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This past February (2019), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in St. Louis. The primary item on the agenda was the existing language in “The Book of Discipline” regarding sexual ethics. After much debate and controversy, over 800 delegates cast their votes. Fifty-three percent favored retaining the language, and forty-seven percent voted against it, revealing how evenly divided the denomination is on this issue. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how the dissenters will proceed, but it is unlikely that the issue will go away or that unity will be the long-term result.

As many have observed, the identity crisis that the United Methodist Church and many other Christian fellowships seem to be facing is due, in large part, to a crisis of authority. Is Scripture the primary authority, and how is it brought to bear on the controversial issues of our day? This question is fundamental to the life and faith of the church and is pertinent to a wide range of topics. Because of the relevance of this question, this issue of *Christian Studies* is devoted to the theme of authority for Christian faith and practice. And this question is of utmost importance. Where does our authority for faith and practice lie? What are the proper sources for theology? What are the standards for evaluating different theologies? What should they be? What role does the greater historic tradition of the church play?

The contributors to this issue have emphasized different aspects of these questions, and various solutions are proposed in the following pages. In addition to biblical insights, these articles offer a range of theological, historical, and philosophical considerations regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As always, our intent is to provide thoughtful reflection that will create dialogue about matters that are important to God's people.

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# Not of Private Interpretation: Scripture and Tradition in Reformation and Early Modern Protestantism

Richard A. Muller

## I. Scripture and Tradition—Basic Issues

*Sola scriptura* has been viewed by some modern Protestants as a call for the exclusion of tradition, sometimes even the ecumenical creeds, from consideration in the formulation of Christian doctrine. Examination of the thought of the Reformers and their successors in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, points in a different direction.<sup>1</sup> As Heiko Oberman indicated, it is a mistake to understand the Reformation conflict as a battle between proponents of “Scripture alone” and proponents of “Scripture and Tradition.”<sup>2</sup> Part of the problem in understanding the Reformers’ views on Scripture and tradition arises from a misconception of the meaning of tradition in early Protestant thought. An analysis of the language and arguments of the Reformers and their successors demonstrates that “tradition” negatively understood is not a simple reference to the teaching of preceding generations of Christians, whereas tradition positively understood can reference biblical interpretations and theological views of past ages.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that *sola scriptura* was not used as a standard term by the Reformers and their successors. See Anthony N. S. Lane, “*Sola Scriptura*? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan,” in *A Pathway Into the Holy Scripture*, ed. P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 297–327; also note Henk van den Belt, “*Sola Scriptura*: An Inadequate Slogan for the Authority of Scripture,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 51/2 (2016): 204–26.

<sup>2</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 54; cf. idem, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 365–75.

The term “tradition” is rooted in the Latin verb, *trado*, to transmit, deliver, hand over, hand down, or consign. A tradition, then, whether divine or human, is something that is delivered or transmitted, notably, sayings or teachings handed down from past generations. The term “tradition” or *traditio* as used by the Reformers and their successors is the typical translation of *paradosis*, from the verb *paradidomi* (rendered into Latin with the verb *trado*), used in the Greek New Testament to indicate a transmission or handing down of teachings. In the early English translations of the New Testament, such as Coverdale’s Bibles of 1535 and 1537, Taverner’s Bible of 1559, or the Geneva Bible of 1561, *paradosis* is consistently rendered as “tradition” and *paradidomi* as “deliver.” As Protestant exegetes and translators recognized, there are both positive and negative connotations in the biblical usages. On the positive side, there is the Pauline usage, as in 1 Corinthians 11:23, “for I received from the Lord what I also delivered [*paredideto*] to you,” and 1 Corinthians 15:3, “for I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.” The negative usage is exemplified by Mark 7:8, 13: “You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition [*paradosin*] of men ... thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on.” Both of these usages had a significant impact on the Protestant approach to tradition.

In pointing out that the Reformation debates were not precisely over “Scripture alone” and “Scripture and Tradition,” Oberman also identified two basic ways, characteristic of late medieval thought, in which the relationship between Scripture and tradition was understood. One way, identified by Oberman as “Tradition I,” was a “single-source theory of interpreted Scripture,” whereas the other, identified as “Tradition II,” was a “two-source theory, which allows for an extrabiblical oral tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Tradition I, then, assumed the ultimate authority of Scripture as the norm for Christian teaching, but it also assumed that there was a churchly interpretive tradition in which the teachings of Scripture were explained and transmitted, qualified, as one of the authors cited by Oberman put it, by the rule that one owes “more respect to canonical Scripture than to human assertions, regardless of who holds them.”<sup>4</sup> So also, Thomas Aquinas taught that Scripture alone offers “incontrovertible

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<sup>3</sup> Oberman, *Forerunners*, 58.

<sup>4</sup> Wessel Gansfort, in Oberman, *Forerunners*, 100.

proof” inasmuch as “our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets,” whereas the authority of the teachers of the church—representatives of the interpretive tradition—“may properly be used, yet as merely probable.”<sup>5</sup>

What Protestantism added to this notion of Tradition I, reinforced by the dual usage in the New Testament, was a narrative of decline from the purer interpretations of the early church into an increasingly problematic mixture of traditionary interpretation of Scripture with extrabiblical human traditions, concluding in what Calvin and others would call the “papal superstitions” of the late Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> The Protestant stripping away of human traditions, specifically of superstitions, was an attempt not entirely to remove the interpretive tradition but to purge its accretions, looking to Scripture itself as the ultimate norm of doctrine but also attending to what the church, in particular the early church and the most trustworthy teachers of later eras, had said about the meaning of the text. In the Protestant view, aspects of the tradition were clearly suspect, especially those belonging to the later Middle Ages. The extant distinction between an interpretive tradition of biblical truths and an extrabiblical oral tradition was modified to distinguish between divine traditions stemming from Scripture either directly or by interpretive inference and human traditions often immersed in error, many of which had mingled with the tradition of interpretation. This modification can be identified both in the writings of early Protestants like Tyndale, Bullinger, and Calvin and, often with clearer nuance, in the writings of later Protestants like Whitaker, Junius, Polanus, and Arminius.

## II. William Tyndale’s Early Reformation Perspective

The text of 2 Peter 1:20, “no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation,” read together with Augustine’s famous comment, “For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the Catholic

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, q. 1, art. 8, ad 2.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 1: 194–96; with Jordan J. Ballor, “Deformation and Reformation: Thomas Aquinas and the Rise of Protestant Scholasticism,” in *Aquinas Among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen, (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 27–48, here 29–33.

Church,”<sup>7</sup> was much debated during the time of the Reformation. From the Roman Catholic side, the Petrine text was taken as a declaration of the authority of the church and its tradition against interpretations of the text by individual Reformers, and Augustine’s comment was taken as a strong reinforcement of the churchly and traditionary norm by the church father who was dearest to Protestants.

Protestant responses countered the Roman reading both of “private” and of Augustine’s reliance on the church. As William Tyndale paraphrased and expanded on the text, “No place of the scripture may have a private exposition; that is, it may not be expounded after the will of man, or after the will of the flesh, or drawn unto a worldly purpose contrary unto the open texts, and the general articles of the faith, and the whole course of the scripture, and contrary to the living and practising of Christ and the apostles and holy prophets.”<sup>8</sup> Tyndale also had a simple explanation of Augustine’s statement. Augustine was a convert from paganism to Christianity who had been moved by the lives and teachings of Christians, and it was from them that he received the truths of Scripture: “they which come after receive the scripture of them that go before.”<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, although Tyndale denied the ultimate authority of the church and tradition in establishing the faith, he did allow a role for church and tradition in conveying the faith from one generation to another. In the specific case of Augustine, Tyndale recognized that Augustine had come to his acceptance of Christianity from paganism and had, early on, “disputed with blind reasons and worldly wisdom against the Christian.”<sup>10</sup> In Tyndale’s view, what had finally brought Augustine to respect Christianity had been the lives of Christians who had undergone persecution for the sake of their beliefs, to the point that he became convinced that the power of the doctrine to guide

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Against the Epistle of Manichaeus Called Fundamental*, v, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ser. 1, IV: 131.

<sup>8</sup> William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, in *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1848), 317.

<sup>9</sup> William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, in *An Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue, The Supper of the Lord after the True Meaning of John VI. and 1 Cor. XI. and Wm. Tracy’s Testament Expounded* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1850), 50.

<sup>10</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 50.

their lives must have come from God. This respect for Christian life in both teaching and practice rendered Augustine willing to receive Scripture from those who had come to the faith before him. This most basic receiving of Scripture from the church, however, yields only a historical faith resting on testimony, namely, the opinion of human beings: what is required for one truly to be Christian is a living and “feeling” faith that rests not on human testimony, which can err, but on “the power of God.”<sup>11</sup>

Tyndale’s point was not to dispose of the teachings of the church but, as he interpreted Augustine’s approach, to subject the church and its teaching to the authority of Scripture:

for the first church taught nought but they confirmed it with miracles, which could not be done but of God, till the scripture was authentically received. And the church following teacheth nought that they will have believed, as an article of faith, but that which the scripture proveth and maintaineth: as St. Augustine protesteth of his works, that men should compare them unto the scripture, and thereby judge them, can cast away whatsoever the scripture did not allow.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately Scripture is the cause of belief—and Scripture receives its authority, ultimately, from the one who sent it, namely, from God.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably, Tyndale’s assumption that Augustine’s receipt of Scripture from the church, understood as the community of belief, was grounded in an appreciation of the value of Christian teaching and practice, as well as Tyndale’s recognition of the value of Augustine’s own writings insofar as they were judged true by the rule of Scripture, point toward a positive albeit cautious sense of the value of what has gone before, namely tradition. This conclusion is reinforced by what Tyndale states, both positively and negatively, about tradition: the final chapter of the Epistle to the Romans includes an admonition to “beware of the traditions and doctrines of men” and to “compare ... all manner of the doctrine of men unto the scripture, and see whether they agree or not.”<sup>14</sup> Wicked and false traditions are arbitrarily imposed churchly ceremonies, lacking biblical justification. Distinct from “wicked traditions and false

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<sup>11</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 135–36.

<sup>13</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Tyndale, *Prologue Upon the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, in *Doctrinal Treatises*, 508.

ceremonies,” the Apostle Paul and later writers of the early church taught “traditions” consisting in “the gospel of Christ, and honest manners and living, and such a good order as becometh the doctrine of Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Tyndale offers no opposition to ceremonies or sacraments that are biblically grounded, “understood by the people ... serve the people, and preach one or another thing to them.”<sup>16</sup> The problem arises when Christians are “brought violently into captivity under the bondage of traditions of men” or made to recite formulae, including the creed, in a language that they cannot understand.<sup>17</sup>

Tyndale’s arguments against tradition are specifically directed against human traditions imposed on Christian belief and practice without suitable biblical warrant. His approach does not oppose, but actually approves, reading traditionary materials, particularly the writings of church fathers like Augustine, for edification—clearly allied with what we have identified as “Tradition I.”

### **III. Traditions Divine and Human in Reformation-Era Confessions and Catechisms.**

The distinction between wrongfully imposed human traditions and traditions of Christian teaching, including the writings of the church fathers and the creeds, is found also in the early Protestant confessions and catechisms. The Tetrapolitan Confession presented at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 included a chapter on the problem of “human traditions” in which a distinction is made between two kinds of tradition, human and divine. The former are those that “conflict with the law of God” whereas the latter, “such as agree with Scripture, and were instituted for good morals and the profit of men, even though not expressed in Scripture, in words,” are recognized as flowing “from the command to love.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the first Helvetic Confession of 1536 offered two articles, one on “the ancient fathers” and the other on “human traditions” immediately following its articles on Scripture. Scripture is identified as “its

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<sup>15</sup> Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 218–19.

<sup>16</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 74.

<sup>17</sup> Tyndale, *Answer to Sir Thomas More’s Dialogue*, 72, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Tetrapolitan Confession, in *Reformed Confessions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries in English Translation*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008–2014), 1: 156–57. Dennison’s volumes will be cited hereinafter as *RC 16–17*.

own interpreter, guided by the rule of love and faith.” As for the church fathers, insofar as they have followed this right interpretation of Scripture, the authors of the confession declare, “not only do we receive them as interpreters of Scripture, but we honor them as chosen instruments of God.”<sup>19</sup> Human traditions, however, are those that fail to follow Scripture.<sup>20</sup>

Reformation-era catechisms, like those of Thomas Cranmer, John Calvin, and John à Lasco, consistently take the Apostles’ Creed as a foundational point of reference in expounding the Christian faith,<sup>21</sup> on the assumption that it was not only a product of the ancient church, but also that it presented the basic truths of Scripture on matters directly related to salvation. In his *Decades*, Heinrich Bullinger devoted three sermons to the Apostles’ Creed after his initial six on Scripture and its interpretation.<sup>22</sup> Beyond this, when he published the *Decades*, he inserted a prefatory chapter on the four general councils of the early church—Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon—identifying them as augmentations of the more basic creed made necessary by heresies. Bullinger also presented the conciliar creeds in full, augmented by several of the early rules of faith and the Athanasian Creed. The councils, he noted, had been gathered “for keeping the soundness of faith, the unity of doctrine, and the discipline and peace of the churches.”<sup>23</sup> Bullinger exhorted his hearers to compare unwritten traditions “with the manifest writings of the apostles,” adding, “if in any place you shall perceive those traditions to disagree with the scriptures, then gather ... that this is the forged invention of man, and not the apostles’ tradition.”<sup>24</sup>

Bullinger also identified the catechetical works of the early church as exemplary of proper teaching given their faithful interpretation of Scripture, as distinct from “private interpretation” resting on human invention.<sup>25</sup> As with Tyndale, “private interpretation” is not merely the problematic interpretation

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<sup>19</sup> First Helvetic Confession, art. 2–3, in *RC 16–17*, 1: 344.

<sup>20</sup> First Helvetic Confession, art. 4, in *RC 16–17*, 1: 344.

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Catechism*, in *RC 16–17*, 1: 371–78; Thomas Cranmer, *Catechism*, in *ibid.*, 1: 547–48; John à Lasco, *Catechism Used for the Teaching of Children*, in *ibid.*, 1: 614–29.

<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, trans. H. I., edited by Thomas Harding, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849–1852), 1: 122–80.

<sup>23</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, 1: 12.

<sup>24</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, 1: 64; cf. *ibid.*, 74–76.

<sup>25</sup> Bullinger, *Decades*, IV: 154–55, citing 2 Pet. 1:20.

of one person, it is any human interpretation not grounded in the right reading of the text, which, as Bullinger himself argues, consents to the intention of the Spirit and conforms to the rule of faith and love.<sup>26</sup>

This very specific way of identifying false, “human traditions” is also embedded in the early confessional and catechetical writings of John Calvin, who later described his conversion to the Reform as an abandoning of “papal superstitions,”<sup>27</sup> while nonetheless having frequent recourse to patristic theology.<sup>28</sup> In its discussion of the pastoral office, Calvin’s early *Catechism* warns against the “pestilential wolves” who teach something other than the Word of God.<sup>29</sup> It then moves on to discuss human traditions, beginning with a positive comment on rules for decency and order in Christian assembly. Such rules are not to be identified as “human traditions” but are to be classed as useful teachings that do not claim to be necessary for salvation, to bind the conscience, or to be a basis for piety. Human traditions in the negative sense—now reflecting the warning against wolves who depart from the Word—are invented rules that are identified in their own right as binding on the conscience.<sup>30</sup> Even so, Peter did not condemn the interpretation “of every individual” as private interpretation as if to “prohibit each one to interpret,” but to show that “whatever men bring of their own is profane.”<sup>31</sup>

In the *Confession* of the Genevan church, the brief chapter on the “Holy Supper” concludes with a warning against “blasphemies and superstitions” that leads to the issue of human traditions. The message is identical to that of the *Catechism*: there are laws (*leges*) necessary to the external governance of the church, which are not to be regarded and/or condemned as human traditions.

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<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Bullinger, *In omnes apostolicas epistolas, divi videlicet Pauli XIII. Et VII. canonicas, commentarii* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1549), at 2 Pet. 1:20 (62).

<sup>27</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, 5 vols. (Edinburgh: for the Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1849), 1: xl–xli.

<sup>28</sup> See Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Catechism or Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans., with an intro. by Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972; revised 1976), xxx (48).

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, xxx (48); cf. idem, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), IV.x; IV.xi.8.

<sup>31</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: for the Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 2 Pet. 1:20 (389–90).

Human traditions are understood quite specifically as claims on the conscience and demands that rites be observed as necessary to salvation even when not explicitly commanded by God in Scripture.<sup>32</sup>

This approach to human traditions in the context of the issue of church order is significant for several reasons. Calvin specifically identifies proper churchly practices as other than human traditions: there is an outward or external practice that must be conducted “decently and in order [*decenter & ordine*]” or in “order and decorum [*ordo & decorum*]” for the sake of the peace of the church. The phrase “decently and in order” that has been so closely associated with Reformed and Presbyterian worship, as well as the pairing of “order” and “decorum” is found in both the *Catechism* and the *Confession* and, in both cases, referred to the words of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 14:40).<sup>33</sup> Such rules, albeit not specifically stated in Scripture, are “comprehended under the general precept of the Apostle,” as long as they are not identified as necessary for salvation, are not specifically determinative of worship, are not viewed as in themselves expressions of piety, and do not “overturn the freedom which Christ has acquired for us.” These rules do not fall under condemnation as human traditions.<sup>34</sup> Human “teachings” and “precepts” must not be followed.<sup>35</sup> Whereas Calvin’s *Catechism* is not specific, the 1538 *Confession* lines out the human traditions: “votive pilgrimages, monasticism, discrimination of foods, prohibition of marriage, auricular confession, and other things of this sort.”<sup>36</sup> His polemic against human traditions does not pose the sole authority of Scripture globally against the written record of the church’s doctrinal formation. Rather it very specifically focuses on rites, ceremonies, and practices that in Calvin’s view replace the Word of God with human invention—very much in accord with his description of his conversion as being freed from the mire of “papal superstition.”

Here again, as in the early case of William Tyndale’s debate with Thomas More, neither Calvin, nor Bullinger, nor the early Protestant confessions take the position of “Scripture alone” or *sola scriptura* to the exclusion of tradition,

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<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, *Confession*, xvii, in Battles, trans., *Catechism or Institution of the Christian Religion*, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, xxxi (48); cf. *Confession*, xvii (58).

<sup>34</sup> *Confession*, xvii (58); cf. Calvin, *Catechism*, xxxi (48).

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Catechism*, xxxi (48).

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Confession*, xvii (59).

broadly construed as the church's tradition of meditation on and interpretation of Scripture. The polemic is directed toward the exclusion of "human traditions" that are not biblically grounded. These human traditions, moreover, are very specifically identified as practices and beliefs imposed on Christians and regarded as binding on the basis of purely human authority.

#### IV. Jacob Arminius and the Early Modern Protestant Perspective

The Reformation-era understanding of Scripture and tradition, with specific distinction made between the legitimate tradition of sound, biblically-grounded doctrine and human traditions that followed "private interpretation" continued into the carefully parsed formulae of post-Reformation Protestantism. Analyses of the problem of tradition were a commonplace among thinkers of the era, often allowing for various distinctions between kinds of tradition, and typically identifying sound traditions either as of divine authority or as resting solidly on the teaching of the apostles.<sup>37</sup>

Jacob Arminius raised the issue of tradition in several places, following out the line of argument found among his Protestant predecessors and contemporaries. The most extended of these are his *Public Disputations* on the subject.<sup>38</sup> There is also a reflection on Scripture and tradition in his *Certain Articles*,<sup>39</sup> in

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<sup>37</sup> Cf., e.g., William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture, against the Papists, especially Bellarmine and Stapleton*, trans. & ed. William Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), VI.iii–iv (500–11); Franciscus Junius, *Loci nonnulli theologici: de theologia, sacris scripturis, Deo ac creatione* (Heidelberg: Bibliopolis Commelianus, 1612), xi (30–31); Amandus Polanus, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Hanau: Wechel, 1615), 124–28; cf. Lucas Trelcatius Jr., *A Briefe Institution of the Commonplaces of Sacred Divinitie. Wherein, the truth of every place is proved, and the sophismes of Bellarmine are reprooved*, trans. John Gawen (London: T. P. for Francis Burton, 1610), 32–33, 480–81.

<sup>38</sup> Jacob Arminius, *Public Disputation, ii. On the Sufficiency and Perfection of the holy Scriptures in Opposition to Traditions; Public Disputation, iii. On the Sufficiency and Perfection of Scripture, in Opposition to Human Traditions; Public Disputation, xxi. On the Roman Pontiff, and the Principal Titles which are Attributed to Him*, in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols and William Nichols, with an intro. by Carl Bangs, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 1:92–111; with occasional correction from the Latin of Jacob Arminius, *Opera theologica* (Leiden: Godefridus Basson, 1629). Hereinafter cited by number from *Public Disputations*.

<sup>39</sup> Jacob Arminius, *Certain Articles to be Diligently Examined and Weighed, i. On the Scripture and Human Traditions*, in *Works*, 2:706–7.

his fifth *Oration*,<sup>40</sup> and in the *Private Disputations*.<sup>41</sup> The net effect of his arguments is to establish the final authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice but also to allow for theological formulation in the church, including a recourse to creeds, councils, and the works of theological writers throughout the history of the church. In his own work, Arminius often drew on the fathers of the church for support in his theological argumentation and he acknowledged the relative authority of the ecumenical creeds of the church.<sup>42</sup>

Arminius not only allowed that there are “divine traditions” in distinction from “human traditions,” he also made an important distinction, paralleling the work of his predecessor, Franciscus Junius, between immediate and mediate divine tradition:

An *immediate* [tradition] is that which proceeds from God, without the intervention of man.... A *mediate* [tradition] is that which is performed by God, as the chief author, through the hands of a man peculiarly sanctified for its execution.... According to its dignity and authority, it may be distributed into *primary* and *secondary*; so that the *primary* may be by way of a man, but one so instructed and governed by the inspiration and direction of the Holy Spirit, that it is not he who speaks, but the Spirit of the Father that is in him [in margin, 2 Sam. 23:2, 3; Matt. 10:20; 2 Tim. 3:16]: that he may not himself be the crier, but the voice of God crying; not himself the Scribe, but the amanuensis of the Holy Spirit [in margin, 2 Pet. 1:21; 1 Pet. 4:11; 1 Cor. 10:11].<sup>43</sup>

Reference to 2 Peter 1:21 identifies the primary tradition or delivery of divine truth, as referencing the process of inspiration by which the text of Scripture, specifically prophecy, is established. Arguably, the citation carries with it the implication of the preceding verse, namely that the interpretation of biblical prophecy cannot be of private interpretation inasmuch as the prophecy itself is delivered mediately from God.

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<sup>40</sup> Jacob Arminius, *On the Reconciling of Religious Dissensions Among Christians*, in *Works*, 2:442–43.

<sup>41</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputation, lv. On the Power of the Church in Delivering Doctrines*; also *Private Disputation, lvi. On the Power of the Church in Enacting Laws*, in *Works*, 2: 421–23, 423–25; hereinafter cited by number from *Private Disputations*.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., *Works*, 1:620–21; 2:601–18, 694–96.

<sup>43</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, iii.3; cf. Junius, *Loci nonnulli theologici*, xi (30).

This conclusion is supported by Arminius' citation of 1 Peter 4:11, "whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God," apposite to his definition of a secondary mediate tradition: "The *secondary*, indeed, is according to the appointment of God, but by the will of man who administers the act of delivery [*traditionis actum*] according to his own judgment."<sup>44</sup> Human will in this case does not indicate willfulness or imposition of opinion on a biblical text and therefore to "human" tradition—rather it indicates the willingness to deliver or present Christian teachings. Accordingly,

the tradition which we call secondary will endure in the Church to the end of the world; for by it the doctrines which have, through the prophets and apostles, been committed to her, are by her, conveyed to her children. For this reason, the Church is called "the ground and pillar of truth" [in margin, 1 Tim. 3:15], but secondarily after the apostles, who, on account of the primary tradition, are distinguished by the title of "pillars," and "foundations" [in margin, Gal. 2:9; Rev. 21:14], before those epithets were bestowed on the church.<sup>45</sup>

Much to the same point, Arminius' sometime colleague, Lucas Trelcatius Jr. noted of the continuing tradition that the "Succession of doctrine ... is coincident with the true and essential marks of the Church."<sup>46</sup>

There is, therefore, a clear distinction between this valid secondary tradition and the human traditions of the papacy. The pope "commands ... his own interpretations of the Scriptures to be embraced with the most undoubting faith, [and] unwritten traditions to be venerated with an affection and reverence equal to that of the written word of God."<sup>47</sup> Specifically,

he introduced into the church many false dogmas ... concerning the insufficiency of the scriptures to prove and confirm every necessary truth, and to confute all errors without traditions; that subjection of every human being to the Roman Pontiff is of necessity for salvation; that the bread in the Lord's supper is transubstantiated into the body of Christ; that in the mass Christ is daily offered by the priest as a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of the living and of the dead; that man is justified before God, partly by faith, and

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<sup>44</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, iii.3.

<sup>45</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, iii.9.

<sup>46</sup> Trelcatius, *Briefve Institution*, 480.

<sup>47</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, xxi.9.

partly by works; that there is a purgatory, into which the souls of those enter who are not yet sufficiently purified, and that they are released from it by prayers, intercessions, vigils, alms, indulgences, &c.<sup>48</sup>

The pope “is also deservedly called the destroyer and subverter of the Church” because he has added “the books of the apocrypha and unwritten traditions to the prophetic and apostolic scriptures.”<sup>49</sup>

The implications of these arguments concerning the nature of tradition become clear in Arminius’ disputation “Of the Power of the Church in Delivering Doctrines.” The issue addressed is the tradition or delivery of doctrine, not the establishment or the initial transmission: that has been accomplished by God and Christ. The task of the church is the “dispensation and administration” of what she has received.<sup>50</sup> As in the case of Scripture itself, the transmission of teachings consists both in the words themselves and in the meaning or true sense of the words. Accordingly, the church has two tasks in the delivery of doctrine. It is the responsibility of the church to present the words delivered to her from God without addition, diminution, or change. It is also the responsibility of the church to explain, interpret, and apply these teachings, to elaborate the meaning of the words—which is to say, to create and develop doctrinal formulations that are grounded in the words originally conveyed to her by God.<sup>51</sup>

Similarly, echoing the arguments found in the early Reformers’ works, Arminius indicates that the church has the power of enacting laws or rules, but within certain defined limits.<sup>52</sup> There are fundamental or principal laws that establish the kingdom of God, specifically concerning matters of faith, hope, and love: these are established by God and Christ, not by the church. There are also, however, secondary laws that are relative to “persons, times, and places,” promulgated for the sake of “good order” and suitable administration

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<sup>48</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, xxi.10

<sup>49</sup> Arminius, *Public Disputation*, xxi.11.

<sup>50</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputation*, lv.2–3, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputation*, lv.5–6.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.viii.1, 8–9; IV.x.8.

of the church.<sup>53</sup> These are laws that may be legitimately enacted by the church, as long as they do not bind the conscience and “invade Christian liberty.”<sup>54</sup>

### V. Conclusions

Whether in the early Reformation or in the later development of Protestant thought, Scripture as the ultimate norm for doctrine, often later summarized under the rubric *sola scriptura*, was not a mandate to separate Protestantism from the historical tradition of Christianity. The doctrine did assume a return to the teachings of Scripture and a stripping away of accretions that had transformed and, in the view of the Reformers, distorted both doctrine and practice. But it did not imply a loss of connection with the truths of Christianity as expounded in previous ages of the church. Various Protestant writers, from William Tyndale and those who came shortly after him to late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century theologians like Arminius and his contemporaries, insisted on a distinction between the valid interpretive tradition of the church, grounded in Scripture, and a body of accretions identifiable as “human traditions.” These human traditions were often identified as violations of the Petrine rule that Scripture is not of private interpretation—with “private” understood not simply as the opinion of a single person but more broadly as a purely human opinion imposed on the church as normative and binding, whether by an individual like the pope or by the collective hierarchy or ministry of the church.

William Tyndale, in controversy with Thomas More, made the basic point that human traditions could and in fact had erred and departed from the norm of Scripture without ruling out the use of positive aspects of the older tradition. This understanding was clearly codified in various early confessions and catechisms, which understood the relative value of the older church tradition, broadly understood as normed by and interpretive of Scripture. By implication the confessions and catechisms also relativized themselves as authoritative only in their capacity as interpretations of the biblical revelation.

Protestants writing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries both carried these understandings forward and refined the definitions. In sum, the Protestant *sola scriptura*, rightly understood as the identification of Scripture

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<sup>53</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputations*, lvi.5–6.

<sup>54</sup> Arminius, *Private Disputations*, lvi.8.

as the ultimate norm of theology, stood in the line of what we have called “Tradition I,” with the added qualification that certain extrabiblical traditions must be excluded as unsupported and even contradicted by the right interpretation of Scripture. The positive understanding of tradition as the ongoing work of faithful interpretation and explanation of Christian teaching allowed Protestant theologians to affirm their catholicity in accord with the historical orthodoxy of the church, most notably with the church fathers but also in a critical reception of medieval thought. This positive understanding of tradition also became evident in the rise and development, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of Protestant traditions of biblical interpretation and of theologies resting on exegesis. At the same time, human traditions, understood negatively as accretions, including such practices as indulgences and such doctrines as purgatory and transubstantiation, could be set aside on scriptural grounds without implying a wholesale repudiation of the “divine” or positive tradition.

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