

As important as the principle of sola scriptura is to Protestant evangelical theology, it was never intended to function in isolation from the historical tradition of the church. Biblical interpretation on the grounds of the Bible alone becomes liable to heretical exegesis.

The Search for *Sola Scriptura* in the Early Church

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A NERVE HAS BEEN HIT and the reverberations are continuing to be felt. The publication of “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” (*ECT*, 1994)¹ provoked strong reactions from many Protestant Evangelicals. Perhaps most intriguing is the accusation of some Evangelicals that the Protestant participants in *ECT* are undermining central points of Protestant doctrine through collaboration with Roman Catholics. The document does offer several brief theological affirmations in order to establish its credibility as representative of orthodox Christianity: the Lordship of Christ, justification by grace through faith, believers as the true body of Christ, obedience to scripture as “the infallible Word of God,” and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer—points that ostensibly sound more Protestant than Roman Catholic.² But the only theological assertion formally submitted by *ECT* is the Apostles’ Creed, “which we can and hereby do affirm together as an accurate statement of scriptural truth.” There is no stone of stumbling here. Such an endorsement supports a faithful ecumenism that upholds the ancient essentials of Christian identity.

Although the drafting committee of *ECT* denied that any joint theological understanding had been achieved by Evangelicals and Catholics,³ it is doctrinal issues that have sparked vehement protests. Anti-Catholic tirades have castigated the document for overthrowing the Bible’s authority and its teaching of salvation,⁴ and for creating a false unity that compromises the integrity of Evangelicalism.⁵

A new campaign has begun among Evangelicals who are reacting negatively to

ECT as well as to the more general problem of theological illiteracy afflicting contemporary Evangelicalism.⁶ By revitalizing Reformation principles, they aim to ground Evangelical identity and emphasize the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Such groups as Christians United for Reformation and the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals seek to reinvest Evangelical Christianity with a new awareness of its Protestant heritage. Theological renewal of this sort is to be welcomed, although its tone is excessively polemical and its publications rarely rise above the repetition of old caricatures and slogans of post-Reformation teaching.

Since much of Protestant Evangelicalism emphasizes the unique authority of scripture in determining matters of faith and practice, it is not surprising that the cry of *sola scriptura* should resurface and demand to claim center stage. Indeed, one writer makes the claim that if the doctrine of *sola scriptura* should topple, “all the Reformers’ other points fall with it.”⁷ That *sola scriptura* is a cardinal issue of Protestant theology is not being debated here. But there remains the dual question of what exactly the term is asserting (and refuting), and how it should be (and not be) used in support of Evangelicalism. The first part of this question has received considerable attention;⁸ I shall therefore confine myself to the second part.

Contemporary proponents of *sola scriptura* insist that the interpretation of scripture must not be subjugated to any religious authority other than the Holy Spirit. Some have insisted on linking *sola scriptura* to the concept of biblical inerrancy.⁹ This heightens the contrast between the status of scripture as the sole revelation of God and that of ecclesial creeds, decrees, and councils, all of which are human foundations prone to error. Since scripture is regarded as the only sufficient source and norm for Christian faith, a sharp distinction is made from the purported “two-source” theory of revelation as taught by the council of Trent, which acknowledges both the authority of scripture and the church’s authority expressed in its tradition and office. Thus, *sola scriptura* is meant to exclude any rival authority in the governing of Christian belief and devotion.

As a result of renewed attention to Evangelical, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox relations,¹⁰ there is increased interest among Evangelicals in the early sources of Christian doctrine and exegetical practices. This too is certainly to be welcomed, though with cautious enthusiasm, since the current reconsideration of the patristic era is not a “return to the sources” (*ad fontes*), but governed by a very specific agenda: to read the ancient fathers through the lens of post-Reformation Protestantism in the search for criteria, such as *sola scriptura*, embedded within the religious consciousness of the early church. Ancient vindication of such religious ideas would presumably further the claim that Protestants, not Roman Catholics, are the upholders of true faith. Witness the recent attempts to find a “patristic principle of *sola scriptura*” in Irenaeus¹¹ or Athanasius, from which the conclusion is reached, “Sola scriptura has long been the rule of believing Christian people, even before it became necessary to use the specific terminology against later innovators who would usurp the Scriptures’ supremacy in the church.”¹²

Is the principle *sola scriptura* historically tenable in the form in which it is usually defined so that the Bible is the only normative source for Christian faith and practice? Do the writings of the early church affirm this principle? As will become apparent, the very search for such a principle in the writings of the fathers is misguided in the light of the early church's understanding of apostolic authority. Even if one argues that a biblicism that approximates *sola scriptura* can be detected within the patristic age, it in no way guarantees a Christian doctrine of God or salvation. On the contrary, a scripture-only principle was found to create greater problems which have plagued Christianity ever since. Let me make it clear that I, as a Baptist minister, am not attacking the classic Protestant concept of the sufficiency of scripture but issuing a plea that its original intent and limitations be acknowledged through broader historical and theological awareness.

Scripture and the Tradition

The search for Protestant doctrines such as *sola scriptura* in the early church is not new. The Reformers greatly valued the early church fathers, especially Augustine, as interpreters of biblical truth. In large part this confidence had to do with the belief that the patristic writers were attempting to develop a theology based on scripture alone—which was precisely what the Reformers were trying to do in the 16th century.¹³ Yet the Reformers' engagement with the literature of the early church reveals an extensive familiarity that differed significantly from what one finds today.¹⁴ The source texts of early Christianity are too easily cited by 20th century Protestants in proof-text fashion for purposes alien to the texts themselves. Simply appropriating select writings from the patristic era to reinforce one's theology does not require any substantial acquaintance with its diverse thought world or with the complexities of doctrinal development from the second to the fifth century. As a result, the writings of the fathers are not often understood on their own terms or within their historical context. Both Protestant conservatives and liberals are guilty of such practices, the former because they think they already know the truth about the issues, and the latter because finding the "truth" is irrelevant to the historical task.

The magisterial Reformers, moreover, did not think of *sola scriptura* as something that could be properly understood apart from the foundational tradition of the church, even when they opposed some of the institutions of the church. Bernard Ramm's assertion that the Reformers rejected the concept of tradition and the authority of the fathers and councils in their bid for scripture alone demonstrates a blind spot common to Evangelicals that wrongly construes the Protestant conflict with Catholicism as one of scripture versus tradition.¹⁵ At work here is the assumption that tradition, unlike scripture, is a (human) product of the church and therefore an expression of the church's attempt to impose its authority through the ages. Evangelicals have been taught to regard scripture and tradition as antithetical.

In truth, however, "tradition" in the patristic and early medieval period was

concerned first with *doctrina*, that is, the church's essential teaching, which was always understood in concert with scripture and was handed down in the course of history (*tradere*). Tradition was secondarily defined as the accepted practices of the church (e.g., discipline and liturgy).¹⁶ In other words, tradition is not always ancillary, and therefore a later addition to the essential beliefs of Christianity. The definition of Tradition in the primary sense—for clarity, often rendered with a capital “T”—points to the central expressions of Christian faith, usually distinguished from the various “traditions” that pertain to church or sacramental polity. It is this second sense of tradition that became the chief battleground during the Reformation. The conflict between the early Reformers and Rome was not one of scripture versus Tradition, but rather a clash over what the traditions had become, or between divergent concepts of tradition. This is what Luther inherited as he developed his own views on the authority of scripture.

Luther constructed his vision for reforming the church by taking into account the early creeds and writings of the fathers. Careful analysis of the received tradition of the church led to what he termed a “re-discovery” of the gospel and a new understanding of the church.¹⁷ In *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), his argument was not about the acceptance of the church's early creeds and doctrines, but who has the right to claim them as authorities. Luther blamed the papacy for playing off the councils and fathers against scripture in order to legitimize decisions founded on the claim of tradition.¹⁸ A general council, he argued, was the first step toward reform and would restore the church by introducing precepts and doctrines of the early church that all parties could accept and thereby receive correction. Calvin likewise complained that the “Romanists” cited the “ancient fathers against us” in order to support the superiority of their position. To depict “us as despisers and haters of the fathers” is ill-founded, he asserted, because “[i]f the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the tide of victory—to put it very modestly—would turn to our side.”¹⁹ Throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin consistently asserts that only the Reformers could justly lay claim to the ancient authorities.

Following this line of reasoning, one could say that the Tradition became secondary to the traditions of medieval Catholicism, which had come to assert ecclesiastical authority not on the basis of derivation from scripture and Tradition, but by virtue of the church's claim to the office of authority. Herein was the conflict with scripture. As ancient Tradition became increasingly interpreted by tradition, regulated by the office of the papacy, scripture alone was the bulwark affording the grounds to reject the Roman claim as the sole interpreter of the church's Tradition. In no way did Luther or Calvin reject the authority of Tradition, although it had to be regulated by scripture. Indeed, their knowledge of the early fathers was the inspiration for their convictions. One must see, Luther argued, how the fathers always subjugated themselves to scripture; they do not conflict with scripture or Tradition.

Such views must be distinguished from the way in which groups comprising the

“Radical Reformation” applied the scripture-only principle. The oft-cited comment of Chillingworth, “The Bible is the only religion of Protestants,” is most applicable to those of the Free or Believers’ church, who historically have repudiated the very organization of the church as hopelessly corrupt. Because the institutional church had become so removed from the original gospel of Jesus, questions about right doctrine came to be detached from issues of ecclesiology. How one maintains continuity with the church’s teaching—a central concern for the Reformers—is sidestepped on the assumption that New Testament teaching requires no external mediation to be clearly understood and followed. The goal was to return to the form of community modeled in the New Testament, where the Spirit moved freely and liberally among the believers, unencumbered as they were by creeds, clergy and rituals.²⁰ According to this model of religious authority, *sola scriptura* translates as the scripture-principle versus the tradition-principle; tradition is viewed as the product of hierarchical Catholicism, and therefore one does not need the church’s teaching to interpret the Bible or arrive at doctrines which are “orthodox.” The inherent perspicuity of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are sufficient. They are the only “authorities” necessary to lead any inquiring believer into the truth.

It is this Free church perspective that tends to govern Evangelical ideologies of church and faith today. American Evangelical theology has been greatly affected by the theory of the right of private judgment with respect to scripture, a notion now deeply embedded in the religious and political consciousness. Fueled both by Enlightenment ideology, which rejected traditional authorities, and by a populist hermeneutic that appealed to one’s own conscience as the highest standard, “democratic values and patterns of biblical interpretation were moving in the same direction, mutually reinforcing ideas of volitional allegiance, self-reliance and private judgment.”²¹ With the application of these convictions to the 16th century notion of *sola scriptura*, the doctrine came to serve as a warrant for rejection of all authoritative structures in favor of a privatized faith and the prerogative of personal interpretation. All too often the Protestant appeal to scripture as the final authority is tantamount in practice to the view “that any institutional or corporate expression . . . becomes unthinkable . . . and that anyone with a Bible in his hands can hear God speaking directly.”²²

This was the very outcome the 16th century Reformers were anxious to avoid. They were fully aware that the *sola scriptura* principle, however useful against Catholics, could also open a hermeneutical “Pandora’s box.” As the diffuse and fragmented history of Protestantism shows, their concern was justified. More than once has Protestant Evangelicalism been accused of a self-contradictory principle inherent in its notions of the sufficiency of scripture. If the Bible is completely self-sufficient, how is it that a Baptist, a Pentecostal, and a Methodist all claim to believe what the Bible says, and yet no two of them agree on what it is that the Bible says? The problem then is not with *sola scriptura* per se, but what it has become and how it has been used.

***Sola scriptura* in context: The case of Maximinus and Augustine**

There remains to consider the claim that the scripture-only precept has its warrant from the patristic church. How the threefold principle of apostolicity—Scripture, Tradition, and church—was initially articulated in the second century has been sufficiently explored.²³ Suffice it to say that since scriptural interpretation was so often at issue between catholics (or “mainline” Christians) and gnostics, it became clear to second and third century writers, such as Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus, that any appeal to the Bible alone for maintaining pure doctrine was impossible. Tertullian was impelled to look for a “prior principle”:

We must not appeal to Scripture. . . one point should be decided first, namely, who holds the faith to which the Bible belongs, and from whom, through whom, when and to whom was the teaching delivered by which men became Christians? For only where the true Christian teaching and faith are evident, will the true Scriptures, the true interpretations, and all the true Christian traditions be found (*On the Prescription of Heretics* 19).

While affirming the eminence of scripture, Tertullian found it necessary to bypass scripture for the authority of the church’s historic teaching *because scripture was itself the point of contention*.

Few writers in subsequent centuries saw the relationship between scripture, tradition, and church with such clarity, but all agreed that scripture could not be rightly handled without reference to the foundational teachings that resided within apostolic churches. Those elements of what the church believed (*fides quae creditur*) were known as the *regula fidei* (or *regula veritatis*), the “rule of faith” (or “rule of truth”). This was a more or less fluid summary of the essential doctrines of Christianity which, as the name “rule” implies, functioned as the standard or “canon” for orthodoxy. To be more precise, the *regula* did not function as a standard for the faith; it was a distillation of the tradition, synonymous with the apostolic faith.²⁴ So directly had the “rule” sprung from the apostolic teaching that it was like a mirror image of the revelation itself. It follows then that all church offices, no matter how esteemed, were subject to the rule. To ignore or abandon it for one’s own interpretation of the Bible or doctrine, Tertullian declares, is to depart from the Christian faith.²⁵

Scripture was thus an aspect of the Tradition and agreed with it on the particulars of Christian teaching or the rule of faith.²⁶ Tradition could not be claimed as an authority in anything ruled out by scripture. But neither should the Bible be used to support just any doctrine, neglecting the church’s Tradition. Irenaeus, too, argues that right knowledge about Christ is like treasure hidden in a field—in scripture.²⁷ To acquire this treasure, which is found only through the true understanding of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and of his resurrection, one must use the “rule of truth.” Irenaeus stresses the centrality of the church in the faithful transmission of apostolic teaching.²⁸ There can be no revelation apart from scripture and the Tradition, and only within the church has this revelation been handed down. The church is not merely the arbitrator of how one should understand and apply the

faith, but the receiver and guardian of that faith. The implication is that the church is the necessary context in which the true faith may be properly expounded, because the church is the original recipient of that faith. Here the gospel is visibly displayed, and here this faith is preserved. Whatever claims to authority are made by the church are based on its possession of the apostolic deposit, scripture, and the Tradition.

To explore further the dynamic of Christian authority, I turn to a lesser-known debate between two bishops in the early fifth century over the interpretation of Christ as God. Even within his lifetime Augustine was revered as a highly effective expounder of scripture and teacher of Christian doctrine. His views did not escape challenge, however. In 427–28, Augustine agreed to debate a younger bishop named Maximinus, who was intent on proving the proper doctrine of Christ from scripture alone. This debate, carefully preserved in the corpus of Augustine’s writings,²⁹ represents one of the few instances in Christian antiquity where the dialogue, as we have it, does not appear to have been tampered with by later editors to validate the favored position or disparage the viewpoints of a heretical opponent.

Maximinus is quick to establish the orthodoxy of his position by maintaining that his doctrine is derived solely from scripture: “We ought to accept all the things that are brought forth from the holy scriptures with full veneration. The divine scripture has not come as a source of our instruction so that we might correct it. How I wish that we may prove to be worthy disciples of the scriptures!” (*Debate with Maximinus* 15, 20).³⁰ Not only does Maximinus advocate the full authority of scripture but, unlike Augustine, he refuses to accept “under any circumstances” theological language not drawn directly from scripture (*Debate with Maximinus* 1). If John 17:3 speaks of “the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent,” then the Father alone is true God, as he is alone good (Mark 10:18) or alone wise (Rom 16: 27), just as he is called by the apostle Paul “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:17). To defend one’s position, therefore, one must use only testimonies from scriptural texts. Accordingly, Augustine is warned of the dangers of employing scripture by “some literary skill or cleverness of mind”: “It is certain, as the divine scriptures warn us, that with much talking you will not escape sin . . . [but] even if one produces testimonies from the divine scriptures all day long, it will not be counted against someone as wordiness” (*Debate with Maximinus* 13). Maximinus speaks of this type of literalist approach to biblical language as a “rule” for the proper construction of doctrine. The stringing together of scriptural “testimonies” naturally yields sound theology. Thus, Maximinus refuses to profess anything other than what he reads in the Bible: “We believe the scriptures, and we venerate the divine scriptures. We do not want a single particle of a letter to perish, for we fear the threat that is stated in these divine scriptures, ‘Woe to those who take away or add!’” (*Debate with Maximinus* 13, 15). The Bible was entirely sufficient for all matters of faith and practice, including the ways in which faith and practice should be articulated.

Does Maximinus give evidence of a strong *sola scriptura* perspective in the early church? It is important to observe that Maximinus’s theological position may be

characterized as “Arian” or, more accurately, “Homoian.” This approach rejected Nicene theology for promoting non-biblical terms such as *homoousios* (consubstantial), or any “substance” language. The Son was “like” (*homoios*) the Father, but not in essence.³¹ Homoians argued that the term “like” appeared in the Bible, making it a legitimate description of divine relations. On the other hand, the Son could not be “true God” because such phrases were used only of the Father, and the Gospels spoke of the Son’s nature in starkly human terms as the Word who became flesh: Jesus said he could do nothing on his own except by command from the Father (John 5:19); he expressed anxiety in the garden (Matt 26:39); and he professed ignorance on one occasion about the Father’s will (Mark 13:32). By applying these limitations solely to the *body* of Christ, as pro-Nicene opponents sought to do, one violated the literal intention of scripture.³²

A second important feature of this debate is that both Maximinus and Augustine appeal to the authority of previously established church teaching to support their positions. When Augustine sought a statement of faith from Maximinus, it was the latter who first made an appeal to the council of Ariminum (359),³³ though he emphasizes that its conciliar creed was derived from scripture. Although Augustine suggested that they both refrain from appealing to conciliar creeds, both continued to draw implicitly from their respective confessional platforms in their scriptural interpretations. It could not be helped. So Maximinus declares that according to the scriptures God, unborn, unmade, and invisible, has not come down in human flesh, a typically Homoian predication of the divine exclusivity of the Father, whereas Augustine summarizes the scriptural teaching of God in terms of a pro-Nicene Trinity: “The power is equal, the substance is one, the divinity is the same” (*Debate with Maximinus* 2).

In a rebuttal of Maximinus’s views written shortly after the debate, Augustine complains that endless recitation of scriptural testimonies was a waste of time, since it was not the point. Both affirm the complete authority of the Bible; they agree that scripture speaks in its fundamental points with sufficient clarity. Elsewhere Augustine taught the perspicuity of scripture—a doctrine that inspired Luther—including the theory that passages whose meaning is clear should interpret those less clear.³⁴

Augustine rightly insists, however, that Catholics and “Arians” alike understand from the scriptures more than they read in them. Both agree that the Father is unbegotten (*ingeneratus*) and unborn (*innatus*), though neither of these terms is found in scripture. Both agree that the Son is begotten and is sent from the Father, though exactly how the Son is related to the Father is an issue that takes them both beyond what they read in scripture. The longstanding “Arian” defense that they alone follow the text of the Bible is unfounded since, in fact, neither side can avoid going beyond a literal repetition of the text if the meaning of the text is to be grasped. Like Athanasius, who had argued sixty years earlier in defense of *homoousios* as the logical outcome of the “sense of the Scriptures” regarding Christ’s identity as the Son of God,³⁵ Augustine claimed one is committed to the use of non-biblical concepts and categories in order to infer from the words of scripture the

truth that is only implicitly contained within it. Indeed, this was one of the fundamental lessons about biblical exegesis learned as a result of the “Arian” controversies: one must go outside of the Bible in order to interpret it. The situation is stated concretely by R. P. C. Hanson:

It was only very slowly, for instance, that any of the pro-Nicenes recognized that in forming their doctrine of God they could not possibly confine themselves to the words of Scripture, because the debate was about the meaning of the Bible, and any attempt to answer this problem in purely scriptural terms inevitably leaves still unanswered the question, “But what does the Bible mean?”³⁶

Augustine asserts the necessity of consulting “the rule of faith” when interpreting scripture. While the principle is roughly the same as what Tertullian or Irenaeus had in mind, the “rule” for Augustine means the same as the authority found in the church. Not that the Bible is subservient to the wishes of an episcopal hierarchy, as Free church proponents would have it, but scripture cannot be faithfully understood apart from the way Nicene theology had come to be received in orthodox churches. The hermeneutic of the church’s “faith” guides the exposition and reception of scripture. Thus Augustine offers the following pro-Nicene guide for exegesis:

Stay with this rule: whenever you read in the authoritative words of God a passage in which it seems that the Son is shown to be less than the Father, interpret it as spoken in the form of the servant, in which the Son is truly less than the Father, or as spoken not to show that one is greater or less than the other, but to show that one has his origin from the other. But if you are unwilling to stay with this correct rule, you will certainly have no reason to say that he is the true Son of God, unless you say that he is of the same substance as the Father.³⁷

In his work *On the Trinity*, Augustine more clearly delineates his doctrinal hermeneutic. All biblical references to the Son’s weaknesses or sufferings must be attributed to his humanity (“in the form of a servant”); all references to the Father and Son’s equality and unity (e.g., John 10:30) reveal the Son’s divinity; and passages that mark the Son as neither less nor equal indicate that he is distinguishable from the Father (e.g., John 5:26).³⁸ Such is Augustine’s “canonical rule,” which governs biblical exegesis in a way that avoids abuse of the Bible by those who claim the One who was sent (Christ) is less than the Sender (the Father). Only by appeal to the doctrinal tradition already existing, yet also developing, within the church can a proper trinitarian interpretation be rendered from the Bible.

In sum, both Maximinus and Augustine used scripture to interpret scripture, with each accusing the other of ignoring the plain meaning of scripture. For both theologians, faith was informed by and derived from the Bible itself, yet both acknowledged—Augustine explicitly—that exegesis must stand in conformity with the confessions of the church. Because of conflicting doctrinal systems, a sound interpretation of the Bible must stand in concert with the historic principles of catholicity, including the doctrinal canon of the Nicene faith. For good reason

Vincent of Lérins later insisted that a true interpretation of scripture cannot be found apart from the church, since heretics have all advanced their own exegeses of biblical passages. It was no less true in the fifth century when these words were written than it is today.

Conclusion

The centrality of scripture to Evangelical theology need not indicate a narrow biblicism. Scripture defines the “center of gravity of Evangelicalism,” as McGrath nicely phrases it, but not necessarily the limits of its reading or knowledge. “Scripture is, for Evangelicals, the central legitimating resource of Christian faith and theology, the clearest window through which the face of Christ may be seen.”³⁹ The Evangelical insistence on the sufficiency of scripture reflects a tendency not to permit anything outside the gospel to set norms for what is truly “Christian.”

To take this a step further, one might argue that *sola scriptura* underscores the historic Protestant contention that the Tradition and the church cannot be severed from scripture, which must act as the arbitrating authority. To say that the ancient creeds of the church have “no independent authority and are not to be accepted if contrary to scripture at any point” is fair enough.⁴⁰ However, our study has shown the reverse is also true. Scripture can never stand completely independent of the ancient consensus of the church’s teaching without serious hermeneutical difficulties. To assert that it is self-interpreting may be true for the most immediate aspects of the gospel. Yet only a brief review of the history of biblical interpretation demonstrates that the piling up of biblical data offers no guarantee of a faithful interpretation of scripture, much less a Christian doctrine of God.

The same can be said about the reassertion of *sola scriptura* as the alleged centerpiece for what it means to be faithful to the gospel. The current theological crisis facing Evangelical Protestantism requires more than repackaging mandates from the Reformation and reasserting them with new vigor. By all means, Protestant Christians should be versed in the critical reforms which 16th century Christians strove to obtain. But for all its importance, the Protestant Reformation should not be the sole means of identity for any Christian. Historically speaking, the “Protestant Reformation began when a Catholic monk rediscovered a Catholic doctrine in a Catholic book.”⁴¹ If the Reformers tried to do anything, they were trying to restore the ancient catholicity of the church. The very ideal of the Reformation pointed beyond itself to a more foundational past.

Evangelicals need to hear again the great Protestant historian, Philip Schaff, who warned of a “grand disease which has fastened itself upon the heart of Protestantism,” sectarianism. Inherent within Reformation Christianity there is always the impulse to retreat into a subjective spiritualism and ahistoricalism, seeking only divine truth and rejecting all forms of institutional authority. Like a centrifugal force, the sectarian mentality threatens to dismantle the very structures of history that gave rise to it, declaring that the scriptures are the only source and norm of

saving truth. And yet, Schaff says, “The Bible principle, in its abstract separation from tradition, or church development, furnishes no security against sects.”⁴² Such sectarianism is but a crude caricature of true Protestantism and of the Reformers’ efforts to restore the church to its catholic identity.

One of the great challenges for Evangelicalism will be to understand that the Reformation needs to be seen in continuity with the whole theological and spiritual heritage of the church, or what is more simply called “catholic” (not to be confused with Roman Catholicism). Rome, just as much as Evangelicals, needs to hear again the historical voices of the early church. Neither an inerrant Pope nor an inerrant text can replace the living Word of God, which is mediated to us through scripture and the Tradition, both of which are to be used in and for Christ’s church.

Furthermore, we must beware of making the American Evangelical articulation of doctrines about scripture the only norm for orthodoxy. We have seen that *sola scriptura* cannot be isolated from one’s ideological and religious context, which itself reveals theological idiosyncrasies that should be honestly acknowledged and sometimes confessed. The sufficiency of scripture, by whatever theory of inspiration, was never meant to be taken in isolation from the ancient consensual tradition, which is much broader than the American experience. How can American Protestants simply gloss over a thousand years of church history and believe that they know how to interpret the Bible or that they alone possess the truth? In effect, *sola scriptura* cannot be rightly and responsibly handled without reference to the historic Tradition of the church. All too easily heretical notions can arise under cover of a “back to the Bible” platform. Moreover, it is too often forgotten that the teaching of *sola scriptura* is itself not in the Bible. Nowhere does the New Testament suggest that believers need only scripture for faithful believing, especially since the first generation of disciples after Jesus lacked a uniquely Christian set of writings. The idea that the Tradition involves a deposit of revealed truth separate from scripture is completely foreign to the writers of the early church, given that both scripture and the Tradition originate from the Holy Spirit and are materially manifestations of the apostolic preaching.⁴³

Perhaps with a more balanced understanding of scripture and tradition, there is room for new understanding between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Most Evangelicals are coming to recognize that they have more in common with conservative Roman Catholicism than they do with the more liberal forms of theology within their own ranks. Both value the existence of an essential core of the faith, the non-negotiables of Christian identity and conduct. No one questions that numerous doctrinal differences exist that cannot and should not be glossed over in the quest for ecclesiastical unity. Evangelicals are right to be wary of the kind of ecumenism whose goal is simply unity for unity’s sake without concern for the historic norms of apostolicity. But we must not allow such tensions to preclude what Sarah Smith appropriately calls “bridge-building” between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, a necessary step for addressing our post-Christian culture with Christian integrity.⁴⁴ Fortunately for both groups and our culture, Christ is the true bridge-builder.

NOTES

1. *First Things* 43 (May 1994) 15–22. *ECT* was the result of a consultation begun in September of 1992 and drafted by Richard John Neuhaus, Charles Colson, George Weigel, and Kent Hill. Since that time, a second statement has been published by “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” in *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1997, entitled “The Gift of Salvation.” The list of co-signers on both sides has grown considerably.

2. It is striking that the most outspoken opponents of the document have paid little attention to these affirmations. Also, cardinal differences between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, such as *sola scriptura*, are not glossed over or minimized in *ECT* (see pp. 17–18).

3. M. J. Paquette, “Catholics, Evangelicals in New Alliance,” *National Catholic Reporter* 30:23 (April 8, 1994) 6.

4. General letter of appeal by J. MacArthur, “Grace to You,” June 20, 1994.

5. J. Ankerberg, cited in S. Smith, “Building a Bridge between Catholics and Protestants,” *Religious Broadcasting* (February 1996) 33.

6. See D. Wells, *No Place for Truth or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); E. T. Oakes, “Evangelical Theology in Crisis,” *First Things* 36 (1993) 38–44.

7. J. MacArthur, “The Sufficiency of the Written Word,” in *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible*, ed. D. Kistler (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996) 161.

8. For example, the entire issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* 19 (1995); A. N. S. Lane, “Sola scriptura? Making Sense of a post-Reformation Slogan,” in *A Pathway into the Holy Scriptures*, ed. P. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 297–327; G. Cole, “Sola Scriptura: Some Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” *Churchman* 104 (1990) 20–34; P. Galbreath, “Protestant Principles in Need of Reformation,” *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 7 (1992) 14–17.

9. See, e.g., R. C. Sproul, “Sola scriptura: Crucial to Evangelicalism,” in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, ed. J. Boice (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 103–19.

10. See *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox in Dialogue*, ed. J. S. Cutsinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997).

11. T. Nettles, “One Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church,” *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us*, ed. J. Armstrong (Chicago: Moody, 1995) 40. Nettles seems oblivious to the crucial distinction between written and oral authority in Irenaeus when he says, “The Scripture is that which is ‘handed down,’ that is, tradition.”

12. J. White, “Sola scriptura and the Early Church,” in Kistler, *Sola Scriptura! The Protestant Position on the Bible*, 53. White’s essay exhibits very limited familiarity with patristic doctrinal history such that it claims Athanasius stood against Liberius, bishop of Rome (p. 42), whereas in fact, Athanasius sought the protection of Liberius’ successor, Julius, during his exile, and he, of all the Greek fathers, remained the most intimate with Rome after Julius’ death in 352. There is hardly a case here for a proto-opposition between “Protestants” and “Roman Catholics.” Moreover, it is striking that White argues that Athanasius makes no appeal to unwritten tradition, and yet in the very citation offered as proof of this point (*Oration Against the Arians* 3.29) Athanasius refers to Mary as *Theotokos*, bearer of God; an Alexandrian tradition which few Protestants would espouse!

13. A. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) 108.

14. Despite the wealth of ancient classical and ecclesiastical texts which the Renaissance was producing, one must not assume that the Reformers had wide access to the writings of the fathers, certainly not as we do today. We possess today a far greater number of reliable editions and translations from the early centuries.

15. B. Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) 29–31.

16. Although the two overlapped in places, there was an acknowledged difference between the essential catholic doctrine and the various expressions of that faith in the

churches as seen in the promulgation of the “Rule of faith.” See p. 356 in text.

17. See B. Lohse, *Luthers Theologie in ihrer historischen Entwicklung und ihrem systematischen Zusammenhang* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995).

18. *Luther's Works* 41.27.

19. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, pref. 4.

20. For the theological implications of free church historiography, see D. H. Williams, “Constantine, Nicaea and the ‘Fall’ of the Church,” in *Studies in Christian Origins*, ed. L. Ayres and G. Jones (London: Routledge) 117–36.

21. N. O. Hatch, “Sola scriptura and Novus ordo seculorum,” in *The Bible in America*, ed. N. Hatch and M. Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 74.

22. B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 90–91.

23. E.g., R. Wilken, “Tertullian and the Early Christian View of Tradition,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38 (1967) 221–33; L. W. Countryman, “Tertullian and the Regula Fidei,” *Second Century* 2 (1982) 208–27; V. Walter, “Beyond Sola Scriptura: Recovering a More Balanced Understanding of Authority,” *Touchstone* 4 (1991) 15–18.

24. B. Hagglund, “Die Bedeutung der ‘regula fidei’ als Grundlage theologischer Auslagen,” *Studia Theologia* 12 (1958) 23.

25. *On the Prescription of Heretics* 3.

26. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 4.2.

27. *Against Heresies* 4.26.1.

28. *Ibid.*, 3.3.3; 5.20.1.

29. Stenographers are said to be present in *Debate with Maximinus* 8, 10.

30. All passages cited are from R. Teske’s recent translation, *Arianism and Other Heresies*, vol. 18 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New York: New City, 1995).

31. See further D. H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Nicene-Arian Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 69–85.

32. *Debate with Maximinus* 12. Cf. *An Arian Sermon* 34 and Augustine’s *Against the Arian Sermon* 6.6, which explain the rationale of the Homoian position.

33. *Debate with Maximinus* 2 (cf. 15,13; 15,15). All episcopal attendees at this infamous council (over 300) were compelled or deceived into abandoning the Nicene creed for a Homoian confession of faith. This was the council about which Jerome later quipped, “All the world groaned and was amazed to find itself Arian.”

34. *On Christian Teaching* 2.30.

35. *On the Definition of the Nicene Creed* 20.

36. R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 848

37. *Answer to Maximinus the Arian* 2.8.

38. *On the Trinity* 2.1. 2–3; cf. *On Diverse Questions* Q. 69.1.

39. A. McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 61.

40. Lane, “Sola scriptura?” 324.

41. P. Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988) 277.

42. P. Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism* (Chambersburg, Pa.: United Church Press, 1845) 115.

43. According to Paul, the church possessed by his time a normative standard which he refers to as the *paradosis* (1 Cor 11:2; 1 Thess 2:15), translated in Latin as *traditio*. He has “received” (*paralambano*) it from the Lord—using the dynamic language of the traditioning process—and has “delivered” (*paradidomi*) it to his readers (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3).

44. Smith, “Building a Bridge between Catholics and Protestants,” 38.



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