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*Editorial:*

*Retrieval, Resourcement, and the Reformation:  
Tradition, Scripture, and the Protestant Reformation*

The rise of Humanism is accompanied by the common expression of *ad fontes*, and thereby can be credited for making Patristic texts the source of inquiry. As it follows, the debate between the Roman Catholic Church and Reformers resided in who could lay claim to the most accurate interpretation of Augustine.<sup>1</sup> The Protestant Reformation, in perhaps the most primary way, was a revolution of one book, the Bible. A fresh return to the Scriptures brought with it a re-infusion of biblical theology and a resurgence of the gospel message.

The reorientation towards God's word did not, however, lead to a rejection of church tradition. The desire for reform raised a particularly thorny question in debate among Reforming and Roman Catholic theologians: what is the place of church tradition? Were the Church Fathers (the early commentators on Scripture) on the side of the Reformers or Rome? Were the creeds, councils, and other early writings to be trusted or trashed?<sup>2</sup> Everyone agreed upon the

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Trueman, "The Renaissance," in *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought*, ed. W. Andrew Hoffercker (Philipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 2007), 182.

<sup>2</sup>For more critical inquiry on the use tradition and Scripture, consider Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed, Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010); Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery, eds., *Scripture, Tradition, and Reasons: A Study in the*

importance of Scripture, but the Reformation sparked a heated debate on the role of church tradition.

As the architects of the Reformation argued, the Word of God both preached and publicly read was the lifeblood of the church. Scripture is transformative, leading people to communion with the living God. But this view of Scripture did not mean that Reformers believed that everyone should interpret the Bible based on their own whims. Scripture needed proper interpretation for it to be used as God intended. This was one of the main issues in the church as the Reformers saw it: the Bible had become subservient to tradition, when it should have been the other way around.<sup>3</sup> Thus, for the Reformers, recovering the interpretative tradition of the Church was pivotal in order to avoid the kinds of errors that sparked the Reformation in the first place. For the Reformers, *sola scriptura* was not deployed to remove themselves from reading the Church Fathers and medieval theologians, it was a way to verify their place among the theological and exegetical traditions of the church.

Reformers looked back to the Fathers, and among many, to Augustine of Hippo in particular.<sup>4</sup> It was in his writings where

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*Criteria of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000); D. H. Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church*, Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>See chapter 11, "Holy Writ and Holy Church," in Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 361–422.

<sup>4</sup>For more on the Reformers's use of the Fathers, consider Irena Backus, ed. *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, Vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999); H. Ashley Hall, *Philip Melancthon and the Cappadocians: A Reception of Greek Patristic Sources in the Sixteenth Century*, Academic Studies 16 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

Reformers saw the true rendering of church tradition in the proper interpretation of Scripture in regards to salvation. Augustine, in his debates with the British monk Pelagius, asserted the inability of man to obey God apart from his supernatural work of grace working in one's heart to bring about love for God and his commands. Pelagius and his followers said that man had the innate ability to follow God's commands. Augustine, reading Paul in Romans 5, said, "The reign of death is only destroyed in any man by the Saviour's grace." Reformers noted that such a view, which was the proper reading of Paul and other New Testament writings, was absent or had become extremely muddled within late medieval theology. So crucial was Augustine to the Reformation cause that one theologian described the Reformation as an "Augustinian renaissance."<sup>5</sup>

Reformers also affirmed what was traditionally called The Rule of Faith, which asserted that any interpretation of Scripture that deviated from the original apostolic declaration was suspect. The Rule of Faith (*regula fidei*) is the apostolic summary of the Bible's redemptive storyline.<sup>6</sup> Christian basics such as Jesus as fully God and fully man, God as triune, and other faith commitments were to be found in Scripture and confirmed by the Rule of Faith (cf. Irenaeus, *Apostolic Preaching*). Works such as John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* were considered summaries of the redemptive message of God found in Scripture and confirmed in the Rule of Faith. Alongside this

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<sup>5</sup>Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 48.

<sup>6</sup>Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide*, Cascade Companions 20 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015); George R. Sumner and Ephraim Radner, eds., *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age* (New York: Church Publishing, 1998); Paul M. Blowers, "The *Regula Fidei* and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith," *Pro Ecclesia* 6, no. 2 (1997): 199–228.

interpretative tradition, Reformers recognized that the early centuries of church teaching always had Scripture as their final authority. The Reformers saw no difference between themselves and the faithful who had come before them, defending the faith and asserting the primacy of Scripture in the life of the church.

Other developments such as the papacy and various councilior decisions were suspect because biblical and early historical warrant was missing. Reformers affirmed the early creeds of the church and promoted their usage within the church. Reformers, therefore, were not wary of church tradition, simply unbiblical church tradition. They recognized that Christianity was a historically-rooted faith and that the body of Christ included faithful men and women who preceded them. Recovering the biblical gospel did not mean tossing all the practices and traditions into the garbage.

What do we learn from the Reformers in regards to Scripture and tradition? First, tradition is not something to cast aside. We are a people with a rich heritage and tradition. We need to look at the early centuries of the church to appreciate (and perhaps reclaim) the interpretive tradition, which saw the redemptive story of God as the primary message of Scripture. God is a triune God, enacting salvation by means of the eternal Son, dispensing power to the church by means of the Spirit. This was central to the early proclamation and what the Reformers sought to recover. This also includes reading scripture with the great tradition of the Christian faith.

Second, Scripture is the lifeblood of the church. Throughout the early preaching, theological defenses, and other writings, the tradition of the church asserted the primacy of the revealed word of God. This inerrant authority was the means by which the church was shaped and

formed. Reformers saw themselves simply walking in the same pattern set forth by the earlier tradition of the church.

Last, no tradition rises above the final authority of Scripture. *Sola scriptura* does not mean scripture as the sole authority or *nuda scriptura*, but rather the final authority. Christians from the beginning have never believed in “No creed but the Bible.” But they have always believed, “No creed valid without the Bible.” The church and its people can err, but God’s word does not. We are to conform our worship, theology, and our daily lives to Scripture as the *norma nomands*, not the other way around. In the shifting sands of cultural whims, the church should always stand upon the unwavering foundation of God’s word, recognizing the Orthodox tradition of theological reflection, which confirms the validity of the Scripture as our best and final authority. In the crucible of the Reformation debates on Scripture and tradition, this was the most valuable principle to be recovered.

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