the Shape of
Sola Scriptura

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Foreword

As Christians continue to struggle against modernity and post-modernity, the term "medieval" is slowly and wonderfully becoming more of a crown than a term of abuse, especially in thoughtful Protestant circles. C.S. Lewis once quipped that the more medieval he became in his outlook, the farther from Roman Catholicism he seemed to grow. The history of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* tends to produce the same effect in many of us. Once one gets beyond the superficial, individualistic, confused accounts of the doctrine presented in contemporary Evangelicalism, this teaching becomes very natural, organic, medieval, and apostolic.

In contrast, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox accounts fall out of rather perfectionistic and rationalistic commitments that are alien to the earthiness of biblical reality. Submitting to an infallible magisterium requires relatively little faith; everything is, in principle, neat and clean, like a doctor's office or a robot husband. A perfect husband would make for a very easy marriage; faith wouldn't be hard at all. He could never go wrong. But most wives require great faith. Submission takes on much more fascinating dimensions when marriage involves sinners.

Biblical history reveals that God's ways are often more ragged around the edges than we might wish. In the Old Covenant, we see the Spirit working through broken institutions, illegitimate priesthoods, and lonely Elijahs. The Sanhedrin of Christ's time presented delicious institutional unity and pomp, but the Spirit

happened to be working through a locust-eating prophet and a band of unordained fishermen.

In this light, the various, widely publicized departures of many Evangelicals to Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy have the distinct aroma of youthful haste and short-term zeal. The Sanhedrin was far better organized than the fishermen, and it had a grand liturgy, an authoritative line of oral tradition, and a succession of leaders. In a healthy church, those forms are good and holy. But to have turned to the Sanhedrin at *that* time would have been to embrace apostasy. Truth, beauty, and goodness were with the fishermen.

God's ways are not our ways. Such disheveled times ought not to be the norm: an established Temple and the unified Church are the norm. Christendom is currently scattered east, west, and Evangelical, but it won't always be that way. We should have Elijah's hope in the midst of disarray. And a mature and ancient understanding of *sola Scriptura* will be at the heart of recovery.

The practice of the ancient and medieval understanding of *sola Scriptura* can often be messy in history, and it requires a maturity that can wisely balance creedal authority and the rare need for Josiahs, a trinitarian one and many. But that is our life on earth. We are to walk by maturity, not by sight. Keith Mathison's work is a grand step in this direction, and, over the past few years, I have been privileged to share in his thinking about these questions. I am even more grateful that he agreed to write this book. He carefully peels away the thick misconceptions concerning *sola Scriptura,* many of which have been key to those claiming to abandon the doctrine. While many Roman and Eastern apologists have been able to ignore such corrections over the past decade, I hope Keith's book will significantly shift the debate and provoke more genuine dialogue.

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Introduction

The doctrine of *sola scriptura,* "by Scripture alone," has been the focal point of intense disagreement between Roman Catholics and Protestants since the Reformation of the sixteenth century. In recent years the subject has gained renewed attention due to the growing number of converts from Protestantism to both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy who claim that their conversion was due in large part to their "discovery" that the doctrine of *sola scriptura* was indefensible.[1] In addition, a new generation of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox apologists has been publishing an ever increasing number of books critical of the doctrine of *sola scriptura.*[2]

Many of these men and women who have left Protestantism claim to have grown increasingly frustrated at the tendency within evangelical Protestantism to divide continually over numerous differences of interpretation and at its seeming inability to even begin resolving these differences. They cite the numerous theological fads that permeate Protestantism and the

[1] E.g., Patrick Madrid, ed., *Surprised by Truth*, (San Diego: Basilica Press, 1994); Scott and Kimberly Hahn, *Rome Sweet Home*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993); David Currie, *Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996); Peter Gillquist, ed., *Coming Home: Why Protestant Clergy are Becoming Orthodox*, (Ben Lomond, CA: Conciliar Press, 1992).

[2] E.g., Robert A. Sungenis, *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*, (Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing Co., 1997); Mark Shea, *By What Authority?* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996); Clark Carlton, *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church*, (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1997).

numerous heretics that are readily given a hearing in evangelical circles as long as these heretics claim to be preaching "what the Bible says." Seeking shelter from the theological chaos that is modern evangelicalism, these men and women fled to communions which claim to have the answer. Part of that answer is a rejection of *sola scriptura.*

Within evangelicalism, many professing Christians use *sola scriptura* as a battle cry to justify endless schism. Other professing evangelicals use the slogan *sola scriptura* to justify every manner of false doctrine imaginable. The numerous ways in which *sola scriptura* has been misused have provided its critics with further evidence of the practical "unworkability" of the doctrine. If *sola scriptura* is true, these critics ask, then why are Protestants unable to come to agreement on what that Scripture teaches? For these reasons and more, it is absolutely imperative that the heirs of the Reformation be able to define accurately their concept of authority and be able to defend it against its opponents.

This will require not only answering the relevant criticisms of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox apologists but also doing away with a large number of faulty concepts which are often wrongly identified with *sola scriptura.* Roman Catholic and Orthodox apologists have been effective in their criticisms in large part because of the fact that most Protestants have adopted a subjective and individualistic version of *sola scriptura* that bears little resemblance to the doctrine of the Reformers. As long as Protestants attempt to maintain this defective version of *sola scriptura,* and as long as this version of the doctrine is allowed to be identified as *the* Protestant position, Roman Catholic and Orthodox apologists will continue to effectively demolish it and gain frustrated seekers.

What this means is that, like the Reformers, our battle must be on two fronts. Just as they had to combat the Roman Catholic position which effectively made the Church autonomous and the Radical Anabaptist position which effectively made the individual autonomous, so we too must combat both of these defective views. Roman Catholic apologists have regrouped, and Eastern

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The Early Church

In order to understand the present nature of the debate over the authority of Scripture it is necessary to gain some historical perspective. Much of the confusion surrounding this discussion is due to the failure of Christians to honestly examine the historical teaching of those believers who have preceded us in the faith. More often than not, the historical records are used for the sole purpose of extracting proof-texts to support a currently entrenched viewpoint. The result is an anachronistic reading of modern ideas and theories back into the writings of the church fathers. This practice may be observed among both Roman Catholic and Protestant apologists, and diligent effort must be made to avoid it. While it is obviously impossible to present an exhaustive examination of the patristic understanding of scriptural authority in a single chapter, a summary overview of the writings of the fathers themselves and of the conclusions of patristic scholars does shed valuable light on the historical question of scriptural authority.

Much of the problem involved in the historical debate over the authority of Scripture concerns the ambiguity surrounding the meaning of the word "tradition." In present day usage, the term commonly denotes unwritten doctrines handed down orally in the Church. It is therefore often contrasted with Scripture. However, a remarkable scholarly consensus shows that in the early church, Scripture and Tradition were in no way mutually exclusive concepts because they coincided with each other completely.[1]

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[1] See Ellen Flessemann van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen,

What this means is that throughout the history of the Church, including the Protestant Reformation, what we find is a battle that cannot often be characterized accurately in terms of Scripture vs. tradition. Instead what we find are competing concepts of the relationship between Scripture and tradition.[2] This will become clearer as the study proceeds.

THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The term "apostolic fathers" is normally used in reference to the earliest Christian authors whose writings were not included in the New Testament. Because they were written in the century immediately following the death of Christ (ca. A.D. 70–135), they are considered to be extremely valuable primary sources. These documents offer invaluable insight into the life and thought of the Church during this crucial transitional period.[3] It was during this period of time that Rome sacked Jerusalem, leaving the Church to wrestle with the question of its identity *vis-a-vis* Judaism. It was also during this period of time that the rapid growth and geographical expansion of the Church forced it to confront pressing questions of administration and government. And it was during this period of time that the last of the Apostles died, forcing the Church to confront the question of authority.

Among the apostolic fathers, one will search in vain to discover a formally outlined doctrine of Scripture such as may be found in modern systematic theology textbooks. The doctrine of Scripture did not become an independent *locus* of theology until the sixteenth century. What we do find throughout the writing of

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1953); J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Rev. Ed., (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 29–51; R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church*, (London, 1962); Heiko Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1986), 269–296; *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tradition: Old and New*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

  [2] Cf. Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, 270.

  [3] See J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers*, second edition, Edited by Michael W. Holmes, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 1–15.

the apostolic fathers is a continual and consistent appeal to the Old Testament and to the Apostles' teaching. During these first decades following Christ, however, we have no evidence demonstrating that the Church considered the Apostles' teaching to be entirely confined to written documents.[4] This first generation of the Church saw many laymen and elders (e.g., Polycarp) who had been personally acquainted with one or more of the Apostles and who had sat under their preaching. We have no reason to assume that the apostolic doctrine could not have been faithfully taught in those churches which had no access to all of the apostolic writings. Copies of the writings of the Apostles were in circulation among the churches and were quoted by the apostolic fathers, but not every local church had a complete collection of all of the twenty-seven books later referred to as the New Testament.

As already noted, we have broad scholarly agreement that Scripture and tradition were not mutually exclusive concepts in the mind of the early fathers. The concept of "tradition," when used by these fathers, is simply used to designate the body of doctrine which was committed to the Church by the Lord and His Apostles, whether through verbal or written communication.[5] The body of doctrine, however, was essentially identical regardless of how it was communicated. No evidence suggests that the apostolic fathers believed they had recourse to any type of secret oral traditions. At this point in the Church's history, Scripture and tradition were coinherent concepts; "there was simply no way of imagining possible conflict between the Christian Scripture and the Christian tradition—and, therefore, no necessity to choose between them."[6] In fact, at this early point in the history of the Church, the use of the term "tradition" to denote the apostolic deposit of faith would, strictly speaking, be anachronistic.

[4] J.N.D Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 33.

[5] The term *paradosis* (tradition) was only rarely used in the period of the apostolic fathers. Clement, for example, uses the phrase "the glorious and holy rule of our tradition" to describe the deposit of faith (7:2). The verb *paradidonai*, on the other hand, is much more common, but it had not yet, at this point in history, acquired any specific technical meaning.

[6] Albert C. Outler, cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, 173.

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The Middle Ages

The period of Western History commonly referred to as the Middle Ages spans approximately a thousand years, yet for most Christians it is one of the least familiar eras of Church history. Its importance, however, for a proper understanding of our subject cannot be overstated. Spanning the period of time between the fifth century and the beginning of the Renaissance and Reformation, the medieval era was not the static age that it is often portrayed to be. This is the age that gave birth to such great thinkers as Anselm and Aquinas and to such great universities as Oxford and Cambridge. It is the age that witnessed the rise and gradual centralization of the papacy as popes battled emperors and the constant temptation of temporal power. It is the paradoxical age that gave us the bloody cruelty of the Inquisition and the Crusades and yet also gave us the awe-inspiring beauty of the great cathedrals.

Like the preceding summary of the early Church fathers, the overview of the medieval discussion of Scripture and tradition will obviously not be exhaustive.[1] Instead, by briefly explaining some of the main biblical, hermeneutical, and theological trends of the Middle Ages, a coherent picture will emerge. As noted, the doctrine of Scripture did not develop as an independent *locus* of

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[1] For a good general introduction to the theology of the Middle Ages, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, Vol. 3, *The Growth of Medieval Theology*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978). For an overview of the history of the Church in the Middle Ages, see R.W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*, (London: Penguin Books, 1970).

systematic theology until the later Middle Ages and the Reformation. Therefore, in order to gain an understanding of the medieval Christian view of Scripture and tradition, we must approach the subject somewhat indirectly. It will be necessary to discern first what was believed and taught about a number of related—and often overlapping—issues including the text of Scripture, the canon of Scripture, hermeneutics, authority, and the relevance of non-Christian philosophical systems.

After briefly examining these important contextual issues, we will be able to see the medieval Church's concept of the relationship between Scripture and tradition more directly. It will become clear that both Tradition I and Tradition II had their medieval adherents, although Tradition II doesn't seriously begin to emerge until the twelfth century.[2] As the Oxford historian and theologian Alister McGrath observes, "it is becoming increasingly clear that the medieval period in general was characterized by its conviction that Scripture was the sole material base of Christian theology."[3] In order to demonstrate the truth of this thesis, however, some context is important.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PAPACY

Any discussion of the concept of authority in the medieval Church must take into account the development of the Roman papacy from its humble beginnings to the position of power it occupied throughout much of the Middle Ages.[4] The growth of the

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[2] Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1986), 280. Cf. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 40–41; Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility 1150–1350*, (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1988), 16.

[3] Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 140. Cf. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages,* second edition, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952); Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 86–87; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1964), 21.

[4] For a good history of the papacy from a critical perspective see William J. La Due, *The Chair of Saint Peter: A History of the Papacy*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999).

papacy as an institution and its emerging role in European politics throughout the Middle Ages has considerable implications for any study of the nature of authority in the Church. Some of the more significant of these medieval developments provide the necessary historical and ecclesiastical context for our study.

Although Rome traces the origins of the papacy to the Apostle Peter, the historical evidence indicates that there was no monarchical bishop in Rome until sometime between A.D. 140–150.[5] Instead of a single bishop, it appears that the Roman church was organized under a college of presbyters or presbyter-bishops. No evidence exists for any claims to jurisdictional supremacy by Rome in the first century. The first historical instances of Roman bishops claiming any type of jurisdictional priority outside of Rome itself occurred in the late second century and early third century. Sometime between A.D. 190 and 195 Pope Victor attempted to sever communion with sister churches over the dating of Easter observance, but his actions had virtually no effect. In the middle of the third century, Pope Stephen was at odds with Cyprian of Carthage over the rebaptism of heretics. Cyprian's response to Stephen, however, rather clearly indicates that he did not believe that Stephen had any jurisdictional authority over Carthage.[6]

In these early centuries up to the time of Constantine, as Geoffrey Barraclough points out, "the bishop of Rome . . . was in no sense a pope and laid no claim to the position of pope."[7] But in the period of time between the death of Stephen (A.D. 257) and the accession of Pope Gregory the Great in A.D. 590, the papacy underwent enormous development. Much of this early development was due to the work of Pope Leo I, who reigned from A.D. 440–461. Leo's influence is most obvious in his famous *Tome to Flavian*, a letter that was very influential at the Council of

[5] Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 204.

[6] See Chapter 1.

[7] Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 10.

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Martin Luther and John Calvin

The Protestant Reformation was one element in a complex of events that shook medieval Christendom to its core.[1] Virtually every aspect of life in Western Europe experienced upheaval in the sixteenth century, the likes of which had not been seen since the fall of Rome. The Renaissance was changing the way men thought about themselves and the world. The political structure of Europe was painfully shifting under the weight of an emerging nationalism. The economy was gradually transforming from the old guild system to a nascent capitalism. The discovery and exploration of the new world was expanding man's geographical horizons. The use of the printing press was expanding his intellectual horizons. In the midst of this were heard cries for reform in the Church, cries which could not and would not be ignored.[2]

Within the Church itself a crisis of authority had been simmering since the rise of the Avignon papacy in the early fourteenth century. The intensity of this crisis had been increased by certain scholastic theologians, such as Ockham, who had denied the pope the right to legislate in matters of faith, and the ensuing debate had not abated. The Great Schism (1378–1417), during which time there had simultaneously been two and ultimately three popes, called into question the very institution of the Church

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[1] For a good introduction to the history of the Reformation, see Owen Chadwick, *The Reformation*, (London: Penguin Books, 1972); Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952).

[2] See Roland H. Bainton, op. cit., 3.

itself. For forty years, there was no certain direction to turn for an authoritative statement of faith—and this during a period of unprecedented doctrinal speculation and diversity.[3] A number of factors contributed to this doctrinal diversity including: the emergence of several different theological schools of thought; disagreements on the sources of theology and their inter-relationships; disagreements concerning theological methodology; the rise of lay piety; and general confusion regarding the official teaching of the Church on certain doctrines—most notably the doctrine of justification.[4]

One debate that flared up again during the sixteenth-century Reformation concerned the source and norm of the Church's doctrine and practice. Oberman observes that, "traditionally this is described as the clash of the *sola scriptura*-principle with the Scripture *and* tradition-principle."[5] This common misunderstanding continues to this day and is found in the works of both Protestant and Catholic scholars. Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformers are repeatedly portrayed as the inventors of an absolutely unheard of doctrine of scriptural authority. Yet this is demonstrably untrue. Unfortunately, endless repetition in the context of heated polemical debates seems to have caused an historically untenable proposition to be regarded as a fact. But as Pelikan rightly notes,

> In Luther's day there were several theories of biblical inspiration being taught by various theologians, and the doctrine of the supreme authority, if not the sole authority, of the Scriptures was widely acknowledged by medieval scholastic theologians. The church did not need a Luther to tell it that the Bible was true.[6]

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[3] Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 12–28.

[4] Ibid., 16; cf. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[5] Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, Ltd., 1986), 270.

[6] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation*, (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1964), 21. Cf. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 67.

As several recent scholars have noted, the real issue did not concern the status of Scripture as much as it concerned the interpretation of Scripture.[7] In fact, the position the magisterial Reformers maintained was essentially that which was held in the early Church and throughout most of the medieval Church—that Scripture was the sole source of revelation; that it was the final authoritative norm of doctrine and practice; that it was to be interpreted in and by the Church; and that it was to be interpreted according to the *regula fidei*. In other words, the case can be made that the Reformers adhered to Tradition I.

Their desire was not to reject the Church or the apostolic faith; their desire was to remove the obvious accretions and abuses that had come to cripple the Church and obscure that faith. The Reformers were convinced that the Church must be reformed, not by being created from scratch, but by returning to her ancient beliefs and practices—including her ancient belief about the place of Scripture.[8] As G.C. Berkouwer notes,

> The decisive question that the Reformers considered and answered in the affirmative was as follows: Had not tradition in the Roman Catholic Church become an independent and in fact a normative authority, valid in itself, through a gradual historical process? The Reformers wished to protest against that independence and its range of influence. The sentiment was not that of an antihistorical revolt but that of a desire for preservation and continuity.[9]

As we have observed, there were, by the time of the Reformation, two main positions regarding Scripture and tradition. During the sixteenth century, however, these two views "became so associated with Protestantism on the one hand and Roman

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[7] Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, second edition, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 140; Cf. John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 80.

[8] McGrath, op. cit., 21.

[9] G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, trans. Jack B. Rogers, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 303.

Catholicism on the other that they could no longer exist within the same ecclesial and confessional body."[10] As Muller observes, "at the same time that the first great Protestant codifiers were formulating their doctrine of the priority of Scripture over tradition . . . Roman Catholic theologians were in the process of de-emphasizing the patristic and medieval tradition concerning the sufficiency of Scripture."[11] What we observe in the Reformation is not Scripture vs. tradition. Instead it is the inevitable clash between two mutually exclusive concepts of tradition: Tradition I and Tradition II.[12] The Reformers strongly asserted the position termed Tradition I, and in reaction Rome adopted, and eventually dogmatized, Tradition II.[13]

MARTIN LUTHER

If the early sixteenth century Western Church was in an unstable and volatile situation, Martin Luther was the catalyst that caused it to explode. His conflicts with Rome ignited what is called the Protestant Reformation. The concern here is with only one particular aspect of Luther's thought—his view of Scripture and tradition, but it is almost impossible to understand why Luther said and did the things he did without some understanding of his

[10] Muller, op. cit., 360.

[11] Muller, op. cit., 367–368.

[12] Oberman, op. cit., 283.

[13] McGrath, *Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 150. Oberman's thesis has been countered by A.N.S. Lane, who argues for a fourfold categorization of the historical views of tradition in "Scripture, Tradition & Church: An Historical Survey," *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975), 37–55. Lane distinguishes between the Coincidence view (tradition coincides with the content of Scripture); the Supplementary view (tradition is a second source of revelation); the Ancillary view (tradition is an aid for interpreting Scripture); and the Unfolding view (tradition is the process by which the meaning of the apostolic doctrine is gradually unfolded). The first view he identifies with the church of the first three centuries; the second with Tridentine Rome; the third with the Reformation; and the fourth with modern Roman Catholicism. He believes it is incorrect to see continuity between the Coincidence view and the Ancillary view. The reason that his criticism fails, however, is simply due to the fact that the early Church's view contained elements of the "ancillary" view, and the Reformers' position contained elements of the "coincidence" view. The broader categories suggested by Oberman are more helpful and accurate.

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The Radical Reformation, the Counter-Reformation, and Post-Reformation Developments

The ancient concept of Scripture, tradition, and ecclesiastical authority advocated by magisterial Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin was not embraced by every segment of Western Christendom. At one end of the spectrum were those Roman Catholics who advocated Tradition II—a two-source theory of tradition that had become commonplace only in the later Middle Ages. But during the early sixteenth century, as Tradition I became more and more identified with the Protestants, Tradition II by default became more and more identified as the position of those loyal to Rome.

At the other end of the spectrum were those who responded to the current Roman Catholic concept of tradition—not by adopting the early Church's concept of tradition—but by rejecting tradition altogether. These Radical Reformers insisted that not only was Scripture the sole infallible authority, but that it was the sole authority altogether. Secondary authorities such as the Church, the *regula fidei,* and the fathers were considered irrelevant at best. All that was necessary, according to these men, was the individual and his Bible. Each individual had the right to interpret the Scripture by himself and for himself.

The magisterial Reformers and their heirs were, therefore, faced with a battle on two fronts—against the Roman exaltation of the Church and against the radicals' exaltation of the

individual. This chapter examines the concepts of Scripture and tradition advocated by the radical Reformers, by the Roman Catholics in the counter-Reformation, and by the heirs of the magisterial Reformers.

THE RADICAL REFORMATION

It is difficult to accurately describe the Radical Reformation in only a few introductory sentences.[1] The term itself is rather broad and is often used to describe a variety of men and movements of the sixteenth century whose beliefs varied considerably. The earliest "radical Reformers" were probably the Anabaptist followers of Conrad Grebel in Zurich in the early 1520s.[2] Disappointed with Zwingli's allowance of magisterial influence over the Church, Grebel started a new fellowship in 1525. Their more distinctive beliefs included the rejection of infant baptism and insistence on believer's baptism (thus the name Anabaptists—or "re-baptizers"), rejection of civil oaths, strict pacifism, religious toleration of dissenters, and a doctrine of scriptural authority generally disconnected from ecclesiastical tradition of any kind. In 1527, Michael Sattler consolidated the beliefs of the Swiss Anabaptists in the Schleitheim Articles.

In South Germany, mystical Anabaptists such as Thomas Muntzer advocated revolution while pacifistic mystics such as Hans Denck advocated the transformation of the inward spirit rather than the transformation of the world. Jacob Hutter founded a communion whose distinctive mark was shared community goods. His followers, the Hutterites, have survived until this day. In the Low Countries an apocalyptic form of Anabaptism arose under the leadership of Melchoir Hofmann who believed that God's Kingdom would soon begin, thereby releasing God's

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[1] For a more thorough history of a broad spectrum of radical reform movements, see George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962).

[2] For a helpful introduction to the Anabaptist movement, see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, third edition, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996).

vengeance upon the wicked. His views spawned two radically divergent branches of "Melchoirites." The Peace Wing was pacifistic, believing that the righteous would participate in God's vengeance upon the wicked only as witnesses. This branch was later continued by Menno Simons and his followers the Mennonites. The Revolutionaries were the other branch, and under the leadership of Jan Matthys they set up a theocracy in Munster. In their understanding, they themselves were to carry out God's vengeance upon the wicked with the sword. Their rebellion was forcefully put down, and many of the leaders were executed.

Another group identified as part of the Radical Reformation was that referred to as "spiritualists." Men such as Caspar Schenkfeld rejected all external forms, ceremonies, and rites. He believed that neither baptism nor the Lord's Supper had been observed properly since apostolic times and even suggested that the Lord's Supper not be celebrated until the proper observation was once again determined. Sebastian Franck completely rejected the idea of a visible Church with visible ceremonies, insisting that the true Church is invisible and scattered until the Lord returns.

Finally a word must be said about the rationalist wing of the Radical Reformation. There were a number of men at this time who so elevated the role of reason and the right of the individual to interpret Scripture apart from the communion of saints and the ancient rule of faith that they rejected several aspects of traditional orthodox theology. Faustus Socinus, for example, rejected the doctrines of the deity of Christ, the Trinity, the atonement, original sin, predestination, and the resurrection of the body.

It would certainly be an oversimplification to argue that all of these various men and movements shared a common understanding of scriptural authority. It would be grossly unfair, for example, to suggest that either Conrad Grebel or Menno Simons shared the theological views of Socinus or Servetus. Not all of these men were anti-Trinitarians. And not all of these men were apocalyptic revolutionaries. What they did have in common, although to varying degrees, was a radicalization of the principle of *sola scriptura* and a rejection of tradition in any form. As McGrath explains,

the magisterial Reformers adopted a positive approach to tradition, particularly the *testimonia patrum,* whereas the radicals adopted a generally negative approach. To most of the radicals, the fathers were an irrelevance: every individual had the unfettered right to interpret scripture in whatever manner seemed right to him or her.[3]

Unlike the magisterial Reformers, who had sought to maintain a continuity with the ancient patristic Church, the radicals believed that they could do theology without reference to what the Church had confessed in the past.[4] They believed that the magisterial Reformers had not gone far enough in their use of the *sola scriptura* principle. According to the radicals, the magisterial Reformers may have done away with many of the scholastic theological accretions, but they wrongly insisted on adhering to the creedal formulations of ancient Christianity.[5]

Building on Oberman's terminology, Alister McGrath refers to the Anabaptist concept of Scripture and tradition as "Tradition 0"—a view which allows no role whatsoever to tradition. This is in contrast to "Tradition I", the position of the magisterial Reformers, a position which allowed for a traditional interpretation of Scripture.[6] He explains the radical view:

For the radicals (or "fanatics," as Luther dubbed them), such as Thomas Muntzer and Caspar Schwenkfeld, every individual had the right to interpret Scripture as he pleased, subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For the radical Sebastian Franck, the Bible "is a book sealed with seven seals which none can open unless he has the key of David, which is the illumination of the Spirit." The way was thus opened for individualism, with the private judgment of the individual raised above the corporate judgment of the church. Thus the radicals rejected the practice of infant

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[3] Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

[4] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels*, (London: SCM Press, Ltd., 1964), 36–38.

[5] Williams, op. cit., 240.

[6] Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, second edition, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), 144.

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Scripture on Scripture and Tradition

The debate over the relationship between the authority of Scripture and the authority of the Church has involved discussions of numerous passages of Scripture. It is well beyond the scope of this work to examine every one of these. There have, however, been certain passages and verses which have consistently surfaced in the works of those on each side of this debate. This chapter will examine some of the most important and controversial scriptural passages dealing with the nature of Scripture and tradition. The next chapter will examine some of the most important scriptural passages that deal with the authority of the Church.

The historical survey showed that the concept of Scripture and tradition which could most legitimately lay claim to being the doctrine of the early Church is that concept we have referred to as Tradition I. This was the consistent teaching of the early Church for at least the first three centuries of her existence. The question that should be asked at this point is whether this was the doctrine of the Apostles of Christ. It would be very easy to fall into any of a number of circular question-begging arguments. No one approaches Scripture without any preconceived notions or presuppositions, and if someone believes that he is able to do so, he has already implicitly adopted the position we have termed Tradition 0—which itself is a presupposition. It is perhaps unavoidable that a certain amount of circularity will be involved in any discussion of Scripture's doctrine of Scripture. Certain hermeneutical assumptions must be made by each of us before we can even begin to search the Scriptures to determine what

hermeneutical presuppositions it demands of all of us. However, if Scripture is the Word of God, as those on every side of this debate would agree, and if Christ's sheep truly can hear His voice, it cannot be futile to open the Scriptures and prayerfully examine what is written, and all the following texts have been examined with the *regula fidei* as a guiding hermeneutical principle.

SCRIPTURE ON SCRIPTURE

A complete discussion of everything Scripture teaches us about itself is obviously beyond the scope of this book.[1] The majority of Evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox who are involved in the current debate agree, for example, that Scripture is the revelation of God and that it is inspired and infallible. Rather than arguing for truths upon which all sides already agree, the focus below will be upon a few of the most debated texts in the controversy concerning the relationship between Scripture, tradition, and the Church.[2]

THE BEREANS (ACTS 17:10–11)

Acts 17:10–11 is one of the most used and abused texts of Scripture in the ongoing debate. The text itself reads as follows:

> Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

Paul's custom when entering a city was to go first to the Jewish synagogue to preach the gospel of Christ (Acts 17:2; cf. 9:20;

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[1] There are a number of excellent works that have been written for this purpose. For a good introductory study, see E.J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957).

[2] Because of the importance of the issue of the canon in this debate, it shall be discussed separately, in more detail, in Part Four.

13:5; 14; 14:1). He does the same in Berea. In order to understand what happens in Berea, it is important to grasp the surrounding context of this passage. In 17:1, Paul, Silas and Timothy arrive in Thessalonica. For three Sabbaths, Paul reasons with the Jews in the synagogue. From the Old Testament he explains and demonstrates "that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (cf. Luke 24:25–26, 44–46; Acts 3:18; 26:22–23; 1 Cor. 15:3–4; 1 Pet. 1:10–11). He declares to them that Jesus, since He has fulfilled these conditions, is the Christ, the Messiah of Israel.

When we recall the difficulty Jesus' own disciples had grasping the fact that He must suffer and die (e.g., Matt. 16:21–22), it is not surprising that this message came as news to other Jews as well. They expected the coming of the Messiah and His kingdom to be cataclysmic. The Messiah was to destroy Israel's enemies and restore her to a place of prominence. When Paul enters the synagogue and begins to show them from the Old Testament that the Messiah had to suffer and die, this is something contrary to the traditional Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament. When he tells them that the Messiah had in fact come, that He had suffered and died, and that this had been at the hands of His own people, we can only imagine their shock.

In 17:4, we are told that some of the Jews were persuaded along with a great number of the devout Greeks and numerous leading women. The reaction of the majority of the Jews, however, was envy (v. 5). Instead of continuing to examine and reason from the Old Testament, these Jews incite a mob and start a riot. They drag some of the Christians to the city rulers accusing them of treason saying, "these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus" (v. 7). The brethren, fearing for the safety of Paul, Timothy and Silas, help them escape under cover of darkness, and they leave for Berea. When they arrive, they go immediately to the synagogue of the Jews (v. 10).

This is where the text begins. We are told first in verse eleven that these Jews were more fair-minded, or noble, than the