

THE GROUND AND THE PILLAR OF THE FAITH: THE WITNESS OF THE PRE-REFORMATION HISTORY TO THE DOCTRINE OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA*

Nathan Busenitz
Ph.D., The Master's Seminary
Executive Vice President
Dean of Faculty
Associate Professor of Theology

* * * * *

The foundation of any church creed must be its doctrine of Scripture—the view of God's Word that dictates the creed's composition. The Nicene Creed is only authoritative insofar as it reflects the doctrinal positions found in the Bible. No church council possesses theological authority in and of itself. God's Word is the authority above every earthly authority. Therefore, what the authors of a church creed believe about God's Word will inevitably shape the creed they formulate. In the case of Nicaea, the church fathers held a high view of God's Word, such that the unspoken foundation of the creed is the doctrine of sola Scriptura. Based on evidence from the writings of the church fathers, the early church held the strong conviction that God's Word is inspired and without error, and that it is the highest authority and final court of appeal for the establishment of sound doctrine. This article will explore that conviction as it appears in early church writings.

* * * * *

Introduction

A high view of Scripture, both in terms of its inerrancy and authority, lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation.¹ For the Reformers, Scripture alone established

¹ This article has been adapted from a chapter titled, "The Ground and Pillar of the Faith," in *The Inerrant Word*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 115–33. Republished with permission. In preparing this material, I am particularly indebted to the work of three evangelical authors. The first is William Webster, *Holy Scripture: The Ground and Pillar of Our Faith*, vol. 2 (Battle Ground, WA: Christian Resources, 2001). It is perhaps the most extensive study on this important topic from an evangelical perspective. Those seeking a more thorough treatment of this subject would do well to engage

the doctrines of the church, and any competing authority had to be rejected. In this regard, the Geneva Confession of 1536 is representative:

We affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as [the] rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other thing which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord.²

Although the Reformers sought affirmation for their views from the writings of the church fathers (i.e., Christian leaders and theologians from the early centuries of church history), they looked to Scripture alone as the foundation and final authority for their theological claims. As Martin Luther explained in 1519 to Johann Eck:

I have learned to ascribe the honor of infallibility only to those books that are accepted as canonical. I am profoundly convinced that none of these writers has erred. All other writers, however they may have distinguished themselves in holiness or in doctrine, I read in this way: I evaluate what they say, not on the basis that they themselves believe that a thing is true, but only insofar as they are able to convince me by the authority of the canonical books or by clear reason.³

For the Reformers, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* encompassed both the purity and the authority of the Bible. They recognized that because Scripture consists of the perfect words of God, it not only reflects His holy character, it also comes with His absolute authority. In recognizing that Christ alone is the Head of His church, they further asserted that His Word alone is the supreme authority for determining the doctrines of the church. Consequently, they concluded that all other would-be authorities (including popes, councils, and church traditions) must be subjected to Christ and His Word.

But were the Reformers the first in church history to embrace such a view regarding the absolute authority of Scripture? Or can a distinct witness affirming this theological conviction be perceived in the writings of earlier Christian leaders? In order to answer those questions from a historical perspective, it is necessary to consider what the church fathers said in this regard.

with Webster's comprehensive survey. The second is James White, "*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church," in *Sola Scriptura*, ed. Don Kistler (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009), 17–37. This chapter long survey is a helpful and concise treatment of this subject. The third is Gregg Allison's summary treatment in his *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), which has been a useful resource on this topic just as it is on many other areas related to the history of Christian doctrine.

² "Geneva Confession of 1536," 1, in *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 120.

³ Martin Luther, *Contra malignum Iohannis Eccii iudicium super aliquot articulis a fratribus quibusdam ei suppositis Martini Lutheri defensio*, WA, 2.626, in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 84.

Though not authoritative as only Scripture is, the witness of pre-Reformation church history provides valuable insight into the early church's perspective on the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. Believers today can benefit greatly from such a study, because it enables them to see how evangelical convictions were articulated and defended by early generations of Christians. In this article, we will survey the writings of the church fathers under two headings: the inerrancy of Scripture and the authority of Scripture.

The Church Fathers and the Inerrancy of Scripture

Even a cursory reading of patristic literature demonstrates that early Christians considered the Scriptures to contain the very words of God. Because they understood that God is perfect, they recognized that His Word is also perfect. Because God cannot lie, His Word is necessarily without error or falsehood.

That commitment is expressed throughout patristic literature in several ways. First, the church fathers understood that because Scripture comes from the Holy Spirit, it cannot contain error.⁴ For example, Clement of Rome (d. ca. 100) makes this connection when he tells the Corinthians, "You have searched the holy scriptures, which are true, which were given by the Holy Spirit; you know that nothing unrighteous or counterfeit is written in them."⁵ Irenaeus (ca. 130–202) echoes that conclusion in his treatise *Against Heresies*: "The Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit."⁶ Second, because Scripture is without error, early church fathers (such as Justin Martyr [d. 165] and Irenaeus) affirmed that it does not contradict itself. Their belief that all Scripture is true led them to conclude that every portion of Scripture harmonizes perfectly with every other part. To cite Irenaeus again:

All Scripture, which has been given to us by God, shall be found by us perfectly consistent: and the parables [i.e., the less-clear passages] shall harmonize with those passages which are perfectly plain; and those statements the meaning of which is clear, shall serve to explain the parables.⁷

To those who might claim there are contradictions in Scripture, Justin offers this reply: "Since I am entirely convinced that no Scripture contradicts another, I shall admit rather that I do not understand what is recorded, and shall strive to persuade those who imagine that the Scriptures are contradictory, to be rather of the same opinion as myself."⁸ Athanasius (296–373) similarly asserts: "It is the opinion of

⁴ For additional examples from patristic literature on this point, see Carl R. Trueman, "The Power of the Word in the Present: Inerrancy and the Reformation," in *The Inerrant Word*, ed. John MacArthur (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 134–46.

⁵ Clement, *First Clement*, 45.2–3, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 105.

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.28.2, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 1:399. Hereafter, *ANF*.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.28.3, in *ANF*, 1:400.

⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 65, in *ANF*, 1:230.

some, that the Scriptures do not agree together, or that God, who gave the commandment, is false. But there is no disagreement whatever, far from it, neither can the Father, who is truth, lie; ‘for it is impossible that God should lie.’”⁹ Early Christian leaders were resolute in their conviction that God’s Word is absolutely true. Tertullian (ca. 160–220) states, “The statements of holy Scripture will never be discordant with truth.”¹⁰ Athanasius offers a similar assertion: “The sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth.”¹¹ In his exposition of John 17:17, John Chrysostom (ca. 347–407) explains, “‘Your word is truth,’ that is, ‘there is no falsehood in it, and all that is said in it must happen.’”¹² Augustine (354–430) is especially clear in this regard, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

I have learned to yield this respect and honor only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.... Concerning which it would be wrong to doubt that they are free from error.¹³

The Scriptures are holy, they are truthful, they are blameless.... So we have no grounds at all for blaming Scripture if we happen to deviate in any way, because we haven’t understood it. When we do understand it, we are right. But when we are wrong because we haven’t understood it, we leave it in the right. We have gone wrong, we don’t make our Scripture to be wrong, but it continues to stand up straight and right, so that we may return to it for correction.¹⁴

It seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books: that is to say, that the men by whom the Scripture has been given to us, and committed to writing, did put down in these books anything false.... For if you once admit into such a high sanctuary of authority one false statement as made in the way of duty, there will not be left a single sentence of those books which, if appearing to anyone difficult in practice or hard to believe, may not by the same fatal rule be explained away, as a statement in which ... the author declared what was not true.¹⁵

⁹ Athanasius, *Easter Letter*, 19.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 4:546. Hereafter, *NPNF*².

¹⁰ Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul*, 21, in *ANF*, 3:202.

¹¹ Athanasius, *Against the Heathen*, 1.3, in *NPNF*², 4:4.

¹² John Chrysostom, *Homily on John 17:17*, in *John 11–21*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 252.

¹³ Augustine, *Letters*, 82.3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:350. Hereafter, *NPNF*¹.

¹⁴ Augustine, *Sermons*, 23.3, in *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Peter Gorday (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 269.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Letters*, 28.3, in *NPNF*¹, 1:251–52.

Seven centuries later, Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109) expresses the same conviction with these words: “For I am sure that if I say anything which is undoubtedly contradictory to holy Scripture, it is wrong; and if I become aware of such a contradiction, I do not wish to hold that opinion.”¹⁶

Because these church fathers recognized God’s Word to be wholly true, they took seriously the warnings in Scripture directed at anyone who would subtract from it or add to it. Athanasius illustrates this principle in his *Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter*. After listing the canonical books of Scripture, he explains: “These are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these.”¹⁷

Basil of Caesarea (330–379) likewise asserts, “To delete anything that is written down or to interpolate anything not written amounts to open defection from the faith and makes the offender liable to a charge of contempt.”¹⁸ In a similar vein, Augustine emphasizes the fact that, because God’s Word is perfect, it must not be altered in any way. He writes:

If anyone preaches either concerning Christ or concerning His church or concerning any other matter which pertains to our faith and life; I will not say, if we, but what Paul adds, if an angel from heaven should preach to you anything besides what you have received in the Scriptures of the Law and of the Gospels, let him be anathema.¹⁹

As this brief survey demonstrates, evidence from prominent church fathers shows that they regarded Scripture as the very revelation of God given through the Holy Spirit, such that it reflects His perfect character. They taught that it contains no error, that it is absolutely true, and that anyone who adds to it or subtracts from it will be judged accordingly by God. In this way, they clearly affirmed their belief in the inerrancy of Scripture.

The Church Fathers and the Authority of Scripture

Just as these early Christian leaders recognized that Scripture reflects the perfect character of God, they also recognized that Scripture comes with God’s own authority. As Justin Martyr explains:

[Scripture ought to] be believed for its own nobility, and for the confidence due to Him who sends it. Now the word of truth is sent from God.... For being sent with authority, it is not necessary that it should be required to

¹⁶ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1.18, in Allison, *Historical Theology*, 83.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *Easter Letter*, 39.6, in *NPNF*², 4:550.

¹⁸ Basil of Caesarea, “Concerning Faith,” in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works, Fathers of the Church*, vol. 9, trans. M. Monica Wagner (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1962), 59.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Against Petilian, the Donatist*, 3.6, in White, “*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church,” 25. Cf. *NPNF*¹, 4:599.

produce proof of what is said; since neither is there any proof beyond itself, which is God.²⁰

Because there is no higher authority than God, there can be no higher authority than the Word that He has revealed.

Augustine connects inerrancy with authority by explaining that when someone attacks the truthfulness of God's Word, he simultaneously attempts to undermine God's authority. Augustine writes: "For, truly, when he [i.e., a false teacher] pronounces anything [in Scripture] to be untrue, he demands that he be believed in preference, and endeavors to shake our confidence in the authority of the divine Scriptures."²¹ Elsewhere, Augustine reiterates the truth that Scripture has the highest authority because it is God's Word:

This Mediator, having spoken what He judged sufficient first by the prophets, then by His own lips, and afterwards by the apostles, has besides produced the Scripture which is called canonical, which has paramount authority, and to which we yield assent in all matters of which we ought not to be ignorant.²²

The commitment of early Christians to the paramount authority of Scripture is evidenced in at least three ways: in their reverence for Scripture within the church, in their reliance on Scripture to expose false teaching, and in their regard for Scripture over every other alleged source of authority.

The Patristic Reverence for Scripture in the Church

The high regard that early Christians had for the authority of God's Word is evidenced first in the fact that the Scriptures occupied a central and authoritative place in the life of the early church. In his *First Apology*, written around 150, Justin provides one of the earliest extrabiblical descriptions of a church service. He writes:

And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president [the pastor] verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.²³

As Justin's description demonstrates, the early church regarded Old Testament texts ("the writings of the prophets") and New Testament texts ("the memoirs of the apostles") as authoritative, such that they were read and preached during the

²⁰ Justin Martyr, *Fragments of the Lost Work of Justin on the Resurrection*, 1, in *ANF*, 1:294 (English rendered clearer).

²¹ Augustine, *Letters*, 28.4, in *NPNF^I*, 1:252.

²² Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.3, in *NPNF^I*, 2:206 (emphasis added).

²³ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 67, in *ANF*, 1:186.

corporate gathering. Believers attending the weekly worship service were admonished and urged to obey the good things revealed in Scripture.

This attitude toward God's Word is made explicit by Irenaeus. Speaking of the apostles, he writes:

We have learned from none others the plan of our salvation, than from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at one time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.²⁴

In response to the heretical teachings of the Gnostics, Irenaeus appealed to Scripture as his final authority—as the “ground and pillar” of the faith of the church.²⁵ Commenting on Irenaeus's view of Scripture, William Webster observes:

It is clear that Irenaeus taught that Scripture is the pillar and ground of the faith.... To Irenaeus, then, Scripture is the full and final revelation given by God to man through the apostles. It is inspired and authoritative and a source of proof for discerning truth and error. It is Scripture that has final and sufficient authority and is the ground and pillar of the Church's faith. The Scriptures are both materially and formally sufficient.²⁶

As Irenaeus's words illustrate, the Scriptures occupied a central place in the weekly worship of the early church because they provided the authoritative basis for what Christians believed and what the church taught.

The Patristic Reliance on Scripture in Condemning Heresy

An early Christian commitment to the authority of Scripture is seen, second, in the fathers' repeated appeal to Scripture in defense of sound doctrine, especially in the face of heretical attack. Historian J. N. D. Kelly sums up this characteristic of patristic theology with these words:

The clearest token of the prestige enjoyed by [Scripture] 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.²⁷

Numerous examples could be produced to demonstrate the veracity of that statement. For example, Irenaeus condemned his Gnostic opponents by appealing to Scripture.

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, in *ANF*, 1:414.

²⁵ Webster points out: “The phrase ‘handed down’ is the verb form of the word ‘tradition.’ ... The Bible is the means by which the *traditio* (tradition), or teaching of the apostles is transmitted from generation to generation and by which true apostolic teaching can be verified and error refuted.” *Holy Scripture*, 2.24–25.

²⁶ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2.24, 26.

²⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (repr., New York: Continuum, 2006), 46.

He wrote: “Such, then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures.”²⁸ For Irenaeus, the fact that the Gnostics based their teachings on something other than God’s Word was sufficient evidence, in and of itself, to prove that their system was false.

Tertullian makes a similar point in his treatise on the resurrection. He writes, “Take away, indeed, from the heretics the wisdom which they share with the heathen, and let them support their inquiries from the Scriptures alone: they will then be unable to keep their ground.”²⁹ Tertullian did not hesitate to label the false teachers as heretics because they could not support their teachings from God’s Word.

Like Tertullian, Hippolytus (ca. 170–236) responds to heretics by comparing their teachings with Scripture:

Let us turn to the exhibition of the truth itself, that we may establish the truth, against which all these mighty heresies have arisen without being able to state anything to the purpose. There is, brethren, one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source.... 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.³⁰

In confronting the falsehood of Arianism, Athanasius writes:

Which of the two theologies sets forth our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Son of the Father, this which you vomited forth [i.e., Arianism], or that which we have spoken and maintain from the Scriptures [i.e., Trinitarianism]? ... Nor does Scripture afford them [the Arian heretics] any pretext; for it has been often shown, and it shall be shown now, that their doctrine is alien to the divine oracles.³¹

Likewise, in his controversy with the Donatists, Augustine appeals to Scripture as the only adequate standard for discerning truth from error:

Let us not bring in deceitful balances, to which we may hang what weights we will and how we will, saying to suit ourselves, “This is heavy and this is light;” but let us bring forward the sacred balance out of holy Scripture, as out of the Lord’s treasure-house, and let us weigh them by it, to see which is the heavier; or rather, let us not weigh them for ourselves, but read the weights as declared by the Lord.³²

²⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.8.1, in *ANF*, 1:326.

²⁹ Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 3, in *ANF*, 3:547.

³⁰ Hippolytus, *Against the Heresy of Noetus*, 8–9, in *ANF*, 5:227.

³¹ Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 1.3.10, in *NPNF*², 4:311–12.

³² Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 2.6 (9), in *NPNF*¹, 4:429.

Such examples demonstrate a standard patristic approach: sound doctrine was defended and false teaching denounced on the basis of biblical authority. These early Christian leaders rested their case in the Scriptures, because there was no higher authority to which they could appeal.

The Patristic Regard for Scripture above Every Other Authority

A commitment to biblical authority in the early church is seen, third, in the fathers' elevation of Scripture above other potential sources of authority. From a survey of patristic literature, a compelling case can be made that the early church viewed Scripture as its highest authority in the determination of sound doctrine. This commitment to the ultimate authority of God's Word (what the Protestant Reformers would later call *sola Scriptura*) can be demonstrated along the following lines.

First, patristic theologians such as Origen and Augustine insisted that noncanonical books—though they might be edifying and beneficial for believers—do not have an authority equal to Scripture. As Origen (ca. 182–254) explains: “No man ought, for the confirmation of doctrines, to use books which are not canonized Scriptures.”³³ Elsewhere, he expands on this conviction: “In the two testaments every word that pertains to God may be required and discussed, and all knowledge of things may be understood out of them. But if anything yet remains which the Holy Scripture does not determine, no other third Scripture ought to be received for authorizing any knowledge or doctrine.”³⁴ Augustine makes a similar comment about any book written after the closing of the New Testament canon. He writes:

There is a distinct boundary line separating all productions subsequent to apostolic times from the authoritative canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. The authority of these books has come down to us from the apostles ... and, from a position of lofty supremacy, claims the submission of every faithful and pious mind.... In the innumerable books that have been written afterwards we may sometimes find the same truth as in Scripture, but there is not the same authority. Scripture has a sacredness peculiar to itself.³⁵

Elsewhere, Augustine reiterates this principle:

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.³⁶

³³ Origen, *Tractates in Matthew*, 26, in Charles Elliott, *Delineation of Roman Catholicism* (New York: George Lane, 1841), 1:120.

³⁴ Origen, *Homily on Leviticus*, 5, in Charles Elliott, *Delineation of Roman Catholicism*, 1:119 (English rendered clearer).

³⁵ Augustine, *Reply to Faustus*, 11.5, in *NPNF¹*, 4:180. In this same context, Augustine further asserts, “In consequence of the distinctive peculiarity of the sacred writings, we are bound to receive as true whatever the canon shows to have been said by even one prophet, or apostle, or evangelist.”

³⁶ Augustine, *The Unity of the Church*, 3, in White, “*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church,” 25.

Second, Christian leaders such as Ambrose (ca. 337–397) regarded Scripture (in which the wisdom of God is revealed) as more authoritative than any form of human wisdom. Ambrose expressed that principle with these words:

Do not follow the traditions of philosophy or those who gather the semblance of truth in the “vain deceit” of the arts of persuasion. Rather, accept, in accordance with the rule of truth, what is set forth in the inspired words of God and is poured into the hearts of the faithful by the contemplation of such sublimity.³⁷

In his treatise *The Unity of the Church*, Augustine similarly 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 agree and which we both believe. There let us seek the church, there let us discuss our case.”³⁸ The context of that statement is notable, because Augustine is appealing to Scripture as his ultimate authority even in matters pertaining to the church.

Third, a number of church fathers expressly state that they regarded the Scriptures as more authoritative than their own opinions and teachings. Rather than elevating their interpretations to a level of equal authority with Scripture, they elevated Scripture above their own perspectives. Consider the following examples:

Dionysius of Alexandria (ca. 265): We did not evade objections, but we endeavored as far as possible to hold to and confirm the things which lay before us, and if the reason given satisfied us, we were not ashamed to change our opinions and agree with others; but on the contrary, conscientiously and sincerely, and with hearts laid open before God, we accepted whatever was established by the proofs and teachings of the Holy Scriptures.³⁹

Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–386): 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 you these things, do not give absolute credence, unless you 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 from the Holy Scriptures.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ambrose, *Six Days of Creation*, 2.1.3, in *Psalms 51–150*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Quentin F. Wesselschmidt (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 318.

³⁸ Augustine, *The Unity of the Church*, 3, in White, “*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church,” 25.

³⁹ Dionysius of Alexandria, cited from Eusebius, *Church History*, 7.24:7–9, in *NPNF*², 1:309 (English rendered clearer).

⁴⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 4.17, in *NPNF*², 7.23 (English rendered clearer).

Basil of Caesarea: Those hearers who are instructed in the Scriptures should examine what is said by the teachers, receiving what is in conformity with the Scriptures and rejecting what is opposed to them; and that those who persist in teaching such doctrines should be strictly avoided.⁴¹

John Chrysostom, noting that all arguments must be supported from Scripture: These then are the reasons; but it is necessary to establish them all from the Scriptures, and to show with exactness that all that has been said on this subject is not an invention of human reasoning, but the very sentence of the Scriptures. For thus will what we say be at once more deserving of credit, and sink the deeper into your minds.⁴²

Augustine: For the reasonings of any men whatsoever, even though they be [true Christians], and of high reputation, are not to be treated by us in the same way as the canonical Scriptures are treated. We are at liberty, without doing any violence to the respect which these men deserve, to condemn and reject anything in their writings, if perchance we shall find that they have entertained opinions differing from that which others or we ourselves have, by the divine help, discovered to be the truth. I deal thus with the writings of others, and I wish my intelligent readers to deal thus with mine.⁴³

As Augustine suggests, intelligent readers are those who evaluate patristic writings against the standard of biblical truth, not vice versa.

Along those same lines, Augustine elsewhere asserts that Scripture is more authoritative than the writings of earlier church fathers. He writes:

Who can fail to be aware that the sacred canon of Scripture, both of the Old and New Testament, is confined within its own limits, and that it stands so absolutely in a superior position to all later letters of the bishops, that about it we can hold no manner of doubt or disputation whether what is confessedly contained in it is right and true; but that all the letters of bishops which have been written, or are being written, since the closing of the canon, are liable to be refuted if there be anything contained in them which strays from the truth.⁴⁴

When Augustine (writing in the fifth century) disagreed with Cyprian (a third-century father), he did not hesitate to assert that Cyprian's writings must be evaluated in light of Scripture. Thus, Augustine explains:

We do no injustice to Cyprian when we make a distinction between his epistles and the canonical Scriptures; we may freely pass judgment on the writings of believers and unbelievers alike.... For that reason Cyprian's

⁴¹ Basil of Caesarea, *The Morals*, Rule 72, in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 185–86.

⁴² John Chrysostom, *Concerning the Statutes*, Homily 1.14, in *NPNF¹*, 9:336–37.

⁴³ Augustine, *Letters*, 148.4.15, in *NPNF¹*, 1:502.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *On Baptism, Against the Donatists*, 2.2–3, in *NPNF¹*, 4:427.

epistles, which have no canonical authority, must be judged according to their agreement with the authority of the divine writings. Thus we can accept from Cyprian only what agrees, and safely reject what does not agree, with Scripture.⁴⁵

As Augustine's example illustrates, it is no slight to early generations of Christians (including those who lived in the second and third centuries) to subject their writings to the authoritative guide of biblical truth.

Fourth, there is evidence that early Christians also viewed Scripture as more authoritative than church councils. Even after the Council of Nicaea took place in 325, Athanasius, the renowned defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy, still regarded the authority of Scripture as superior to it. The council was authoritative only insofar as it accurately reflected the teachings of God's Word. Speaking of Arian theologians, Athanasius wrote:

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; but if a Council be needed on the point, there are the proceedings of the Fathers, for the Nicene Bishops did not neglect this matter, but stated the doctrine so exactly, that persons reading their words honestly, cannot but be reminded by them of the religion towards Christ announced in divine Scripture.⁴⁶

Notice that Athanasius argues that "Scripture is sufficient above all things," including councils. Furthermore, he defends the orthodoxy of the Council of Nicaea on the grounds that its determinations reflected the truth "announced in divine Scripture." Arianism was not in error because it violated the findings of a council, but rather because it distorted and rejected the clear teaching of God's Word.

Augustine similarly notes that the councils of the church are not the Christian's ultimate authority. In debating an Arian heretic named Maximinus, Augustine openly states: "I must not press the authority of Nicaea against you, nor you that of Ariminum against me; I do not acknowledge the one, as you do not the other; but let us come to ground that is common to both, the testimony of the Holy Scriptures."⁴⁷ In other words, where the authority of councils fails, the authority of God's Word continues to reign supreme.

Fifth, in doctrinal matters, evidence from the fathers demonstrates that they generally regarded Scripture as more authoritative than church tradition. Though some of the fathers occasionally cite oral tradition to support certain ecclesiastical practices, on the whole, they look to Scripture as the final authority in matters of doctrine.⁴⁸ Basil provides an example in this regard. In places, he references

⁴⁵ Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, 2.39–40, in A. D. R. Polman, *The Word of God according to St. Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 65. Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:76.

⁴⁶ Athanasius, *De Synodis: Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*, 1.6, in *NPNF*², 4.453.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Against Maximinus the Arian*, 2.14, in George Salmon, *The Infallibility of the Church* (London: John Murray, 1888), 288.

⁴⁸ For a thorough examination, from an evangelical perspective, of the church fathers' use of tradition, see Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:22–238.

unwritten customs such as triple immersion in baptism and facing east to pray.⁴⁹ But in the determination of sound doctrine, he looks solely to Scripture as his authoritative guide.⁵⁰

Consider, for example, how Basil responds to the proponents of Arianism:

Their complaint is that their custom [i.e., tradition] 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.⁵¹

In denouncing the errors of Arian theology, Basil's ultimate appeal was not to tradition or to church councils, but to the Word of God. From his perspective, the definitive reason Arianism was wrong was not that it violated Trinitarian custom, but that it departed from biblical truth.

Elsewhere, Basil reiterates this point:

What our fathers said, the same say we, that the glory of the Father and of the Son is common; wherefore we offer the doxology to the Father with the Son. But we do not rest only on the fact that such is the tradition of the Fathers; for they too followed the sense of Scripture, and started from the evidence which, a few sentences back, I deduced from Scripture and laid before you.⁵²

As Basil's statement demonstrates, his case for the deity of Christ did not ultimately rest on the teachings of earlier Christian leaders, but on an even greater authority: the Word of God.

In summary, abundant examples from early Christian writings can be produced to show that, in matters of doctrine, the early church elevated the Scriptures above (1) noncanonical writings, (2) human wisdom, (3) their own teaching (and the teaching of earlier church fathers), (4) the findings of church councils, and (5) the traditions of the church. On this basis, then, a strong case can be made to show that a chorus of patristic voices anticipated the Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, that Scripture is perfectly true and that it stands alone as the ultimate authority for determining what the church is to believe and to teach.

⁴⁹ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 27.66, in *NPNF*², 8:40–42.

⁵⁰ Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:73.

⁵¹ Basil of Caesarea, *Letters*, 189.3, in *NPNF*², 8:229 (emphasis added).

⁵² Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, 7.16, in *NPNF*², 8:10.

A Note about Tradition

But what about those places where the church fathers do speak of “tradition”? How should such references be understood in light of the fathers’ clear affirmation of the inerrancy and authority of Scripture?

The Roman Catholic Church insists that certain Christian doctrines were preserved not only through the *writings of inspired Scripture*, but also through *the transmission of extrabiblical oral tradition*. Such oral tradition supposedly explains the origination of distinctly Catholic doctrines such as the infallibility of the pope and the immaculate conception and assumption of Mary.

In responding to such claims, it is helpful to recognize that the church fathers used the term *tradition* in a variety of ways, none of which ultimately substantiates modern Catholic claims. For example, Irenaeus defines tradition not in terms of extrabiblical doctrines, but in terms of the essentials of the Christian faith, all of which are expressly taught in Scripture. Irenaeus explains that the “ancient tradition” of the apostles consists of the following:

Believing in one God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and all things therein, by means of Christ Jesus, the Son of God; who, because of His surpassing love towards His creation, condescended to be born of the virgin, He Himself uniting man through Himself to God, and having suffered under Pontius Pilate, and rising again, and having been received up in splendor, shall come in glory, the Savior of those who are saved, and the Judge of those who are judged, and sending into eternal fire those who transform the truth, and despise His Father and His advent.⁵³

For Irenaeus, “tradition” includes (1) belief in one God, (2) belief that he created all things through Christ, (3) belief in the incarnation, (4) belief in the deity and humanity of Christ, (5) belief in Christ’s passion, (6) belief in his resurrection, (7) belief in the ascension, and (8) belief in the second coming. That list articulates the fundamentals of the Christian faith and corresponds to doctrinal truths that are clearly taught in Scripture.⁵⁴

Importantly, Irenaeus was using the term tradition as a direct refutation of Gnostic heretics who claimed that they possessed a secret tradition that had been orally passed down from the apostles but was different from Scripture. In response, Irenaeus explains that the traditions of the apostles are contained in the teachings of Scripture. Thus, the Gnostics were wrong because they elevated unbiblical, secret tradition above Scripture, whereas true believers had no other authoritative tradition besides God’s Word.

To be sure, the church fathers sometimes appealed to prior generations of Christian leaders to show that, unlike the heretics, their teachings were not novelties. However, this appeal to earlier church history was never regarded as being an authority above or equal to Scripture. As Gregg Allison explains:

⁵³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.4.2, in *ANF*, 1:417.

⁵⁴ Cf. White’s discussion of this quotation in “*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church,” 20–22.

This practice of appealing to church authority, especially to the writings of [earlier] church fathers, was never intended to deprive Scripture of its rightful place of authority. In battles against heresy, the point of appeal was to provide support for true doctrines because they were the doctrines the church had always embraced; they were not the novel ideas of the false teachers. And of course, whatever the church believed had to be traced back to Scripture itself, because that was the ultimate authority in all matters.⁵⁵

Admittedly, there were also times when some church fathers (such as Basil of Caesarea) used the word tradition to speak about church practices of secondary importance, such as triple immersion in baptism and facing east to pray.⁵⁶ Importantly, modern Catholic doctrines such as the infallibility of the pope and the assumption of Mary are not included in the traditions of which Basil speaks. Furthermore, in the early church, even secondary practices were subject to evaluation on the basis of Scripture. Thus, Basil himself can explain that “every word and deed should be ratified by the testimony of the Holy Scripture to confirm the good and cause shame to the wicked.”⁵⁷

A century before Basil, Cyprian (ca. 200–258) provides a helpful example of this kind of biblical evaluation of tradition. Cyprian was addressing the question of whether or not heretical Novatianists who returned to the orthodox church should be rebaptized. Our goal in this chapter is not to address that particular issue, but instead to look at the authority to which Cyprian appealed in order to answer the question he posed. Significantly, he wished to follow a traditional practice only if it came from the Bible. Thus, he writes:

Where is that tradition from? Does it come from the authority of the Lord and of the Gospel, or does it come from the commands and the epistles of the apostles? For God bears witness to the fact that those things which are written must be done.... If, therefore, it is either prescribed in the Gospel, or contained in the epistles or Acts of the Apostles, ... [then] let this divine and holy tradition be observed.”⁵⁸

In sum, when the church fathers spoke of tradition in a doctrinal sense, or in the sense of the “rule of faith,” they were generally referring to truths that are expressly taught in Scripture, as the example from Irenaeus demonstrates. At the same time, some patristic writers (such as Basil in the fourth century) occasionally spoke of unwritten, extrabiblical “traditions” that pertained to certain ecclesiastical practices and customs. Even so, the evidence suggests that most of the church fathers would have gladly agreed with the principle that everything—whether doctrinal or practical—is ultimately subject to the Word of God. Consequently, their use of the word tradition does not contradict their commitment to the final authority of Scripture.

⁵⁵ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 81.

⁵⁶ Cf. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:142–48. It should be noted that many of the secondary practices mentioned by Basil are not practiced by the Roman Catholic Church today.

⁵⁷ Basil of Caesarea: *The Morals*, Rule 26, in *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, 106.

⁵⁸ Cyprian, *Letters*, 73.2, in *ANF*, 5:386–87 (English rendered clearer).

Conclusion

Based on evidence from the writings of the church fathers, a strong case can be made to demonstrate that the early church affirmed the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*—namely, the conviction that Scripture is without error and that it alone is the highest authority and the final court of appeal for the establishment of sound doctrine. It is the rule by which all things must be measured.

Scripture is God’s Word. Therefore, it reflects His perfect character and comes with His absolute authority. The early church understood that to submit to Scripture is to submit to the lordship of its divine Author. Thus, in the writings of the church fathers, we find statements such as the following:

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.⁵⁹

For among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith and the manner of life.⁶⁰

What more shall I teach you than what we read in the apostle? For holy Scripture fixes the rule of our doctrine, lest we be wiser than we ought.... Therefore, I should not teach you anything else except to expound to you the words of the Teacher.⁶¹

In light of such evidence, contemporary evangelicals can have great confidence that their commitment to the inerrancy and authority of Scripture has a rich history that spans the last two millennia. The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* was not a sixteenth-century invention. Though it may not always have been articulated as clearly or directly in the pre-Reformation period as it was during the sixteenth century, it has nonetheless been the cherished conviction of believers throughout the entire history of the church.

Along those lines, Webster writes:

The opinion of the fathers and theologians throughout the history of the Church and up to the Reformation was overwhelmingly in favor of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* and antithetical to the position of the Council of Trent. Contrary to claims by Roman Catholic apologists, the principle of *sola Scriptura* is not only biblical, it is historical.⁶²

⁵⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, citing his sister Macrina, in *NPNF*², 5:439.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 2.9, in *NPNF*¹, 2:539.

⁶¹ Augustine, *On the Good of Widowhood*, 2, in White, “*Sola Scriptura* and the Early Church,” 24–25. Cf. *NPNF*¹, 3:442.

⁶² Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 2:92.

Armed with the confidence that this doctrine is established in Scripture and affirmed in church history, believers can go forth boldly in the knowledge that there is no higher authority than the Word of God, because there is no authority greater than God Himself.