

The Shape of *Sola Scriptura*

THE SHAPE OF
SOLA SCRIPTURA

KEITH A. MATHISON

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800-488-2034 | www.canonpress.com

Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*
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Cover design by David Dalbey.
Printed in the United States of America.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Mathison, Keith A.

The shape of sola scriptura / Keith A. Mathison.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-10: 1-885767-74-9 (pbk.)

ISBN-13: 978-1-88576-774-5 (pbk.)

1. Bible—Evidences, authority, etc. 2. Protestant churches—Doctrines.

I. Title.

BS480 .M36 2001

220.1—dc21

2001000512

09 10 11 12 13 14 15

12 11 10 9 8 7

To my father and mother.

Parents are the pride of their children
Proverbs 17:6

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Acknowledgments

As I reflect upon the completion of this book, I cannot help but smile in wonder at the amazing providence of God. When I began to study this topic almost five years ago, I did not think that I wanted to write a book on the subject. After several years of study my thoughts on the matter changed somewhat. I became absolutely certain that I did not want to write a book on the subject. It is not that I do not like the topic. One cannot study something in depth for five years unless he has at least some interest in it. The problem was the sometimes overwhelming complexity involved. It seemed at times as if every question raised ten further questions, and each of those ten questions raised ten more and so on.

This book only exists because Doug Jones at Canon Press asked me to write it. I want to thank him for asking me to do this because I may have never attempted it otherwise. I would also like to thank my beautiful wife Tricia for putting up once again with almost daily trips to and from the library. I want to thank my daughter Sarah for being such a joy and for reminding me to take frequent breaks for “play time.” I also want to thank my mom and my dad for their constant encouragement.

There are several others who contributed to this project in different ways. I would like to thank Roy Bennett, David Temples, Darren Edgington and Tom Forest for numerous conversations and discussions during the years when I was beginning to study this issue and wrestle with the many implications involved. I would also like to thank Ethan Harris for once again bearing the heavy burden of reading the first draft.

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

Orthodox apologists are making numerous inroads. We must continue to stand firm against their view which ultimately results in a Church which is a law unto itself. But we must also take a strong stand against those Protestants whose view ultimately results in each man being a law unto himself. Both positions are a deadly poison in the body of Christ, and both are condemned not only by Scripture itself, but also by the witness of the communion of saints throughout the history of the Church.

The purpose of this book is twofold. First, it is an attempt to clear away some of the often misleading historical and theological rhetoric surrounding this debate. Much of the apologetic output from proponents on all sides has either ignored or mishandled crucial historical evidence, presented confusing and often contradictory definitions of terms, and in many cases simply annihilated armies of straw men. The second purpose of this book is to outline a consistent doctrine of the authority of Scripture. Nothing novel will be said in this study, though much might be new to some ears in this debate. It is the conviction of this author that the view of the relationship between Scripture, tradition, and the Church that the Reformers attempted to restore to the Church is substantially correct. It is a doctrine for which they coined the term *sola scriptura*. It is a doctrine which has been vigorously attacked by its opponents and often misused by its supporters, but it is the Christian doctrine, and therefore it is the doctrine that will prevail.

PART ONE:
THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1. The Early Church
2. The Middle Ages
3. Martin Luther and John Calvin
4. The Radical Reformation,
the Counter-Reformation,
and Post-Reformation Developments

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

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

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.

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

⁵The 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.

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

The concept of an apostolic deposit of faith existed, but no specific term, including “tradition,” was universally used at this point to denote it.⁷

The fact that the Lord committed his teaching to the Church is also significant in the thought of the apostolic fathers. We do not find in their writings a dichotomy between the apostolic teaching and the apostolic Church. The Church is distinguished from Scripture, but the two are not opposed.⁸ The true apostolic doctrine could only be found in the true body of Christ—the Christian Church.

THE SECOND AND THIRD CENTURIES

In the second and third centuries, the Church’s struggle with the Gnostic heresy resulted in further clarification of the relationship between Scripture, tradition, and the Church. Because the Gnostics utilized scriptural texts to prove their points and because they also appealed to alleged secret apostolic traditions, the fathers were forced to explain the true relationship between Scripture and tradition.

IRENÆUS (CA. 130–200)

Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, was on the front lines in the early Church’s battle against Gnosticism. He has left the Church an immensely valuable work entitled *Against Heresies*. The book is devoted to destroying the various forms of the Gnostic heresy while at the same time defending the truth of Christianity. According to the Gnostics, the revelation of redeeming knowledge was not generally available to all men. Instead it was contained in secret apostolic traditions that were available only to those inducted into the Gnostic mysteries.⁹

⁷ Kelly, op. cit., 34–35.

⁸ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. by D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 218–219.

⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*,

In his defense of apostolic Christianity, Irenaeus developed the concept of the *regula fidei* or the “rule of faith.”¹⁰ The *regula fidei* was essentially the content of the profession of faith that every catechumen was asked to recite from memory before his or her baptism. It was a summary of the faith taught by the Apostles and committed to their disciples.¹¹ Whereas the Gnostics appealed to a secret unwritten tradition, Irenaeus appealed to the public tradition of the Church. Does this mean that Irenaeus subordinated Scripture to unwritten tradition? No. As Heiko Oberman points out,

Irenaeus insists that the rule of faith or the rule of truth (*regula fidei* or *regula veritatis*) is faithfully preserved by the apostolic Church and has found multiform expression in the canonical books. There is an unbroken continuation of the preached kerygma into Holy Scripture. One may speak here of an “inscripturisation” of the apostolic proclamation which in this written form constitutes *the* foundation and cornerstone of faith.¹²

This “inscripturisation” means for Irenaeus that the apostolic faith had been safeguarded by being permanently written in the Holy Scripture.¹³ The two were not somehow opposed, nor was Scripture “subordinate” to the other. Irenaeus simply appealed to this *regula fidei* as a necessary hermeneutical principle. The Orthodox scholar Georges Florovsky points out that in the early Church, exegesis was “the main, and probably the only, theological method, and the authority of the Scriptures was sovereign and supreme.”¹⁴ But the *regula fidei* was the necessary context for the correct interpretation of that authoritative Scripture.¹⁵ F.F. Bruce summarizes this early understanding of the rule of faith:

(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 92. Cf. H.E.W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth*, (A.R. Mowbray & Co. Ltd., 1954), 310.

¹⁰ It may be found, for example, in Book III, 4, 2 of *Against Heresies*.

¹¹ Bruce, *op. cit.*, 115–116.

¹² Oberman, *op. cit.*, 272. See also Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 38–39.

¹³ *Against Heresies* III, 1, 1. Cf. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 38.

¹⁴ Georges Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, (Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

When the summary of the apostolic tradition is called the rule of faith or the rule of truth, the implication is that this is the church's norm, the standard by which everything must be judged that presents itself for Christian faith or claims to be Christian doctrine, the criterion for the recognition of truth and exposure of error. If at times it is formally distinguished from Scripture in the sense that it is recognized as the interpretation of Scripture, at other times it is materially identical with Scripture in the sense that it sums up what Scripture says. Plainly what was written down by the apostles in their letters and what was delivered by them orally to their disciples and handed down in the church's tradition must be one and the same body of teaching.¹⁶

This concept of the *regula fidei* remained a crucial tool in the early Church's arsenal against Gnosticism and other heresies.

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA (CA. 150–CA. 215)

One of the lengthiest explanations of the relationship between Scripture, tradition and the Church in early Christian literature is found in the *Stromata* of Clement of Alexandria. Written within the historical context of the battle with Gnosticism, chapter 16 of Book VII is devoted to an elucidation of Scripture as the criterion by which truth and heresy are to be distinguished. In the very first sentence of chapter 16, Clement declares the necessity of having all things proven from Scripture: "But those who are ready to toil in the most excellent pursuits, will not desist from the search after truth, till they get the demonstration from the Scriptures themselves."¹⁷ Like Irenaeus, Clement recognizes the necessity of the *regula fidei* as the interpretive context of Scripture and the Church as the interpreter of Scripture, and he explains this relationship further in chapter 17; but throughout this chapter it is the Scripture itself that is considered the criterion of truth.¹⁸

¹⁶ Bruce, *op. cit.*, 117–118.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise noted, all patristic citations are taken from the 38 volume English edition of the fathers co-published by Wm. B. Eerdmans and T&T Clark.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, for which Rome claims a universal and continuous tradition, is explicitly declared by Clement to be false in this chapter.

TERTULLIAN (CA. 155–220)

Tertullian's explanation of the relationship between the Scripture, tradition, and the Church does not differ in any significant way from that of Irenaeus. Like Irenaeus, he does not contrast Scripture and tradition; instead he claims the oral preaching of the Apostles was written down in Scripture.¹⁹ For Tertullian, as Kelly explains, "Scripture has absolute authority; whatever it teaches is necessarily true, and woe betide ["befall"] him who accepts doctrines not discoverable in it."²⁰ In refuting a particular tenet of Docetism, for example, Tertullian writes, "But there is no evidence of this, because Scripture says nothing."²¹ When contending against the patripassianism of Praxeas, he writes, "Let us be content with saying that Christ died, the Son of the Father; and let this suffice, because the Scriptures have told us so much."²² In contending against Hermogenes' teaching that matter is eternal, he says, "But whether all things were made out of any underlying Matter, I have as yet failed anywhere to find. Where such a statement is written, Hermogenes' shop must tell us. If it is nowhere written, then let it fear the woe which impends on all who add or take away from the written word."²³

We also find in Tertullian "a marked insistence on the decisive difference between the tradition of God, preserved in the canon and the traditions of man (*consuetudines*)."²⁴ In chapter 13 of *On Prescription Against Heretics*, Tertullian condemns as madness the idea that the Apostles "did not reveal all to all men" but instead "proclaimed some openly and to all the world, whilst they disclosed others (only) in secret and to a few." This Gnostic idea of a secret apostolic tradition Tertullian heartily condemns.

Like Irenaeus, Tertullian outlines the *regula fidei* in a number of

¹⁹ Kelly, *op. cit.*, 39.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *On the Flesh of Christ*, ch. 6. Docetism (from the Greek *dokein*, meaning "to think or suppose") was an early heresy that denied the reality of the incarnation. According to the Docetists, Christ's human body only "appeared" to be real.

²² *Against Praxeas*, ch. 29.

²³ *Against Hermogenes*, ch. 22.

²⁴ Oberman, *op. cit.*, 274.

places throughout his writings.²⁵ In chapter 13 of his treatise *On the Prescription Against Heretics*, for example, he describes the rule of faith as

the belief that there is only one God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen “in diverse manners” by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets, at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ; thenceforth He preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe; will come with glory to take the saints to the enjoyment of everlasting life and of the heavenly promises, and to condemn the wicked to everlasting fire, after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh.

One will immediately notice the similarity in overall form between this early outline of the rule of faith and what later became known as the Apostles’ Creed. The rule of faith, like the Apostles’ Creed, follows a Trinitarian outline, beginning with a confession of faith in the Father, followed by a confession of faith in the Son and the Holy Spirit. It must also be noted that as in the case of Irenaeus, for Tertullian, the Scriptures are in no way subordinated to this “rule of faith.” It is the Scriptures, according to Tertullian, that “indeed furnish us with our Rule of faith.”²⁶ But it is the rule of faith that is the hermeneutical context for a proper interpretation of Scripture. Because both the apostolic Scriptures and the apostolic rule of faith have as their source the Apostles, they are mutually reciprocal and indivisible for Tertullian.²⁷

²⁵ Eg., *On Prescription Against Heretics*, ch. 13; *Against Praxeas*, ch. 2; *On the Veiling of Virgins*, ch. 1.

²⁶ *Against Praxeas*, ch. 11.

²⁷ *On Prescription Against Heretics*, ch. 19.

HIPPOLYTUS (CA. 170–236)

Further testimony demonstrating patristic belief in the one source understanding of God's self-revelation may be found in the writing of Hippolytus. In a work entitled *Against the Heresy of One Noetus*, Hippolytus explains the source of our knowledge of God.

There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source. For just as a man, if he wishes to be skilled in the wisdom of this world, will find himself unable to get at it in any other way than by mastering the dogmas of philosophers, so all of us who wish to practice piety will be unable to learn its practice from any other quarter than the oracles of God. Whatever things, then, the Holy Scriptures declare, at these let us look; and whatsoever things they teach, these let us learn; and as the Father wills our belief to be, let us believe; and as He wills the Son to be glorified, let us glorify Him; and as He wills the Holy Spirit to be bestowed, let us receive Him. Not according to our own will, nor according to our own mind, nor yet as using violently those things which are given by God, but even as He has chosen to teach them by the Holy Scriptures, so let us discern them.²⁸

Hippolytus does not divorce the Holy Scriptures from the Church or from the *regula fidei*. In fact, he includes a summary of how the Church used the *regula fidei* in their condemnation of Noetus,²⁹ but the Holy Scripture is held forth as the unique standard and only source for the knowledge of God.

CYPRIAN (CA. 200–258)

Further insight into the early Church's understanding of the relationship between Scripture, the Church, and tradition may be gained through an examination of the letters of Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage. The question of lapsed Christians was a

²⁸ *Against Noetus*, ch. 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 1.

contentious issue at this time, and Cyprian quarreled extensively with Pope Stephen over the question of baptism.³⁰ What is of interest at this point is not the subject of the debate so much as the manner of the debate and the principles expressed. In a letter written to explain Stephen's actions, Cyprian directly accuses the pope of error. He writes, "I have sent you a copy of his reply; on the reading of which, you will more and more observe his error in endeavoring to maintain the cause of heretics against Christians, and against the Church of God."³¹ He continues,

Let nothing be innovated, says he, nothing maintained, except what has been handed down. Whence is that tradition? Whether does it descend from the authority of the Lord and of the Gospel, or does it come from the commands and the epistles of the apostles? For that those things which are written must be done, God witnesses and admonishes, saying to Joshua the son of Nun: "The book of this law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate in it day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein."³²

Cyprian grieves over this error of Stephen: "What obstinacy is that, or what presumption, to prefer human tradition to divine ordinance, and not to observe that God is indignant and angry as often as human tradition relaxes and passes by the divine precepts."³³ He laments the fact that "that which is done without against the Church is defended within the very Church itself."³⁴ And arguing against the pope's own claim that he is merely defending the ancient tradition of the Church, Cyprian counters, "Nor ought custom, which had crept in among some, to prevent the truth from prevailing and conquering; for custom without truth is the antiquity of error."³⁵

³⁰ William La Due, *The Chair of Saint Peter: A History of the Papacy*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), 33–39.

³¹ *Epistle* 73:1.

³² *Epistle* 73:2.

³³ *Epistle* 73:3.

³⁴ *Epistle* 73:8.

³⁵ *Epistle* 73:9.

In a letter from Firmilian, the Bishop of Caeserea, to Cyprian regarding Pope Stephen's actions, we gain another witness to the attitude of the early Church towards authority. Firmilian writes, "they who are at Rome do not observe those things in all cases which are handed down from the beginning, and vainly pretend the authority of the apostles."³⁶ He argues that by advocating heresy, Pope Stephen has broken the peace and unity of the Catholic Church.³⁷ There is no intimation here, or anywhere in the ante-Nicene fathers, of a *charism* or gift of infallibility given to the Roman bishop which automatically preserves him from doctrinal deviation from the apostolic faith. Not only is the possibility of grievous error assumed, it is expressly declared to have been embraced.

THE FOURTH AND FIFTH CENTURIES

The fourth and fifth centuries of the Church's history were a period of great theological controversy and great theological consolidation. It was during this period of time that the intense Trinitarian and Christological battles reached their climax. It was also during these two centuries that the standards of Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy were clarified and explained at the ecumenical councils of Nicea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (A.D. 381), Ephesus (A.D. 431), and Chalcedon (A.D. 451) and officially set forth in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon.

ATHANASIUS (CA. 296–373)

Considered to be the greatest theologian of his time, Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, was a key player in the fourth-century battle with the Arian heresy. His tireless efforts were largely responsible for the great ecumenical council at Nicea in

³⁶ *Epistle* 74:6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

A.D. 325, which officially condemned Arianism and vindicated the orthodox doctrine.³⁸

Like earlier heretics the Arians appealed to Scripture and, in fact, insisted that all discussion be restricted to the text of Scripture. Athanasius's critique of these heretics, therefore, proves invaluable to a study of the early Church's concept of authority. Athanasius does not deny the sufficiency of Scripture for the defense of the truth. Instead he often explicitly affirms it. He states in one place that "the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth."³⁹ Elsewhere he argues that "holy Scripture is of all things most sufficient for us" and urges "those who desire to know more of these matters to read the Divine word."⁴⁰ And again he says, "divine Scripture is sufficient above all things."⁴¹

The error of the heretics, according to Athanasius, is not in their appeal to Scripture but in their appeal to Scripture taken out of the context of the apostolic faith, that which Irenaeus referred to as the *regula fidei*. As Florovsky notes,

This "rule," however, was in no sense an "extraneous" authority which could be "imposed" on the Holy Writ. It was the same "Apostolic preaching," which was written down in the books of the New Testament, but it was, as it were, this preaching *in epitome*.⁴²

According to Athanasius, Holy Scripture is the apostolic *paradosis* or "tradition."⁴³ There is no second source concept of tradition. In his entire debate with the Arians, Athanasius never appeals to any plural "traditions."⁴⁴ He appeals to the sufficiency of the Holy Scripture as interpreted within the context of the apostolic *regula fidei*.

³⁸ For a history of the events and debates surrounding the Arian controversy and the Council of Nicea, see Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 33–80; cf. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 280–309.

³⁹ *Against the Heathen*, I: 3.

⁴⁰ *To the Bishops of Egypt*, I:4.

⁴¹ *De Synodis*, I, 1, 6.

⁴² Florovsky, *op. cit.*, 82–83.

⁴³ *Ad Adelphium*, 6.

⁴⁴ Florovsky, 83.

HILARY OF POITIERS (CA. 300–367)

The concern for interpreting the authoritative Scriptures within the context of the apostolic faith is repeated in the writings of Hilary, the Bishop of Poitiers. The apostolic rule of faith and the Holy Scripture are essentially one and the same for Hilary. In his treatise *On the Councils*, he provides a brief outline of the evangelical and apostolic tradition and then concludes, “For all those things which were written in the divine Scriptures by Prophets and by Apostles we believe and follow truly and with fear.”⁴⁵ The same truths he refers to as the apostolic tradition he refers to as written in the Scriptures.

These Scriptures, however, cannot be interpreted apart from the context of the apostolic faith without destroying their meaning. He writes of heretics, “Such is their error, such their pestilent teaching; to support it they borrow the words of Scripture, perverting its meaning and using the ignorance of men as their opportunity of gaining credence for their lies.”⁴⁶ Scripture is the final doctrinal authority, according to Hilary, but only when it is interpreted rightly. The mere use of Scripture does not guarantee the right use of Scripture.

CYRIL OF JERUSALEM (CA. 315–CA. 384)

One of the most fascinating statements made by any of the early Church fathers concerning the authority of Scripture is found in the *Catechetical Lectures* of Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem. He writes,

For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell thee these things, give not absolute credence, unless thou receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *On the Councils*, 29–30.

⁴⁶ *On the Trinity*, IV:14.

⁴⁷ *Catechetical Lectures*, IV:17.

Here we find stated, about as clearly as possible, the necessity of firm scriptural proof for every article of faith. Cyril tells his catechumens not to rest their faith upon plausibility or ingenious arguments or even upon his own authority as a Bishop, but to rest it upon clear proof from the Holy Scripture.

THE TRANSITIONAL PERIOD

Thus far the testimony of the early Church fathers regarding the question of authority is consistent. Scripture is the authority, but it must be interpreted according to the apostolic *regula fidei*. As noted by G.L. Prestige, "The voice of the Bible could be plainly heard only if its text were interpreted broadly and rationally, in accordance with the apostolic creed and the evidence of the historical practice of Christendom."⁴⁸ In a number of historical studies, the church historian Heiko Oberman describes the characteristics of this early patristic position. As he explains, this one source concept of "tradition" has two primary qualities:

1. The immediate divine origin of tradition together with the insistence on a clearly circumscribed series of historical acts of God in the rule of faith or the rule of truth.
2. The rejection of extra-scriptural tradition.⁴⁹

For the sake of clarity, Oberman terms this "single exegetical tradition of interpreted scripture 'Tradition I'."⁵⁰ It is this view which was universally held for the first three centuries of the Church. During the fourth century, however, a transitional period began as several prominent fathers started to hint at a two-source concept of tradition.

⁴⁸ Cited by Florovsky, 80.

⁴⁹ Heiko Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1986), 276. Cf. also Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 361–393.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 280. Because of the value of Oberman's thesis and because it has been built upon by other historical scholars, this study will continue to use his terminology.

BASIL THE GREAT (CA. 330–379)

It is in the fourth-century writings of Basil the Great that we find for the first time the suggestion “that the Christian owes equal respect and obedience to written and to unwritten ecclesiastical traditions, whether contained in canonical writings or in secret oral tradition handed down by the Apostles through their successors.”⁵¹ The passage in question is found in Basil’s treatise *On the Holy Spirit*. He writes,

Of the beliefs and practices whether generally accepted or publicly enjoined which are preserved in the Church some we possess derived from written teaching; others we have received delivered to us “in a mystery” by the tradition of the apostles; and both of these in relation to true religion have the same force. And these no one will gainsay; no one, at all events, who is even moderately versed in the institutions of the Church. For were we to attempt to reject such customs as have no written authority, on the ground that the importance they possess is small, we should unintentionally injure the Gospel in its very vitals; or, rather, should make our public definition a mere phrase and nothing more.⁵²

As we shall see, these comments by Basil were seized upon in the late Middle Ages by canon lawyers and theologians seeking to defend an authoritative second extra-Biblical source of revelation. And while it is very possible that Basil’s teaching is the first explicit instance of what Oberman terms “Tradition II,” the case has been made by the Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky that Basil meant nothing of the sort. He notes,

In any case, one should not be embarrassed by the contention of St. Basil that *dogmata* were delivered or handed down by the Apostles, *en misterio*. It would be a flagrant mistranslation if we render it as “in secret.” The only accurate rendering is: “by the way of mysteries,” that is—under the form of rites and

⁵¹ Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 369.

⁵² *On the Holy Spirit*, 66.

(liturgical) usages, or “habits.” In fact, it is precisely what St. Basil says himself: *ta pleista ton mustikon agraphos hemin empoliteuetai*. [Most of the mysteries are communicated to us by an unwritten way]. The term *ta mustika* refers here, obviously to the rites of Baptism and Eucharist, which are, for St. Basil, of “Apostolic” origin. . . . Indeed, all instances quoted by St. Basil in this connection are of ritual or liturgical nature.⁵³

All of these liturgical rites, according to Basil, come from a “silent” and “private” tradition. But, as Florovsky notes, “[t]his ‘silent’ and ‘mystical’ tradition, ‘which has not been made public,’ is not an esoteric doctrine, reserved for some particular elite.” In fact, “the ‘elite’ was the Church.”⁵⁴ The historical context sheds some light on this obscure concept:

St. Basil is referring here to what is now denoted as *disciplina arcani*. [The discipline of secrecy]. In the fourth century this “discipline” was in wide use, was formally imposed and advocated in the Church. It was related to the institution of the Catechumenate and had primarily an educational and didactic purpose. On the other hand, as St. Basil says himself, certain “traditions” had to be kept “unwritten” in order to prevent profanation at the hands of the infidel. This remark obviously refers to rites and usages. It may be recalled at this point that, in the practice of the Fourth century, the Creed (and also the Dominical Prayer) were a part of this “discipline of secrecy” and could not be disclosed to the noninitiated. The Creed was reserved for the candidates for Baptism, at the last stage of their instruction, after they had been solemnly enrolled and approved. The Creed was communicated, or “traditioned,” to them by the bishop *orally* and they had to recite it by memory before him. . . . The Catechumens were strongly urged not to divulge the Creed to outsiders and not to commit it to writing. It had to be inscribed in their hearts.⁵⁵

It is against this historical context and background that Basil’s comments must be interpreted and understood.

⁵³ Florovsky, *op. cit.*, 86–87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 87–88.

The only difference between *dogma* and *kerygma* was in the manner of their transmission: dogma is kept “in silence” and *kerygmata* are “publicized”. . . . But their intent is identical: they convey the same faith, if in different manners. . . . Thus, the “unwritten tradition,” in rites and symbols, does not actually add anything to the content of the scriptural faith: it only puts this faith in focus. . . . St. Basil’s appeal to “unwritten tradition” was actually an appeal to the faith of the Church. . . . He pleaded that, apart from this “unwritten” rule of faith, it was impossible to grasp the true intention and teaching of the Scripture itself. St. Basil was strictly scriptural in his theology: Scripture was for him the supreme criterion of doctrine.⁵⁶

Basil explicitly declares Scripture to be his supreme criterion in one of his many letters. Writing about his controversy with the heretics, he says,

Their complaint is that their custom does not accept this, and that Scripture does not agree. What is my reply? I do not consider it fair that the custom which obtains among them should be regarded as a law and rule of orthodoxy. If custom is to be taken in proof of what is right, then it is certainly competent for me to put forward on my side the custom which obtains here. If they reject this, we are clearly not bound to follow them. Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the Word of God, in favor of that side will be cast the vote of truth.⁵⁷

The evidence seems to indicate that, despite the inherent ambiguity of his infamous words, Basil did not intend to be understood as teaching a two-source concept of revelation.

GREGORY OF NYSSA (CA. 335–CA. 394)

Gregory, his brother Basil the Great, and their lifelong friend Gregory of Nazianzus, are known to historians as the Cappado-

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 88–89.

⁵⁷ *Letters*, 189:3.

cian Fathers. These men are best known for their detailed defense of Nicene Trinitarianism against the attacks of the Arian heretics. Gregory, who was ordained Bishop of Nyssa, wrote a large number of philosophical, theological and apologetic treatises. One of these works, entitled *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, contains a summary statement of his view of the authority of Scripture. The book is set forth in the form of a dialogue between Gregory and Macrina, who is referred to as “the Teacher.” Throughout the book, Gregory raises the objections of the philosophers to the Christian doctrine, and the Teacher answers. Near the beginning of the tract, Gregory summarizes the orthodox Christian answer to the speculations of philosophers. He writes,

But while the latter proceeded, on the subject of the soul, as far in the direction of supposed consequences as the thinker pleased, we are not entitled to such license, I mean that of affirming what we please; we make the Holy Scriptures the rule and the measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings.⁵⁸

Although written in the context of a philosophical debate, the intent of Gregory’s statement is clear. The Scripture is the doctrinal norm of the Christian faith.

J.N.D. Kelly suggests that Gregory differentiated between Scripture and an extra-scriptural tradition when, in his desire to prove the unique generation of the Son, he argued that it is sufficient that “we have the tradition descending to us from the fathers, like an inheritance transmitted from the apostles along the line of holy persons who succeeded them.”⁵⁹ It is unclear, however, that Gregory meant anything different here than what the earlier fathers meant by their use of tradition. In fact, Gregory himself explains in another place:

⁵⁸ *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. There are no book or chapter divisions in the Eerdmans English edition of this text. See, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, Vol. V, 439.

⁵⁹ Cited in Kelly, *op. cit.*, 45.

The Christian Faith, which in accordance with the command of our Lord, has been preached to all nations by His disciples, is neither of men, nor by men, but by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. . . . He, I say, appeared on earth and “conversed with men,” that men might no longer have opinions according to their own notions about the Self-existent, formulating into a doctrine the hints that come to them from vague conjectures, but that we might be convinced that God has truly been manifested in the flesh, and believe that to be the only true “mystery of godliness,” which was delivered to us by the very Word and God, Who by Himself spake to His Apostles, and that we might receive the teaching concerning the transcendent nature of the Deity which is given to us, as it were, “through a glass darkly” from the older Scriptures—from the Law, and the Prophets, and the Sapiential [Wisdom] Books, as an evidence of the truth fully revealed to us, reverently accepting the meaning of the things which have been spoken, so as to accord in the faith set forth by the Lord of the whole Scriptures, which faith we guard as we received it, *word for word*, in purity, without falsification, judging even a slight divergence from the *words delivered to us* an extreme blasphemy and impiety. . . . In the Faith then which was delivered by God to the Apostles we admit neither subtraction, nor alteration, nor addition, knowing assuredly that he who presumes to pervert the Divine utterance by dishonest quibbling, the same “is of his father the devil,” who *leaves the words of truth* and “speaks his own,” becoming the father of a lie.⁶⁰

The emphasis throughout this passage is that the faith—the tradition—that is handed down is clearly written “word for word.” In other words it is the apostolic Scriptures, together with the older Scriptures, from which Gregory admits no subtraction, alteration or addition.

JOHN CHRYSOSTOM (CA. 347–407)

Considered one of the “doctors” of the Church, John spent a number of years as a deacon and elder in the church at Antioch.

⁶⁰ *Against Eunomius*, II:1. Emphasis mine.

His gift of preaching was so admired that it later earned him the nickname *Chrysostomos* or “golden mouth.” In A.D. 398, John became the Bishop of Constantinople, one of the great sees of the ancient Church, but it is his gifted preaching for which he is most remembered.

Unlike Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, whose support of Tradition II is ambiguous at best, John seems to clearly embrace a two-source concept of revelation. While he will without hesitation assert the authority of Scripture, he also seems to assert the existence of authoritative unwritten apostolic traditions. An explicit declaration of John’s view of the authority of Scripture is found in his sermon on 2 Timothy 3:16–17. In his examination of this passage, John carefully comments on each phrase. He writes regarding the ways in which Scripture is profitable for doctrine:

For thence we shall know, whether we ought to learn or to be ignorant of anything. And thence we may disprove what is false, thence we may be corrected and brought to a right mind, may be comforted and consoled, and if anything is deficient, we may have it added to us.

“That the man of God may be perfect.” For this is the exhortation of the Scripture given, that the man of God may be rendered perfect by it; without this therefore he cannot be perfect. Thou hast the Scriptures, he says, in place of me. If thou wouldst learn anything, thou mayest learn it from them. And if he thus wrote to Timothy who was filled with the Spirit, how much more to us!⁶¹

One of the most interesting comments John makes here is his assertion that the Scriptures are what the man of God now has “in place of” an Apostle. The authority of the Apostles is now found in their writings—the Scripture. In another place John tells his hearers, “I exhort and entreat you all, disregard what this man and that man thinks about these things, and inquire from the Scriptures all these things.”⁶²

⁶¹ *Homilies on II Timothy*, IX.

⁶² *Homilies on II Corinthians*, XIII.

This, however, is not all that John has to say. In a homily on 2 Thessalonians 2:15, John says that,

It is manifest that they [the Apostles] did not deliver all things by Epistle, but many things also unwritten, and in like manner both the one and the other are worthy of credit. Therefore let us think the tradition of the Church also worthy of credit. It is a tradition, seek no farther.⁶³

While it is possible that John may have meant no more than Basil, the specific distinction between what is written and what is unwritten is clear.

AUGUSTINE (354–430)

Probably the greatest theologian in the first thousand years of the Church, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, is known popularly for his *Confessions*. Equally important, although less familiar to most, are his numerous theological works such as *On the Trinity*, the anti-Pelagian writings, and his massive and highly influential philosophy of history—*The City of God*.

According to Oberman, Augustine is clearly an early proponent of Tradition II—the concept of tradition that allows for an authoritative extra-biblical source of revelation. On the one hand he repeatedly asserts the primacy and authority of Scripture. For example, in his moral treatise *On the Good of Widowhood*, he writes,

What more can I teach you, than what we read in the Apostle? For holy Scripture setteth a rule to our teaching, that we dare not “be wise more than it behoveth to be wise.”⁶⁴

Likewise in *The Unity of the Church*, he writes,

Let us not hear: This I say, this you say; but, thus says the Lord. Surely it is the books of the Lord on whose authority we both

⁶³ *Homilies on II Thessalonians*, IV.

⁶⁴ *On the Good of Widowhood*, 2.

agree and which we both believe. There let us seek the church, there let us discuss our case. . . . Let those things be removed from our midst which we quote against each other not from divine canonical books but from elsewhere. Someone may perhaps ask: Why do you want to remove these things from the midst? Because I do not want the holy church proved by human documents but by divine oracles.⁶⁵

Augustine also makes it clear that the *regula fidei* is essentially a summary of Holy Scripture. In a sermon to catechumens, he declares that the words of the Creed “which ye have heard are in the Divine Scriptures scattered up and down; but thence gathered and reduced into one.”⁶⁶

If this were all Augustine said, we could confidently conclude that he shared the same concept of tradition taught in the first three centuries. However, while Augustine clearly asserts the authority of scriptural revelation, he also suggests that there is an authoritative extra-scriptural oral tradition. This comes out most obviously in his writings on issues such as baptism. He writes, for example, in one treatise on the subject, “if any one seek for divine authority in this matter, though what is held by the whole Church, and that not as instituted by Councils, but as a matter of invariable custom, is rightly held to have been handed down by apostolic authority.”⁶⁷ And in a comment on Cyprian’s controversy with Pope Stephen, he adds,

“The Apostles,” indeed, “gave no injunctions on the point;” but the custom, which is opposed to Cyprian, may be supposed to have had its origin in apostolic tradition, just as there are many things which are observed by the whole Church, and therefore are fairly held to have been enjoined by the apostles, which yet are not mentioned in their writings.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ *The Unity of the Church*, 3. Cited in Martin Chemnitz, *An Examination of the Council of Trent*, Vol. I, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 157.

⁶⁶ *On the Creed: A Sermon to the Catechumens*, I.

⁶⁷ *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, IV: 24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, V: 23.

On the face of it, this statement and the others like it appear to indicate that Augustine advocated a two-source concept of tradition. And it is very possible that he did embrace this view. It is certainly true that his statements were later interpreted in that way. But when we consider the fact that his suggestive comments (like those of Basil) almost all occur within the context of debates over liturgical and ritual issues, the possibility must remain open that Augustine meant nothing more than what Basil meant and that neither intended to advocate a new concept of tradition.

In addition to the comments Augustine made regarding Scripture and tradition, there are numerous statements in his writings regarding the authority of the Church. Perhaps the most infamous statement of Augustine that bears on the question of ecclesiastical authority is one he made in his anti-Manichaean writings. The statement itself reads as follows: "For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church."⁶⁹ This brief comment has become a foundational proof-text for modern Roman Catholicism's ecclesiastical claims, but it remains to be seen whether it can bear the weight placed upon it. As Oberman explains, Augustine's assertion of "practical priority" was later interpreted as an assertion of "metaphysical priority."⁷⁰ The actual language and context of Augustine's comment, however, will not allow for this interpretation. Oberman points out that "moved" is a translation of the Latin *commovit me* and that here "the Church must be understood to have an authority to direct (*commovere*) the believer to the door which leads to the fullness of the Word itself."⁷¹ Florovsky explains the importance of a contextual reading of Augustine:

The phrase must be read in its context. First of all, St. Augustine did not utter this sentence on his own behalf. He spoke of the attitude which a simple believer had to take, when confronted

⁶⁹ *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus*, ch. 5.

⁷⁰ Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 278.

⁷¹ Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1967), 56.

with the heretical claim for authority. In this situation it was proper for a simple believer to appeal to the authority of the Church, from which, and in which, he had received the Gospel itself: *ipsi Evangelio catholicis praedicantibus credidi*. [I believed the Gospel itself, being instructed by catholic preachers]. The Gospel and the preaching of the *Catholica* belong together. St. Augustine had no intention “to subordinate” the Gospel to the Church. He only wanted to emphasize that “Gospel” is actually received always in the context of Church’s catholic preaching and simply cannot be separated from the Church. Only in this context it can be assessed and properly understood. Indeed, the witness of the Scripture is ultimately “self-evident,” but only for the faithful, for those who have achieved a certain “spiritual” maturity,—and this is only possible within the Church. He opposed this teaching and preaching *auctoritas* of the Church Catholic to the pretentious vagaries of Manichean exegesis. The Gospel did not belong to the Manicheans. *Catholicae Ecclesiae auctoritas* [the authority of the Catholic Church] was not an independent source of faith. But it was the indispensable principle of sound interpretation. Actually, the sentence could be converted: one should not believe the Church, unless one was moved by the Gospel. The relationship is strictly reciprocal.⁷²

In this Augustine is in agreement with the earlier fathers who insisted on the necessary role of the Church. The evidence simply does not support later medieval concepts of a Church that has metaphysical priority over Holy Scripture. This interpretation (which persists today) stems from taking one sentence out of context and reading far more into it than that context will allow.

The evidence does, however, lend possible support to Oberman’s assertion that Augustine is one of the first, if not the first, Latin father to explicitly endorse a two-source concept of revelation. This is significant because, as Pelikan notes, “in a manner and to a degree unique for any Christian thinker outside the New Testament, Augustine has determined the form and the content of church doctrine for most of Western Christian history.”⁷³

⁷² Florovsky, *op. cit.*, 92.

⁷³ Pelikan, *op. cit.*, 293.

THE VINCENTIAN CANON

As we have seen, the question of how to distinguish truth from heresy has always faced the Church. From the first century onward, heresies have arisen, and Christians have been forced to combat them. We've seen the manner in which the concept of the *regula fidei* developed and guided patristic apologetics. One of the fullest and most influential treatments of the question of discernment to be found in the early Christian fathers is Vincent of Lerins's *Comonitory*.

VINCENT OF LERINS (D. CA. 450)

Little is known of the author of the *Comonitory*. The book is written under an assumed name, but it is attributed to Vincent of Lerins by Gennadius in the late fourth century, and his judgment has been almost unanimously accepted. The object of the book is to provide a standard or rule by which apostolic Christian truth may be distinguished from heresy.⁷⁴ Because of its significance, the relevant parts of Vincent's comments are quoted in full.

[W]hether I or any one else should wish to detect the frauds and avoid the snares of heretics as they rise, and to continue sound and complete in the Catholic faith, we must, the Lord helping, fortify our own belief in two ways; first by the authority of the Divine Law, and then, by the Tradition of the Catholic Church.

But here some one perhaps will ask, Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church's interpretation? For this reason—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters. . . . Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation.

⁷⁴ *Comonitory*, I.

Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense “Catholic,” which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.⁷⁵

For the purposes of this study it must be determined whether Vincent embraced a one-source or two-source concept of tradition. Did he embrace “Tradition I” or “Tradition II”?

Oberman notes that Vincent’s view does not allow for an authoritative extra-scriptural tradition. Vincent does not reject the material sufficiency of Scripture, only the formal sufficiency.⁷⁶ He argues that Scripture must be interpreted by the Church because heretics have repeatedly promoted their own various false interpretations. However, “the sole purpose of interpretation is preservation: the faith once declared to the Apostles has to be protected against change, which represents for him perversion.”⁷⁷ As Florovsky notes,

Tradition was not, according to Vincent, an independent instance, nor was it a complementary source of faith. Ecclesiastical understanding could not add anything to the Scripture. But it was the only means to ascertain and to disclose the true meaning of Scripture. Tradition was, in fact, the authentic interpretation of Scripture. And in this sense it was coextensive with Scripture. Tradition was actually Scripture rightly understood. And

⁷⁵ Ibid., II.

⁷⁶ Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 279.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 279.

Scripture was for Vincent the only, primary and ultimate, canon of Christian truth.⁷⁸

In this Vincent was completely consistent with the early fathers' concept of tradition. Vincent does not establish any secret oral tradition as the standard of proper interpretation; instead he finds this standard in the consensus of the fathers. And yet, it is important to note, as Oberman observes, that "Vincent does not want the interpretation of the Church, which one may call the exegetical tradition, to become a second tradition or source apart from Holy Scripture."⁷⁹ Even the most godly of the fathers "are in principle *magistri probabiles*, teachers whose utterances are probable but do not yet constitute proof."⁸⁰

In Vincent, we find one of the fullest early examinations of the vexing problem of authority. The standard Vincent sets forth by which one may distinguish truth from error is consistent with the one-source concept of tradition (Tradition I) found universally throughout the early fathers. His view of an authoritative exegetical tradition is directly opposed to any kind of two-source concept of tradition.⁸¹

THE AUTHORITY OF COUNCILS, CREEDS, AND FATHERS

The patristic attitude toward the authority of the Councils, the creeds, and their predecessors also plays into this debate. The discussion of Irenaeus and Tertullian illustrated the importance of the *regula fidei* in the early decades of the Church's history. It is interesting to note the gradual way in which the earliest creeds built upon the rule of faith. As F.F. Bruce explains,

In Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen alike this summary of the content of the apostles' teaching is in three sections, relating respectively to God the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. This

⁷⁸ Florovsky, op. cit., 74-75.

⁷⁹ Oberman, op. cit., 280.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Cf. *Comonitory*, III.

⁸¹ Ibid.

is comparable to the primitive baptismal confession of the Gentile churches, which consisted of an affirmative answer to the threefold question, framed more or less like this: Do you believe in God the Father? And in his Son Jesus Christ? And in the Holy Spirit? The response to this threefold question forms the skeleton on which were built up the early creeds, best known of which is the Roman creed, the ancestor of what we call the Apostles' Creed. But even the old Roman creed, and to a much more marked degree the creeds of the eastern churches (culminating in the Creed of Nicea and what we traditionally call the Nicene Creed) amplify the original threefold response by means of such a summary of the faith as we find in Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen. Thus, even if the baptismal confession and the "rule of faith" were independent in origin, they came in time to interpenetrate each other, until from the fourth century onward the ecumenical creed supersedes the appeal to the rule of faith.⁸²

The Creed was essentially a continuation of the *regula fidei*, expressing the same truths in a fuller way.

In the first three centuries of the Church, councils were occasional meetings held to discuss and decide upon issues of concern to the many local churches. The earliest councils were regarded more as "charismatic events" than ecclesiastical institutions.⁸³ Councils were never accepted as valid in advance in spite of the appearance of formal regularity. That this is true is clearly observed when we realize that many councils were disavowed.⁸⁴ In the fourth and fifth century there were four councils which gained a place of special prominence in the Church and were termed "ecumenical councils."⁸⁵ These councils dealt with significant Trinitarian and Christological issues that were rending the Church apart.

Until the division between the Eastern and Western churches,

⁸² Bruce, *op. cit.*, 115–116.

⁸³ Florovsky, *op. cit.*, 96.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Nicea in A.D. 325; Constantinople in A.D. 381; Ephesus in A.D. 431; and Chalcedon in A.D. 451. For a good summary of the history of the ecumenical councils see Leo Donald Davis, *op. cit.*

an ecumenical council was defined “as a synod the decrees of which have found acceptance by the Church in the whole world.”⁸⁶ Their acceptance in the early Church is illustrated by the way in which some early Christians referred to the Church as “the Church of the four Gospels and the four councils.”⁸⁷ Their purpose, however, was not to supplant Scripture. Their purpose was to defend the apostolic interpretation of Scripture against the attacks of the heretics. Athanasius, for example, wrote the following in response to Arians calling for another council after Nicea: “Vainly then do they run about with the pretext that they have demanded Councils for the faith’s sake; for divine Scripture is sufficient above all things.”⁸⁸

Similarly, we find that a patristic appeal to earlier fathers is not an appeal to an authority equal to or above Scripture. As Florovsky reminds us, “It must be kept in mind that the main, if not also the only, manual of faith and doctrine was, in the ancient Church, precisely the Holy Writ.”⁸⁹ Appeal to the fathers was made in order to guarantee faithfulness to the proper interpretation of that authoritative Holy Scripture. As J.N.D. Kelly observes, “the authority of the fathers consisted precisely in the fact that they had so faithfully and fully expounded the real intention of the Bible writers.”⁹⁰ Scripture was the doctrinal norm of the fathers. The clearest evidence of this is the fact that

almost the entire theological effort of the fathers, whether their aims were polemical or constructive, was expended upon what amounted to the exposition of the Bible. Further, it was everywhere taken for granted that, for any doctrine to win acceptance, it had first to establish its scriptural basis.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Henry R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*, Vol. XIV of *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), xi. Since the split, Rome has redefined the definition of an ecumenical council to emphasize the role of the Bishop of Rome. Cf. Leo Donald Davis, *op. cit.*, 323.

⁸⁷ Pelikan, *op. cit.*, 335.

⁸⁸ *De Synodis*, I, 1, 6.

⁸⁹ Florovsky, *op. cit.*, 102.

⁹⁰ Kelly, *op. cit.*, 49.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 46. Kelly illustrates this by pointing out the difficulty that faced those who championed novel theological terms like *homoousios*. The objection that was

This is why the fathers were cited in the early Church—because they were faithful interpreters of Scripture. They were not cited as a second source of revelation or a second authority on par with Scripture.

SUMMARY

For the first three centuries, we find a general consensus regarding authority. The New Testament which was the “inscripturisation” of the apostolic proclamation, together with the “older Scriptures,” was the source of revelation and the authoritative doctrinal norm. The Scripture was to be interpreted by the Church and in the Church within the context of the *regula fidei*. If it was taken out of its apostolic context, it would inevitably be mishandled. Yet neither the Church nor the *regula fidei* were considered second sources of revelation or equal authorities on par with Scripture. The Church was the interpreter and guardian of the Word of God, and the *regula fidei* was a summary of the apostolic preaching and the hermeneutical context of the Word of God. But only the Scripture *was* the Word of God. In other words, for the first three centuries, the Church held to the concept of tradition defined by Oberman as “Tradition I.”

In the fourth century the first hints of a two-source concept of tradition—one which allows for an extra-scriptural revelation as authoritative as Scripture itself—begin to appear. This two-source position, or “Tradition II,” is possibly suggested in the writings of both Basil and Augustine. And while it is uncertain that either of these fathers actually intended to advocate “Tradition II,” it is certain that this understanding of tradition would have been foreign to the earliest church fathers. Its suggestion in the writings of Augustine, however, ensured it a place in the thought of the Middle Ages.

vigorously raised in both orthodox and heretical circles was that these terms were not found in the Bible. The opposition was finally overcome only when they were able to demonstrate that, even if the terms were not found in the Bible, the meaning of those terms was the meaning of the Bible.