to St. Paul's admonition; for these religious do not preach to another man's people. It is not true to say that the Pope cannot alter any Apostolic decree; for the penalties pronounced against bigamy and against fornication among the clergy, are, by authority of the Holy See, sometimes in abeyance. The power of the Pope is limited only in so far that he cannot alter the canonical scriptures of the Apostles and Prophets, which are fundamental to the faith of the Church.[239]

The question at hand is that of the pope's authority to supersede previously held belief and practice. Here, Thomas clearly places papal authority beneath that of the scripture. The pope can in no way depart from the canonical scriptures for they are the foundation of the church, and therefore of the papacy itself. Yet equally clearly, the pope *can* alter *certain* apostolic declarations. What declarations? The example given is that of the discipline of wayward clergy members, a subject not addressed in the canonical scriptures. Thus, if this material is *apostolic* in origin, it can only have come from unwritten apostolic traditions. But could Thomas use of the term "apostolic decree" to refer to decrees of prior popes and church fathers, and not to the apostles themselves? This is not likely. The immediate context is St. Paul's admonishment against preaching among the already converted (of which Thomas believes the pope is not guilty).[240] This canonical example, which may not be superseded, is compared to other apostolic decrees,

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[238] For example: "Hence it is clear that anyone who maintains that the Pope need not be obeyed is a heretic." Thomas Aquinas, "An Apology for Religious Orders," in *Saint Thomas Aquinas Collection - 22 Books* (Aeterna Press, 2016), 42-43, Kindle.
[239] Aquinas, *An Apology for Religious Orders,* 68.
[240] Romans 15:20, 2 Corinthians 10:16).

which the pope may supersede. This second category of mutable decrees (which includes the discipline of clergy) can then only be non-canonical material of apostolic origin. This demonstrates that not only is the pope bound by the canon, but that only the canon is unalterable, and therefore higher than oral tradition.

One of the proper roles of the church is to recapitulate scripture for the benefit of the people. This it has done via confessions of faith:

> The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ, diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice, which are unattainable by all those who require to know the truth of faith, many of whom have no time for study, being busy with other affairs. And so it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.[241]

Of note here is that the scripture is itself sufficient. The "truth of faith" is fully encompassed within the canon. Nothing more is required (including unwritten tradition), and nothing is added by the church when it summarizes scripture in confessions of faith. Additionally, an official interpretation of the scriptures by the church is also not strictly necessary, since the scriptures can be fully understood, provided they are adequately studied. The purpose of the confessions is to make the truth of scripture more readily accessible to people who lack the opportunity for proper study. The confessions are thus of practical value, but in no way constitute an additional source of truth. Nor is the church authorized to establish truth apart from scripture.

Yet, Aquinas also held to a cohesive and inseparable relationship between scripture and church:

> Now the formal object of faith is the First Truth, as manifested in Holy Writ and the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth.

[241] Aquinas, *Summa,* 3060.

> Consequently, whoever does not adhere, as to an infallible and Divine rule, to the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth manifested in Holy Writ, has not the habit of faith, but holds that which is of faith otherwise than by faith.[242]

The scriptures are the elemental and infallible source of truth. The church is informed by this truth, and as such, is likewise entirely reliable. For Aquinas there is no question of competition between the scripture and the church. The church is built on the scripture therefore the church's teaching will always be scriptural. Thomas' understanding is both like and unlike that of the Council of Trent. The church and the scriptures are an organic unity; therefore, it is inconceivable that the church would ultimately teach anything contrary to scripture. Trent also held that Roman Catholic Church will always teach what is doctrinally correct, but on the basis of its own authority to interpret scripture, essentially assigning itself as judge *over* scripture. This was not Thomas' view.

That Thomas held the scriptures as the highest authority may be seen from this passage addressing the *filioque* controversy:

> We ought not to say about God anything which is not found in Holy Scripture either explicitly or implicitly. But although we do not find it verbally expressed in Holy Scripture that the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Son, still we do find it in the sense of Scripture, especially where the Son says, speaking of the Holy Ghost, "He will glorify Me, because He shall receive of Mine" (John 16:14).[243]

Reminiscent of Anslem if Canterbury, Aquinas argues in favor of the *filioque* from scripture. He does not invoke an inviolable papal authority to rule against the Eastern churches. The Eastern Orthodox are not in error simply because they disagree with the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, they are in error because they wrongly understand

[242] Aquinas, *Summa*, 3117.
[243] Aquinas, *Summa,* 494.

scripture (as Aquinas attempts to demonstrate), and for this reason they are estranged from Rome.

## Aquinas – Conclusion

In Thomas Aquinas we find an interplay between scriptural revelation, reason, and the church:

> …although the argument from authority based on human reason is the weakest, yet the argument from authority based on divine revelation is the strongest. But sacred doctrine makes use even of human reason, not, indeed, to prove faith…but to make clear other things that are put forward in this doctrine. Since therefore grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity…Hence sacred doctrine makes use also of the authority of philosophers in those questions in which they were able to know the truth by natural reason, as Paul quotes a saying of Aratus: "As some also of your own poets said: For we are also His offspring" (Acts 17:28). Nevertheless, sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as an incontrovertible proof, and the authority of the doctors of the Church as one that may properly be used, yet merely as probable. For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.[244]

Much may be known of God though human reason. Such was Aquinas' understanding of "natural theology." He therefore values and utilizes the work of the philosophers. However, the knowledge of the divine gained through unaided reason is conditional and tentative. It has not the sure footing and irrefutable authority of scriptural revelation, and is subject to revision and correction by the scriptures.

Likewise, the church's rich tradition of theological thought is respected and may be employed as a viable source of doctrine. Yet, even the most revered non-canonical

[244] Aquinas, *Summa,* 41.

authorities are subordinate to the scriptures, and their teachings must be founded upon the scriptures. Aquinas argued that it only the *canonical* scriptures" that offer the "incontrovertible proof." Thus, unwritten tradition, even that attributed to the apostles, is relegated to a secondary position. Only the canonical scriptures are uniquely inerrant. Much like natural reason and human philosophical systems, non-canonical apostolic tradition may be used to supplement areas where scripture is silent but never overrule scripture.

Thomas held the Roman Catholic pope in high esteem, and recognized his authority to regulate certain apostolic ordinances, but only those that were not recorded in the canonical writings. These were fixed and unchangeable, themselves the foundation of the church and of papal authority. As the church derived its authority from scripture, so the church was preserved from false teaching. For Aquinas, the church and the scripture were organically joined, but that implied the church's dependence upon scripture, and not its authority over scripture.

It would surely be wrong to characterize Thomas Aquinas as a strict Biblicist, an adherent of what Keith Mathison would call "Tradition 0." As we have seen, he recognized reason, non-Christian philosophers, prior Christian theologians, the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic pope, and unwritten apostolic traditions as all worthy of consideration for determining doctrine. He was therefore not a proponent of *sola scriptura*, in the sense of scripture *entirely* alone. Yet, he is closer to the views of the magisterial Reformers[245] than to those promulgated by the Council of Trent. The crucial question is which source has the final say? For Aquinas, this was the canonical scriptures.

[245] This common ground with the Reformers is specifically with respect to the role of scripture. It would be quite inaccurate to generalize Aquinas as a "Protestant." There are many Roman Catholic doctrines that he

# Chapter 8

## Conclusions

The Council of Trent formally repudiated *sola scriptura*. As we have seen, opponents of this essential Reformation principle consider it an ahistorical novelty, having no precedent prior to the sixteenth century. However, this survey of Christian thought leaders demonstrates the doctrine's historical continuity, from the patristic period up through the later Middle Ages.

It is crucial to understand what Martin Luther and the other magisterial Reformers truly believed. They were not dispensing with non-canonical authorities entirely. They respected both the church fathers and the ancient councils. They frequently cited St. Augustine. Nevertheless, Luther and his followers insisted that the scriptures were the overarching and uncontested authority to which all others were subject. Only the canonical books were inerrant. All other sources- the fathers, the councils, decrees of popes, and unwritten apostolic traditions, even if genuine, did not rise to the level of infallibility and thus commanded only conditional authority. Neither did the Reformers promote an entirely individual and subjective interpretation of scripture. The church as a body, as a whole, was the proper expositor of the divine texts. Still, the church was never to be placed in authority over scripture. Neither the church as a whole, nor the pope had the authority to change, add to, or remove any doctrines established by scripture. Scripture was properly the corrector of popes, and not the reverse. This is the case made

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adhered to which the Reformers would later oppose. For example: "It is evident that hypocrisy is a mortal sin: for no one is entirely deprived of holiness save through mortal sin."- Aquinas, *Summa,* 62442.

by the Reformation era theologians, and this we must compare with the beliefs of their predecessors.

## The Unique Place of Scripture

On the question of scripture's unique status, the patristic and medieval theologians were in very close agreement with the Reformers. Scripture was exclusively inerrant, entirely sufficient and the proper foundation of doctrine. The examples from the patristic period are numerous: Irenaeus and Tertullian held the rule of faith to be rooted in scripture. According to Origen, the scriptures alone are inspired by the Holy Spirit and are the only source of divine knowledge. Heresies arise from teachings other than those allowed by scripture. Augustine believed the canonical scriptures to be the paramount authority, the only source that is free from error. The scriptures supersede Augustine's own opinions, and he is hesitant to make pronouncements upon questions that scripture does not address. Augustine did not believe his own teachings should be unquestionably accepted, rather they should be measured against scripture and disbelieved if found wanting. For Augustine, a clear line of demarcation exists between the canonical books and everything else.

Turning to the Middle Ages, Vincent of Lérins held the scriptures to be the only proper source of doctrine; there can be no other gospel other than that originally preached and recorded in the scriptures. Anselm of Canterbury placed great emphasis on reason, but its value was in gaining greater insight into that which scripture had already established, and understanding things not addressed by scripture. Anselm never made human reason equal to scripture. Peter Abelard and Hugh of St. Victor both considered only the canonical scriptures to be inerrant. Thomas Aquinas explicitly followed

Augustine in his view of the scriptures' unique inerrancy. The Christian faith is built upon the scriptures; if they are not inerrant there is no certitude. Like Anslem, Aquinas, placed human reason below scripture. Reason compliments scripture, but does not overrule it- one's failure to understand scripture does not mean the scripture is wrong. Truths discerned by reason as less sure than truths revealed in scripture. For Thomas, the literal sense of scripture was foundational, and the basis for doctrine.

## Unwritten Apostolic Tradition

Heiko Oberman's argument for Tradition I is partly correct. Scripture was always preeminent. But it must be acknowledged that the patristic writers also recognized and esteemed a type of tradition that was more than Tradition I. For them, tradition was not strictly limited to scripture and its historical interpretation. We find in these writers some sense of an authoritative Tradition II, the scriptures *and* the unwritten apostolic utterances. But the key difference between this and the Council of Trent is that the earlier theologians never made the oral tradition equal to scripture. It was largely employed to address issues not covered in the canonical books and was not pitted against scripture as a source worthy of equal consideration. This unwritten tradition could be used to establish doctrine and church practice only if it did not contradict scripture. St. Augustine implied the unwritten tradition is subject to corruption over time. He also expressed uncertainty over which particular aspects of tradition enjoyed apostolic origin. He conveyed no such lack of confidence or ambiguity for the canonical writings. Augustine clearly considered the canon as limited to the Old and New Testament. The unwritten sources were not at all in the same category.

Peter Abelard taught that only the canonical works of the prophets and apostles were free from error. Any sayings, even if legitimately traceable to the apostles, did not possess this quality. As an example, he pointed out (as had Augustine), the Apostle Peter's failings recorded in Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Therefore, Abelard assuredly did not regard unwritten apostolic tradition equal to scripture. Hugh of Saint Victor argues that only the scriptures are without error, and specifically listed those books, and those books only, that comprised the canon. Traditional material arose from uncertain origins and thus was not wholly reliable. John Duns Scotus argued that nothing can be known about God beyond those things disclosed in scripture. Aquinas likewise considered only the canon, and not oral tradition, the standard of faith.

## Scripture and Papal Authority

Finally, the idea of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy elevated in authority above the scriptures was largely foreign to patristic and medieval thinking. Clement of Alexandria argued that the church must submit to scripture: the final interpretive authority of the scriptures belonging to the scriptures themselves. For Augustine, even the full consensus of the church is not on a par with the canon. Not only decrees from bishops but even universal church councils are subject to error and may be over-ruled. Anselm contrasted scripture with reason, but there is little appeal made to the authoritative role of the church in his arguments. Abelard believed the scriptures readily comprehensible to anyone who studies them. There was no need for an official interpreter. We find examples of medieval popes who subordinate their own opinion to scripture and reverse previous papal pronouncements on the authority of scripture.

In St Thomas Aquinas we have a well-defined distinction between papal and scriptural authority. The pope cannot alter anything in the scriptures. He may, however alter apostolic traditions outside of scripture. With this, Thomas limits the standing of both the pope and tradition. The proper role of the church is to summarize and recapitulate scripture; to make scriptural truths more readily available to the people. The church's teaching is itself reliable only because it is rooted in the scriptures.

We thus find great commonality between the Reformers and their predecessors on the question of *sola scriptura.* Much confusion comes from a misunderstanding of the Reformers intent, and subsequent arguments against the doctrine's historicity have tended to focus on that misconception. The doctrine became controversial during the Reformation, so it is of course impossible to say exactly how these earlier thinkers would have responded in that context. However, it is not hard to envision St. Augustine or Peter Abelard siding with Martin Luther against the pope. *Sola Scriptura* was not a novel doctrine that was invented in the sixteenth century. A version of it, very similar to that taught by the Reformers, had been a mainstem accepted principle since the apostolic age.

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