

# CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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*EDITOR'S NOTE* ..... 5

## *ARTICLES*

The Rule of Faith as Hermeneutic ..... 7  
Keith D. Stanglin

Reading Scripture Baptismally ..... 17  
Scott Adair

Not of Private Interpretation:  
Scripture and Tradition in Reformation and Early Modern  
Protestantism ..... 29  
Richard A. Muller

A Shifting Ethos:  
Transitions in the Understanding of the Authority of Scripture in  
Churches of Christ..... 45  
Allan J. McNicol

Authority:  
Some Philosophical and Theological Considerations ..... 59  
Frederick D. Aquino

The Authority of Scripture Today?  
A Review Essay ..... 73  
Jeffrey Peterson

*OBITER DICTA*..... 83

*CONTRIBUTORS*..... 87

This past February (2019), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in St. Louis. The primary item on the agenda was the existing language in “The Book of Discipline” regarding sexual ethics. After much debate and controversy, over 800 delegates cast their votes. Fifty-three percent favored retaining the language, and forty-seven percent voted against it, revealing how evenly divided the denomination is on this issue. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how the dissenters will proceed, but it is unlikely that the issue will go away or that unity will be the long-term result.

As many have observed, the identity crisis that the United Methodist Church and many other Christian fellowships seem to be facing is due, in large part, to a crisis of authority. Is Scripture the primary authority, and how is it brought to bear on the controversial issues of our day? This question is fundamental to the life and faith of the church and is pertinent to a wide range of topics. Because of the relevance of this question, this issue of *Christian Studies* is devoted to the theme of authority for Christian faith and practice. And this question is of utmost importance. Where does our authority for faith and practice lie? What are the proper sources for theology? What are the standards for evaluating different theologies? What should they be? What role does the greater historic tradition of the church play?

The contributors to this issue have emphasized different aspects of these questions, and various solutions are proposed in the following pages. In addition to biblical insights, these articles offer a range of theological, historical, and philosophical considerations regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As always, our intent is to provide thoughtful reflection that will create dialogue about matters that are important to God’s people.

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# The Rule of Faith as Hermeneutic

Keith D. Stanglin

## I. Introduction

The rule of faith, or the rule of truth, refers to the oral proclamation of the Christian faith handed down from the apostles. Although its function is somewhat different than that of later creeds, its content is summed up well in the ancient creeds of the church, especially the Apostles' and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds. It had many functions in the ante-Nicene church, but we are interested here in how the rule of faith functioned as a hermeneutical key to Scripture. Before modern exegetes excluded all theological presuppositions from biblical interpretation, an essential feature of biblical exegesis was the insistence on interpreting Scripture within the boundaries set by the rule or canon of faith (*regula fidei*) and the whole of Scripture. In other words, premodern exegetes read Scripture overtly through a theological lens. The reason is simple, and it is as true now as it has always been: *nuda scriptura*—bare Scripture interpreted objectively without the interference of creeds or traditions—does not guard against false teaching.

That *nuda scriptura* (bare Scripture) is inadequate to the task is evident already in the New Testament itself. The devil himself knew and quoted Scripture to support his case (Matt 4:5-6). His was probably an intentional misuse. In 2 Peter 3:16, the writer acknowledges that ignorant and unstable interpreters have taken Paul's letters and other Scriptures and twisted their meaning. Theirs was more likely an unintentional misuse. In the second and third centuries, early Gnostic sects proved their doctrine of the ogdoad from John 1 or

their worship of the serpent based on Genesis 3.<sup>1</sup> In short, without a proper hermeneutical key—or rather, with any hermeneutical key one wishes—one can take Scripture by itself and arrive at various and contradictory meanings. *Nuda scriptura*, or “Bible only-ism,” does not guarantee correct interpretation, much less Christian unity in that correct interpretation. In fact, it has often been argued that it leads rather to Christian disunity.<sup>2</sup>

In order to counter such possible interpretations of the ogdoad and the serpent, Irenaeus of Lyons suggested that Scripture should be interpreted according to the proper *hypothesis* (ὑπόθεσις) or principle. The *hypothesis* acts as a pattern or lens through which Scripture is to be read. Irenaeus invites us to think of Scripture as a mosaic, the tesserae or pieces of which are intended to form a beautiful image of a majestic king. This is indeed the natural image, the one that makes sense of all the various tesserae. It is possible, however, to arrange the tesserae in such a way as to form an image of a hideous animal. The fit is not as natural, but it is possible.<sup>3</sup> The *hypothesis* is the pattern that, like the box of a jigsaw puzzle, confirms the correct image, and could even be used on the front end to steer the worker toward the correct image. For Irenaeus, the *hypothesis* or pattern that guides readers in the right interpretation of Scripture is the rule of faith.

My contention is that the doctrine contained in the early church’s rule of faith and, to a degree, in the later tradition of the church, ought to play a role in the church’s ongoing interpretation of Scripture, not unlike its role in the early church. The rule of faith, moreover, is not sufficient but is a necessary hermeneutical aid. That is, the rule of faith is not all one needs for the task of exegesis. It never stood alone in the life and teaching of the church, and it does

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<sup>1</sup> On the ogdoad, or eight divine principles, see Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* I.ix.2–3, trans. Dominic J. Unger, *Ancient Christian Writers* 55 (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 46–47 (*Patrologia Graeca* 7:540–44). On the Ophites and the veneration of the serpent, from its first appearance in the Garden of Eden, see Origen, *Contra Celsum* VI.24, 28, 30, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 337–40, 343–46; Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 37, in *The Panarion of Epiphanius*, 1:241–48; *Secret Book of John* 11, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 116; Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 45–48.

<sup>2</sup> See Keith D. Stanglin, “The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity,” *Christian Studies* 28 (2016): 7–20.

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.viii.1 (41).

not stand alone in biblical interpretation. It is, however, a minimal requirement. This article will seek to address some concerns that may arise from, and delineate some of the benefits of, a conscious use of the rule of faith and Christian tradition in the exegetical task. In the process, the hermeneutical role of the rule of faith should become a little clearer.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Concerns

In a Christian fellowship whose identity was at its very founding forged by its opposition to creeds and confessions of faith on the principle of (as we would put it now) *nuda scriptura*, objections are bound to be raised against the suggestion of inviting an interpretive lens to come alongside Scripture. Let us consider and offer brief responses to three primary concerns.

1) The first objection may go something like this: “The Bible is the only rule of Christian faith and practice. No interpretive aid should be added to it.”

But the Bible does not come with its own hermeneutic. It is not self-interpreting, at least not enough to guarantee that truth-seeking readers will not arrive at some wildly different conclusions regarding meaning and application. The only way for the early church to ensure that Scripture would not be employed in support of heresy was to interpret it through the lens of the rule of faith, or, as the apostle Paul calls it in Romans 12:6, the “analogy of the faith.” Without that hermeneutical lens of the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith), the Scriptures could be wrested to support any doctrinal or ethical aberration that one desired.

Given this indisputable reality, even restorationists have attempted to supply various hermeneutical aids, all of which are external to Scripture. The fundamental principle itself—no creed but the Bible—is of course an extrabiblical creed. On the popular level, slogans have tended to function as extrabiblical hermeneutical lenses. “Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent” is perhaps the best known of these slogans. On the more scholarly level, leaders have felt the need to advocate and explain various methods and principles. Alexander Campbell has his seven principles of interpretation and D.

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the themes taken up in this article are treated also in Keith D. Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

R. Dungan his hermeneutics textbook.<sup>5</sup> And who could forget the celebrated threefold hermeneutic of application—express command, approved example, necessary inference? All of these are hermeneutical lenses that we have invited to come alongside Scripture.

We may discuss whether this or that hermeneutical lens is more or less consistent with Scripture or seems to be in accord with the evidence in Scripture. But, speaking strictly, any hermeneutical lens will be extrabiblical. This acknowledgment alone is no more a strike against the rule of faith than it is against beloved slogans or methods such as command-example-inference.

Among the many extrabiblical hermeneutical rules on offer, the rule of faith has the advantage of historical pedigree. In favor of the rule of faith, it must be noted that, among other principles, the early church did engage in Scripture reading and application according to the oral, unwritten interpretive traditions of Jesus and his apostles. For instance, in Luke 24:44–49, Jesus himself helps the apostles interpret the Old Testament based on the Christ event. In several passages, Paul speaks about the importance of the oral traditions for the church’s doctrine and practice (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6). In Romans 12:6, Paul enjoins prophecy that is “according to the analogy of faith.” The oral tradition is not an external influence with no relation to Scripture. The truths expressed in the oral canon or rule of faith come from the same community that produced, received, and recognized the written canon, Scripture.

2) A second objection may be considered: “If you read the Bible through a lens, then that lens ends up obscuring the view. Objectivity is replaced with subjectivity.”

Campbell argued against reading Scripture through the lens of any creed, for interpreters will find in the Bible the content of what they already believe.

If I must examine the Bible through the creed, then the creed is my eyes—my artificial eyes, (for it cannot be my natural eyes)—my spectacles. If my spectacles are green glass, the Bible is also green; if blue, the Bible is blue; and as is the creed, so is the Bible to me. I am a Calvinist, or an Arminian, or a Fullerite, according

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander Campbell, “The Bible—Principles of Interpretation,” *Millennial Harbinger*, 3rd series, 1 (1846): 13–24; D. R. Dungan, *Hermeneutics: A Text-book*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1888).

to my spectacles or my creed, my “established opinions, customs, and regulations.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Campbell, presuppositions impede the objectivity that is necessary for discerning the truth. When a reader approaches the Bible through the lens of any philosophy or system of thought other than the Bible itself, it obscures the message of the Bible.

It is a legitimate concern that the lens or window through which the text is viewed becomes the very object of viewing, thus obscuring what was the ostensible object. The concern here is that doctrinal presuppositions, such as those found in the rule of faith or in later creeds, impede exegetical objectivity. And to a certain extent, Campbell is right. A green lens indeed makes the Bible appear green, and a blue lens makes it look blue. But what if those doctrinal presuppositions are right? What if the green lens is in fact the correct lens? There should then be no problem with it. With the rule of faith, readers have the correct lens, or at least the properly Christian lens. Again, the Bible is not self-interpreting. A lens will be used, and there are incorrect lenses. There is the lens of the non-Christian and the (methodological) atheist, for whom the Bible is simply a record of ancient religious thought. There are allegedly Christian lenses that see Jesus as a mere human, his resurrection as a mere myth, his words as endorsement of the prosperity gospel, Scripture’s clear ethical norms as mere suggestions, and so on. All these are possible interpretations.

Recall Irenaeus’ *hypothesis* and its relationship to the intended and completed mosaic. The correct pattern, like a jigsaw puzzle box top, does cause the artist to see each and every tessera through that pattern; every piece comes to look like it contributes to the picture of the king. The worker cannot help but be influenced by the pattern and indeed wants to be guided by it. At the same time, however, the lens or pattern does not eliminate all objectivity. One can still take a step back and see how the mosaic fits better with the proper *hypothesis* than it does with any alternative. Those other interpretations, though possible, do not fit as easily with the rest of the picture. One has to force the pieces together unnaturally to form a picture other than the king. The lens also should not eliminate the possibility of Scripture challenging our faith and overturning our practice in healthy ways. Our preconceptions must neither replace

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Campbell, “Reply,” *Christian Baptist* 5 (1827): 209.

Scripture nor become a front for eisegesis or reading our own opinions into it. The point, again, is that the church for which Scripture is written provides its own lens, a lens that is unapologetically Christian.

3) For those who may be sympathetic to the rule of faith and tradition, a third question may still arise: “Whose tradition will we follow, how much authority does it have, and when does the normative tradition chronologically cease?”

My suggestion does not entail an attempt to heed everything that every church has ever said. First of all, a distinction should be made between the rule of faith and later tradition. Of the two, the rule of faith is primary, both logically and chronologically. It represents the earliest Christian consensus on the core teachings about God, Christ, and creation. By the end of the second century, the living oral memory of Jesus and the apostles had faded and the Scripture of Old and New Testaments became more prominent. The subsequent extrabiblical tradition continued to expand, sometimes in ways that were consistent with the early church’s canons, written and oral, and at other times in ways that were inconsistent with these standards. Trinitarian dogma is a case of the former, and obligatory clerical celibacy is a case of the latter. In the later tradition, as in a choir,<sup>7</sup> some voices stand out above the others for their superior quality; other voices may be more or less off key. We are not bound to follow the voices whose tones are dissonant or wildly different from the original musical score.

Thus, it is not that the tradition is infallible, especially with regard to matters that are not specified in the rule of faith. A novel interpretation of Scripture, one that has never been conceived in two millennia, could be the correct one. For example, some advances in our knowledge of ancient history, particularly that of the ancient Near East, enhance this possibility. The point, though, is that a biblical interpreter should hear the chorus of voices and have a very good reason for differing with them. In short, of the two, the rule of faith is of primary importance, and later tradition is of subordinate importance. Like a stream, the water tends to be purer when it is nearer to the source.

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<sup>7</sup> I am here expanding on the chorus analogy given in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 122.

### III. Benefits

If potential concerns over introducing the rule of faith as a hermeneutical key can be satisfactorily answered, is there a positive case to be made for the proposal? For believers who are more or less satisfied with the status quo, what are the benefits of such an approach?

1) First, to read Scripture with the rule of faith reminds us of our primary identity as Christians and that we are to read Scripture not as disinterested scientists but as Christians. There may and should be an attempt at objectivity, but there is no such thing as pure hermeneutical objectivity. The myth of the pure neutrality of reason has been effectively debunked in philosophy now for centuries, and the similar myth of hermeneutical neutrality has been similarly debunked in biblical studies now for decades. To apply a lens through which Scripture is read is to accept the postmodern insight that no reader is entirely unbiased and that everyone reads through a lens. One's reading will be "ruled" or regulated by something. Which grid or lens should we bring to our reading of Scripture? No shortage of options has been provided. Just like identity politics, we have identity hermeneutics. While the current culture exalts identity hermeneutics—readings based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and the like—a Christian's principal and (dare I say) sole identity is in Christ. Perhaps we cannot help but be shaped by our embodied circumstances, but these identities are subordinate in Christ. To read Scripture through the church's tradition is to read as a Christian. As Robert Jenson said, the creed is our "critical theory" of interpretation.<sup>8</sup> A Christian reading is to be regulated or ruled by the content of the faith.

2) Second, reading with the Christian tradition opens up true interpretive possibilities. The American Restoration Movement began to flourish at the same time that modern exegesis came to dominate, especially in the academy. As a result of this coincidence, some principles of the so-called historical-critical method, particularly the emphasis on human authorial intent, have been taken for granted in the movement. The search for human authorial intent excludes all meanings that could not possibly have crossed the mind of the human author. To be sure, human authorial intent, when it is discernible,

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<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 81.

should remain the starting point for exegesis, but it should not end there. Pre-modern Christian exegesis reminds us that the biblical text can be read on multiple levels and thus open itself to multiple meanings, all of which may be true.

3) Third, reading with the Christian tradition helps to limit false interpretations. As noted already, such regulation of the range of possible interpretations was the only way to ensure that Scripture would not be used in support of heresy. Timothy George compares it to a guardrail that helps keep travelers on the right path when they find themselves on a dangerous highway.<sup>9</sup>

4) Fourth, reading Scripture alongside the Christian doctrinal, moral, and liturgical traditions could help bring greater unity to divided churches. The old saying, “In necessary things, unity; in non-necessary things, liberty; in both, charity,” begs the question of what falls in which category. The categories are indisputable, but what goes where is not. Scripture gives a few answers. The line may remain somewhat blurry, but tradition is an aid that confirms which doctrines are more central and which more peripheral. The content of the rule of faith or ancient creeds alone may not guarantee the kind of unity that is only possible eschatologically, but it might have prevented “Bible-believing” churches in the past from acrimoniously dividing over, say, whether to worship with an instrument, support missionary societies, or use multiple cups.

5) Finally, to acknowledge the role of the rule of faith and the influence of the Christian theological and exegetical tradition in biblical interpretation is simply to make explicit what is likely already implicit and practiced. In other words, exegetes are in fact shaped by the Christian tradition, including those who deny the influence. Even the most anti-creedal, traditionless Christians, on occasion, unwittingly read Scripture through the lens of received tradition. The Christian reader of Genesis 3 who just knows that the serpent is the one lying, the reader of John 1 who knows that the Logos is equal with the supreme God and that there are not eight aeons, the reader of Acts who understands that the time is more important than the place of Eucharistic observance, and the reader of 1 Corinthians 15 who knows that Paul was not endorsing baptism for the dead—they are already reading Scripture through the lens of the rule

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 123.

of faith and Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup> They may as well do so with clear eyes and welcome rather than mute the voice.

#### IV. Conclusion

It is good to acknowledge and welcome the voices of the Christian past into the life of our churches, for therein is much wisdom, perspective, and truth to inform our faith, ethics, and liturgy, as well as biblical interpretation. It is an alternative to *nuda scriptura* in favor of *prima scriptura*; that is, Scripture is the first and primary authority for faith and practice, but not necessarily the only voice to be heard.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the influence of the rule of faith and the ancient creeds in exegesis is also an alternative to the hermeneutic of simple restorationism or to that of vague, evangelical or mainline ecumenism that eschews all dogma.

This proposal assumes, of course, that Christians know both the Scriptures and the ancient tradition of interpretation. Restorationists, who have typically been known for their biblical literacy, have ignored church history and tradition. In other words, their biblical literacy has usually been accompanied by a willful, general Christian illiteracy—that is, ignorance and rejection of the traditions, creeds, doctrines, and influential figures of the church’s history, as well as ignorance of the doctrines and practices of the wider contemporary Christian world. More recently, this ignorance of the greater tradition is being addressed in some of these churches. But it is troubling that, as some restorationist churches are perhaps becoming slightly more literate in general Christian faith and tradition, their biblical literacy is sharply declining across the board. As a fellowship, Churches of Christ, like others, are in the midst of an identity crisis. Being anchored in both Scripture and the Christian tradition could help prevent this denominational identity crisis from mutating and becoming simply a Christian identity crisis.

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of this point along with some concrete examples, see Keith D. Stanglin, “Restorationism and Church History: Strange Bedfellows?” *Christian Studies* 26 (2013–14): 21–32.

<sup>11</sup> For more on *nuda scriptura* and *prima scriptura*, see Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation*, 130–32.

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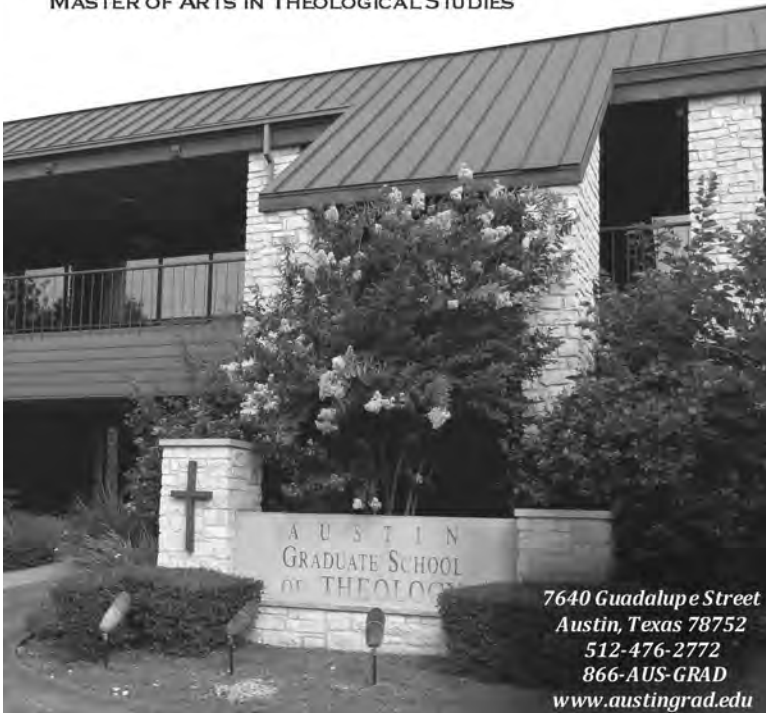


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# Reading Scripture Baptismally

Scott Adair

## I. Introduction

The Churches of Christ occupy a rare space between two Christian worlds concerning baptism. Along with Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and some mainline Protestants we believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. As the Nicene Creed (381) puts it, we, too “acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” On the other hand, with Evangelicals we insist that baptism is only for believers. We have a high view of baptism similar to the former and a high view of faith similar to the latter. But we reject the former’s low view of faith at the time of baptism, and the latter’s low view of baptism at the time of faith. As such, our precise baptismal theology is, in some ways, a bridge, and, in some ways, a wall. Of course, our baptismal theology is not the result of picking and choosing what we like from different traditions; it comes from our approach to Scripture: our patternistic restoration hermeneutic.<sup>1</sup> While “doing and saying what the New Testament church did and said” has fine-tuned our convictions about baptism, this way of reading Scripture has its blind spots. Based on the polarity and divisiveness we see in our movement, apparently our hermeneutic has not been effective in helping us navigate controversies. For even though Scripture itself elevates certain teachings as more important than others,<sup>2</sup> our patternism has not always enabled us to clearly distinguish between essential doctrines and matters of expedience. This

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Stanglin, “The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity,” *Christian Studies* 28 (2016): 10.

<sup>2</sup> Some of these distillations of essential truths in Scripture are doctrinal in nature: the seven ones (Eph 4:4–7), and what Paul received and passed on “as of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3). Some are ethical: the golden rule (Matt 7:12), and the commandment of love (Rom 13:9–10). Some are both: the *Shema* (Deut 6:4, Mark 12:29).

deficiency shows up in two ways: 1) demanding adherence to peripheral teachings as if they were central, or 2) allowing too much leeway when it comes to core teachings.<sup>3</sup> Until we address this problem in our approach to Scripture, we will continue to isolate ourselves and split churches.

What the Churches of Christ need is an agreed upon theological center, a lens through which to read Scripture. We need an authoritative summary that lays out for us the core teachings of the apostles. The answer may be nearer to us than we think. There is an overlooked summary of the Christian faith inherent in baptism. This article calls for Restorationists to read Scripture baptismally, not just baptize scripturally. While we have a thoroughgoing theology *about* baptism, we have overlooked the theology *in* baptism. This initiating rite, after all, is not arbitrary. It is not simply a hoop to jump through or a meaningless test of obedience. Rather, it is freighted with essential truths about the divine story one is entering. We understand this principle when it comes to the Lord's Supper. We recognize that the bread and the wine communicate central truths about Christ. But we have not been as astute with baptism. When we limit our baptismal theology to precise instructions about a final step unto salvation, we fail to see that this ancient, participatory rite is a distillation of the whole Christian system. With just the slightest adjustment of perspective one can see that all of the central tenets of the Christian faith are compressed, stored, expressed, and enjoined upon the church in this (un)systematic theology called baptism.<sup>4</sup> The enduring ordinance, understood in this way, is more than just a "salvation issue." In ritual form, it makes claims about God (theology), Christ (Christology), the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), the church (ecclesiology), humanity (anthropology), sin (hamartiology), and hope (eschatology)—as well as salvation (soteriology). I will support this claim by decompressing the ritual—unpacking its doctrinal contents—noting, along the way, how this material compares with that of other summaries recognized in the broader Christian tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> Just last year, a prominent scholar in our movement said to the Bible faculty at Harding University that adhering to the doctrine of the Trinity is not essential and should be understood as a matter of opinion or a disputable matter such as those addressed by Paul in Romans 14.

<sup>4</sup> "Unsystematic" because it is not linear, not systematized. Yet "systematic" because it stores information about each of the main categories that traditional systematic theology covers.

## II. Baptism as Summary

Baptism—that is, the entire event of baptism and the words that accompany it—provides a comprehensive encapsulation of the Christian faith. It instructs the church and binds upon it the core content of the apostolic message through its invocation, confessions, and symbolic actions. More so, this content is consistent with that found in later summaries, such as the rule of faith and the Apostles' Creed. And while baptism expresses both doctrinal and ethical truths, this article focuses primarily on its doctrinal content.

*Invoking the Triune Name.* First, baptism done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit initiates one into a faith that is distinctly and unapologetically Trinitarian. This trifold invocation of God's name lays out the basic outline of the Christian system. Whether sprinkling, pouring, or immersing, invoking the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit has been a ubiquitous feature of the practice throughout Christian history and across denominational lines. Some might point out that the very earliest baptisms did not adhere to this triune formula. For example, Acts of the Apostles reports that converts were baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ.” Granted, but this is not at odds with the triune invocation. In fact, it is consistent with it. After all, the inner logic of the name, “Jesus Christ,” retains within it the Trinitarian contours of the apostolic message because the honorific, “Christ,” or “the Anointed One,” points to the “beginning of the gospel” (Mark 1:1), when the Father anointed the Son with the Holy Spirit in the Jordan (Mark 1:9–11). This scene, this opening act at the Jordan River, links baptism and Trinity.<sup>5</sup>

This triune invocation is the most natural explanation for the origin of the three-limbed formulation of the Roman Symbol, a baptismal confession in the West that found its final form in the Apostles' Creed.<sup>6</sup> When comparing the

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<sup>5</sup> Killian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), demonstrates that the baptism of Jesus was the dominant baptismal metaphor for the first three centuries of the church, as witnessed in patristic reflection as well as early Christian art.

<sup>6</sup> Explaining the provenance of the Apostles' Creed, or more challenging, the rule of faith, is not as simple as I have stated here. Determining exactly how the *kerygma*, early creeds, hymns, liturgical confessions, baptismal formula, the Roman Symbol, pre-baptismal catechism, the rule of faith, the councils, and the Apostles' Creed relate to each other, regarding origins, is likely not possible. Nevertheless, this has not stopped some from trying, see Tomas Bokedal, “The Rule of Faith: Tracing its

baptism described in the *Didache* (80–120) to the practice in the Apostolic Tradition (200–215), one can see the movement from triune invocation to a three-part interrogatory creed, the latter of which is almost identical in content to the declaratory Apostles' Creed. Echoing the Great Commission, the *Didache* instructs, "Concerning baptism, baptize in this way. Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, in living water."<sup>7</sup> The following excerpt from the Apostolic Tradition shows how the succinct invocation expanded to form the outline of the baptismal creed.

When each of them to be baptized has gone down into the water, the one baptizing shall lay hands on each of them, asking,

"Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?"

And the one being baptized shall answer, "I believe."

He shall then baptize each of them once, laying his hand upon each of their heads.

Then he shall ask, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the quick and the dead?"

When each has answered, "I believe," he shall baptize a second time.

Then he shall ask, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, and the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?"

Then each being baptized shall answer, "I believe."

And thus let him baptize the third time.<sup>8</sup>

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Origins," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7 (2013): 233–55. See also, Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 48–65.

<sup>7</sup> *Didache* 7, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 64.

<sup>8</sup> *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, ed. Gregory Dix (London: Alban Press, 1992), 36.

The trifold invocation is also consistent with the heresy-fighting efforts of the Church fathers. When distortions of the apostolic message threatened the young Christian movement from within, bishops and theologians based their polemic on the three-pronged rule of faith, the sum content of the Christian gospel.<sup>9</sup> The standard, therefore, by which new teachings were measured, was always Trinitarian.

As such, baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a primary basis for Christian unity, not simply because of the shared words and forms, but because these point to the non-negotiable Trinitarian faith that is unmistakably and unashamedly Christian. Trinitarian baptism as the foundation for unity is not foreign to the New Testament. When Paul pleads for unity in Ephesians 4:4–7, the divine persons and baptism comprise four of the seven “ones.”<sup>10</sup>

In keeping with the historic church, Restorationists, too, have typically been careful to invoke “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” at baptism, though seemingly unaware that the divine name provides the threefold outline for the core content of the gospel. Restorationists, who have been so intent on baptizing scripturally, have too often failed to read Scripture baptismally. I am convinced that had Barton Stone and his heirs read Scripture through the filter of “Father, Son, and Spirit,” they would have seen the interrelatedness of God as the stage on which the drama of Scripture unfolds. As such, they would have been spared from their Arian leanings.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, *Rule of Faith*, 1–15, essentially provides a rule of faith reader with examples from the works of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and others. While it may be difficult to establish, with certainty, first-century baptismal invocation (e.g. Matt 28:19) as the root of the rule of faith, it is uncontroversial to say that it is consistent with the rule of faith.

<sup>10</sup> Baptism relates directly to the remaining three “ones” of Ephesians 4:4–7, as well: “one body,” “one hope,” “one faith.”

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of Barton Stone’s Christology, namely his rejection of the Son’s eternal existence and co-equality with God, the Father, see Robert D. Cornwall, “Christology,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, Douglas A. Foster, D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 204. In the same volume, Newell Williams, “Barton Warren Stone,” notes that Stone denied the “Arian” and “Socinian” labels that others gave him, and made efforts to distinguish his views from such heresies (701, 710–12).

*Confessing Jesus as Lord.* Second, baptism encapsulates the core content of the Christian faith through its confessions or creeds. It is the common, if not universal, practice that a Christological confession is made at the time of baptism.<sup>12</sup> This is certainly true in the Churches of Christ, which points to the fact that Restorationists, technically speaking, are not anti-creedal.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the Churches of Christ require a creed, and it is at the time of baptism: “I believe Jesus is the Son of God.”<sup>14</sup> Christological creeds, such as this one, undoubtedly go back to the very earliest Christian experience.<sup>15</sup> More strongly, without Christological creeds, there is no such thing as “Christian experience.”

The New Testament reflects more than just one creedal formula spoken at the time of baptism.<sup>16</sup> That is, there was flexibility regarding the exact wording of the confessions. While there was no variation regarding Jesus as the primary subject, those first believers had multiple ways to verbally express their allegiance to him at baptism. The most prevalent were, “Jesus is the Messiah,” “Jesus is Lord,” and “Jesus is the Son of God.” Each wording had a special emphasis, to be sure, but all of the phrases pointed to the same reality. To say, “Jesus is the Messiah,” given the Jewish origins of the faith, is to say, “Jesus is

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<sup>12</sup> Baptism and creeds were united very early in church history. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 379: “Because the proclamation of the kerygma and the administration of baptism belonged together, creeds were made necessary also by the demand of Christian baptism ‘in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ or ‘in the name of Christ.’”

<sup>13</sup> The Restoration framers were only opposed to human-made creeds. See William B. Decker, “Baptismal Confession,” *Restoration Quarterly* 1 (1957): 184.

<sup>14</sup> This is typically expressed by affirming an interrogatory creed: “Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?”

<sup>15</sup> Bokedal, “Rule of Faith,” 242, regarding the confession, “Jesus is the Son of God,” from Acts 8:37, he says, “This Western reading may, in fact, be our earliest extant baptismal profession of faith, indicating that the Christ-confession was associated with baptism from the beginning.”

<sup>16</sup> Abraham Malherbe, “New Testament Creeds and their Uses,” *Christian Studies* 14 (1994): 10, asserts that Rom 10:9—“if you believe in heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord you will be saved”—is a baptismal text. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 1972), 14–19, points to several early single-clause Christological creeds, such as Acts 8:16; 19:5; 1 Cor 6:11; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11.

the Son of God.”<sup>17</sup> Such a confession was provocative and costly, given the political ramifications. For when people confess Jesus as King, or divine Son, or Lord, they are saying Caesar is not.<sup>18</sup> The Apostles’ Creed, though, rather than choosing one Christological title over another, locks-in all three of the honorifics: “[I believe] in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.”

All of this is simply to say that Christian baptism, like the rule of faith and the Apostles’ Creed, is Christocentric. In other words, Jesus Christ is the clear focal point of the content of each. For example, of the twelve articles in the Apostles’ Creed, six of them are about Jesus (one article for the Father, and one article for the Spirit). This is consistent with the rule of faith as well. Whether it is the version of the rule found in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Clement, or anywhere else, there is always more doctrinal material dedicated to Jesus Christ than there is to any other category. The story unfolds along Trinitarian lines, but the story, itself, focuses on the person of Christ. So, it is the case with Christian baptism, including the one that Restorationists practice. The spoken words associated with the rite are unmistakably Christocentric. Sadly, however, Christ-centeredness has not always described how Restorationists approach Scripture.<sup>19</sup>

In review up to this point, when the Churches of Christ baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God (and/or Lord), they are verbalizing the very foundation of the Christian faith,

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<sup>17</sup> Ps 2:7, 2 Sam 12:7, as well as Mark 1:9–11 show the connection between the Jewish understanding of Messiah and Son of God. In these passages the Anointed One is also the Son of God.

<sup>18</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 16, captures the costly nature of Christian baptism and its attendant creeds: “When admitting to participation in the Eucharist by baptism, God and the church needed to ask whether a candidate had grasped what he or she was taking on. And so, as the candidate took the morally revolutionary and quite possibly fatal step, the candidate would be asked, ‘Do you believe . . .?’”

<sup>19</sup> For example, T. W. Brents, *The Gospel Plan of Salvation* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1874). This ambitious and influential volume ostensibly gave Restorationists a complete exposition of the gospel. The first one hundred and fifty pages exposed the errors of Calvinist doctrines. The final three hundred focused on the proper mode and function of baptism; refuting pedobaptists, non-immersionists, and anyone that does not view baptism as essential for salvation. Doug Foster notes that the *Gospel Plan of Salvation*, in spite of its title, has nothing in it that can properly be labeled Christological, in “Christology in the Stone-Campbell Movement: An Exploratory Survey” (paper presented at *Restoration Theological Fellowship*, Boston, November 20, 1999), 10.

one that enjoys overlap with the essential content of the rule of faith and the Apostles' Creed. All three of these historic summaries present a doctrinal core that is Trinitarian and Christocentric. Flowing out of this Trinitarian, Christocentric story are several remaining essential elements that baptism expresses.

*The Depths of the Symbol.* Third, the symbolic act of immersion in water enjoins upon the convert and proclaims to the church, even if non-discursively, the remaining basic tenets of the Christian faith. In addition to theology and Christology, the ritual, as it is described in the New Testament, expresses other core teachings concerning the Spirit, humanity, sin, salvation, the church, and our future hope. This article will continue to compare the content of baptism with that of the Apostles' Creed, which also includes central tenets beyond the Trinity and Christ. The rule of faith, though, has too many variations on these matters for a treatment of this length to make any meaningful comparisons.

While some baptizers are careful to mention the promise from Acts 2:38 concerning the gift of the Holy Spirit, the sending and sealing of the Spirit is expressed in the ritual whether verbalized or not. After all, Christian baptism finds its primary narrative antecedent in Jesus' baptism in the Jordan.<sup>20</sup> As such, Christian baptism recalls and re-enacts the Trinitarian drama where the Father anoints his Son with his Spirit (Matt 3:16–17; Mark 4:9–11; Luke 3:21–22). Just as the Father sent his Spirit to confirm Jesus' divine Sonship, so also the Father sends us his Spirit as we unite with his Son, confirming our adoption as sons or daughters. This pneumatologically rich symbol invites the church to develop from Scripture a robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Not unlike baptism, the connection between water and the Spirit of God is a theme in the biblical story from beginning (Gen 1:2) to end (Rev 22:17).<sup>21</sup> To read Scripture baptismally is to recognize that this water/Spirit motif offers insights about the work of the Holy Spirit within the created order, not simply an apologetic for the necessity of baptism.

Admittedly, whether in word or in symbol, the explicit pneumatological content in baptism is brief. But that is how rituals function. They compress

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<sup>20</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, "The One Baptism as a Category of New Testament Soteriology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953): 257–74, makes the case that Paul draws on the baptism of Jesus to inform Christian baptism. Consider, for example, how Paul connects "baptism," with "sonship" and "Spirit" in Galatians 3:26–4:7.

<sup>21</sup> Other examples include John 3:5 and 1 John 5:7–8.

inexhaustible concepts into a memorable symbolic action that invites further exploration. The Apostles' Creed is similarly concise: "I believe in the Holy Spirit."<sup>22</sup>

In a passage of Scripture almost as familiar to Restorationists as Acts 2:38, Romans 6 connects immersion in water with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As such, being lowered and lifted from the water recalls the pivotal event of human history, the crux of the apostolic message (1 Cor 15:3–7). The rite not only looks back, it looks forward, claiming Jesus' triumph over death as the destiny for believers as well as the bellwether for the cosmos (Rom 8:18–23). The ritual is dramatized eschatology. The Apostles' Creed, likewise, includes eschatological articles of faith: "[I believe] in the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."

Beyond just doctrinal content, this death and rising imagery also has an ethical element. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to develop this ethical dimension in detail, it should not be overlooked that this symbolic death connotes that the convert is no longer living for herself (Rom 6, Gal 2:20). In other words, baptism symbolizes and enjoins upon the person the mandate of obedient self-outpouring, modeled perfectly in the incarnation and cross of Christ (Phil 2:6–11). The Apostles' Creed, on the other hand, does not contain this participatory, ethical component. As such, it is deficient as a stand-alone distillation of the faith. To be fair, however, the Apostles' Creed emerged not in isolation but in connection with baptism.

The New Testament also connects baptism with washing. In simplest terms, baptism is a bath (1 Pet 3:21). This washing symbolism, as well as the phrase, "for the forgiveness of sins," that Restorationists zero-in on, says something about the nature of sin, human culpability and the need to be reconciled (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Baptism, and the gospel that it summarizes and enacts, engages the categories of hamartiology, anthropology, and soteriology. The Apostles' Creed follows suit: "[I believe in] the forgiveness of sin." While it

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<sup>22</sup> Concerning the need to flesh out the creed or summary of faith with Scripture, see Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 41: "One cannot keep saying 'Jesus died to save us from our sin' without pondering how that might work [. . .] thus sophisticated theological reflection a la Paul or John. [. . .] One cannot keep confessing 'he is Lord' without identifying the subject. Thus to remain Gospel, the gospel narrative requires narrative expansion, a la the Gospels."

might be easy to take such a pithy phrase for granted, any statement claiming to summarize the Christian faith that gives no accounting for human sinfulness and its remedy is simply not Christian.

Also, it should not go unnoticed that the ritual is passive. Restorationists have traditionally understood baptism as one of “the five steps” in “the plan of salvation.”<sup>23</sup> However, given the passive nature of the command, “be baptized,” perhaps “step” is not the most fitting metaphor. The convert is not so much the doer or the actor, but the one giving consent to be acted upon. This is not just a matter of semantics. It is germane to the content of the Christian message that one never baptizes oneself. Someone else, one belonging to the church, gives the convert a bath. A private baptism, then, or a baptism without any witnesses, is not actually possible. For there will at least be one other, or it is not Christian baptism. This universal feature of baptism communicates meaning regarding the role that the church plays in mediating divine grace. To say it plainly, one cannot bypass the church to receive the benefits of Christ. The New Testament’s baptismal ecclesiology is explicit, presenting it as a symbol of catholicity: “for we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free” (1 Cor 12:13). The Apostles’ Creed also makes ecclesiological confessions: “[I believe in] the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.”

### III. Conclusion

In sum, this cursory analysis demonstrates that baptism, both in word and symbol, makes claims about theology, Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, anthropology, hamartiology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. It stores, expresses, and enjoins upon the church the core content of the apostolic message. The letters of the New Testament were written to baptized communities. Based on the number of baptismal allusions in them, it seems that the authors

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<sup>23</sup> This five-step approach among Restorationists is traced back to Walter Scott (1796–1861), who used his five-finger exercise as a memory aid in teaching. See Peter Morgan, “Five Finger Exercise,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 338–39. Scott pointed to each finger, starting with the thumb, and repeated the words, “faith,” “repentance,” “baptism,” “remission of sins,” “gift of the Holy Spirit,” sometimes pairing “eternal life” with the Holy Spirit on the little finger. It also served as a contrasting response to *ordo salutis* in Reformed soteriology. Soon after Scott, however, the following revised five-step plan emerged: hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.

assumed that the audience could not read or hear these letters except baptismally. This may explain why New Testament documents do not typically argue *to* baptism, rather they argue *from* baptism.

Since the Churches of Christ have not had a guide or a lens that spells out clearly those basic tenets of the apostolic message, we have often allowed secondary or tertiary matters to be treated as essential issues that threaten the truth of the gospel, resulting in isolationism and division. We need an authoritative summary to help us distinguish non-negotiable truths from other important, though not core, matters of faith. And while leaders in the Churches of Christ would likely affirm each statement in the Apostles' Creed as representative of the core content of the faith,<sup>24</sup> it is unlikely that they would see the creed itself, in its fixed form, as authoritative. To use a prescription drug analogy, our leaders may have confidence in the powdery medication, itself (the truths stated in the Apostles' Creed), but would be hesitant, if not dubious, about the capsule form in which it comes (the Apostles' Creed as a fixed, authoritative summary). Baptism, however, is a capsule form that they already see as early, apostolic, and authoritative. They just need to acknowledge that it is not an empty shell. Once Restorationists recognize within their own practice of baptism the broad strokes of the Christian story, this comprehensive (un)systematic encapsulation could serve as an interpretive guide to prioritize doctrines and help navigate controversy. Of course, this is no panacea. In no way does it replace the need to study Scripture, pray for wisdom, and rely on the Spirit. But if a doctrinal dispute arises among leaders who read Scripture baptismally, they could at least discern the level of the threat. That is, if the doctrinal issue in question is not related to the content that is stored and expressed in Christian baptism—in its invocation, confessions, or symbolism—it is not a core tenet of the Christian faith. For example, does the dispute challenge the oneness of God as Father, Son, and Spirit? Does it deny the divinity or Lordship of Jesus? Does the teaching reject the presence and transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Does it undermine or deny the life, death, rising and ascension of Jesus, the forgiveness of sin, the hope of resurrection, or the church as the body of Christ? If not, then it is likely not an essential doctrinal matter and it would be an affront to the truth of the gospel to divide the church

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<sup>24</sup> Though they might quibble with the phrase, “he descended into hell,” as others have.

over it. If leaders are able to discern with confidence that a disputable matter is non-essential, they could guide the church through the controversy with the expedience, wisdom, and consideration described in Romans 14–15.

It is not difficult to find people within the Churches of Christ who feel we have made too big of a deal of baptism. Many are embarrassed because our emphasis on baptism has built a wall between the Churches of Christ and the rest of Christendom. Not only have we isolated ourselves, we have splintered into factions within our own fellowship because our approach to Scripture has not brought clarity concerning how to distinguish essentials from non-essentials. What we have needed all along is an agreed upon theological center—a Trinitarian, Christocentric encapsulation of the apostolic faith. The answer has been right under our nose the whole time. What we need is the unifying theology *in* baptism. In this respect, the Churches of Christ have not made a big enough deal of baptism.

# Not of Private Interpretation: Scripture and Tradition in Reformation and Early Modern Protestantism

Richard A. Muller

## I. Scripture and Tradition—Basic Issues

*Sola scriptura* has been viewed by some modern Protestants as a call for the exclusion of tradition, sometimes even the ecumenical creeds, from consideration in the formulation of Christian doctrine. Examination of the thought of the Reformers and their successors in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, points in a different direction.<sup>1</sup> As Heiko Oberman indicated, it is a mistake to understand the Reformation conflict as a battle between proponents of “Scripture alone” and proponents of “Scripture and Tradition.”<sup>2</sup> Part of the problem in understanding the Reformers’ views on Scripture and tradition arises from a misconception of the meaning of tradition in early Protestant thought. An analysis of the language and arguments of the Reformers and their successors demonstrates that “tradition” negatively understood is not a simple reference to the teaching of preceding generations of Christians, whereas tradition positively understood can reference biblical interpretations and theological views of past ages.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that *sola scriptura* was not used as a standard term by the Reformers and their successors. See Anthony N. S. Lane, “*Sola Scriptura*? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan,” in *A Pathway Into the Holy Scripture*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaithe and D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297–327; also note Henk van den Belt, “*Sola Scriptura*: An Inadequate Slogan for the Authority of Scripture,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 51/2 (2016): 204–26.

<sup>2</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 54; cf. idem, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 365–75.

The term “tradition” is rooted in the Latin verb, *trado*, to transmit, deliver, hand over, hand down, or consign. A tradition, then, whether divine or human, is something that is delivered or transmitted, notably, sayings or teachings handed down from past generations. The term “tradition” or *traditio* as used by the Reformers and their successors is the typical translation of *paradosis*, from the verb *paradidomi* (rendered into Latin with the verb *trado*), used in the Greek New Testament to indicate a transmission or handing down of teachings. In the early English translations of the New Testament, such as Coverdale’s Bibles of 1535 and 1537, Taverner’s Bible of 1559, or the Geneva Bible of 1561, *paradosis* is consistently rendered as “tradition” and *paradidomi* as “deliver.” As Protestant exegetes and translators recognized, there are both positive and negative connotations in the biblical usages. On the positive side, there is the Pauline usage, as in 1 Corinthians 11:23, “for I received from the Lord what I also delivered [*paredideto*] to you,” and 1 Corinthians 15:3, “for I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” The negative usage is exemplified by Mark 7:8, 13: “You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition [*paradosin*] of men ... thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on.” Both of these usages had a significant impact on the Protestant approach to tradition.

In pointing out that the Reformation debates were not precisely over “Scripture alone” and “Scripture and Tradition,” Oberman also identified two basic ways, characteristic of late medieval thought, in which the relationship between Scripture and tradition was understood. One way, identified by Oberman as “Tradition I,” was a “single-source theory of interpreted Scripture,” whereas the other, identified as “Tradition II,” was a “two-source theory, which allows for an extrabiblical oral tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Tradition I, then, assumed the ultimate authority of Scripture as the norm for Christian teaching, but it also assumed that there was a churchly interpretive tradition in which the teachings of Scripture were explained and transmitted, qualified, as one of the authors cited by Oberman put it, by the rule that one owes “more respect to canonical Scripture than to human assertions, regardless of who holds them.”<sup>4</sup> So also, Thomas Aquinas taught that Scripture alone offers “incontrovertible

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<sup>3</sup> Oberman, *Forerunners*, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Wessel Gansfort, in Oberman, *Forerunners*, 100.

proof” inasmuch as “our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets,” whereas the authority of the teachers of the church—representatives of the interpretive tradition—“may properly be used, yet as merely probable.”<sup>5</sup>

What Protestantism added to this notion of Tradition I, reinforced by the dual usage in the New Testament, was a narrative of decline from the purer interpretations of the early church into an increasingly problematic mixture of traditionary interpretation of Scripture with extrabiblical human traditions, concluding in what Calvin and others would call the “papal superstitions” of the late Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> The Protestant stripping away of human traditions, specifically of superstitions, was an attempt not entirely to remove the interpretive tradition but to purge its accretions, looking to Scripture itself as the ultimate norm of doctrine but also attending to what the church, in particular the early church and the most trustworthy teachers of later eras, had said about the meaning of the text. In the Protestant view, aspects of the tradition were clearly suspect, especially those belonging to the later Middle Ages. The extant distinction between an interpretive tradition of biblical truths and an extrabiblical oral tradition was modified to distinguish between divine traditions stemming from Scripture either directly or by interpretive inference and human traditions often immersed in error, many of which had mingled with the tradition of interpretation. This modification can be identified both in the writings of early Protestants like Tyndale, Bullinger, and Calvin and, often with clearer nuance, in the writings of later Protestants like Whitaker, Junius, Polanus, and Arminius.

## II. William Tyndale’s Early Reformation Perspective

The text of 2 Peter 1:20, “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation,” read together with Augustine’s famous comment, “For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, q. 1, art. 8, ad 2.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1: 194–96; with Jordan J. Ballor, “Deformation and Reformation: Thomas Aquinas and the Rise of Protestant Scholasticism,” in *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 27–48, here 29–33.

Church,”<sup>7</sup> was much debated during the time of the Reformation. From the Roman Catholic side, the Petrine text was taken as a declaration of the authority of the church and its tradition against interpretations of the text by individual Reformers, and Augustine’s comment was taken as a strong reinforcement of the churchly and traditionary norm by the church father who was dearest to Protestants.

Protestant responses countered the Roman reading both of “private” and of Augustine’s reliance on the church. As William Tyndale paraphrased and expanded on the text, “No place of the scripture may have a private exposition; that is, it may not be expounded after the will of man, or after the will of the flesh, or drawn unto a worldly purpose contrary unto the open texts, and the general articles of the faith, and the whole course of the scripture, and contrary to the living and practising of Christ and the apostles and holy prophets.”<sup>8</sup> Tyndale also had a simple explanation of Augustine’s statement. Augustine was a convert from paganism to Christianity who had been moved by the lives and teachings of Christians, and it was from them that he received the truths of Scripture: “they which come after receive the scripture of them that go before.”<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, although Tyndale denied the ultimate authority of the church and tradition in establishing the faith, he did allow a role for church and tradition in conveying the faith from one generation to another. In the specific case of Augustine, Tyndale recognized that Augustine had come to his acceptance of Christianity from paganism and had, early on, “disputed with blind reasons and worldly wisdom against the Christian.”<sup>10</sup> In Tyndale’s view, what had finally brought Augustine to respect Christianity had been the lives of Christians who had undergone persecution for the sake of their beliefs, to the point that he became convinced that the power of the doctrine to guide

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental*, v, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 1, IV: 131.

<sup>8</sup> William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, in *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), 317.

<sup>9</sup> William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, in *An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue, The Supper of the Lord after the True Meaning of John VI. and 1 Cor. XI. and Wm. Tracy’s Testament Expounded* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1850), 50.

<sup>10</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 50.

their lives must have come from God. This respect for Christian life in both teaching and practice rendered Augustine willing to receive Scripture from those who had come to the faith before him. This most basic receiving of Scripture from the church, however, yields only a historical faith resting on testimony, namely, the opinion of human beings: what is required for one truly to be Christian is a living and “feeling” faith that rests not on human testimony, which can err, but on “the power of God.”<sup>11</sup>

Tyndale’s point was not to dispose of the teachings of the church but, as he interpreted Augustine’s approach, to subject the church and its teaching to the authority of Scripture:

for the first church taught nought but they confirmed it with miracles, which could not be done but of God, till the scripture was authentically received. And the church following teacheth nought that they will have believed, as an article of faith, but that which the scripture proveth and maintaineth: as St. Augustine protesteth of his works, that men should compare them unto the scripture, and thereby judge them, can cast away whatsoever the scripture did not allow.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately Scripture is the cause of belief—and Scripture receives its authority, ultimately, from the one who sent it, namely, from God.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably, Tyndale’s assumption that Augustine’s receipt of Scripture from the church, understood as the community of belief, was grounded in an appreciation of the value of Christian teaching and practice, as well as Tyndale’s recognition of the value of Augustine’s own writings insofar as they were judged true by the rule of Scripture, point toward a positive albeit cautious sense of the value of what has gone before, namely tradition. This conclusion is reinforced by what Tyndale states, both positively and negatively, about tradition: the final chapter of the Epistle to the Romans includes an admonition to “beware of the traditions and doctrines of men” and to “compare ... all manner of the doctrine of men unto the scripture, and see whether they agree or not.”<sup>14</sup> Wicked and false traditions are arbitrarily imposed churchly ceremonies, lacking biblical justification. Distinct from “wicked traditions and false

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<sup>11</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 135–36.

<sup>13</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Tyndale, *Prologue Upon the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, in *Doctrinal Treatises*, 508.

ceremonies,” the Apostle Paul and later writers of the early church taught “traditions” consisting in “the gospel of Christ, and honest manners and living, and such a good order as becometh the doctrine of Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Tyndale offers no opposition to ceremonies or sacraments that are biblically grounded, “understood by the people ... serve the people, and preach one or another thing to them.”<sup>16</sup> The problem arises when Christians are “brought violently into captivity under the bondage of traditions of men” or made to recite formulae, including the creed, in a language that they cannot understand.<sup>17</sup>

Tyndale’s arguments against tradition are specifically directed against human traditions imposed on Christian belief and practice without suitable biblical warrant. His approach does not oppose, but actually approves, reading traditionary materials, particularly the writings of church fathers like Augustine, for edification—clearly allied with what we have identified as “Tradition I.”

### **III. Traditions Divine and Human in Reformation-Era Confessions and Catechisms.**

The distinction between wrongfully imposed human traditions and traditions of Christian teaching, including the writings of the church fathers and the creeds, is found also in the early Protestant confessions and catechisms. The Tetrapolitan Confession presented at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 included a chapter on the problem of “human traditions” in which a distinction is made between two kinds of tradition, human and divine. The former are those that “conflict with the law of God” whereas the latter, “such as agree with Scripture, and were instituted for good morals and the profit of men, even though not expressed in Scripture, in words,” are recognized as flowing “from the command to love.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the first Helvetic Confession of 1536 offered two articles, one on “the ancient fathers” and the other on “human traditions” immediately following its articles on Scripture. Scripture is identified as “its

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<sup>15</sup> Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 218–19.

<sup>16</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 72, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Tetrapolitan Confession, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014), 1: 156–57. Dennison’s volumes will be cited hereinafter as *RC 16–17*.

own interpreter, guided by the rule of love and faith.” As for the church fathers, insofar as they have followed this right interpretation of Scripture, the authors of the confession declare, “not only do we receive them as interpreters of Scripture, but we honor them as chosen instruments of God.”<sup>19</sup> Human traditions, however, are those that fail to follow Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

Reformation-era catechisms, like those of Thomas Cranmer, John Calvin, and John à Lasco, consistently take the Apostles’ Creed as a foundational point of reference in expounding the Christian faith,<sup>21</sup> on the assumption that it was not only a product of the ancient church, but also that it presented the basic truths of Scripture on matters directly related to salvation. In his *Decades*, Heinrich Bullinger devoted three sermons to the Apostles’ Creed after his initial six on Scripture and its interpretation.<sup>22</sup> Beyond this, when he published the *Decades*, he inserted a prefatory chapter on the four general councils of the early church—Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon—identifying them as augmentations of the more basic creed made necessary by heresies. Bullinger also presented the conciliar creeds in full, augmented by several of the early rules of faith and the Athanasian Creed. The councils, he noted, had been gathered “for keeping the soundness of faith, the unity of doctrine, and the discipline and peace of the churches.”<sup>23</sup> Bullinger exhorted his hearers to compare unwritten traditions “with the manifest writings of the apostles,” adding, “if in any place you shall perceive those traditions to disagree with the scriptures, then gather ... that this is the forged invention of man, and not the apostles’ tradition.”<sup>24</sup>

Bullinger also identified the catechetical works of the early church as exemplary of proper teaching given their faithful interpretation of Scripture, as distinct from “private interpretation” resting on human invention.<sup>25</sup> As with Tyndale, “private interpretation” is not merely the problematic interpretation

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<sup>19</sup> First Helvetic Confession, art. 2–3, in *RC 16–17*, 1: 344.

<sup>20</sup> First Helvetic Confession, art. 4, in *RC 16–17*, 1: 344.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Catechism*, in *RC 16–17*, 1: 371–78; Thomas Cranmer, *Catechism*, in *ibid.*, 1: 547–48; John à Lasco, *Catechism Used for the Teaching of Children*, in *ibid.*, 1: 614–29.

<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, trans. H. I., edited by Thomas Harding, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849–1852), 1: 122–80.

<sup>23</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, 1: 12.

<sup>24</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, 1: 64; cf. *ibid.*, 74–76.

<sup>25</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, IV: 154–55, citing 2 Pet. 1:20.

of one person, it is any human interpretation not grounded in the right reading of the text, which, as Bullinger himself argues, consents to the intention of the Spirit and conforms to the rule of faith and love.<sup>26</sup>

This very specific way of identifying false, “human traditions” is also embedded in the early confessional and catechetical writings of John Calvin, who later described his conversion to the Reform as an abandoning of “papal superstitions,”<sup>27</sup> while nonetheless having frequent recourse to patristic theology.<sup>28</sup> In its discussion of the pastoral office, Calvin’s early *Catechism* warns against the “pestilential wolves” who teach something other than the Word of God.<sup>29</sup> It then moves on to discuss human traditions, beginning with a positive comment on rules for decency and order in Christian assembly. Such rules are not to be identified as “human traditions” but are to be classed as useful teachings that do not claim to be necessary for salvation, to bind the conscience, or to be a basis for piety. Human traditions in the negative sense—now reflecting the warning against wolves who depart from the Word—are invented rules that are identified in their own right as binding on the conscience.<sup>30</sup> Even so, Peter did not condemn the interpretation “of every individual” as private interpretation as if to “prohibit each one to interpret,” but to show that “whatever men bring of their own is profane.”<sup>31</sup>

In the *Confession* of the Genevan church, the brief chapter on the “Holy Supper” concludes with a warning against “blasphemies and superstitions” that leads to the issue of human traditions. The message is identical to that of the *Catechism*: there are laws (*leges*) necessary to the external governance of the church, which are not to be regarded and/or condemned as human traditions.

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<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *In omnes apostolicas epistolas, divi videlicet Pauli XIII. Et VII. canonicas, commentarii* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1549), at 2 Pet. 1:20 (62).

<sup>27</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: for the Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1849), 1: xl–xli.

<sup>28</sup> See Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Catechism or Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans., with an intro. by Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972; revised 1976), xxx (48).

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, xxx (48); cf. idem, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.x; IV.xi.8.

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: for the Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 2 Pet. 1:20 (389–90).

Human traditions are understood quite specifically as claims on the conscience and demands that rites be observed as necessary to salvation even when not explicitly commanded by God in Scripture.<sup>32</sup>

This approach to human traditions in the context of the issue of church order is significant for several reasons. Calvin specifically identifies proper churchly practices as other than human traditions: there is an outward or external practice that must be conducted “decently and in order [*decenter & ordine*]” or in “order and decorum [*ordo & decorum*]” for the sake of the peace of the church. The phrase “decently and in order” that has been so closely associated with Reformed and Presbyterian worship, as well as the pairing of “order” and “decorum” is found in both the *Catechism* and the *Confession* and, in both cases, referred to the words of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 14:40).<sup>33</sup> Such rules, albeit not specifically stated in Scripture, are “comprehended under the general precept of the Apostle,” as long as they are not identified as necessary for salvation, are not specifically determinative of worship, are not viewed as in themselves expressions of piety, and do not “overturn the freedom which Christ has acquired for us.” These rules do not fall under condemnation as human traditions.<sup>34</sup> Human “teachings” and “precepts” must not be followed.<sup>35</sup> Whereas Calvin’s *Catechism* is not specific, the 1538 *Confession* lines out the human traditions: “votive pilgrimages, monasticism, discrimination of foods, prohibition of marriage, auricular confession, and other things of this sort.”<sup>36</sup> His polemic against human traditions does not pose the sole authority of Scripture globally against the written record of the church’s doctrinal formation. Rather it very specifically focuses on rites, ceremonies, and practices that in Calvin’s view replace the Word of God with human invention—very much in accord with his description of his conversion as being freed from the mire of “papal superstition.”

Here again, as in the early case of William Tyndale’s debate with Thomas More, neither Calvin, nor Bullinger, nor the early Protestant confessions take the position of “Scripture alone” or *sola scriptura* to the exclusion of tradition,

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<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, *Confession*, xvii, in Battles, trans., *Catechism or Institution of the Christian Religion*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, xxxi (48); cf. *Confession*, xvii (58).

<sup>34</sup> *Confession*, xvii (58); cf. Calvin, *Catechism*, xxxi (48).

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, xxxi (48).

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Confession*, xvii (59).

broadly construed as the church's tradition of meditation on and interpretation of Scripture. The polemic is directed toward the exclusion of "human traditions" that are not biblically grounded. These human traditions, moreover, are very specifically identified as practices and beliefs imposed on Christians and regarded as binding on the basis of purely human authority.

#### IV. Jacob Arminius and the Early Modern Protestant Perspective

The Reformation-era understanding of Scripture and tradition, with specific distinction made between the legitimate tradition of sound, biblically-grounded doctrine and human traditions that followed "private interpretation" continued into the carefully parsed formulae of post-Reformation Protestantism. Analyses of the problem of tradition were a commonplace among thinkers of the era, often allowing for various distinctions between kinds of tradition, and typically identifying sound traditions either as of divine authority or as resting solidly on the teaching of the apostles.<sup>37</sup>

Jacob Arminius raised the issue of tradition in several places, following out the line of argument found among his Protestant predecessors and contemporaries. The most extended of these are his *Public Disputations* on the subject.<sup>38</sup> There is also a reflection on Scripture and tradition in his *Certain Articles*,<sup>39</sup> in

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<sup>37</sup> Cf., e.g., William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, against the Papists, especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. & ed. William Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), VI.iii–iv (500–11); Franciscus Junius, *Loci nonnulli theologici: de theologia, sacris scripturis, Deo ac creatione* (Heidelberg: Bibliopolis Commelianus, 1612), xi (30–31); Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Hanau: Wechel, 1615), 124–28; cf. Lucas Trelcatius Jr., *A Briefe Institution of the Commonplaces of Sacred Divinitie. Wherein, the truth of every place is proved, and the sophismes of Bellarmine are reprooved*, trans. John Gawen (London: T. P. for Francis Burton, 1610), 32–33, 480–81.

<sup>38</sup> Jacob Arminius, *Public Disputation, ii. On the Sufficiency and Perfection of the holy Scriptures in Opposition to Traditions; Public Disputation, iii. On the Sufficiency and Perfection of Scripture, in Opposition to Human Traditions; Public Disputation, xxi. On the Roman Pontiff, and the Principal Titles which are Attributed to Him*, in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, with an intro. by Carl Bangs, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 1:92–111; with occasional correction from the Latin of Jacob Arminius, *Opera theologica* (Leiden: Godefridus Basson, 1629). Hereinafter cited by number from *Public Disputations*.

<sup>39</sup> Jacob Arminius, *Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed, i. On the Scripture and Human Traditions*, in *Works*, 2:706–7.

his fifth *Oration*,<sup>40</sup> and in the *Private Disputations*.<sup>41</sup> The net effect of his arguments is to establish the final authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice but also to allow for theological formulation in the church, including a recourse to creeds, councils, and the works of theological writers throughout the history of the church. In his own work, Arminius often drew on the fathers of the church for support in his theological argumentation and he acknowledged the relative authority of the ecumenical creeds of the church.<sup>42</sup>

Arminius not only allowed that there are “divine traditions” in distinction from “human traditions,” he also made an important distinction, paralleling the work of his predecessor, Franciscus Junius, between immediate and mediate divine tradition:

An *immediate* [tradition] is that which proceeds from God, without the intervention of man.... A *mediate* [tradition] is that which is performed by God, as the chief author, through the hands of a man peculiarly sanctified for its execution.... According to its dignity and authority, it may be distributed into *primary* and *secondary*; so that the *primary* may be by way of a man, but one so instructed and governed by the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit, that it is not he who speaks, but the Spirit of the Father that is in him [in margin, 2 Sam. 23:2, 3; Matt. 10:20; 2 Tim. 3:16]: that he may not himself be the crier, but the voice of God crying; not himself the Scribe, but the amanuensis of the Holy Spirit [in margin, 2 Pet. 1:21; 1 Pet. 4:11; 1 Cor. 10:11].<sup>43</sup>

Reference to 2 Peter 1:21 identifies the primary tradition or delivery of divine truth, as referencing the process of inspiration by which the text of Scripture, specifically prophecy, is established. Arguably, the citation carries with it the implication of the preceding verse, namely that the interpretation of biblical prophecy cannot be of private interpretation inasmuch as the prophecy itself is delivered mediately from God.

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<sup>40</sup> Jacob Arminius, *On the Reconciling of Religious Dissensions Among Christians*, in *Works*, 2:442–43.

<sup>41</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputation, lv. On the Power of the Church in Delivering Doctrines*; also *Private Disputation, lvi. On the Power of the Church in Enacting Laws*, in *Works*, 2: 421–23, 423–25; hereinafter cited by number from *Private Disputations*.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., *Works*, 1:620–21; 2:601–18, 694–96.

<sup>43</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, iii.3; cf. Junius, *Loci nonnulli theologici*, xi (30).

This conclusion is supported by Arminius' citation of 1 Peter 4:11, "whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God," apposite to his definition of a secondary mediate tradition: "The *secondary*, indeed, is according to the appointment of God, but by the will of man who administers the act of delivery [*traditionis actum*] according to his own judgment."<sup>44</sup> Human will in this case does not indicate willfulness or imposition of opinion on a biblical text and therefore to "human" tradition—rather it indicates the willingness to deliver or present Christian teachings. Accordingly,

the tradition which we call secondary will endure in the Church to the end of the world; for by it the doctrines which have, through the prophets and apostles, been committed to her, are by her, conveyed to her children. For this reason, the Church is called "the ground and pillar of truth" [in margin, 1 Tim. 3:15], but secondarily after the apostles, who, on account of the primary tradition, are distinguished by the title of "pillars," and "foundations" [in margin, Gal. 2:9; Rev. 21:14], before those epithets were bestowed on the church.<sup>45</sup>

Much to the same point, Arminius' sometime colleague, Lucas Trelcatius Jr. noted of the continuing tradition that the "Succession of doctrine ... is coincident with the true and essential marks of the Church."<sup>46</sup>

There is, therefore, a clear distinction between this valid secondary tradition and the human traditions of the papacy. The pope "commands ... his own interpretations of the Scriptures to be embraced with the most undoubting faith, [and] unwritten traditions to be venerated with an affection and reverence equal to that of the written word of God."<sup>47</sup> Specifically,

he introduced into the church many false dogmas ... concerning the insufficiency of the scriptures to prove and confirm every necessary truth, and to confute all errors without traditions; that subjection of every human being to the Roman Pontiff is of necessity for salvation; that the bread in the Lord's supper is transubstantiated into the body of Christ; that in the mass Christ is daily offered by the priest as a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the living and of the dead; that man is justified before God, partly by faith, and

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<sup>44</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, iii.3.

<sup>45</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, iii.9.

<sup>46</sup> Trelcatius, *Briefve Institution*, 480.

<sup>47</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, xxi.9.

partly by works; that there is a purgatory, into which the souls of those enter who are not yet sufficiently purified, and that they are released from it by prayers, intercessions, vigils, alms, indulgences, &c.<sup>48</sup>

The pope “is also deservedly called the destroyer and subverter of the Church” because he has added “the books of the apocrypha and unwritten traditions to the prophetical and apostolic scriptures.”<sup>49</sup>

The implications of these arguments concerning the nature of tradition become clear in Arminius’ disputation “Of the Power of the Church in Delivering Doctrines.” The issue addressed is the tradition or delivery of doctrine, not the establishment or the initial transmission: that has been accomplished by God and Christ. The task of the church is the “dispensation and administration” of what she has received.<sup>50</sup> As in the case of Scripture itself, the transmission of teachings consists both in the words themselves and in the meaning or true sense of the words. Accordingly, the church has two tasks in the delivery of doctrine. It is the responsibility of the church to present the words delivered to her from God without addition, diminution, or change. It is also the responsibility of the church to explain, interpret, and apply these teachings, to elaborate the meaning of the words—which is to say, to create and develop doctrinal formulations that are grounded in the words originally conveyed to her by God.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, echoing the arguments found in the early Reformers’ works, Arminius indicates that the church has the power of enacting laws or rules, but within certain defined limits.<sup>52</sup> There are fundamental or principal laws that establish the kingdom of God, specifically concerning matters of faith, hope, and love: these are established by God and Christ, not by the church. There are also, however, secondary laws that are relative to “persons, times, and places,” promulgated for the sake of “good order” and suitable administration

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<sup>48</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, xxi.10

<sup>49</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, xxi.11.

<sup>50</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputation*, lv.2–3, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputation*, lv.5–6.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.1, 8–9; IV.x.8.

of the church.<sup>53</sup> These are laws that may be legitimately enacted by the church, as long as they do not bind the conscience and “invade Christian liberty.”<sup>54</sup>

### V. Conclusions

Whether in the early Reformation or in the later development of Protestant thought, Scripture as the ultimate norm for doctrine, often later summarized under the rubric *sola scriptura*, was not a mandate to separate Protestantism from the historical tradition of Christianity. The doctrine did assume a return to the teachings of Scripture and a stripping away of accretions that had transformed and, in the view of the Reformers, distorted both doctrine and practice. But it did not imply a loss of connection with the truths of Christianity as expounded in previous ages of the church. Various Protestant writers, from William Tyndale and those who came shortly after him to late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century theologians like Arminius and his contemporaries, insisted on a distinction between the valid interpretive tradition of the church, grounded in Scripture, and a body of accretions identifiable as “human traditions.” These human traditions were often identified as violations of the Petrine rule that Scripture is not of private interpretation—with “private” understood not simply as the opinion of a single person but more broadly as a purely human opinion imposed on the church as normative and binding, whether by an individual like the pope or by the collective hierarchy or ministry of the church.

William Tyndale, in controversy with Thomas More, made the basic point that human traditions could and in fact had erred and departed from the norm of Scripture without ruling out the use of positive aspects of the older tradition. This understanding was clearly codified in various early confessions and catechisms, which understood the relative value of the older church tradition, broadly understood as normed by and interpretive of Scripture. By implication the confessions and catechisms also relativized themselves as authoritative only in their capacity as interpretations of the biblical revelation.

Protestants writing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries both carried these understandings forward and refined the definitions. In sum, the Protestant *sola scriptura*, rightly understood as the identification of Scripture

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<sup>53</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputations*, lvi.5–6.

<sup>54</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputations*, lvi.8.

as the ultimate norm of theology, stood in the line of what we have called “Tradition I,” with the added qualification that certain extrabiblical traditions must be excluded as unsupported and even contradicted by the right interpretation of Scripture. The positive understanding of tradition as the ongoing work of faithful interpretation and explanation of Christian teaching allowed Protestant theologians to affirm their catholicity in accord with the historical orthodoxy of the church, most notably with the church fathers but also in a critical reception of medieval thought. This positive understanding of tradition also became evident in the rise and development, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of Protestant traditions of biblical interpretation and of theologies resting on exegesis. At the same time, human traditions, understood negatively as accretions, including such practices as indulgences and such doctrines as purgatory and transubstantiation, could be set aside on scriptural grounds without implying a wholesale repudiation of the “divine” or positive tradition.

*Allan J. McNicol*

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# A Shifting Ethos: Transitions in the Understanding of the Authority of Scripture in Churches of Christ

Allan J. McNicol

Late last year a fascinating book came to my attention. It was beautifully written and illustrated by a professional journalist and newspaper editor whose family has lived in the Central Texas area for well over a hundred years.<sup>1</sup> The main title immediately drew my attention. The book tells stories involving many colorful figures who served honorably to build up the body of Christ in this area. But why would the author give it such a puzzling title? *Choosing Sides*. What did he have in mind?

It did not take long to find out. Lovingly, but often with a streak of pain, Larry Jackson tells the story. He pulls no punches. Although we turn out to be a fellowship that has had considerable impact in Austin, there is also another strain present that permeates the history. We are a quarrelsome people. Over the years something like half a dozen clear divisions emerged among the churches with the result that fellow believers for long periods of time decided to meet separately. Indeed, a number of these divisions are now entrenched and appear to remain in place for the foreseeable future.

Interestingly, nearly all of the conflicts trend back to the same issue: How do we read and interpret the Scriptures as authoritative? To build on Jackson's concern, we are left with the impression that too much time and energy continue to be spent squabbling over the interpretation of texts. The unstated,

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<sup>1</sup> Larry C. Jackson, *Choosing Sides: A History of the Churches of Christ in Austin 1847–2018* (La Grange, 2018).

underlying point of the book is clear: We need to do better, especially considering that, ironically, our movement began with a call for the unity of Christians on the basis of the fundamental teaching of the New Testament. Clearly, we do have a problem with the procedures we use for how the Scriptures function as authoritative. How do we fix it?

Jackson's account of the journey of Churches of Christ in Austin, I believe, is paradigmatic for the wider brotherhood. Often, if we do not agree with a particular way of reading certain Scriptures, we simply separate from one another. Needless to say this does not appear to be fruitful. Is there a way out of this malaise?

### **Looking More Closely at the Problem**

If our people agree on anything it is the importance of the Scriptures. We wish to do as we always claim: to hold firmly to the same faith that the apostles passed on to the first-century followers of Jesus. The Scriptures are foundational for providing us with the resources to work toward this goal (2 Pet 1:16–23; 3:14–16; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:8; 3:8–10; 3:17). Already by the time of Jesus the Scriptures of the Jews were held to be authoritative for the people of God. Most of the earliest leaders of the church were Jews, and they inherited the belief that these writings functioned as “the deep structure” for construing the truth of the divine revelation.<sup>2</sup> As Charles E. Hill states:

The Christian church did not so much construct a doctrine of Scripture as inherit one. It succeeded to its conception of the diversity and authority of Holy Scripture, one might say, as bequeathed to it from the broad Jewish heritage in general.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Hill goes on to summarize the early patristic writer Hippolytus, “Even schismatics and heretics used, and had to use, the Holy Scriptures, for all knew

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Ben Meyer for the phraseology “deep structure.” Cf. Ben Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self Discovery*, Good News Studies 16 (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1985), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Charles E. Hill, “‘The Truth Above All Demonstration’: Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 44.

the final court of appeal among the churches was the voice of God speaking in the Scripture.”<sup>4</sup>

I realize that the debate on the process of canonization continues to drone on, and many insist that it persisted into the fourth and fifth centuries. But I am disposed to conclude that, functionally, the New Testament Scriptures were in place and served authoritatively for the church by the middle of the second century of our era.<sup>5</sup> There is widespread support in the academy for this position.

However, there is another issue about Scripture and authority, much less discussed among Restorationists, that demands closer attention, especially because of our investment on claiming to hold firmly to the same faith as the

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<sup>4</sup> Hill, “Truth Above All Demonstration,” 45. The quote summarizes Hippolytus, *Contra Noetum* 9.

<sup>5</sup> I should note that, in keeping with what I have stated, most of the references to “the Scriptures” in our New Testament writings refer directly to the various Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible. Among the many examples in our New Testament is Jesus quoting from Psalm 118:22–23 in Matt 21:42, where he refers to the psalm as Scripture. This is not unusual. As to when the words and deeds of Jesus and the writings of the apostles are reckoned to be placed in this category, the process seems to point to a growing recognition of their special importance since the earliest days of the church. We have a small peek of how this works by looking at 2 Pet 3:15–16. There the writer draws attention to the existence of a collection of Paul’s letters that were in circulation. Although the unstable are reckoned to twist its meanings, the writer presumes this collection functions at the level of the Scriptures. Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC 50 (Waco: Word Books, 1981), 330–34, notes that although the dating of 2 Peter still remains an open question, by the end of the first century there is evidence that various collections of Paul’s works circulated in the churches (1 Clement 47:1) with internal evidence from this era (cf. 1 Thess 5:27 and Col 4:15–16). By the early second century there is record of quotes of Jesus as Scripture (2 Clement 2:4–6).

Although the dating of the Gospels (despite the unjustified confident claims of many commentators) is still murky, there is enough evidence to indicate that by the early days of the second century of our era the words of Jesus and the apostles were held in the highest regard by the church. Given the composition of the Muratorian Fragment and Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* later in the second century, together these works indicate widespread recognition that their New Testament was very close to what is in use in the church today. We will never know as much as we would like to know about the context of the writing and circulation of the fourfold Gospels and apostolic writings in the earliest period. What we do know is that from the beginning they were reckoned by the church as authoritative remembrances of the apostolic witness by all those in a position to speak responsibly on what took place.

apostles.<sup>6</sup> The issue is this: since we hold so firmly to following the same faith as the apostles, what status do we attach to doctrinal/ecclesial development following the New Testament period? To address the pros and cons of this issue adequately doubtless demands a much lengthier analysis. Without question however, massive changes in matters of faith and ecclesiology, probably without precedent, took place in the first century. For example, consider the perception of Jesus before and after his resurrection. Before the resurrection Jesus was primarily a preacher and teacher in Israel. After the resurrection he was the heavenly Lord. And what about the turmoil over Paul's allowance of Gentile converts to be a people in full fellowship with God without keeping vital areas mandated by the Torah? Were the changes in the second century of our era and later times of Christian history any different in kind? Or does our commitment to Restorationism demand theologically that we conclude that the amalgam of twenty-seven small writings, representing the earliest perception of the faith of the apostles, read in conjunction with the Hebrew Scriptures, constitute the ultimate authority for what we do? I think the answer is yes. There is a difference in kind between how we read Scripture and how we treat doctrinal developments in the church at a later period. But it remains a matter for continued discussion.

### **Our Procedure**

In this essay I will attempt to defend a version of the position that Restorationists are called to hold: maintain the same faith as the apostles passed on to the first-century followers. But I will do so with some equivocations. I believe strongly that the way Restorationists have preached the gospel over the last two hundred years sets forth a core understanding of what Jesus intended for his "little flock," the people of the New Covenant, to maintain. However, I also

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<sup>6</sup> Many scholars (especially Protestants) refer to this as the issue of Early Catholicism. No doubt this particular terminology goes back to developments set in motion by the Reformation. In German the term *Frühcatholicismus* is used widely. Generally speaking, it refers to notable changes beginning to develop in church leadership (area-wide bishops, etc.) and other significant areas of church life and doctrine as early as the second century. There was a tendency by some to consider that the monarchical bishop determined what constituted the work of the Spirit in the faith community. Thus, the critical question emerges as to whether the earliest Christianity ever had a single ecclesial identity in the era of the apostles only to enter into a process of incremental change sometime later? Cf. Meyer, *The Early Christians*, 15.

believe from time to time we have not honored the task that the early Restorationist leaders challenged us to complete. We have not been loyal to focusing intently on our basic standard of authority: teaching and especially living the faith that the apostles bequeathed to us.

Procedurally I will draw attention particularly to two contemporary areas in Churches of Christ that indicate significant trends that hinder our task. First, there is excessive attention paid in some quarters to turning the apostles' teaching into a legalistic blueprint. We need to be aware that the legacy of the apostles is not merely a set of static demands but a call to pursue a dynamic lifestyle. Second, in other quarters there is a growing tendency to take our eyes off the guiding light of full loyalty to the apostles teaching and, in search of some short-term benefits such as church growth or wider cultural acceptance, pitch our tents with generic evangelicalism. In my estimation, in their own way, both of these trends represent a strong set of hindrances to our contemporary witness. It allures us away from our central concern to be faithful to the new order of the people of God which Jesus directed the apostles to set in place.

Following this analysis, I plan to restate what I conceive to be the central features of the Restorationist project: to read and interpret the Scriptures as authoritative for holding the same faith that the apostles bequeathed to us. I believe this should be the central theological *discrimen* that should underscore our approach to how we conceive the authority of Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

### **The New Testament as a Blueprint**

Some things make lifelong impressions. In my late teenage years one Lord's Day morning I walked by the foyer of my hometown church. There I noticed that a one-page sheet was on display with the arresting title "The Pattern of the New Testament Church." It consisted of a diagram featuring a set of boxes containing numerous scriptural texts all carefully displayed under titles such as "time and place of foundation," "elements of worship," and so on. Having grown up in a rural area, I was familiar with blueprints for automobiles, tractors, and building structures, but I had never seen one for the church.

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<sup>7</sup> According to David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 160, the term *discrimen* designates "a configuration of criteria that are in some way organically related to one another as reciprocal coefficients." In ordinary discussion, this means the essential features of a proposal needed to contribute to a coherent argument which we put on the table.

I must admit that at this time of my life the impression was very positive. My congregation had raised me to have a deep love for the Scriptures. Without dispute, *sola scriptura* was presumed to be normative. This pattern diagram seemed to provide a perfect layout on one page for what I needed to know about the biblical teaching regarding the church.

I later discovered that my appreciation was not unusual. The Scottish-Irish immigrants who poured into the American heartland and British Commonwealth countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were heavily influenced by Evangelicals who had deep roots in various versions of Reformed theology. This model of outlining beliefs cut a broad swath across many of the Protestant faith communities of the era. It was presumed that one could discover an intrinsically perfect pattern in Scripture for all that is needed to live the Christian life. Now all one had to do was learn how to interpret it.

As early as 1809 Thomas Campbell, in his *Declaration and Address*, spoke in a certain peculiar logical discourse of the time. Language such as “express terms in teaching,” “approved precedents,” and “necessary deductions from a biblical premise” was often used to underscore procedures for interpreting Scripture.<sup>8</sup> This language seemed more congruent with legal discussions about a constitution than with interpreting Scripture. To this day, this has continued to be an important factor in conservative Restorationist biblical interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Just as a builder can only be successful if he follows the standard rules governing the work of professionals, so the exegete views the study of Scripture as a rational work of logic, seeking to determine what the divine architect has put in place for the church. Is this really the best way to determine apostolic teaching? It is my contention that somewhere along the line this hermeneutical approach for interpreting scriptural authority has taken us off the track.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The language used by people who traded in this kind of terminology was not always exactly the same, but it was understandable among those who used it. I have drawn some of this phraseology from John Allen Hudson, *The Church in Great Britain* (London: Old Paths Book Club, 1948), 3.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noticing that a prominent book used in Restorationist circles, *Biblical Interpretation Principles and Practices: Studies in Honor of Jack Pearl Lewis*, ed. F. Furman Kearley, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), stresses overwhelmingly the need to follow strict exegesis to arrive at the proper interpretation of the text. Campbell’s tendency to read the New Testament as our constitution is inherent in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas H. Olbricht, “Hermeneutics,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas A. Foster, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 387–89. To many,

The truth is that much of the argumentation behind the model of conceiving of the New Testament as a blueprint emerged in certain European Puritan and Calvinist circles. It focused strongly on ways for voluntary communities of Christian believers (rather than the state) to determine the parameters for legitimate worship after the Reformation. In short, it was a tool for the times. True Restorationism returns to the first century. It wishes to be historically legitimate in terms of what was the core legacy of the apostles' teaching for the church. When we look at it this way, it is not a logical device but a much more dynamic way of reading Scripture that is needed. Scripture is meant to function as a dynamic word, not an architectural blueprint. I have studied the New Testament all of my life and am convinced that one of the best descriptions of what this collection is seeking to accomplish comes from another document that appeared about the same time in the earliest Christian communities. I refer to the writing called *The Didache: Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. Its opening line states, "There are two ways: one is the way of life; the other of death. There is a great difference between the two."<sup>11</sup> A way of life! That is what early Christian converts were expected to discover when they heard the books read that constitute our New Testament. In my judgment it should be the same today.

### **The Transmutation of Theological Allegiances**

Due to my family situation these days I usually sit near the rear of the assembly that I attend. From this position I am able to observe how large numbers of people conduct themselves while they are involved in worship. One of the heartening observations I note is that when the minister announces the text for the sermon large numbers will turn to the passage (usually on their cell phones) and follow the reading. Even among millennials and young families this is a widespread practice. It is good to know that there are many who choose to pay close attention to the Scriptures even in a generation that has become suspicious of almost all claims to authority. But how do we process the Word? Here, it becomes a little more complicated.

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this whole approach is outdated; but if we look at Larry Jackson's history of Churches of Christ in Austin, many of the divisions arose in this kind of milieu. Now, *Polishing the Pulpit*, arguably the largest representative annual gathering among leaders in Churches of Christ, remains open for invoking versions of this hermeneutical approach.

<sup>11</sup> Didache 1:1. This is my own translation of the Greek text.

Few realize that the phraseology “the authority of Scripture” is such an ambiguous issue. As we noticed in examining “the blueprint model,” scriptural authority was often treated as a straightforward logical issue. There we simply ask, “What does the text say, and is this word bound on the believer today?” But with contemporary sermons, Bible classes, and home fellowship groups, this is seldom how we encounter expositions of the text. Usually the text functions as a beginning point to move into the particular subject matter that the speaker has in mind. For example, how many times have you attended a class or heard a sermon on a parable of Jesus that does not focus on the point of the word in the text but provides an unusual phrase or metaphor that intrigues the expositor as opening up the possibility for a fresh way to view Christian life? The point that I am making is that in many cases Scripture is used as a trusted authority (something like the speeches of Abraham Lincoln that are used at a Kiwanis club), as a hook on which to hang some spiritual lesson.<sup>12</sup> All too often the actual word of the text and theological framework in which it occurs are treated as peripheral.

In my judgment this present state of affairs accounts for the neglect of our traditional emphasis on the norm of the apostles’ teaching concerning the importance of being the people of God of the new covenant. Increasingly, except for the appearance of a band, our preaching and teaching often resemble that of the multiplying number of non-denominational churches that have come up and spread like daisies throughout the country.<sup>13</sup> I believe that is why many in contemporary Churches of Christ—not seeing or appreciating our theological *discrimen* of being a dynamic New Testament Church that intends to make a real difference in the religious world—gravitate to these other assemblies. This is particularly true with our youth. Sometimes parents are deeply troubled by decisions made by their children—often when they move to college or another community. They go elsewhere. Increasingly, though, what I see is that this parental remorse is often followed by a statement of relief. In a culture

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<sup>12</sup> Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture*, 90–197.

<sup>13</sup> Here I refer not so much to the theological orientation of these fellowships. Groups like Vineyard, Willow Creek, and Hillsong are usually mildly charismatic with a generic evangelical theology. But, like us, they are mostly independent, do claim to be non-denominational, and for many people their preaching and exposition of Scripture do not sound all that much different from many local Churches of Christ.

increasingly hostile to historic Christianity, the comment is often made that “at least our children are going somewhere!”

I am inclined to agree with many shrewd observers that this description of the situation faced in Churches of Christ is only a small part of a much wider phenomenon that is now well entrenched in American Protestant Christianity. Here I refer to the massive erosion of membership in traditional denominations such as Methodist, Presbyterians, Disciples, and Southern Baptists. In one way or another historic denominationalism is coming to represent an interim ecclesiology.<sup>14</sup> Churches rapidly appear to be transitioning into a new formation of non-denominational fellowships which, at least for the time being, seem to be able to accommodate our increasingly secular culture.<sup>15</sup> I believe that this wider trend that is taking place in American Christianity is primarily responsible for the present membership losses that we are facing today.

Beginning with the Campbells, we have always claimed that central to our existence is the demand to be obedient to the original apostolic teaching, and at the very heart of this concern stands the doctrine of the church. Its component parts constitute the fulcrum of the story of the people of God. It is the saving ark of salvation. Given the present circumstances, if we have anything to say to the religious world, it is this doctrine of the church, and this should be the time to say it and commend it as something to stand for! I believe that the narrative of Scripture comes to its zenith with this scriptural claim.<sup>16</sup> With the founding of the church, the totality of God’s revelation, starting with creation, becomes comprehensible (Eph 5:23–27). This is where it speaks most authoritatively. The doctrine of the church, our “canon within the canon,” ought

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<sup>14</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), has an interesting chapter which spells out this phenomenon. Leithart draws attention to a Methodist church in Florida that has almost completely become a generic evangelical community. It initiates the programs and procedures of the non-denominational churches even to the extent of almost never declaring in any of its publicity it is Methodist. It now has become the largest church in this particular city. I recommend this analysis to church leaders as a harbinger of future trends.

<sup>15</sup> Leithart, *The End of Protestantism*, 149-161.

<sup>16</sup> See Allan J. McNicol, *The Persistence of God’s Endangered Promises: The Bible’s Unified Story* (New York: Bloomsbury/T & T Clark, 2018), where I spend a whole volume arguing this point.

to sound this message to the religious world with heartened vigor. That is what we stand for!

### **Apostolic Teaching: The Authoritative Norm for a Restorationist Reading of Scripture**

We have seen so far that the Churches of Christ, in the main a conservative fellowship, are staunch defenders of the proposition that the Scriptures are the norm for what we do. This is certainly true with the patternists and even those who decide to go elsewhere usually drift into other conservative fellowships. But for those who choose to maintain loyalty to our traditional *raison d'être* of restoring the New Testament church, how do we continue to construe an identifiable and workable model of authority?

In an article on this topic in an earlier volume of this journal, Tony Ash raised an important question on this point:

What kind of reality lies behind the Bible? Is it meant to be seen like a book of law? Is it a document in which we turn to the appropriate page, paragraph, and sub-paragraph to find the rule for a particular life situation? Is this what the authors of the Bible intended? Is this what God intended?<sup>17</sup>

From these questions, we might be tempted to conclude that this is difficult, so why try to do better? We might simplistically suggest, "Let us just seek to determine what the text is saying and leave it at that." But I think this is a mistake. We need to have a core, coherent, integrative vision that undergirds how we construe the diverse body of writings in the Bible. This is particularly true for Restorationists who base so much of their *discrimen* on the claim that Scripture is foundational because it unfolds the nature of the church that Jesus founded and the apostles developed.

Around two hundred years have elapsed since the time that a clarion call began to ring out, both in the United Kingdom and the American western frontier, that it was time to return to the original apostolic teaching as the basis for the unification of the church. Surely, to be faithful to this legacy, we should

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<sup>17</sup> Tony Ash, "The Authority of the Bible," *ICS Faculty Bulletin / Christian Studies* 2 (1981): 11. Ash goes on to suggest that most of the biblical writers did not state their arguments in constitutional prose. Psalms, Nahum, and Romans make their arguments in very different genres of expression.

work to honor its original insight and prescience—especially if it seems to be intuitively worthwhile. So, as I move to conclusion, I seek to propose how those earlier insights ought to be stated in contemporaneous terminology to form a working conception of scriptural authority for the church today.

Since the Campbells, we have learned much more about the details of the world in which Jesus and the apostles lived and functioned. Especially important is the greater appreciation we now have for the centrality of the influence of the story of Israel on both Jews and early Christians. Much of the Bible centers around the account of how God took a small tribal people and called them as his special possession (Deut 7:6–8). The culmination of this story is where we find New Testament Christianity embedded.

In Jesus' day, there was a tendency to divide the story of Israel into two eras: their age and the age to come. Many Jews believed that this was the time when the old age (the era since creation) was ending and a new, exciting age was at hand. More importantly, Jesus and the apostles viewed themselves precisely as living at the intersection of these two worlds.

Terminology representing this belief is common in the New Testament. Starting with the ministry of John the Baptist we learn of this message. “The time (of the new order) is at hand.” The people of God need to repent and prepare for it. “It is the last days,” and “the time has come.” The earlier way of telling the legacy of Abraham and his descendants is now about to be subject to drastic revision.

Jesus, the teacher of divine origin, reinforces this message of John. He too begins his mission by proclaiming that a new kingdom was at hand in Israel. Of course his ministry was cut short by the opposition of Israel's temple authorities who handed him over to the Romans to be put to death. They thought his ministry must be obliterated because it was perceived to be a revolutionary threat to those who were determined to keep the old order. At his crucial last meal with his closest followers, Jesus takes the bread and cup and uses these elements as the basis to interpret his death. Through this offering of his life Jesus states that his sacrifice will enable those who accept its benefits to have a

place with “the little flock” (the apostles) he had gathered to prepare Israel for the new age.<sup>18</sup>

Through the work of Paul and others, we Gentiles have been welcomed into this community of the new covenant or age. Through our baptism into Christ we are to adopt a behavioral existence in keeping with the demands of the new age. We now have become an integral part of the new creation (Gal 3:26–29; 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:1–4).<sup>19</sup>

Given the importance of these first-century events, the New Testament Scriptures simply function as a dynamic record of the founding of the new order of the people of God. They supplement the story of the first or old order of God’s people. Put together, in being read this way, this narrative represents the faith of the apostles. It is the authoritative norm for a Restorationist reading of Scripture. The faith once delivered to the saints is embedded in the Scriptures (Jude 3; 2 Tim 3:16–17). It is the word of life that separates us from the way of death. It is the authority from which we speak. May we extend to it the centrality and respect it deserves in our proclamation.

### **Conclusion**

I opened this essay by picking up on the drift of Larry Jackson’s narration of the journey of Churches of Christ in Austin. As noted, I see it as a metaphor for the story of the journey taken by European immigrants (especially the Scottish-Irish) on their westward push along the American frontier. Restorationism was in the air as a viable theological option, and the descendants of the Stone-Campbell movement reaped an abundant harvest of adherents.

Still the journey has not been a bed of roses. An over reliance on certain hermeneutical procedures drawn from earlier forms of Protestant orthodoxy has resulted in a pattern of unfortunate divisions. Examples of divisions, such as whether the fruit of the vine should be served in “one cup” or “multiple cups,” that resulted from use of these procedures could easily be multiplied. On the other hand, in recent decades a growing number of those in

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<sup>18</sup> For more details see my article, “Till He Come: The Lord’s Supper and the End Time,” *Christian Studies* 30 (2018): 57–69.

<sup>19</sup> Nils Dahl, in his majestic study, “Christ, Creation and the Church,” in *Jesus and The Memory of the Early Church: Essays by Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 120–40, shows how the New Testament writers claimed that the new age or era is the climactic fulfillment of everything God put in place with the first creation.

Restorationist fellowships seem to be discounting their association with the heritage and adopting an attitude toward Scripture much more in keeping with the position of contemporary evangelicals. Thus, it seems, with respect to the authority of Scripture we have either been too narrow or too accommodating.

In this essay I have argued that our heritage of Restorationism is the crown jewel of our fellowship. As a key principle it is a valid theological *discrimen*. Objections, several noted briefly, ought to be carefully addressed. But in the end our task is to be faithful to the apostles' teaching, and I contend our basic approach is the most straightforward way to do it.

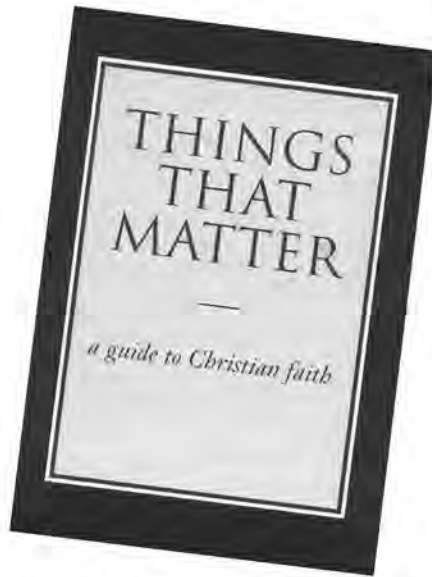
I have suggested we ought to give special attention to reading the Scripture as the narrative story of the people of God as a guiding principle for our exegesis. This narrative climaxes in Jesus' inauguration of the new covenant and his creation of "the little flock," the divine community of the new era. The apostles took initial leadership of this flock from the Good Shepherd. Our task today is simply to be faithful to this heritage and maintain its key tenets until the end of the age.

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# Authority: Some Philosophical and Theological Considerations<sup>1</sup>

Frederick D. Aquino

It is not uncommon for people to employ Scripture to navigate discussions about a host of issues. This is especially the case for those that take Scripture as authoritative for Christian faith and practice. It is not surprising, then, to see a laundry list of questions emerge in light of such a commitment. Some of these questions involve determining 1) the locus of authority for Christian faith and practice, 2) the proper sources for theology, and 3) the criteria that help us evaluate different theological claims or conflicting interpretations of Scripture.

This line of inquiry has a long, complex, and multifaceted history that traverses denominational lines and theological perspectives. We can see its impact on and relevance to how we tackle issues in our own contemporary context. At first glance, for example, the problem of adjudicating competing claims seems to be more prevalent now than it used to be. But is this case? It is certainly true that we have greater and quicker access to more information, and so this reality may explain why we have a heightened awareness of the problem of disagreement and of the challenge of furnishing a common standard of adjudication. However, it is not as though the problem of securing a criterion or method by which people can adjudicate claims of knowledge is something new.<sup>2</sup> The failure to agree on the locus of authority for judging theological and

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to William Abraham, Keith Stanglin, Chance Juliano, and Michael Van Huis for comments on previous drafts of this article.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Descartes's internal appeal to the *cogito* as the clear, distinct, self-evident foundation for all other beliefs. The same kind of crisis also can be seen in

non-theological issues has fueled and continues to fuel the long search for new grounds of certainty. By now, most of us have experienced a cognitive dissonance of some sort and have tried different ways to heal the intellectual wounds of our past. Yet, we continue to participate in and feel the impact of a long-standing crisis of authority in our current setting. The point here is not to map out fully the details of the crisis of authority.<sup>3</sup> I am simply noting that the effects of the crisis seem to be very much with us, especially as we try to navigate a course that stipulates the conditions for handling the relationship between the soteriological and epistemological aspects of Christian faith. As we will see, an important task involves figuring out whether Scripture in the economy of the church should be treated primarily as a book about God that functions as a means of grace and makes us wise unto salvation (2 Tim 3:15, a soteriological conception of Scripture) or as a criterion that determines whether any/all beliefs are true, justified, and constitute knowledge (an epistemological conception of Scripture).

The Stone-Campbell Restoration tradition (henceforth RT) is no exception. This free-church expression of the Christian tradition has its own, though not fully explored and developed, chapter in the modern crisis of authority and in the modern story of theology.<sup>4</sup> In particular, RT has been fundamentally committed to the goal of retrieving, if not restoring, early Christian beliefs and practices.<sup>5</sup> At the heart of this vision is the desire to acquire true (rather than false) beliefs concerning the ancient order of things. More exactly, the aim is

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claims of papal and biblical authority. For a fuller treatment of the regional and universal dimensions of the problem of the criterion in the Reformers, Descartes, and other proposals, see William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> On the modern crisis of authority and its implications for contemporary theology, see Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*. In my estimation, Abraham's analysis is a nice complement to Stout's historicist narrative and vice versa.

<sup>4</sup> For a recent treatment of the philosophical contours of RT, see Caleb Clanton ed., *Restoration Philosophy: New Philosophical Engagements with the Stone-Campbell Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller account of intellectual formation in RT, see Frederick D. Aquino, "Toward a Constructive Account of Intellectual Formation in the Restoration Movement," in Clanton, *Restoration Philosophy*.

to reconstruct and restore New Testament Christianity. The normative constraint of such a project is the primitive New Testament church.

The emphasis on acquiring true beliefs is admirable and important. However, it seems clear that RT has begun to think more constructively about its history, its theological vision, and its aims in light of the broader Christian tradition. As RT seeks to make progress towards developing a constructive conversation about what is authoritative for Christian faith and practice, I think we need to make some important distinctions and clarifications. Accordingly, the first section will briefly draw attention to three areas: 1) the relationship between divine revelation and Scripture, 2) the authority of Scripture, and 3) the nature and function of Scripture. The second section will argue that discussions about the epistemological aspects of Scripture fit more naturally in a new sub-discipline called the epistemology of theology. The third section will offer some concluding reflections. In particular, it will spell out some ways in which RT can put its commitments in conversation with recent work in the epistemology of theology and thus make progress towards advancing a constructive proposal. To this end, I hope my reflections will serve as a springboard for conversation and further work.

### **Preliminaries**

Whether we seek to reduce, expand, or maintain our sources of theological assessment, we need to recognize an important distinction between the soteriological and epistemological aspects of Christian faith. More exactly, employing Scripture within the life of the church for soteriological purposes is different than using it for epistemological purposes. The former focuses on issues with which the church confronts us when we are baptized and initiated into the faith (for example, who is God, what is the human predicament like, how has Jesus liberated us for salvation and healing), whereas the latter focuses on issues related to the adjudication of truth claims (for example, determining whether a belief is true, justified, constitutes knowledge).<sup>6</sup> The failure to provide clarification on this front has contributed to a host of misunderstandings and controversies on different topics (for example, the relationship between religion

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<sup>6</sup> For further reflection on this distinction, see William J. Abraham, Jason Vickers, and Natalie Van Kirk eds., *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

and science, between scripture and philosophy, and between the church and the academy). With this distinction in mind, I want, in a preliminary way, to draw attention to three areas that warrant greater clarification and development.

First, we need to make a clear distinction between divine revelation and the means by which we gain access to it. Such a distinction presupposes that divine revelation is antecedent to or distinct from that which bears witness to (or mediates) it (see Luke 1:1–4; John 1:1–3, 14; 1 Cor 15:3–8; Eph 3:3; Heb 1:1–3, 2:4; Rev 1:1–3). In other words, the event, manifestation, or speech act of divine revelation at a particular time is distinct from the process by which it is recognized and appropriated. As William Abraham points out, “it is one thing to construe Scripture as a sure and certain foundation of knowledge; it is another to see it as a contingent medium of divine revelation.”<sup>7</sup> Abraham employs the language of contingent medium to highlight the polymorphous activity of divine revelation and the diversity of mediators and means of God’s self-disclosure (see Heb 1:1–2).<sup>8</sup> Thus, there is a sharp distinction between divine revelation and the relevant sources of transmission and preservation.

Failure to make such a distinction incorrectly assumes that Scripture is the primary epistemic concept, when in fact it is in and through divine revelation that we acquire knowledge of God. Scripture, then, is derivatively, not fundamentally, authoritative insofar as it bears witness to or mediates what has been made known in a revelatory speech act, event, manifestation, and so on. In recognizing such a distinction, we see the importance of not confusing divine revelation with the means of transmission and preservation.

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<sup>7</sup> Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Theology*, 5. In *The Divine Inspiration of the Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 89–90, Abraham also makes the following helpful distinction of three separate acts in the process of revelation and response: 1) the act of God in speaking, 2) the recognition of the speech act on the part of the recipient, and 3) the response of the recipient to the revelation.

<sup>8</sup> William J. Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 57–58. Sandra Menssen and Thomas D. Sullivan, “Revelation and Scripture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 30, agree that “Not all revelation is reducible to scripture, for God’s fundamental revelation is in the person of Jesus Christ.” Given that Scripture is about divine revelation, this “‘aboutness’ relationship is one-directional, and makes revelation ontologically prior—prior in ‘the order of being’—to Christian scripture.”

Second, we need greater clarity on what sort of claim we are making when we talk about the authority of Scripture. What kind of authority is it? Is it a practical authority? A theoretical authority? Or both?<sup>9</sup> What is the scope and range of its authority? With respect to what is it authoritative? If an authority is relative to a particular subject matter and field of knowledge, then over what subject matter or field of knowledge is Scripture authoritative?

It makes little sense to say that a document, field of knowledge, or person is authoritative without qualification. Instead, we think of authority in domain-specific terms. In this sense, something is authoritative with respect to a particular domain of inquiry or field of knowledge. Just because someone is an authority in one field of knowledge does not mean that he or she is an authority in every other field of knowledge. For example, if we want to learn something about the basic principles or laws that govern the physical world, then we will defer to the insights of people working within the field of physics. We would not, however, see physics as an authoritative guide for how to read literature, nor would we turn to biology for how to make sense of political structures. So, authority seems to be domain-specific. The extent to which a text, for example, is authoritative depends very much on what we intend to tackle in terms of the subject matter. Thus, we might say, “no ascription of authority to a text is complete without the specification of the domain within which it has authority.”<sup>10</sup>

Third, we need greater clarification on the nature and function of Scripture. Is it a list of books used by the church as a means of grace that initiates people into (as well as sustains them in) the life of God? Or, is it an epistemic criterion that demarcates true from false beliefs, rationality from irrationality, and knowledge from opinion? The point here is not to deny that one can come to know God in and through the witness of Scripture. Certainly many have come to believe in or know God as a result of engaging in practices like Scripture reading, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, spiritual direction, and so on. Rather, the question is whether we should treat Scripture as an epistemic criterion that determines whether any/all beliefs are true, justified, or constitute knowledge.

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<sup>9</sup> On the distinction between theoretical and practical authority, see Michael C. Rea, “Authority and Truth,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 872–98.

<sup>10</sup> Rea, “Authority and Truth,” 874.

The distinctions that I have made thus far may lead some to say that I am relativizing Scripture. More exactly, the charge could be that I am suggesting that Scripture does not make truth claims, that it does not contain truth, or that it does not offer any epistemological suggestions. This could not be further from the truth. Instead, I think that making the relevant distinctions and clarifications is crucial to avoiding category mistakes and thus confusing Scripture (in terms of its derivative status) with divine revelation (in terms of its fundamental source) or assuming that the range of its authority is unlimited. In addition, there is a fundamental difference between making truth claims (for example, asserting something to be true) and determining whether these claims are true, rational, warranted, and so on. So, in the case of Scripture, it certainly makes truth claims or provides information with respect to a particular theological domain of inquiry (for example, God, salvation). However, the question at hand is whether Scripture in fact provides a reflective consideration of what, for example, constitutes knowledge (as opposed to mere opinion).<sup>11</sup>

Now it is certainly the case that various people, practices, and materials play an indispensable role in the process of forming and shaping Christian identity. They can function as sources for forming theological judgments and for seeking God. Christians have employed or have drawn insights from Scripture, doctrinal summaries (for example, creeds), liturgical materials (for example, baptism, the Lord's Supper), spiritual exemplars (for example, saints, fathers, mothers), and teachers to form and sustain Christian identity. They are authoritative insofar as they provide crucial information with respect to the process of forming and sustaining Christian identity. The primary interest here is "soteriological." That is, the aim is to "bring about the healing of human agents and restore them to their proper dignity and destiny."<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, one can read Scripture, be baptized, take the Lord's Supper, pray, preach, catechize, and so on without working out a full-blown epistemology of Christian belief. In other words, there is a fundamental distinction between being initiated into the life of God and securing an epistemology for Christian truth claims.

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<sup>11</sup> For this distinction, see William J. Abraham, "Smoky the Cow Horse and Wesleyan Understanding of Scripture," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 51/2 (2016): 7–25.

<sup>12</sup> Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*, 58. See also Abraham, Vickers, and Van Kirk, *Canonical Theism*.

## **Relocating the Discussion**

The primary task of the church, then, is not to provide a full-blown epistemology of Christian belief. In other words, the church should not drop everything (for example, preaching the gospel, initiating people into the faith) until it develops a theory of justification and knowledge. However, such a caveat does not suggest that the aim of justifying Christian belief (or determining whether Christian claims constitute knowledge) is irrelevant to or incompatible with Christian faith. In fact, the Christian tradition encourages, rather than inhibits, this kind of pursuit. Along these lines, recent work in epistemology can help theologians make the relevant distinctions and alert them to epistemic components in the Christian tradition that have been ignored, neglected, or not formulated adequately. For example, some recent work in virtue epistemology may help identify epistemic suggestions in the Christian tradition that stress the importance of the proper function of cognitive faculties, conversion, volitional openness, and transformation for knowledge of God.

More specifically, questions concerning the norms and sources of theology (including Scripture) belong in the sub-discipline called the epistemology of theology. By the epistemology of theology, I mean the attempt to provide an orderly, constructive, and critical investigation of appropriate epistemic concepts and theories in or related to theology (for example, justification, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom). In particular, this involves examining and articulating what counts as appropriate epistemic evaluation in theology. The wide-ranging nature of this kind of inquiry can be seen in the following distinction. On the one hand, there are concepts that are usually thought of as questions about norms and sources of theology (for example, reason, experience, tradition, Scripture, revelation). On the other hand, there are some general epistemic concepts that can be related to theology (for example, wisdom, understanding, virtue, evidence, testimony, skepticism, disagreement).

An example along these lines is Linda Zagzebski's book, *Epistemic Authority*. In a chapter on religious authority, for example, she focuses on the epistemological significance and intersection of divine revelation, testimony, and authority. She thinks that there is a clear distinction between divine testimony (a divine telling at a particular time) and the appropriation of it (this would include but is not limited to Scripture; see the distinction between divine revelation and Scripture in the first section). As she points out, "Christianity existed

as a tradition decades before the Christian Scriptures were written down, and in the early Church, the Word of God did not primarily refer to a book.”<sup>13</sup> Early Christian witness included appeals to a broader network of practices, people, and materials.

The significance of this divine telling for people beyond the revelatory event requires the development of authority structures to “preserve and transmit the practices that define it to distant and future members of the community.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Zagzebski draws attention to three models of revelation, “all of which are intended to explain how something communicated by God” at a particular time “can be transmitted to a great number of people over a long period of time in widely varying circumstances in such a way that the communication succeeds in producing a state of faith that includes reasonable belief.”<sup>15</sup> A principle of epistemic trust in others undergirds a transmission of this sort. This kind of trust includes both a general trust that my cognitive faculties are similar to theirs and “a particular self-reflective trust in those others whose conscientiousness I discover by being conscientious.”<sup>16</sup> If acquiring true beliefs is desirable, then I, as a conscientiously self-reflective being, should extend the same degree of trust to conscientious others as I do to myself. Moreover, conscientious self-reflection may reveal that others are in a better position to pursue and acquire the relevant epistemic goods. An appeal to authority, then, is “justified by the commitments of conscientious self-reflection.” Likewise, religious beliefs can be justified by principles that arise “from conscientious reflection of self-conscious beings.” So, I am justified in taking beliefs on the authority of a religious community, “if I conscientiously judge that I am more likely to believe what God revealed if I take the authority of the Church than if I do not.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Linda T. Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 192.

<sup>14</sup> Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 191.

<sup>15</sup> Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 191. See also her chapter, “Authority in Religious Communities,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, 97–110.

<sup>16</sup> Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 184–85.

<sup>17</sup> Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 198–99. See also Richard T. De George, “The Function and Limits of Epistemic Authority,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1970): 199–204; De George, *The Nature and Limits of Authority* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985); Phillip Kitcher, “Authority, Deference and the Role of Individual Reason,” in *The Social Dimension of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. E. McMullin, (Notre Dame:

Although Zagzebski does not develop a theology of Scripture, she shows what is at stake when we make epistemic claims about divine revelation, the transmission of it, and the relevant authorities or authority structures that preserve it. In particular, she seeks to establish that a person's acceptance of authority in a particular community can be justified by principles that outsiders would readily accept. As a result, the particular beliefs justified by that authority would not be immune to external criticism. The point here is not to evaluate Zagzebski's proposal but rather to show, by way of an example, that if a theology of Scripture is going to be spelled out in epistemic terms, we must be prepared to do the epistemological work or defer to those who have done such work.

Accordingly, I have contended that epistemological issues related to or in Scripture should be relocated in the epistemology of theology. This is not to say that connecting epistemological issues and Scripture is wrongheaded; it is simply to say that these issues fit more naturally in the epistemology of theology. An important aim along these lines is to attend more fully to the epistemological issues that arise in the course of doing Christian theology and in the course of engaging Scripture epistemologically.

The time for such a project is propitious. On the one hand, the whole field of epistemology has been revolutionized over the last fifty years. One fruitful and refreshing feature of recent work in epistemology is the expansion of its topics.<sup>18</sup> The landscape includes, but is not limited to, developing accounts of

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University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 244–71; Richard Foley, "Egoism in Epistemology," in *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick F. Schmitt, 53–73 (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1994); Arnon Keren, "Epistemic Authority, Testimony, and the Transmission of Knowledge," *Episteme* 4 (2007): 368–81; Sanford Goldberg, *Relying on Others: An Essay in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Paul Moser, "God and Epistemic Authority," *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 14/2 (2015): 415–24; and Katherine Dormandy, "Epistemic Authority: Preemption or Proper Basing," *Erkenntnis* 83/4 (2017): 773–91.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., William Alston, *Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Alvin Goldman and Denis Whitcomb, eds., *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John Greco and John Turri, eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012); Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, eds., *Social Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jonathan Kvanvig, "Truth is not the Primary Epistemic Goal," in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* ed. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 284–96.

knowledge, rationality, justification, warrant, understanding, wisdom, the intellectual virtues, and the social dimensions of cognition (for example, testimony, trust, authority). Along these lines, some have already shown how different theological topics can be addressed in light of these recent developments in epistemology.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, these projects have paved the way for fuller theological appropriation and have created space for constructive work in epistemology as it crops up within theology.

On the other hand, there are signs that some theologians are ready to participate in the epistemology of theology project. They see the relevance of recent developments in epistemology for their own work.<sup>20</sup> Given the extraordinary diversity within theology at present, it is clear that theologians are acutely

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<sup>19</sup> E.g., William J. Abraham, “The Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7 (1990): 434–50; Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*; William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Alston, “The Distinctiveness of the Epistemology of Religious Belief,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. G. Brüntrup and R. K. Tacelli (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999), 237–54; John Greco, “Religious Knowledge in the Context of Conflicting Testimony,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 83 (2009): 61–76; Greco, “Religious Belief and Evidence from Testimony,” in *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology*, ed. Dariusz Lukasiewicz and Roger Pouivet (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2012), 27–46; George Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1973); Mitchell, *Faith and Criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomena to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Wainwright, *Reason, Revelation, and Devotion: Inference and Argument in Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Abraham, *Canon and Criterion*; Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold of Divine Revelation*; Frederick D. Aquino, *Communities of Informed Judgment: Newman’s Illative Sense and Accounts of Rationality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2004); Sarah Coakley, “Dark Contemplation and Epistemic Transformation: The Analytic Theologian Re-Meets Teresa of Avila,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280–312; Paul L. Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

aware of the need to sort through how to adjudicate the theological and epistemological options in a responsible manner. They cannot really do so without getting into the epistemology of theology.

### **Constructive Suggestions**

As I have suggested, an important task of the church, soteriologically speaking, is the cultivation of Christian identity (for example, Phil 2:5–11). However, the process of forming and sustaining Christians does not take place in a vacuum but is conditioned by the relevant beliefs, practices, and processes. More exactly, formation of this sort calls for deep immersion in a set of practices. As a result, the Restoration tradition (RT) needs to maintain its commitment to the formative role of ecclesial practices (for example, preaching, singing, Scripture reading, the Lord's Supper, prayer) while recognizing that there are epistemological options for making sense of and justifying Christian belief.

The key here is not to confuse these formative practices with theorizing about the intellectual status of Christian belief. Such confusion incorrectly presumes that epistemological analysis is a precondition to Christian formation. Many have come to faith without engaging in this kind of reflection. Instead, the distinction between the soteriological and epistemological should liberate people to see more clearly the importance of dividing the cognitive labor and thus clarifying the particular goals we have in mind when, for example, we read Scripture. So, in making such a distinction, I am not suggesting that we should shy away from engaging in epistemological reflection of the relevant themes and issues in Scripture. I am simply putting the soteriological and epistemological in their proper place. The latter can certainly take its place alongside the former without blurring the relevant distinction.

When one blurs the distinction between the epistemological and soteriological functions of scripture, two problematic options emerge.<sup>21</sup> One option is to view Scripture as an unqualified authority that holds sway in all domains of knowledge. The consequence of this option, however, is that Scripture, as one authoritative voice among many others, becomes beholden to the norms of each discipline to which it is an authority (for example, physics, biology, psychology). Another option in an attempt to avoid such a consequence would be

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<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Chance Juliano for helping me clarify things a bit in this (and the next) paragraph.

to up the authoritative ante of Scripture and treat it as an epistemic criterion (not *merely* as an authority). If Scripture is a criterion that adjudicates all claims, it becomes unclear how one can adjudicate competing claims about Scripture itself! To appeal to Scripture in this case would be circular. One could, of course, claim that select parts of Scripture norm the rest of Scripture, in which case all of Scripture would not be normative and the real norm would lie in some subset of Scripture. This is of course well known as the canon within the canon. But what do we do when the smaller normative subset of Scripture is disputed? Do we appeal to yet another norm? Given that both parties will be appealing to Scripture, it seems that we need a standard list of criteria to make adjudication a real possibility. We are bound to look for criteria to sort out the relevant issues when comparing rival claims. One can see, then, the troubles that occur when one makes Scripture an epistemic criterion. In addition, we set people up for an unnecessary faith crisis by misconstruing Scripture as something that is primed for resolving questions concerning the justification of Christian belief (for example, employing Scripture as a criterion for navigating questions in fields of knowledge such as science).

Are we, then, to understand that Scripture is in no sense epistemically authoritative? No. Scripture *is* epistemically authoritative but 1) not in an unqualified sense and 2) not as an epistemic criterion. The solution between these two extremes is that Scripture is epistemically authoritative in a limited or circumscribable sense; it is uniquely positioned as a witness to divine revelation. As I have shown, Scripture's authoritative domain is not un-circumscribable. But in what domains is Scripture epistemically authoritative? Not all Christians need to be burdened with the task of trying to circumscribe the epistemic authority of Scripture; this is a task for those who engage in the epistemology of theology. This is why it is important not to confuse the soteriological and epistemological functions of Scripture. Given that Scripture is primarily soteriological, not all need to worry about reading epistemology textbooks. Scripture is, of course, epistemically authoritative, and theologians with an acute interest in epistemology can follow up the debate as far in the weeds as they desire. This is not to undermine the authority of Scripture. Rather, such a distinction divides the cognitive labor in such a way so as to enable the church to retain Scripture's authority but not at the cost of lapsing into incoherence.

With these distinctions and clarifications in mind, epistemological questions concerning the status of Christian belief are natural and inevitable. In this respect, the time is ripe for folks within RT to put some of their commitments in conversation with recent work in the epistemology of theology. So, I hope that RT will explore the relevant epistemological issues in Scripture, a resource that has been central to its theological and ecclesial identity. Accordingly, I will draw attention to two areas that warrant further reflection and development.

First, a nice place to begin is with reflection on the epistemological issues that are identified in Scripture. A project of this sort would seek to do historical, theological, and philosophical justice to various themes in Scripture while seeking to explore the constructive epistemological possibilities. The interdisciplinary nature and scope of this project, however, is a vivid reminder of the importance and challenge of bringing together insights from various domains of inquiry.

For example, Scripture makes a connection between purity of heart and perceptual knowledge of God. “Blessed are the pure in heart; for they will see God” (Mt. 5:8). Such a connection is ripe for epistemological analysis. The text seems to suggest that the cultivation of a pure heart is a precondition to the process of making progress towards and achieving perceptual knowledge of God. However, it is not entirely clear in what sense purity of heart is integral (epistemically speaking) to or shapes the process of sensing things divine. What kind of epistemological sense can we make of spiritual perception? What role in particular does a pure heart play in shedding perceptual distractions (such as vanity, pride, and so on), in cultivating perceptual readiness, and in fostering a stable and discerning habit of mind?<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Recent work on trained perception may provide some clarification along these lines. In particular, it has shown how perception and perceptual processes can be altered or improved by learning, attention, and training. The focus here is on the social conditions under which people depend on structures, practices, and others to improve their perceptual capacities. Such training is important in many fields of knowledge. Under the tutelage of others, people learn to attend well to things and thereby become better perceivers. The goal of perceptual training, then, is to cultivate increased sensitivity to important features in an environment. It is deeply crucial to the process of refining our perceptual capacities and thus becoming better perceivers in the relevant domain. In this case, to become a better spiritual perceiver is to take up the relevant beliefs, practices, virtues, and learn how to screen out irrelevant or vicious stimuli. See

Second, an equally important task involves providing a more precise understanding of what a constructive account of RT entails. Before we carve out an account of authority, it may be helpful to understand exactly what we have in mind with the language of restoration. Is a constructive account of authority tied to some kind of primitivist project that seeks to recapture and reprimarize the earliest and purest form of early Christian thought? If the pursuit of true rather than false beliefs concerning early Christian beliefs, practices, and materials is still an important goal of RT, would it make better sense to draw from other resources within the Christian tradition as well as Scripture? If so, the kind of restoration envisioned here would 1) include a broader account of the resources of the Christian tradition, 2) do justice to the formation and development of theological concepts from these resources, and 3) explore the intersection of Scripture with other early Christian practices and materials. The point here is to relocate Scripture within a broader network of practices and resources.

Given the previous distinctions, clarifications, and focus on a new sub-discipline, what, then, does it mean for RT to take seriously the integrity of its own ecclesial and theological commitments while charting a constructive path? It certainly does not mean forgetting its own commitments, nor does it mean exempting those commitments from engagement with the broader streams of the Christian tradition and recent work in the epistemology of theology. However, if RT is going to make headway towards a more constructive path, it needs to formulate a more systematic account of the formative practices that put people in a better position to achieve the stipulated goals, whether they are soteriological or epistemological. Along these lines, we must avoid conflating the soteriological and epistemological aspects of Christian faith. The inability (or refusal) to do so will likely contribute to a long-standing crisis of authority.

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Frederick D. Aquino and Paul Gavriluk, eds., *Sensing Things Divine: Towards a Constructive Account of Spiritual Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

# The Authority of Scripture Today? A Review Essay

Jeffrey Peterson

Joseph K. Gordon. *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. Pp. ix + 424. \$65.00.<sup>1</sup>

This wide-ranging, informative, and readable study, originating as the author's doctoral dissertation at Marquette University, offers the reader "a systematic theology of the Christian Bible" (*7 et passim*), intended to assist contemporary Christians in the "perennial challenges" of "[d]etermining the function and role of Scripture in Christian life and thought and articulating the precise parameters of interpretation of the Bible" (1). At the outset of his inquiry, Gordon notes the "embarrassment of riches" for biblical study and interpretation that Roman Catholic theologian Robert Sokolowski has identified as an aspect of "our present postmodern situation" (1). Gordon identifies as the "most pressing challenge of our contemporary situation" coming to terms with the recognitions "that all human meanings [including those inscribed in the texts of Scripture] are nested in historical, cultural, social, and linguistic contexts," and that "the human readers of these texts always interpret them from somewhere and never from nowhere," perspectives he associates with "the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and various postmodern philosophers such as Stanley Fish and Jacques Derrida" (2).

Gordon's perspective on contemporary biblical interpretation is thus thoroughly situated within the academic humanities, outside which few wrestle with the significance of Wittgenstein, Ricoeur, or Derrida. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical citations in the text refer to this book.

understandable for a project that originated as a doctoral dissertation, and the questions raised are entirely legitimate and appropriate in that context. One might ask whether present social conditions in America and other “developed” countries and the situation of biblical interpreters therein may commend other challenges as more pressing than those on which Gordon focuses; this essay will suggest one possibility after surveying and assessing Gordon’s work.

Gordon opens by situating his inquiry among three broad approaches to the study of Scripture on current offer. First, “historical criticism” is concerned with “understanding the texts [of Scripture] within their hypothetically reconstructed original settings of composition, redaction, interpretation, and use” so as to “avoid anachronism.” According to Gordon, pursuit of this concern serves to “build ‘an impenetrable wall’ between the texts and contemporary people” and “threatens to take Scripture out of the hands of everyday Christian believers” (3). Such judgments are not uncommon among recent theological interpreters, though one might question whether the imposing edifice of historical commentary built up by interpreters since Spinoza is quite “impenetrable,” and how the threat is realized when representative results of historical interpretation are made accessible to any reader of English in works such as the *HarperCollins Study Bible*.<sup>2</sup>

The second current perspective on interpretation, more briefly noted, consists of “so-called contextual approaches to the study of Scripture” which “focus on the concerns that culturally and socially located readers—especially those who have suffered from disenfranchisement and marginalization—bring to the texts from their own horizons of experience and meaning” (4). Gordon appears to regard such approaches as having undermined the “pretension of historical criticism to total neutrality” and exposed its practitioners as having “unreflectively endorsed androcentric and narrowly Western perspectives” (4), but he does not otherwise engage “contextual” interpretation closely.<sup>3</sup> As a third perspective on scriptural interpretation, Gordon identifies explicitly

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<sup>2</sup> Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Gordon notes the formidable volume of the relevant literature (271 n. 15) and suggests that Lonergan’s idea of “[i]ntellectual conversion provides a basis for both affirming and critiquing the differentiated achievements of ... contextual or advocacy approaches to Scripture,” as well as the other two approaches surveyed (164), also previewing a future exploration of Lonergan’s idea (369 n. 179).

“theological approaches” (4), including the retrieval of “premodern approaches to the function and role of Scripture in the day-to-day lives of Christian communities” (5). Gordon’s contribution has most in common with the latter group of studies, with historical criticism serving largely as a foil and contextual approaches as a warning against “the pursuit of a totalizing discourse” (14).

In developing his proposal, Gordon draws on an array of authorities spanning the centuries from the ancient church to the modern. His second chapter presents Irenaeus, Origen, and Augustine as representative exponents of the ancient “rule of faith” or “rule of truth” (33–67), taking inspiration from them for his contention that “an adequate statement of the economic work of the Triune God provides the broadest necessary context for responsible and faithful Christian engagement with Scripture” (66–67). Gordon employs the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed “as the ecclesially received rule of faith for the present account of the nature and purpose of Christian Scripture” (81).

Gordon makes judicious use of the work of modern interlocutors, as well. He draws extensively on the work of Bernard Lonergan (cf. 9–11, 14–31), in whose account of “the normative structures of human cognition and understanding throughout history” he finds the key to “identifying and affirming actual historical developments within Christian theological reflection that should be retrieved, appropriated, and, if necessary, reframed in contemporary theological reflection” (18). In the work of Henri de Lubac, he finds a helpful guide to premodern exegesis (cf. 12–13) and to the understanding of “authentic human subjectivity,” or in traditional terms “the soul, its transformation and purification” (116, quoting Lewis Ayres; cf. 116–24). Gordon refers more briefly to the work of Robert Sokolowski (cf. 85–88), but Sokolowski’s account of “the Christian distinction between God and the world” (86) is perhaps even more crucial to the cogency of Gordon’s project than other authors on whom he draws. It is only if God and creatures are recognized as fundamentally different kinds of beings, the one necessary and the others contingent, that we may “speak intelligibly about divine and human causation in a noncompetitive,

nondualistic way” (85), in respect of Scripture as of any contingent medium of divine revelation.<sup>4</sup>

While I am in sympathy with the appeal to ancient theologians and symbols, it seems curious to adopt a creed of the fourth century AD as an apparently unproblematic (or at worst, minimally problematic) summary of Christian convictions, able to provide us significant and clear interpretive guidance, whereas the Christian Scriptures, including the New Testament composed in the first century AD, are taken to confront the interpreter with tortuous difficulties. No less than the authors of the New Testament, the bishops at Nicaea and Constantinople wrote prior to the work of Lorenzo Valla, Nicolaus Copernicus, Isaac Newton, and Charles Darwin, among others whose researches have served to complicate contemporary biblical interpretation and theology.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, if “*Scripture is not a speaking and acting agent*” (28, italics original), neither are Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, the Nicene signatories, Aquinas, Lonergan, de Lubac, or (in print) Gordon. Yet our access to all the latter also comes only via “inanimate ... marks on pages that are artifacts of human technology” (216; cf. 28, 109, 135–6, 208). In Gordon’s account, however, it is only Scripture whose interpretation appears uniquely problematic in consequence of this.<sup>6</sup>

In his fourth chapter, Gordon offers his contribution toward “a Christian notion of the human person that is grounded in the tradition of Christian reflection but that simultaneously has a place for more recent advances in human understanding of the constitution of human nature” (119–20), an undertaking he regards as “in an important sense ... foundational for the whole work” (15). Gordon’s fifth chapter, unusually for a work of systematic theology, surveys the *realia* of Scripture (for example, the adoption of the codex as a medium for the transmission of Scripture among Christians, their use of *nomina sacra*, and

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<sup>4</sup> See Sokolowski’s outstanding introduction to theology, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995 [1982]).

<sup>5</sup> See Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century* (London: SCM, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> This might be justified by reference to the observation that, prior to any hermeneutical or theological reflection, many (most?) Christians are “committed to Scripture and its authority” (7), but Gordon leaves largely unexplored the special status of Scripture vis-à-vis other texts.

the presence or absence of works in extant manuscripts as evidence for canonical development) and argues that “even under the most restrictive and exclusivistic understandings of what the boundaries of the church are, the Christian community has not fixed and preserved exactly the same text” (169). The sixth chapter seeks to locate this variable Scripture within the redemptive work of the economic Trinity, maintaining that “Christian Scripture is an instrument of the Holy Spirit and Son of God, and its purpose is to facilitate the transformation of its readers for their participation in the recapitulation of all things in Christ”; this “location” of Scripture within the transformative purpose of the Triune God means that to use Scripture as an “instrument of violence and oppression ... is to reject the authority of the Son of God Incarnate, Jesus Christ, to whom Scripture testifies” (258).

No book can do everything, of course, nor can any study of Scripture address every relevant subject of merit. Since Gordon holds that “[t]he most pressing concerns [of contemporary readers of Scripture] are moral in nature” (6), and that “Scripture is inspired and ... mediates divine revelation in the very particularity of its words” (28), one topic that might be thought to deserve more attention could be labeled the “moral phenomenology of Scripture.” Pursuing this topic, one would ask how and in what role(s) Scripture appears (or should appear) in the moral formation, decision-making, and life-construction of Christian communities and individuals today.<sup>7</sup>

Contemporary Americans, including American Christians, inhabit an “opt-in” society. Once we have attained adulthood, we choose our associations, from the most casual to the most intimate, selecting as we think best our friends and vocations and marital partners, along with the churches we attend (or, increasingly, don’t) and the sports teams and charities and political parties we support. We organize our lives on the voluntary principle, and there is no door we enter that we do not reserve the right to exit if the association ceases to meet our needs. (The marital association is the last holdout against that principle one can find, in some shrinking precincts of American life.) I mention

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<sup>7</sup> The moral concerns of Scripture’s contemporary readers that Gordon identifies have to do not so much with the Scriptures’ “reading” of us and our mores as with our reading of problematic moral judgments in Scripture: “What are Christians to do with an authoritative Scripture that seems to depict God as not only condoning, but even sanctioning slavery, wanton violence, genocide, patriarchy, and racism?” (6).

these social realities not in order to celebrate our situation or to commend the American way of life as presently configured, but merely so as to see clearly the ground on which we in fact stand when we consider any question of the church's life or of our Christian discipleship as it must be lived out in the circumstances in which we find our individual and communal lives embedded.

It is related to this setting that the typical American Christian encounters the word "authority" or the concept that it represents at work or school, perhaps, but seldom at church or in connection with the practice of religion. Even for the Christian who regularly attends church meetings, religion is typically a matter not of recognizing authority and submitting ourselves to it, but of exercising individual taste and choice and seeking individual meaning and significance: What do I make of the new minister or worship leader or teacher? How did the sermon or the song service leave me feeling? What sort of devotional regime feeds my soul? It may scarcely occur to us to ask "by what authority" religious practices or doctrines are embraced or rejected.

That puts the religious experience of current American churchgoers deeply at odds with that of previous generations, for whom authority in religion was a question of vital concern.<sup>8</sup> We are some distance from eras when anathemas might be pronounced and wars declared over such issues as whether, for example, the Bible or the pope is the authority on which Christians should rely for what to believe about God or how to live to please him. There are of course obvious benefits to living in such a time and place, notably decreased hostility and unpleasantness between the members of different churches. But there are also disadvantages to living out one's discipleship in such an era, even if they may require more care to discern.

To take one unhappy example: Few subjects are treated with greater perspicacity or forcefulness in the Christian Bible than the binding character of marriage and the disallowance of divorce as a practice among Jesus' disciples. The rigorous teaching attributed to Jesus on this subject by Paul, Mark, and Luke—no remarriage following divorce for Jesus' disciples—holds up

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<sup>8</sup> Our contemporary situation represents the latest equilibrium point between techniques for mass evangelism and the adjustment of standards for community membership, the dynamic which Franklin H. Littell proposes as the guiding thread of American religious history (*From State Church to Pluralism: A Protestant Interpretation of Religion in American History* [Garden State, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1962]).

impressively under historical-critical scrutiny.<sup>9</sup> And while the instructions in Paul and Matthew admit certain exceptions to Jesus' prohibition of divorce, they by no means normalize divorce-and-remarriage as a practice for committed Christians. This remains the case even if the exceptions admitted in Scripture open up consideration of other exceptional circumstances in which divorce might be permitted among those who seek to be guided by the spirit of Jesus' teaching.<sup>10</sup> Divorce is the rare exception for followers of Jesus guided by Scripture, by no means the rule.

Yet in the half-century since no-fault divorce began to be adopted in American family law (beginning in California under Ronald Reagan), divorce has proliferated among professed Christians, and churches—including churches that profess a “high view of biblical authority”—have offered little effective resistance.<sup>11</sup> As adults have been freed to “follow their bliss” out of old marital relationships into new ones, the social and personal costs of the “divorce revolution” have fallen especially on the children of dissolved unions.<sup>12</sup> Surveying this question, it is difficult to see how Scripture can be said to have functioned or been consulted as an “authority” in the Christian communities concerned, unless “authority” is taken to mean “a text we consult in preparation for evading its clear provisions.” Nor is it immediately clear how a community that wished to order its life under the authority of Scripture would proceed to do so effectively; the physical and social mobility of

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<sup>9</sup> See E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1989), 324–28; Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 185–228; William Loader, *Sexuality in the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), esp. 112–20; and John P. Meier, *Law and Love, A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 4; (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 95–128.

<sup>10</sup> See Craig Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), esp. 28–37, 50–66, 104–10.

<sup>11</sup> This is true even if the divorce rate among Christians, and evangelical Christians, has been exaggerated, as is argued by Glenn Stanton, “FactChecker: Divorce Rate Among Christians” (<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-divorce-rate-among-christians/>, accessed 15 April 2019). Determining the facts on this and related questions is complicated by the circumstance that virtually every position taken reflects apologetic or polemical interests.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 46–79, 263–78; R. R. Reno, *Resurrecting the Idea of a Christian Society* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2016), esp. chap. 2.

American life is such that even members of a “covenanted” community no longer willing to be bound by marital or other obligations need only relocate to another church fellowship to feel both their religious and their personal needs met.

Perhaps a first step toward the recovery of biblical authority in this domain and others is offered by Christopher Bryan’s distinction between “coercive authority” and “appellative authority.”<sup>13</sup> Coercive authority is wielded by the parent who restrains us during a childhood tantrum or consigns us to our room “for our own good”; in adulthood it is signified by the red and blue lights that strobe in the rearview mirror when we let our foot rest too heavily on the gas pedal, intimating the force that can be used to compel our compliance with the speed limit or exact the prescribed penalty. Appellative authority, in contrast, is the sort that makes an appeal, as when a friend kindly and patiently makes a case that leads us to abandon a destructive course of action, or when a fund-raising or patriotic appeal moves us to contribute or enlist, or when a painting or a piece of music “compels” us to stop and attend to it.

It is an exaggeration to maintain, as Bryan does, that God’s authority “is presented in the Bible as invariably appellative.”<sup>14</sup> The law God decrees for Israel imposes penalties for disobedience (cf. Exod 21:1–23:33), and Christ’s apostle orders the expulsion and shunning of seriously wayward members of his mission churches (cf. 1 Cor 5:1–13; 2 Thess 3:6–15). Yet it is helpful to recognize that God’s authority as expressed in Scripture is *initially* and *primarily* appellative; Scripture first appeals to us with a vision of transformed life and community and invites us into a fellowship devoted to pursuing this, before it imposes discipline if we seek to evade its requirements (cf. Exod 20:2; 1 Cor 1:4–9, 21–25, 30–31; 2:1–5; 2 Thess 1:3–4, 11–12; 2:13–3:5). It is difficult to see how the Bible functions as an authority in any sense in a community that fails even to articulate the fundamental moral appeals of Scripture.

As an analogy to the ongoing life of the church and the authority of Scripture within it, Tom Wright has proposed a company of actors who undertake to stage a production of a play left unfinished by Shakespeare. The players proceed by studying the four completed acts left on paper within the

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Bryan, *And God Spoke: The Authority of the Bible for the Church Today* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2002), 85–90.

<sup>14</sup> Bryan, *And God Spoke*, 88.

Shakespearean and Elizabethan milieu and, rather than committing a fifth act to writing themselves and so presuming to place their work on a level with the Bard's, collaborate in improvising the conclusion on the basis of their immersion in the work and the spirit of the master.<sup>15</sup> I have no better parable to offer contemporary Christians as a guide through our interpretive and communal difficulties.

Joseph Gordon directs our attention to issues that must be considered by any troupe of disciples that seeks to act out its improvisation in awareness of the full range of options for understanding the biblical "script" that have been attempted by companies that have preceded us in this endeavor, including some gifted and notable "directors," and with a fuller understanding of the options and limits involved in mounting our own production. For his work in this regard, he merits the gratitude of everyone who shares his commitment to the effort.

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<sup>15</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 140.

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## **Ecclesiastical Authority and Interpretation**

Here, perhaps, someone may ask: Since the canon of the Scripture is complete and more than sufficient in itself, why is it necessary to add to it the authority of ecclesiastical interpretation? As a matter of fact, [we must answer,] Holy Scripture, because of its depth, is not universally accepted in one and the same sense. The same text is interpreted differently by different people, so that one may almost gain the impression that it can yield as many different meanings as there are men.

Vincent of Lerins, *The Commonitories*

## **The Light of the Word**

That brightness which is borne in upon the eyes of all men both in heaven and on earth is more than enough to withdraw all support from men's ingratitude—just as God, to involve the human race in the same guilt, sets forth to all without exception his presence portrayed in his creatures. Despite this, it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the universe. It was not in vain, then, that he added the light of his Word by which to become known unto salvation; and he regarded as worthy of this privilege those whom he pleased to gather more closely and intimately to himself.... Just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God. This, therefore, is a special gift, where God, to instruct the church, not merely uses mute teachers but also opens his own most hallowed lips.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

## **The Judgment of Antiquity**

Neither may we in this case lightly esteem what hath been allowed as fit in the judgment of antiquity, and by the long continued practice of the whole Church; from which unnecessarily to swerve, experience hath never as yet found it safe.

Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*

## **On Novel Interpretations**

There is a kind of men who think that about a hundred years ago the true church, which in no prior age was seen, first began to show itself to the world. But I from my soul detest their folly. And thus I judge that the Papists have done no more harm to the church of God, while defending their errors today with the pretense of antiquity, than men who love novelties, who interpret sacred Scripture according to their own lust, and think that whatever does not agree with their own interpretations is false and impious.

Isaac Casaubon, to Cornelius van der Myle, 1612

## **Reading Scripture in Modernity**

In modernity...we have supposed that biblical scholarship must come first, with theology coming thereafter to make what it can of the biblical scholars' results. The very curricula of the seminaries and surviving theological faculties are organized around the assumption that biblical scholarship on the one hand provides the materials for theology, and on the other hand does not itself presuppose theological learning or disciplined theological reflection. The curriculum instructs us to ask first, "What did texts from the various parts of the Bible mean in 'their own terms,' 'back then'?" Only thereafter are we to ask, "Whatever are we now to do with all these witnesses?" We do not notice that presumptions hidden in the way the first question is cast make the second question unanswerable.

Robert Jenson, *Canon and Creed*

## **The Stones Cry Out**

Christ prophesied the whole of Gothic architecture in that hour when nervous and respectable people (such people as now object to barrel organs) objected to the shouting of the gutter-snipes of Jerusalem. He said, "If these were silent, the very stones would cry out." Under the impulse of His spirit arose like a clamorous chorus the façades of the mediæval cathedrals, thronged with shouting faces and open mouths. The prophecy has fulfilled itself: the very stones cry out.

G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

## **Christianity: Foundational for Modernity**

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.

Jürgen Habermas, *Time of Transitions*

## **The Word of God**

As the Word of God in the sign of this prophetic-apostolic word of man Holy Scripture is like the unity of God and man in Jesus Christ. It is neither divine only nor human only. Nor is it a mixture of the two nor a *tertium quid* between them. But in its own way and degree it is very God and very man, i.e., a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation, and historically a very human literary document.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/2*

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