

## ***What Are We Trying to Conserve?: Evangelicalism and Sola Scriptura***

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### **I. EVANGELICALISM AND CONSERVATISM**

Evangelical theologians often call the movement to which they belong 'conservative'.<sup>1</sup> The natural question that arises out of this assertion is 'What are Evangelicals trying to conserve?'. To confess theological conservatism is one thing, but it is quite another to understand the content of that which is being conserved. Indeed, the sources listed in the last footnote illustrate this quite vividly. Anyone familiar with evangelical theology understands that there is a wide variety of stances maintained within the call to conservatism.

Consider, for example, Baptist theologians Millard Erickson and Stanley Grenz. In arguing for Evangelicalism as a conservative movement Erickson traces it back to the New Testament itself and states that the movement represents a return to the original teaching and

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experience that Jesus himself introduced.<sup>2</sup> Grenz also argues for a conservative Evangelicalism by stating that evangelicals are committed to the Bible and that doctrines must be based on the Bible.<sup>3</sup> Grenz adds that he is committed to recovering an understanding that characterized 'classic evangelicalism', which is, in turn, characterized by a 'generous orthodoxy'.<sup>4</sup> Clearly both theologians see the importance of conservatism for Evangelicalism, but Erickson and Grenz are a vivid illustration of the problems inherent in this call to

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<sup>1</sup> A small sampling of Evangelicals who affirm this conservatism includes the following: Darrell L. Bock, *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Controversies* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 9, 17; Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 11-32; Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 11-23; Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003), 156-186; James I. Packer, 'Maintaining Evangelical Theology', in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (ed. By John G. Stackhouse, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker/Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press/Vancouver: Regent, 2000), 181-189; Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 7-8; D. H. Williams, ed., *The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), vii-xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Erickson, *The Evangelical Left*, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, 21.

conservatism precisely because they are actually in fundamental disagreement on what is to be conserved, or at least how it should be conserved.<sup>5</sup>

The point here is that the affirmation of conservatism does not necessarily result in a unified evangelical movement. This is because in many cases there is disagreement on exactly what Evangelicalism is conserving. My purpose in writing this essay is to point out some of the inherent difficulties within Evangelicalism that come to bear when evangelical conservatism is seen in this light. If Evangelicalism is a theologically conservative movement it then behooves evangelical theologians to be precise and clear about what it is we are conserving.

There is general consensus concerning the influences that converged to form Evangelicalism. An important result of the various streams that contributed to Evangelicalism's origin is its diversity.<sup>6</sup>

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This is to say that perhaps a common denominator in evangelical theology is this diversity. This diversity has left contemporary Evangelicalism a confusing (confused?) legacy. That legacy is one of controlling influence.

The term 'evangelical' has a history as long as Protestantism itself. This is because the term was, in fact, synonymous with Protestant and why most trace Evangelicalism to the Protestant Reformation. Often the claim is made in a generic way—something to the effect that evangelicals hold to the Reformation doctrine of the final authority of the Bible.<sup>7</sup> But it also occurs in a somewhat more detailed explanation that Evangelicalism holds fast to the reformers' insistence on the authority of the Bible over against the 'Church' or 'tradition'.<sup>8</sup> In both the generic and the more detailed claim the same type of problem arises—the failure to understand the fact that the Reformation was not one monolithic movement. The term 'Reformation' can be used in a number of ways.<sup>9</sup> The magisterial (Lutheran and Reformed)

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<sup>5</sup> This is seen in Erickson's criticism of Grenz for flirting dangerously close to postmodernity while Grenz claims that for Evangelicalism to remain conservative it must contextualize within a postmodern culture. See Erickson, *The Evangelical Left*, 45-49; idem., *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 83-102; Grenz, *Renewing the Center*, idem., *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Donald Dayton ('Some Doubts About the Usefulness of the Category "Evangelical"', in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* [ed. by Donald W. Dayton and Robert K Johnston; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991], 245) argues that the category evangelical remains an 'essentially contested concept'. Robert Johnston ('American Evangelicalism: An Extended Family', in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, 253) argues that it is the diversity within the movement that causes Evangelicalism to be an essentially contested concept, and that when something is contested one finds people using it in different ways with no common standard. This essentially contributes to a contest between differing doctrinal understandings with each contestant arguing for their own specific definition as true or 'orthodox'. See also Lyman Kellstedt, 'Simple Questions, Complex Answers: What do we mean by "evangelicalism?" What difference does it make?' *Evangelical Studies Bulletin* 12/2 (Fall 1995), 1-4; Lyman Kellstedt and John C. Green, 'The Mismeasure of Evangelicalism', *Books and Culture* (Jan/Feb 1996), 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 45.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Orthodoxy and Heresy: A Guide to Doctrinal Discernment* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 59-67; D. A. Carson, 'Recent Development in the Doctrine of Scripture', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Academie Zondervan, 1986), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction* (3rd ed.; Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 5-11.

wings of the Reformation were quite different from the radical (Anabaptist) wing of the Reformation, particularly on the very issue of interpreting the Bible that both held as finally authoritative. The point to realize here is that when appeal to the 'Reformation' as Evangelicalism's model of biblical authority is made, it is not necessarily an appeal to 'the Bible and the Bible alone'. This is because the magisterial reformers had a different understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle when compared with the radical reformers. One could even say that there were different understandings of the principle within the ranks of the radicals.

## II. *SOLA SCRIPTURA*—SOME EVANGELICAL EXAMPLES

### A. James Montgomery Boice

Consider a common evangelical explanation on the necessity of the *sola scriptura* principle in biblical interpretation. James Boice argues that it was the assurance that God had spoken to them directly

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through the Bible that gave 'the reformers' their unique boldness.<sup>10</sup> This truth was then fundamental for the Reformation and its battle cry, 'Scripture alone'. But the *sola scriptura* principle meant more than the simple understanding that God reveals himself in the Bible and thus gives it authority—even the Roman Catholic Church believed that. There was a new element here that was stressed (recovered) by the reformers. This new element was that 'Scripture can and does interpret itself to the faithful from within—Scripture is its own interpreter...'. Since scripture is its own interpreter there is no need for popes or Councils to tell the interpreter what it means. Boice continues here to set up issues of the Reformation as being summarized in the battle between scripture (reformer's position) and tradition (Roman Catholic position). By focusing on the Bible as the sole source for theology the reformers are thus presented as restoring biblical authority to the Church. 'The Reformers called the activity of God by which the truth of his Word is borne upon the mind and consciences of his people, "the internal witness of the Holy Spirit." They stressed that such activity was the subjective or internal counterpart of the objective or external revelation....'<sup>11</sup>

The above claim must be re-evaluated with a view towards more precision. When we speak of the 'Reformation view' or the 'reformers view' of something a certain degree of precision should be demanded. But this precision is not always present. If claim is being made to a magisterial reformer's view of the final authority of the Bible like Luther or Calvin that is one thing, but if the claim is made to a Radical Reformer's view like Thomas Muntzer, Sebastian Franck, or Conrad Grebel it is quite another.<sup>12</sup>

### B. W Robert Godfrey

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<sup>10</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology* (One Volume edition; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 48-50.

<sup>11</sup> Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, 49.

<sup>12</sup> This will be discussed below.

Some, however, are more specific in singling out Martin Luther as having established the Reformation slogan *sola scriptura* and then linking that establishment with contemporary Evangelicalism.<sup>13</sup> But

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there are problems with the way some Evangelicals understand and explain Luther's own understanding of the concept. W. Robert Godfrey is among those evangelicals who specifically use Luther to posit an understanding of this slogan for the contemporary Evangelical.<sup>14</sup> Godfrey's penchant to speak in generalities results in a rather simplistic historic understanding of the phrase that Godfrey states Luther pioneered. Luther is said to be in line with Wyclif and Hus in showing that the Medieval tradition had clear contradictions with the Bible. Thus, the authority of the Scriptures had been compromised which resulted in a compromise of the church. The only way of reforming the church was to recapture the teaching and authority of the Bible. 'This conviction about the Bible came to be known by the slogan *sola scriptura*, "Scripture alone"'.<sup>15</sup>

Godfrey explains that the *sola scriptura* principle was really formulated at the Leipzig Debate in 1519. It was there that Luther realized the uncertainty of appeals to history and tradition—both popes and councils have made mistakes. 'He [Luther] was beginning to see that the church needed an authority from God that is absolutely true, clear and sufficient.'<sup>16</sup> It was at Leipzig that Luther realized that tradition and scripture were at odds with one another and thus made the decision for *sola scriptura*. This conviction was then vividly manifested in his famous 'Here I Stand Speech' at the Diet of Worms in 1521. Worms reinforced Luther's conviction of *sola scriptura* over against tradition. Part and parcel of this understanding was Luther's belief that the fathers and ecumenical councils were prone to error. For Luther, the Bible was 'clear enough to interpret itself. No other authority was necessary.'<sup>17</sup>

Godfrey's explanation of the Evangelical understanding of *sola scriptura* drawn from Luther is somewhat misleading. It is misleading because he speaks in generalities. To his credit, he does recognize that there were competing versions of tradition in the medieval church. However, he seems to gloss over the possibility that there may be a way of understanding tradition amongst these competing versions to which Luther could agree. Also to his credit, Godfrey understands that there were other reformers (radicals) whose *sola scriptura* principle manifested itself in extreme individualism and wild biblical

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<sup>13</sup> The slogan actually postdates the Reformation. Use of the slogan in this article is not meant to imply the establishment of the phrase by the reformers. Rather, its use here is to encapsulate the teaching of the reformers. See Anthony N. S. Lane, 'Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan', in *A Pathway Into the Holy Scripture* (ed. by Philip E. Satterthwaite & David F Wright; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 298; Gerhard Ebeling, *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1968), 117-119.

<sup>14</sup> W. Robert Godfrey, 'Martin Luther: An Evangelical Original', in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel* (ed. by John H. Armstrong; Chicago: Moody, 1996), 45-55.

<sup>15</sup> Godfrey, 'Martin Luther', 46.

<sup>16</sup> Godfrey, 'Martin Luther', 50.

<sup>17</sup> Godfrey, 'Martin Luther', 53.

interpretations.<sup>18</sup> But with this he concludes that the fault is not with the Bible or the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, but rather with the sinful misuse of the Bible.<sup>19</sup> If the fault lies with the sinful misuse of the Bible, then how is the sinful misuse avoided? Unfortunately, Godfrey's explanation of Luther's doctrine of *sola scriptura* does not protect against this 'sinful misuse'.

### III. SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION IN REFORMATION THOUGHT

Both Godfrey and Boice erect an alternative—either Scripture or tradition—in their explanations of *sola scriptura*. This choice between Scripture and tradition then becomes the foundation block upon which the evangelical understanding of *sola scriptura* is built. This understanding requires some foundational reassessment in light of an important study instigated by Heiko Oberman. In 1963 Oberman produced a monograph that bears directly on the issue under discussion.<sup>20</sup> Subsequent to Oberman's influential study Anthony N.S. Lane offered some important qualifications to Oberman's thesis.<sup>21</sup>

#### A. Heiko A. Oberman's Thesis

Oberman points out that great confusion is caused when the Reformation is presented as the choice between the alternatives, Scripture or tradition, as if the reformers relied totally on Scripture for their doctrine and Roman Catholics relied totally on tradition. In place of this assumption should rather be an understanding that the conflict was between two concepts of tradition.

Oberman explains that in the pre-Augustinian church Scripture, Tradition, and kerygma were seen to completely coincide. 'The Church preaches the kerygma which is to be found *in toto* in written form in the canonical books.'<sup>22</sup> This, in turn, implies the explicit

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denial of extra-scriptural tradition since the kerygma is traditioned, or handed down, only in the Church. According to Oberman, Augustine (354-430) propagated a new concept of tradition in the West that was formulated earlier by the eastern father Basil the Great (ca. 330-379). Basil discusses certain liturgical traditions of the church in connection with the relation of Scripture and tradition. In this discussion we find for the first time the explicit claim that equal respect should be paid by the Christian to written and unwritten ecclesiastical traditions.<sup>23</sup> This understanding of tradition was then transported into the Middle Ages by

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<sup>18</sup> Godfrey, 'Martin Luther', 53.

<sup>19</sup> Godfrey, 'Martin Luther', 54.

<sup>20</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*. (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000 [originally Labyrinth Press, 1963]). See also idem., 'Quo Vadis, Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to *Humani Generis*', in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (ed. Heiko A. Oberman; Edinburgh: T. & T Clark, 1986), 269-296.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony N. S. Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey', *Vox Evangelical* 9 (1975), 37-55 [[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol09/scripture\\_lane.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol09/scripture_lane.pdf)]. See also Richard J. Bauckham, 'Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason' in *Scripture, Tradition and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine* (ed. Richard Bauckham & Benjamin Drewery; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 117-145. Since Oberman's thesis is foundational what follows will begin there and make reference to Lane's important qualifications once Oberman's thesis has been explained.

<sup>22</sup> Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 366.

<sup>23</sup> Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66.

canonists.<sup>24</sup> Thus, for the canon lawyer, canon law stands on the two sources of Scripture and tradition. The situation is different, however, for the medieval doctor of theology who understands theology as the science of Holy Scripture. In other words, the Bible is understood to be the authoritative source, the final test. Augustine's propagation of this understanding bequeathed a dual legacy to the Middle Ages. First, he does reflect the early church principle of the coinherence of Scripture and Tradition. But, second, he also, in places, reflects the Basilean view. In Augustine, there exists mention of an authoritative extrascriptural oral tradition.<sup>25</sup>

Oberman points out that all these extrascriptural data were inherited by the fourteenth century along with the *sola scriptura* principle. 'This inheritance contained, therefore, two concepts of Tradition parallel to the two aspects of Augustine's thought.... These had been unconsciously held together without conscious effort to integrate the two.'<sup>26</sup> With this we have both identification and definition of the differing concepts of tradition. The 'single-source' theory of Tradition (Tradition I) held to a traditional way of interpreting scripture within the community of faith while the 'two sources.' theory (Tradition II) allows for extra-biblical oral tradition. In the Late Middle Ages both Tradition I and Tradition II had their partisans.

Tradition I in the later medieval age should be seen as a protest against the growing acceptance of the Basilean two-sources theory. This growing acceptance can most likely be attributed to the impor-

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tance of the canon lawyer in the fourteenth century. During this time the canon lawyer surpassed the doctor of theology in status at both the papal *curia* and at the royal courts. It is not surprising that this canon-law tradition started to feed into the major theological stream. Thus, the Basilean passage became a genuinely theological argument and the foundation for Tradition II. Tradition I, on the other hand, represented the sufficiency of Holy Scripture as understood by the fathers and doctors of the Church. But here Scripture has final authority.

Thus, immediately after explaining that John Huss's insistence on *sola scriptura* resides squarely in the single-source theory, Oberman concludes that 'this insistence on the authority of Holy Scripture is not *sola scriptura* in the sense that it would exclude Tradition understood as the ongoing interpretation of Scripture. The *sola* is only restrictive in that the law of God is sovereign and sufficient to determine alone—*without ecclesiastical law*—all cases that have to be tried by the Church.'<sup>27</sup>

The above summary of Oberman's work culminates in the Reformation. Indeed, Oberman claims that the consensus position of Reformers like Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, and John Calvin, differentiation notwithstanding, decidedly contrasts Tradition I with Tradition II.

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<sup>24</sup> Oberman (*Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 369) states that No of Chartres (ca. 1040-1115), the great expert in canon law, refers to the Basilean dictum to insist on equal reverence for scriptural and for extrascriptural oral traditions. Of greater importance here is that Gratian of Bologna (d. not later than 1159) copied this passage from No and included it into his highly influential *Decretum*. From there it found its way into textbooks of canon lawyers.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *On Baptism* 22; 36.

<sup>26</sup> Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 371.

<sup>27</sup> Oberman, *Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 377. Italics in original.

In other words, the Reformers represent Tradition I.<sup>28</sup> The clash between Tradition I and Tradition II is well represented in the magisterial Reformation and the counter-Reformation which culminated at the Council of Trent (1545). As stated above, it is not a clash of alternatives between Scripture or Tradition, but a clash between two different concepts of tradition. Thus, in late medieval Catholicism, Tradition I came to be seen as subordinate to Tradition II—ecclesiastical authority was asserted by virtue of the church's claim to the office of authority rather than on the basis of derivation from Scripture and tradition. This was the locus of the conflict. 'As ancient Tradition [I] became increasingly interpreted by tradition [II], regulated by the office of the papacy, scripture alone was the bulwark affording the grounds to reject the Roman claim as the sole interpreter of the church's Tradition [I].'<sup>29</sup>

### ***B. Anthony N. S. Lane's Qualifications***

In order to understand Lane's qualifications we must return back to Oberman's comments about Basil and Augustine's contribution to

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Tradition II, or what Lane calls the supplementary view. Lane points out here the necessity of understanding the context of Augustine's appeal—ecclesiology.<sup>30</sup> In Oberman's explanation Augustine is presented as appealing to unwritten tradition. But understood in its proper ecclesiological context, Lane argues that Augustine was, rather, appealing to the authority of the church. This conclusion is reached by an examination of some key passages found in both Basil and Augustine.

In *On the Holy Spirit*<sup>31</sup> Basil asserts that some of the beliefs and practices of the church are found in written teaching while others are found in a mystery by the tradition of the apostles and that both have the same force. A precedent was thus set as later medieval canonists often cited Basil.<sup>32</sup> But Augustine also set an important precedent. As mentioned above, Augustine appealed not to a new form of tradition but to the authority of the church. In fact, against the Manichaeans he claims that it was only on the authority of the church that he came to believe the scriptures.<sup>33</sup> Further, in *On Baptism*<sup>34</sup> Augustine claims that the Roman practice of accepting heretical baptism can be understood to have originated in apostolic tradition even though Scripture is silent. The point here is well expressed by Lane,

It can be argued that the status of heretical baptism is a ceremonial or disciplinary rather than doctrinal matter. More important is the manner in which this attitude makes the church a *de facto* source of binding tradition. Augustine doubtless believed that the traditions concerned were of apostolic origin but it can be seen how other traditions came to be seen as apostolic within a few years of their fourth-century origin.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Oberman, 'Quo Vadis, Patre?', 283.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, 'The Search for Sola Scriptura', 357.

<sup>30</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 40-42.

<sup>31</sup> 27.66; 29.71.

<sup>32</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 41.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Against the Epistle of Manicheus Called Fundamental*, 5.6; Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 41.

<sup>34</sup> 5.28.31.

<sup>35</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 41.

The church, which often gets subsumed under these unwritten traditions, is central here. Lane correctly stresses the importance of the church in these appeals in order to properly understand the protests of the sixteenth century reformers. What must be remembered in this view of scripture and tradition is the realization in the Middle Ages that not all the church taught was found in Scripture. Since Scripture was not sufficient, there was need of tradition to supplement Scripture. The teaching of the church thus became equated with the teaching of scripture supplemented where needed by tradition.<sup>36</sup>

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So here we have a situation in which the official teaching of the church contained things not found in Scripture. In instances where this was the case, tradition was brought in to supplement that teaching. In most of these cases the tradition appealed to was ceremonial, 'the principle that the *lex orandi* is the *lex credendi* was the basis'<sup>37</sup> of this view. With this view it was assumed that the accepted teaching and practice of the church must go back to the apostles. This attempt to find apostolic foundation for church teaching was, in effect, making the church herself, especially her liturgical life, a source of doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

According to Lane, this situation precipitated a crisis between the Scripture and the church, not a crisis between Scripture and tradition.<sup>39</sup> The medieval church came to teach things that were actually contrary to Scripture, not merely things on which Scripture was silent. This was what the heretical Waldensians, the spiritual Franciscans, Wyclif and the Lollards were protesting against and which led to a dichotomy between Scripture and the church.

In Lane's presentation the ecclesiological context is foundational to understanding the qualifications of Oberman's thesis. Oberman correctly notes that the Reformation was not a protest against tradition as such.<sup>40</sup> The problem became the fact that during the Middle Ages church teaching came to contradict Scripture.<sup>41</sup> Thus, since the reformers often sought to use tradition on their side, Oberman argues that the Reformation was simply a call to return from Tradition II (the supplementary view for Lane) to Tradition I (the coincidence view for Lane).<sup>42</sup> Lane argues that this is only partly true. Yes, the Reformation was a protest against the teaching of the church which was recognized by the reformers as based on supplementary tradition. But the problem was that the teaching of the church, in their opinion, differed from Scripture and tradition.<sup>43</sup>

The great error here, according to Lane, is underestimating the significance of ecclesiology. When the ecclesiological context is understood it is apparent that the reformers were not, in fact arguing for a simple return to the supplementary view. The reformers 'did allow for an interpretive tradition not adding to Scripture but

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<sup>36</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 41.

<sup>37</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 42.

<sup>38</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 42.

<sup>39</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 42.

<sup>40</sup> Oberman, 'Quo Vadis, Petrel', 226, 241-244.

<sup>41</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 42.

<sup>42</sup> Oberman, 'Quo Vadis, Petrel' 240-244.

<sup>43</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 42-43.



did not see either this tradition or ecclesiastical teaching as infallible.<sup>44</sup> We should therefore see two important differences between the view of the reformers, which Lane calls the ancillary view, and the coincidence view.<sup>45</sup> First, the task of the fathers was to show the identity of ecclesiastical with apostolic teaching while the task of the reformers was to show the opposite. Second, the fathers accepted the inherited faith because it was apostolic while the reformers accepted the creeds only because they believed them to be scriptural. The difference here is significant. The reformers did not reject tradition, but neither did they accept it without judging it against the final arbiter of Scripture. Thus, tradition was viewed by the reformers as a tool that was useful in helping the church understand Scripture. Tradition was not a normative interpretation of Scripture.

The important qualification to be made to Oberman's thesis is that the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* was not primarily directed against tradition, but against the teaching of the contemporary church. The issue is misunderstood as a conflict between Scripture and tradition because the Reformation was a rejection of the understandings of the role of tradition that served to justify the teaching of the contemporary church as apostolic and to permit no appeal to Scripture against it.<sup>46</sup> The issue is ecclesiology. The fact of the matter is that the reformers could not return to the coincidence view because it depended upon the assumption not just that Scripture and tradition have the same content but also that this content is found in the teaching of the church.<sup>47</sup> But once the contemporary church started contradicting Scripture the tradition became corrupt and it was no longer possible to identify true tradition according to the above assumption. The reformers would thus argue that true tradition must be distinguished from corrupt tradition. This can be done only by testing all tradition according to its faithfulness to Scripture. Thus, Scripture becomes the norm for identification of true tradition, rather than tradition the norm for interpretation of Scripture.<sup>48</sup>

The *sola scriptura* principle was not used by the magisterial reformers to argue that the church had been in total error since the second century. Some radicals did take this line of argument in their understanding of *sola scriptura*.<sup>49</sup> But the magisterial reformers were very

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concerned with establishing an historical link to the apostolic age, that is, to establish their pedigree.<sup>50</sup> The late medieval church required reform, in the eyes of the reformers, because it had clearly contradicted Scripture in some of its teaching and practice. This meant that the teaching authority of the church had to be soundly rejected. But this did not mean that the individual had the right to interpret as he or she saw fit. As will be shown below, the reformers were very aware of the problems associated with private judgment.

### ***C. Martin Luther and Sola Scriptura***

Luther will suffice as an illustration of how this issue became manifest in the sixteenth century. There is no doubt that part of the foundation of Luther's theology is the *sola*

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<sup>44</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 43.

<sup>45</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 43.

<sup>46</sup> Bauckham, 'Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason', 122.

<sup>47</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 43.

<sup>48</sup> Bauckham, 'Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason', 122.

<sup>49</sup> For example, Sebastian Franck, who will be discussed below.

<sup>50</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 43.

*scriptura* principle. But, since Luther rejects contemporary church authority, this does not imply a rejection of tradition. Part of the mistake writers like Boice and Godfrey make when describing Luther's understanding of *sola scriptura* is to rely on his writings and actions before 1522, particularly his famous speech at the Diet of Worms in 1521.<sup>51</sup> Luther's writings before 1522 show a decided emphasis on the authority of the Bible over papal decisions. This, of course, makes perfect sense if Luther is understood as rejecting the authority of the contemporary church and not as rejecting tradition per se. Relying on these pre 1522 writings without the proper ecclesiological context brought in by Lane could cause one to misunderstand that true tradition was not equated with ecclesiastical decisions in Luther's eyes. Thus, it is a mistake to rely primarily on this period for Luther's full views on tradition. It is really when the radical wing of the Reformation started to rise in the early part of the third decade in the sixteenth century that Luther more precisely defined what the *sola scriptura* principle should look like.

It is quite clear that Luther rejected the supplementary view. A vivid illustration of this is the burning of the books of canon law at the Elster Gate at Wittenberg in December of 1520. But what of tradition? Does the *sola scriptura* principle as understood by Luther reject the fathers and ancient, ecumenical councils? A reading of Luther's

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*On the Councils and the Church*, written in 1539, gives us an answer to this question.<sup>52</sup> Although there is clear antagonism in the document towards the papacy, one should not let this cloud our understanding of Luther's stance toward tradition. There is a significant amount of reference to and preference for Augustine throughout the document, thus indicating a trust in the heritage passed down from the great western father. In one particularly telling section, Luther makes clear reference to the Canon Law as that 'stinking and filthy book', because it, in fact, contradicts 'the fathers'.<sup>53</sup> *On the Councils and the Church* shows that the argument was not about the acceptance of the early church's creeds and doctrines, but about who has the right to claim them as authorities. The papacy was singled out in this document because Luther believed it was playing off the councils and fathers against scripture in order to legitimize decisions founded on the claim of tradition.<sup>54</sup> Luther states,

But they would like to rule the church, not with trustworthy wisdom, but with arbitrary opinions, and again confuse and perplex all the souls in the world, as they have done before. But just as they reject all the fathers and theologians in their petty canons, so do we, in turn, reject them in the church and in Scripture. They shall neither teach us Scripture nor rule in the church; they are not entitled to it, nor do they have the competence for it. But they shall attend to their trifling canons and squabbles over prebends—that is their holiness. They have cast us poor theologians, together with the fathers, from their books; for this we thank them most kindly. Now they propose to throw us out of the church and

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<sup>51</sup> Oberman (*Quo Vadis, Petre?*, 284) calls Luther *situationsbedingt* (opportunist) in his letters and treatises. Thus, his first five years of productivity are taken up by his primary purpose of contrasting Scripture with papal decisions. R. C. Sproul (*Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999], 38) illustrates this tendency of relying on Luther's pre-1522 writings when he states, 'At Worms, when Luther was called on to recant his teaching, he replied that he could not unless convinced by sacred Scripture. Scripture alone, rather than tradition or church councils, has the authority to bind the conscience.'

<sup>52</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (ed., Timothy F. Lull; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 539-575.

<sup>53</sup> Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, 559.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, 'The Search for Sola Scriptura', 357.

out of Scripture; and they themselves are not worthy to be in them. That is too much, and rips the bag wide open. And furthermore, we shall not put up with it.<sup>55</sup>

Using Oberman along with Lane's important qualifications we can thus see that the issue was not one in which Luther was rejecting tradition. The issue was one of the authority of the contemporary church to teach. Luther could not argue for a return to Tradition I because the church had corrupted that. But this did not mean that Luther rejected tradition—he was calling for a return for Scripture to be the final arbiter, not the church.

#### ***D. The Radical Reformation and Sola Scriptura***

Understanding Luther's relationship with the radical wing of the Reformation also helps to answer this question of whether Luther

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rejected the ancient councils and fathers. In his explanation of Oberman's thesis Alister McGrath has added the designation of 'Tradition 0' to the different understandings of tradition in the Reformation age.<sup>56</sup> Tradition 0 is an understanding of theology that allocates no role whatsoever to Tradition—an allocation he identifies with the radical reformers. The only wing of the Reformation that applied the principle of *sola scriptura* as totally separate from the history of interpretation in the Church was this radical wing. Radicals believed that every individual had the right to interpret scripture as he saw fit, subject to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This opened the way for radical individualism in scriptural interpretation. The danger in this kind of understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition is seen in some examples from the radicals themselves.

In 1531 Sebastian Franck (ca. 1499-1542) wrote a letter to John Campanus (d. 1575), an influential Lutheran turned Anabaptist, whose ideas were a factor in the Münster theocracy.<sup>57</sup> The letter illustrates, among other things, the danger of *sola scriptura* controlled by Tradition 0. Foundational to Franck's theology is his understanding that immediately after the death of the apostles the external church of Christ ascended into heaven. This causes him to disparage the church fathers quite often, calling their works 'utter child's play and quite unlike the spirit of the apostles'.<sup>58</sup> The church is thus spiritual and must be understood as such. This, of course causes him to lay great stress upon the Spirit of God in imparting divine truth to the Christian via the Bible—the inner Word. It is only the Spirit, through the Scriptures, that can teach what is divine.<sup>59</sup> But Scripture needs to be interpreted 'spiritually' if it is to be interpreted properly. The culmination of the letter to Campanus occurs in Franck's advice that he not be so addicted to the 'letter of Scripture' because it draws the heart away from the teaching of the Spirit.<sup>60</sup> He rather advises Campanus to interpret according to his conscience, so that it testifies to the heart.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Luther, *On the Councils and the Church*, 559-560.

<sup>56</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 154-157.

<sup>57</sup> Sebastian Franck, 'A Letter to John Campanus', in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (ed. by George H. Williams and Angel M. Hergal; The Library of Christian Classics: Icthus Edition; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 145-159.

<sup>58</sup> Franck, 'Letter to John Campanus', 148; see also pp. 150-152.

<sup>59</sup> Franck, 'Letter to John Campanus', 157.

<sup>60</sup> Franck, 'Letter to John Campanus', 159.

<sup>61</sup> Franck, 'Letter to John Campanus', 159.

Franck's argument here is a seemingly evangelical argument for *sola scriptura*. However, the rub is that immediately preceding this advice to Campanus to allow the Spirit to teach him, Franck has

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applied this spiritual interpretation to deny a cardinal doctrine of Christianity—the Nicene understanding of the Holy Trinity.<sup>62</sup> Granted, this may be an extreme view of the *sola scriptura* principle, but it illustrates just how far it may be taken when the right of private judgment is retained at the expense of tradition as a tool to help understand scripture.<sup>63</sup> The magisterial reformer's understanding of tradition allowed them to agree with the Roman Catholic Church on the essential doctrine of the Holy Trinity as understood at Nicaea and Constantinople—it was, in other words, part of the Tradition.

If the above illustration using Franck seems somewhat unfair to other less 'radical' radicals, consider also the example of the Anabaptist reformer Conrad Grebel (1498-1526). The early Anabaptists like Grebel were formatively influenced by Thomas Muntzer (ca. 1490-1525).<sup>64</sup> This influence and admiration is well observed in a letter written by Grebel to Muntzer in 1524.<sup>65</sup> In the letter Grebel advocates a strict biblical literalism, i.e., if something is not mandated in the Bible, then it should not be practiced. He severely criticizes the magisterial reformers and the Roman Catholic Church for mixing the divine word with the human. On the one hand Grebel praises Muntzer for treasuring 'only the good and the right which can be clearly found in Scripture alone.'<sup>66</sup> But he still has some criticism for Thomas—among other things, he does not like the fact that he has composed new German hymns. Among the reasons for his disagreements with this Grebel states, first and foremost, that there is no New Testament mandate for singing. In fact, he asserts that Paul actually forbids it in Ephesians and Colossians. He admonishes Muntzer to abolish singing in order to do everything only according to the word, and to teach and establish what the apostles practiced.<sup>67</sup>

We see here a principle of *sola scriptura* at work that is decidedly different than that of Luther. This is seen in Grebel's assertion that Muntzer has the Bible as protection against the Lutherans' 'deceitful, negligent faith, and against their preaching, in which they do not teach Christ as they should...'<sup>68</sup> Clearly we see a different principle of *sola scriptura* at work in Grebel than in Luther.

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#### IV. EVANGELICALISM AND *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

So, what may we conclude about this discussion on the 'reformers' view of *sola scriptura* as it relates to Evangelicalism? Evangelicals often make the claim that the reformers chose Scripture over tradition, thus propagating and manifesting the *sola scriptura* principle. Both

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<sup>62</sup> Franck, 'Letter to John Campanus', 158-159.

<sup>63</sup> Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church', 43-45.

<sup>64</sup> Michael G. Baylor, 'Introduction', in *The Radical Reformation* (ed., Michael G. Baylor; Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), xiv.

<sup>65</sup> Conrad Grebel, 'Letter to Thomas Muntzer', 38.

<sup>66</sup> Grebel, 'Letter to Thomas Muntzer', in *The Radical Reformation*, 36-48.

<sup>67</sup> Grebel, 'Letter to Thomas Muntzer', 40.

<sup>68</sup> Grebel, 'Letter to Thomas Muntzer', 46.

Oberman and Lane should cause qualification in the understanding that is given by Boice, Godfrey and other Evangelicals as the Evangelical position of *sola scriptura*. If appeal is made to Martin Luther as the 'Evangelical Original',<sup>69</sup> and his doctrine of *sola scriptura* is advocated as the Evangelical understanding should we not expect an accurate historical and theological understanding of the principle and doctrine in its context? But this is sadly lacking as the position is still being propagated as a choice between Scripture or tradition. What is actually happening is that Luther is being made into a radical reformer in these explanations. Those who held to Tradition 0 could easily appeal to the Bible to reject essential Christian truths like the Trinity.

Luther and other magisterial reformers, on the other hand, were working to conserve the traditional doctrines of the church like the Holy Trinity.<sup>70</sup> They believed that the traditional understandings of the ecumenical Councils Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) were correct interpretations of Scripture. This was a proper corrective to *sola scriptura* guided by Tradition 0. And, indeed, this is why Godfrey's explanation above, that the fault of improper interpretation lies not with the doctrine of *sola scriptura* but with the 'sinful misuse of the Bible', falls short. The question which must be asked here is: Who determines the misuse? According to Godfrey, the Bible itself makes the determination because it is perspicuous. But the Bible needs to be interpreted and determination must be made as to the proper interpretation. One needs to look no further than the Arian controversy in the fourth century as a prime example of this.<sup>71</sup>

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#### ***A. The Example of Nicaea***

As an eyewitness to the outbreak of the Arian controversy and the proceedings of the Council of Nicaea (325), Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296-273) provides us with a vivid example of the issue of *sola scriptura* guided by Tradition 0. Arius is well-known for his Christology that denied the eternality and deity of Jesus. Arius believed that if the Son were truly a Son, in relation to God the Father, then He must have had a beginning, and that there must, therefore, have been a time when he did not exist.<sup>72</sup> The Council of Nicaea was called expressly to discuss the Arian controversy.<sup>73</sup> The point that needs to be emphasized is that Arius used a host of scriptural passages and terminology to explain and affirm his denial of the eternality and deity of the Son.<sup>74</sup> In fact, the initial desire of the Council of Nicaea was to use Scriptural terms to combat Arius's interpretations. But it was soon realized that this would not alleviate

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<sup>69</sup> This is the subtitle of Godfrey's essay, 'Martin Luther', 45.

<sup>70</sup> I am not saying that all radical reformers rejected the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. Nor do I want to group all radicals in the same category as Franck or Müntzer. My point here is that a *sola scriptura* principle guided by Tradition 0 allows for many different interpretations. How, in this kind of situation, is the determination made as to the orthodox interpretation?

<sup>71</sup> For other examples see D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 229-234.

<sup>72</sup> Theodoret; *Ecclesiastical History in The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (ed. by Philip Schaff & Henry Wace; Second Series; 14 vols; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 3.34.

<sup>73</sup> Athanasius of Alexandria, *Epistle to the Bishops in Africa in The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (ed. by Philip Schaff & Henry Wace; Second Series; 14 vols; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 4.489.

<sup>74</sup> For an examination of the passages used by Arius in support of his theology see Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (ed. by Philip Schaff & Henry Wace; Second Series; 14 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 4. 303-447.

the problem because proper interpretation of these Scriptural passages was the problem.<sup>75</sup> Arius was offering a certain interpretation of Scripture by appealing to Scripture alone. Yet, he was denying a doctrine that the Nicenes held as essential. Clearly, the charge that Arius was 'sinfully misusing' Scripture is true here. But what is the standard against which this sinful misuse is measured? If it is the Bible alone, we are simply talking in circles.

### ***B. The Evangelical Rule of Faith***

Too often the answer to the question of a standard is given as *sola scriptura* guided by Tradition 0. In other words, the Bible is posited as the 'rule of faith' for Evangelicals.<sup>76</sup> This is exactly what John Armstrong argues in the introductory essay of a book that is written for

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evangelicals—for those who, according to Armstrong, are anchored in Reformation theology. For Armstrong, it is one thing to subscribe to the authority of the Bible and *sola scriptura*, but 'once we have defended the truth of an inspired text, we still must handle it properly.'<sup>77</sup> Using Luther and the 'Protestant evangelicals' as exemplars, Scripture is affirmed as the only source and norm for Christian theology.<sup>78</sup> Armstrong explains that throughout history evangelical Protestant leaders believed that the Bible was '*canon et regula fidei* (the canon and rule of faith)'.<sup>79</sup> With this understanding, the reformers are said to be in line with 'Tertullian and Augustine through Luther and Calvin, to Edwards and Warfield.'<sup>80</sup> Here we have an argument that is similar to Godfrey's above. We are said to need the Bible to be the self-attesting, objective, and final revelation because there are 'sinful people' who pervert the Word of God time and time again.<sup>81</sup> Again, we have the observation that there are proper interpretations and improper interpretations of the Bible. The only way to know which are proper and which are not is to appeal to the rule of faith—the Bible. Again, Arius's interpretations based on Scripture alone seems to throw a wrench into this seemingly perspicuous schema. The issues discussed above notwithstanding, Armstrong's defense here falls short on two counts. The first has to do with canon history, while the second has to do with the rule of faith. Tertullian will serve as an illustration for both points.

First, Armstrong shows little interest in or knowledge of the history to which he is appealing—the formation of the biblical canon. He appeals to the church father Tertullian (ca. 160- ca. 225), among others, as holding to the 'bedrock principle' that the Bible is the rule of faith.<sup>82</sup> The problem with this explanation is that Tertullian most likely did not know of a closed canon. Recent studies on the history New Testament canon have called into question the common conclusion that the New Testament canon was closed by the end of the

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<sup>75</sup> Athanasius, *Epistle to the Bishops in Africa*, 491; idem., *Defence of the Nicene Definition* in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (ed. by Philip Schaff & Henry Wace; Second Series; 14 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 4.162.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, John H. Armstrong, 'Introduction: Two Vital Truths', in *The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel* (ed., John H. Armstrong; Chicago: Moody, 1996), 20.

<sup>77</sup> Armstrong, 'Introduction: Two Vital Truths', 18.

<sup>78</sup> Armstrong, 'Introduction: Two Vital Truths', 18.

<sup>79</sup> Armstrong, 'Introduction: Two Vital Truths', 20. Italics in original.

<sup>80</sup> Armstrong, 'Introduction: Two Vital Truths', 20.

<sup>81</sup> Armstrong, 'Introduction: Two Vital Truths', 21.

<sup>82</sup> Armstrong, 'Introduction: Two Vital Truths', 20.

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second century.<sup>83</sup> If the canon was still 'open' in Tertullian's day, to what was he appealing as a guide for our message and method? This is not to say that Tertullian did not appeal to documents that later came to be included in the canon as authoritative. He affirmed these documents as authoritative and appealed to them as such. The point here to realize is that singling Tertullian out as one who used the Bible as the rule of faith is not really solving the problem because he has no 'Bible' to which he may appeal. This, in effect, opens the door for a host of other theological and historical issues that need clarification. This, however, is not the most important historical blip that appears in Armstrong's assertion.

Armstrong's defense of the Bible as the evangelicals' rule of faith has a second, more pronounced problem—the concept of the rule of faith itself.<sup>84</sup> Tertullian's use of the rule of faith shows no reference to it being synonymous with the Bible. In *The Prescription Against Heretics* Tertullian appeals to a tradition of proper doctrine that was delivered by Christ, spread by the Apostles and finally deposited in and safeguarded by the apostolic church.<sup>85</sup> This tradition of proper doctrine was the rule or standard or right belief. For Tertullian, the rule of faith was the guide to proper interpretation of the Scriptures, not the Bible itself. This can be seen in *Prescription*, chaps. 15-19. In this passage Tertullian deals with the issue of how one should conduct an argument with heretics. He is bothered by the audacity of

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heretics in even using Scripture—heretics have no right to do so because the Scriptures belong to the church. And because the church has possessed them since ancient times, it is the church's ordained responsibility to properly interpret them. In chap. 19 Tertullian's argument reaches its climax when he explains that this rule of faith plays a vital part in the interpretation of scripture.

Our appeal, therefore, must not be made to the Scriptures; nor must controversy be admitted on points in which victory will be either impossible, or uncertain, or not certain enough. But even if a discussion from the Scriptures should not turn out in such a way as to place both sides on par, (yet) the natural order of things would require that this point

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<sup>83</sup> An extended discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this essay. I discuss the issue in more detail in my forthcoming book, *A High View of Scripture: The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon*. Among the many books and articles arguing for a fourth or post-fourth century date for a closed New Testament canon see: Craig D. Allert, 'The State of the New Testament Canon in the Second Century: Putting Tatian's Diatessaron in Perspective', *BBR* 9 (1999), 1-18 [[http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/pdf/bbr/tatian\\_allert.pdf](http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/pdf/bbr/tatian_allert.pdf)]; Harry Y. Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Geoffrey Mark Hahneman, *The Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (2nd ed.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995); Albert C. Sundberg Jr., 'Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon', *Studia Evangelica* 4 (1968), 452-461.

<sup>84</sup> For detailed discussions on the rule of faith as a concept and in its context see, Craig D. Allert, *Revelation, Truth, Canon and Interpretation: Studies in Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho* (Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 64; Leiden, NL: Brill, 2002), 202-215; Richard P. C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (Library of History and Doctrine; London: SCM, 1962); J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London/New York/Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1950), 30-99; Joseph T. Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority. The Canon of the Christian Bible in History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

<sup>85</sup> In *Prescription* 20-29 Tertullian explains and defends this sequence.

should first be proposed, which is now the only one which we must discuss: 'With whom lies that very faith to which the Scriptures belong? From what and through whom, and when, and to whom, has been handed down that rule, by which men become Christians?' For wherever it shall be manifest that the true Christian rule and faith shall be, *there* will likewise be the true Scriptures and expositions thereof, and all the Christian traditions.

For Tertullian the proper interpretation of Scripture is found in adherence to the rule of faith which had been handed down by and safeguarded in the church. The rule of faith must be adhered to in the interpretation of the Scriptures because true faith is found in that rule. Tertullian was fully aware that scripture is open to many different interpretations. This is why he argues for the rule of faith. The apostolic faith is manifested in the rule of faith, and it is here that proper interpretation of Scripture is found.

Returning now to Armstrong's definition and explanation of the rule of faith we see certain anomalies with the historical context to which he is appealing. In making the historic claim that the fathers believed that 'Scripture was *canon et regula fidei*' the historical context within which the rule of faith and Scripture functioned together is short-changed and misrepresented.<sup>86</sup> In the brief examination above of Tertullian we have seen how he makes reference to proper interpretation of Scripture that is safeguarded by the church via the rule of faith. If the rule of faith safeguarded orthodox biblical interpretation it is inaccurate to make the claim that the Bible and the rule of faith were seen as one and the same.

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## V. WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO CONSERVES?

Although it has been lurking behind everything I have written up to this point, I have said little about the title of this essay, 'What Are We Trying to Conserve?' My purpose in critiquing certain contemporary evangelicals' view of *sola scriptura* is not to argue that we as evangelicals should not maintain the doctrine. I agree that the doctrine is an important distinctive within the movement. But I want to ask exactly what view of *sola scriptura* we as evangelicals are affirming and propagating as essential evangelical belief. Too often we appeal to theological history to state or undergird our position without really understanding the theological and historical context to which we appeal.

D.H. Williams has recently argued that Evangelicals, to their detriment, suffer from historical amnesia.<sup>87</sup> He is in good company here as many Evangelicals are calling for a proper contextual understanding of our own formative influences as Evangelicals.<sup>88</sup> I have sought to

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<sup>86</sup> Another good example of the coinherence of Scripture and the rule of faith in the early church is found in the Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*. On this see Allert, *Revelation, Truth, Canon and Interpretation*, 202-215; Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority*.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*.

<sup>88</sup> Among those making a similar call see, James S. Cutsinger, ed., *Reclaiming the Great Tradition: Evangelicals, Catholics & Orthodox in Dialogue* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997); Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998); idem., *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002); Stephen R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002); Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity.... What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); idem., *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*; Kenneth Tanner & Christopher A. Hall, eds., *Ancient & Postmodern Christianity: Pale-& Orthodoxy in the 21st Century. Essays in Honor of Thomas C. Oden* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002); Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*; idem., *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).



add my perspective on this call in this article. My desire has been modest—to challenge evangelicals to understand our own history before we make claims about evangelical essentials. To offer a program of return to classical Christianity as the proper context through which to understand evangelicalism lies beyond the scope of this essay and has been ably approached by scholars of wider hearing than myself.<sup>89</sup> The challenge I offer, however, is that we must be historically and theologically responsible if we are to speak from within the movement and for the movement.<sup>90</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

At its heart Evangelicalism is a conservative movement. But the various streams of influence that converge in this movement have left Evangelicalism with a confused legacy - controlling influence. This legacy is readily apparent in Evangelicalism's claim of anchoring itself in the Reformation and its insistence on biblical authority. The appeal to the 'Reformation view' is often made without understanding or indicating the contextual issues fundamental to understanding that very view. Thus the contemporary evangelical is often called to hold a version of *sola scriptura* that was not, in fact the version of Luther or Calvin. The contemporary version of *sola scriptura*, apparently based on Luther and Calvin, is then used as a reason to reject Tradition as a source for theology. It is here shown these Reformers did not reject Tradition in favor of the Bible alone. The slogan must be understood within its proper historical context. The dangers of a rejection of Tradition can be seen in the radicals Franck and Grebel. If appeal is made to 'the reformers view' of *sola scriptura* it is essential that we understand the context of that appeal if we are to offer it as the evangelical view.

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<sup>89</sup> For example, Thomas Oden, Robert Webber, and D. H. Williams. This is a matter I will be addressing in *A High View of Scripture*.

<sup>90</sup> I wish to thank Dr. Hans Boersma for reading and critiquing an earlier draft of this essay.