

Sola Scriptura and Tradition

Introduction

What is the relationship between the concept of *sola Scriptura* and tradition? Evangelical and orthodox Christianity does not question the explicit witness of God's Word in regards her own attributes: The Word of God is by nature God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) and the holy writers were instruments of God Himself (2 Peter 1:21). The Bible is therefore authoritative and "the sacred writings...[lead] to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (2 Tim. 3:15)

From my own tradition (Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod), we have faithfully stood by these convictions and have understood them to justify the belief that we are bound *exclusively* to Scripture. Francis Pieper admits that while the Christian Church is indeed older than Holy Scripture, that after God chose to transmit His Word in writing: "the Church of every age was *strictly* bound to the written Word of God."¹ [emphasis mine] The Bible itself identifies our foundation upon "the apostles and prophets," the ones God used to transmit the written Word (Eph. 2:20). We see in this verse that "foundation" is in the singular. Why *not* deduce *sola Scriptura*?

The question being considered, however, is whether the Word of God's explicit self-description also *implicitly* teaches *sola Scriptura*, especially in light of Christendom's value in tradition. In crass rewording of the query: Is the Bible the *only*/the *sole* expression of apostolic foundation in Christ and what is *sola Scriptura's* relationship to tradition?

I: *Sola Scriptura*: Scripturally Implicit or Developed Over Time?

A. What Is Implied and What Is Assumed:

I realize that to ask the question challenges the moors of conservative Protestantism, and implies that perhaps Rome has it right after all. These inferences, however, are incidental

¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), vol. 1, p. 193.

to the goal of accurately perceiving *sola Scriptura*. There seems to be legitimate room for the question in light of the fact that while such doctrines as inspiration are lucid – literally expressed -- in the Bible, *sola Scriptura* is not. Most evangelical theologians know the standard reply to what I’ve just said: “It doesn’t have to be, since *sola Scriptura* is implied, inferred, implicit, etc, neither do we find the word ‘Trinity’ anywhere mentioned in the sixty-six books of the sacred canon, but that doesn’t mean that the Bible doesn’t *teach it!*”

It may be argued, however, that *sola Scriptura* is not on par with Trinity. For example, the singular “name” of Matthew 28:19 is attached to “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Deuteronomy 6:4 says God is one, and Matthew 28:19 verifies that the majestic plural of Genesis 1:26 is clearly identified as three persons. To say that the Holy Trinity is a lucid deduction is an understatement.

Can the same be said for *sola Scriptura*? Again, there is no question of the Bible’s clear self-witness in regards inspiration, unity, etc., but what about *exclusivity* viz. *sola*? For example, simple logic would not have us leap to the conclusion that because Scripture is holy, nothing else is holy. Michael is an angel, but the *explicit* witness in Scripture teaches us that he is not the *only* angel. Furthermore, some might argue that he is the only identified *arch-angel*, but is it true that just because Michael is the only one who directly receives this title that there are no other angels who share this status? There is no question that we are to rely upon the Word of God for salvation, but is there any *other* authority for us to be considerate of as we are being saved?

It might help to consider where *sola Scriptura* came from, but let us start with a definition: *Sola Scriptura* means ***“that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New***

Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged.”² But again, where did this concept come from?

B. Full Development In The Reformation Era:

Pieper seems to *assume* apostolic origin as he asserts: “we see that the Apostles insisted already very firmly on the sola Scriptura.”³ It is evident, however, that Pieper desired to make a case via inference. In his *Scripture, Traditions, and Infallibility*, Beegle attributes the “strict” concept to the lead Reformers. He says, “The strict ‘Scripture alone’ *of Luther and Calvin* [emphasis mine] evoked the opposite claim ‘the Church alone’ (*sola ecclesia*) by Albert Pigge (1490-1542), a strong apologist for Roman orthodoxy.”⁴

There is no question that *sola Scriptura* had fully developed thanks to the Reformation:

As time went on [in the Lutheran tradition in this case], rather long discussions of the divine origin and the attributes of Scripture became common. This development took place not because of any new and advanced interest in the doctrine of the inspiration per se but because it became increasingly apparent to Lutheran theologians that the authority of Scripture as the source of theology cannot be maintained in the church unless the divine origin of Sacred Scripture is confessed and upheld. Actually in their entire treatment of Scripture the orthodox Lutherans, like Luther himself, really have only two basic concerns. First, they desire to maintain the principle of *sola Scriptura*: only Sacred Scripture can establish articles of faith; all theology is to be drawn from the written Word of God alone. Second, they are intent on emphasizing the power and efficacy of Scripture as God’s Word...⁵

The Lutheran confessions also maintain: “[The Bible is] the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged...”⁶ Preus helps us to appreciate the wording, which could also be put as “Scripture is the one source

² Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Saint Louis/London: Concordia Publishing House, 1970), vol. 1, p. 257.

³ *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 195.

⁴ Dewey M. Beegle, *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), p. 100.

⁵ *The Theology of Post-Reformation Theology*, vol. 1, p. 256.

⁶ Theodore G. Tappert (trans. & ed.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 464.

(*principium cognoscendi*) of theology.”⁷ The mature form – the form as we have it in our possession today – was clearly explicated during the 16th and 17th centuries.

C. Pre-Reformation Evolution:

Is all of this to say that Lutheranism – or other Reformation tradition – is responsible for the concept? No, it is not. Pelikan provides a sense of historical development:

Those who made the most of the authority of the primitive church were accused of “wanting to have Sacred Scripture alone [*solam Scripturam sacram*] as a judge,” as well as of “wanting to interpret that Scripture according to their own ideas, without caring about the interpretation of the community of wise men in the church”...The origins of these discussions lay in the fourteenth century. Duns Scotus had said that his theology dealt only with what was in Scripture and what could be drawn from Scripture, but one of the doctrines in the second of these was for him the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary. Ockham had been more strict in enforcing the authority of “Sacred Scripture and the doctrine or assertion of the universal church” over that of the pope, as well as the superiority of Scripture to any church father...But his own view would seem to have been that “there are many catholic truths that neither are contained explicitly in Sacred Scripture nor can be inferred solely from its contents.”⁸

In the early 1400’s, John Huss took the stance that the Bible is the final authority by which even the pope could be judged. For Huss, a pope who was not obedient to the Word of God was not to be obeyed.⁹ In analyzing the Reformers who came 100 years later, Philip Schaff puts the situation this way:

The *objective* (generally called the *formal*) principle maintains the absolute sovereignty of the Bible, as the only infallible rule of the Christian faith and life, in opposition to the Roman doctrine of the Bible *and tradition*, as co-ordinate rules of faith. Tradition is not set aside altogether, but is subordinated, and its value made to depend upon the measure of its agreement with the Word of God.¹⁰

What comes out in all of this is that *sola Scriptura* seems to have *evolved*. We might

⁷ *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol. 1, p. 257.

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), vol. 4, pp. 119-120

⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), vol. 1, p. 349.

¹⁰ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1983), vol. 1, p. 206.

agree with Beegle above and speak of the version we know today as the “strict” sense, but what are saying at this point? Are we saying that the strict sense is the *proper sense* accurately derived from the implicit teaching of God’s Word – and one that faithful expositors of *any time period* would recognize -- or are we saying that the “strict” sense is the fully developed sense? Ironically, to adhere to the latter would be to accept a high authority of Church tradition!

Furthermore, Beegle presents a challenge even while defending the other explicit attributes of Scripture:

It should be recognized at the outset that it is impossible to practice the use of “Scripture alone” in the absolute sense. Even Martin Luther did not understand it that way. Those who take Scripture seriously are hardly consciously dishonest, yet the prejudices of religious training and cultural environment often conspire to prevent clear understanding of the truth in the text.¹¹

Now to be perfectly fair to Beegle, he is speaking in terms of returning to Scripture -- neither tradition nor anything else -- to consider exegetical issues and to be aware of one’s own contextual influences. However, in making this specific point, he makes the general observation that “Scripture alone” is not to be treated in an “absolute sense”. That is, Scripture is never approached in a vacuum. It must after all, be *interpreted*. Here one will cite some of our favorite orthodox principles of hermeneutics such as *Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*. However, is this the *only* qualifier? We would say there are other principles of interpretation certainly, but do any of these relate to tradition? Might tradition be an important compliment to the Word of God actually working in the lives of men?

Furthermore, is it possible that *sola Scriptura* is *itself* the result of Church tradition, though not necessarily per other popular perspectives on tradition (e.g. Eastern Orthodoxy)? This is a fascinating possibility.

¹¹ *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*, p. 119.

II. The Tradition Called “*Sola Scriptura*”?

If there is such a thing as a “strict-sense” or pinpointed form of *sola Scriptura* that came to realization during the Medieval and Reformation eras, it seems that ancient traditions from Rome and Constantinople are not the only ones possessing sacred dogma not explicitly found in Sacred Scripture. Yes, the Protestant might console himself by the fact that *his* tradition appears *closer* to the explicit witness of Scripture itself, but as we all know -- when it comes to truth -- “closer” is of no consolation at all. We all know the foolishness of describing any woman as being “a *little* pregnant.” We are either being faithful or unfaithful to the apostolic witness. Do the Scriptures themselves allow for a higher view of tradition? Again for that matter, is *sola Scriptura* a Protestant form of higher tradition? What seems certain, however, if *sola Scriptura* is only several centuries old, then the concept is quite simply *not* on par with other confessional standards. Arand and Voelz cite the following:

The confessors recognized that the Creeds (especially the Apostles’ Creed) can trace their lineage back to the Rule of Faith or Canon of Truth which contained the sum of apostolic doctrine. Irenaeus and Tertullian indicate that these precursors reach back to the processes of handing on the faith orally by the apostles and not directly from the Scriptures. Their summarized content, however, was entirely congruent with Scripture and contained nothing that could not be found in the Scriptures themselves. And so the early church regarded such “a normative overview as ‘apostolic’ and as the standard to which appeal was to be made when controversy about the content or interpretation of scripture arose” [Frances Young, *The Making of the Creeds*, (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1991), p. 9]. Both points, derivation and congruence, are captured by Martin Chemnitz: “For there is no doubt that the primitive church received from the Apostles and from apostolic men, not only the text (as we say) of the Scriptures, but also its legitimate and natural interpretation” (Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), I, 244)... *What might be said of the earliest rules of faith and perhaps even of the Apostles’ Creed cannot be said with reference to the sixteenth-century Lutheran confessions from the Augustana to the Formula of Concord.*¹² [emphasis mine]

But if we cannot say that the later confessions share the same level of derivation and

¹² Charles P. Arand and James W. Voelz, “The Lutheran Confessions as Normative Guides for Reading Scripture,” *Concordia Journal* 21 (October 1995), p. 367.

congruency as apostolic “legitimate and natural interpretations,” neither can we say that post-apostolic doctrinal refinements are congruent with Scripture either. Consequently, if a “strict” sense of *sola Scriptura* did not come to fruition until *after* the apostolic witness, then *sola Scriptura* is an example of Protestant traditionalism.

III. “Tradition” Has More Than One Meaning:

It is now becoming evident I think why the question of *sola Scriptura* ought be considered along with the question of tradition. Thus, it is time for another definition. What do we mean by “tradition”? Let us consider various perspectives.

A. Roman Catholicism:

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* presents a distinctive view of tradition:

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own “always, to the close of the age.”

Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit.

And [Holy] *Tradition* transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound, and spread it abroad by their preaching.

As a result the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, “does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.”¹³

Without getting into all the potential abuses of the view, the Roman Catholic Church clearly teaches this “flowing out from the same well-spring” doctrine. Scripture and Tradition are in essence *both* Word of God. This version of “tradition” *rejects sola Scriptura*. Rome does not mince words: ***“[The Church] does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone.”***

¹³ *Catechism Of The Catholic Church*, (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 31.

B. Eastern Orthodoxy:

Eastern Orthodox theology has clear similarities: “There cannot be, therefore, any question about ‘two sources’ of Revelation.”¹⁴ However, in the Eastern tradition, there are also distinctions that account for yet *another* version of tradition. Meyendorff makes this intriguing observation:

Jesus’ logia on the Bread of Heaven, the Vine, or “water springing up into eternal life” (even if the sacramental interpretation of these passages is not the only possible one) cannot be fully understood if one ignores the fact that Christians in the first century practiced Baptism and performed the Eucharist. *This makes it quite clear that Scripture, while complete in itself, presupposes Tradition, not as an addition, but as a milieu in which it becomes understandable and meaningful.*¹⁵ [emphasis mine]

In effect, there is a real function of tradition in relation to Scripture: “to make Scripture available and understandable to a changing and imperfect world. In this world, treating problems in isolation from Tradition by simplistic references to Scripture may lead to error and heresy.”¹⁶

Bishop Kallistos Ware suggests the use of Tradition as a “criterion” for interpretation of Scripture [note the significant dissimilarity between this view and the Roman view expressed above: the Orthodox view does not call Tradition “Word of God,” but rather treats tradition as an interpretive criterion]. Ware says, “The final criterion for our interpretation of Scripture is the *mind of the Church*. And this means keeping constantly in view how the meaning of Scripture is explained and applied in Holy Tradition: that is to say, how the Bible is understood by the Fathers and the saints, and how it is used in liturgical worship.”¹⁷

How might we apply this interpretative “milieu” or “criterion”? The following is a fine example of what the Eastern Church means:

The Orthodox Church has never proclaimed dogmas which are not direct interpretations of historical facts related in the Bible. Let us take a concrete and still

¹⁴ John Meyendorff, *Living Tradition*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), p. 16.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 15-16.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 17.

¹⁷ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), p. 110.

relevant example, that of the veneration of Mary, the Mother of God. For the Orthodox this veneration rests essentially on the dogma of the anti-Nestorian Council of Ephesus (431), which in no way made any “Mariological” definition, but simply condemned a doctrine, attributed to Nestorius, according to which Christ was a union of two “subjects”: the son of Mary and the Son of God. However, there was in Christ only one “subject.” This was the Son of God, who became also son of Mary. Therefore Mary must be the Mother of the Son of God Himself. Thus she is the “Mother of God,” *Theotokos*. It is clear that the council was essentially concerned with the understanding of an eminently biblical fact, the Incarnation. In order to express the full actuality of the Incarnation, we recognize Mary as the “Mother of God” and not of a simple man, and consequently judge her worthy of quite exceptional veneration. On the other hand, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception appears to the Orthodox theologian as not only absent from the biblical narrative, but also contrary to the biblical and traditional doctrine of the original sin.¹⁸

Let us pause here and consider some potential ramifications at this juncture. Whereas the first view of tradition – the Roman teaching – claims the falsity of *sola Scriptura*, the second view from the East invites some interesting correspondence. If the Christian Church could legitimately make the connection between Christ’s divinity and *Theotokos*, then why couldn’t she do the same for the sufficiency of Scripture and *sola Scriptura*? If *sola Scriptura* was the natural formulation in connection to the “facts” of the Bible, why not call it a “direct interpretation” of biblical attributes?

While these questions might be compelling, it seems clear that if we adopt such a strategy for defending *sola Scriptura*, we would also be adopting the still-existing claim of Eastern Orthodoxy that the meaning of Scriptures is “explained and applied in Holy Tradition.” On the other hand, perhaps this is what the Protestant tradition is *already* doing when it comes to *sola Scriptura*. In actuality, we cannot rest on this conclusion.

IV. Towards A Proper Understanding Of Evangelical Tradition:

A. “Tradition” Isn’t A Bad Word:

Since the concept “tradition” knows so much diversity and because that diversity is

¹⁸ *Living Tradition*, p. 18.

also characterized by extreme versions of “tradition,” it is not difficult to appreciate why so many Evangelical/Protestant Christians recoil at the mere mentioning of the word. This, however, is an unfortunate state of affairs since in reality *every* confession within Christendom *at present* affirms some form of tradition.

From the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* we have these observations:

[Tradition is] the entire process by which normative religious truths are passed on from one generation to another: As such, tradition is found in all religious communities, whether its form be oral or written, its contents embodied in a closed canon or a living organism. Even evangelical Protestants, inclined though they may still be to overlook it, must recognize that oral tradition preceded and shaped the canon of written Scripture and that their own understanding of Scripture and consequently their own community life have been molded, consciously or unconsciously, by particular traditions.¹⁹

To be sure, this is a critical insight on this issue. Ironically, “those free churches...that claim to stand on Scripture alone and to recognize no traditional authorities are in some sense the least free because they are not even conscious of what traditions have molded their understanding of Scripture.”²⁰

B. The Early Church Had A Clear Understanding Of Tradition:

Long before the East-West schism of A.D. 1054 and before the proliferation of gross man-made tradition (like the human tradition repudiated by Christ in Matt. 15:3; Mark 7:9, 13), the ancient Christian Church was not unfamiliar with the salutary use of tradition [note that here we offer yet two more definitions of “tradition” as distinct from the Roman and Eastern versions offered above: there is what we might call “gross” man-made tradition like that of the Pharisees and now we suggest a truly *good* or *apostolic* tradition recognized by the early Church].

In the book *Inerrancy*, Preus provides this historical backdrop:

¹⁹ Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 1104.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 1106.

Meanwhile another position was beginning to take shape and become articulate. Along with total commitment to the Scriptures as the norm of all doctrine, a new and clear conviction concerning the authority of oral tradition began to develop. This oral tradition, handed down from generation to generation and going back through the apostles directly to Christ, in no way conflicted with the Scriptures. But it did aid the church in interpreting the Scriptures and particularly in summarizing the Christian faith and thus protecting Christians against the aberrations of Gnostics and other heretics. To Tertullian and Irenaeus, who developed this position, such apostolic tradition, which faithfully transmitted Christ's teaching, was, like Scripture, infallible. Thus, for all practical purposes we have at the turn of the third century a kind of two-source doctrine of authority in the church, with both the New Testament and the rule of faith thought to be eminently apostolic. It is probably true that neither Tertullian nor Irenaeus meant to subordinate Scripture to unwritten tradition. Only Scripture could ultimately authenticate tradition. But at the same time, the ongoing tradition was necessary to counteract heretical distortions and interpretations of Scripture.

Thus the two revelatory authorities, identical in content, complemented and authenticated each other. This position was held in a variety of forms from the third century until the time of the Reformation... *We must say, however, that in practice both the Eastern and Western fathers as a rule gave much more deference to Scripture than to any traditional rule of faith. Creeds were written on the basis of Scripture and in terminology that was clearly biblical; likewise commentaries and treatises of all sorts were based on Scripture as the source of doctrine.*²¹

Now here again, we hear of such descriptions as “two-source” and “two revelatory,” but this ought not be construed as being identical to the views already discussed. Here is a summary of what we've so far touched on (“two source” refers to Scripture and tradition):

1. **Roman Catholic Tradition:** Two source, and tradition is *also* Word of God. *Sola Scriptura* is explicitly and utterly rejected.
2. **Eastern Orthodox Tradition:** Two source, but Tradition is milieu or criterion that interprets the Word of God. *Sola Scriptura* is logically no longer the *sole* principle and is implicitly rejected.
3. **Pharisaical Tradition:** One source from the teachings of men. *Sola Scriptura* is contradicted and ignored.
4. **Early Church Tradition:** Two source, but Scripture interprets tradition. Thus tradition as “source” is secondary. *Sola Scriptura* is the resultant “tradition” coming out of this understanding.

²¹ Norman L. Geisler (ed.), *Inerrancy*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), pp. 359-360.

C. Evangelical Tradition:

What do we mean by “resultant ‘tradition’”? We mean that *sola Scriptura* is not singularly drawn from one source, but has been produced by the two, legitimate sources identified by the early Church. And while we keep in mind the above distinction on confessions pre- or post- Rule of Faith and Canon of Truth, there is still a sort of normative character to this tradition of *sola Scriptura* clearly defined by the Reformers. That is, the Scriptures themselves give meaning to this tradition called *sola Scriptura*. For example, *sola Scriptura* is also interpreted (considerably) through 2 Timothy 3:15: “*and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings (Scriptures) which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.*” Here we are presented with the sufficiency of Scripture: we may be assured that if Scripture is all we possess – apart from say a pope for example – we will have all the revelation we need for salvation. This has direct application for understanding the actual meaning of *sola Scriptura*, ***because sola Scriptura is derived from the Bible and a tradition that treated its development that way!***

That is to say, not only does Scripture interpret Scripture, but Scripture interprets tradition when the Holy Spirit faithfully and providentially guides the Bride of Christ and produces “Scriptural tradition,” -- a “priority of Scripture” if you will -- what I would treat as a synonym for Evangelical tradition. Thus, I have no problem with a *possible* implicit doctrine in Scripture that is later – and in some cases, *much* later – developed and refined into a “strict” concept as long as that concept is explained and applied by Scripture itself.

Thus, while it appears that *sola Scriptura* has come from an Evangelical tradition (from the likes of Luther and Calvin) that nevertheless *sola Scriptura* derives its normative character from no man, but from the Word of God which interprets it to be reflective of a biblically-congruent apostolic witness. This is not the doctrine of extra-biblical tradition *per*

se, but the doctrine of a tradition that *Scripture* identifies as congruent with its own apostolic foundation.

For conservative Evangelical and Protestant Christians, however, to perpetuate the idea that *sola Scriptura* is *not* characterized by a form of Evangelical tradition is just naïve and probably doing our cause more harm than good. Let us instead be bold and admit that Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians are not the only ones with “living traditions,” we are after-all also living members of the Body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. We too possess the Word of God, the Sacred Scriptures, and we also possess an Evangelical tradition. A tradition we believe to be not less consistent with the primitive Church, but *more* consistent with her!

Furthermore, in the above attitude the Church of Christ will enjoy a certain freedom when it comes to Evangelical tradition. The latitude of this freedom might *surprise* the average Evangelical Protestant. Take for example the freedom Tertullian [A.D. 145-220] enjoyed when it came to tradition:

At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out, when we put on our clothes and shoes, when we bathe, when we sit at table, when we light the lamps, on couch, on seat, in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign [of the Cross].

If, for these and other such rules, you insist upon having positive Scripture injunction, you will find none. Tradition will be held forth to you as the originator of them...²²

Now everyone would readily agree that the tracing of the sign of the Cross is at no place positively stated in Scripture. The Bible simply does *not* instruct us to do it! The question, however, is whether Scripture can interpret the tradition -- clearly secondary to Scripture -- while upholding and reinforcing the Biblical message. Now from Tertullian’s immediate context, he does not offer Scriptural commentary, but it does not seem difficult to

²² Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.), vol. 3, pp. 94-95.

imagine what that commentary might be like. Take for example Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 2:2: "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Likewise, Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me." Add to these references the Scriptural themes of "remembering/recalling;" the symbolism of "forehead" in regards our thoughts and knowledge; the importance of "marking" and "marks" in terms of our allegiance and what or who we are identified with, etc. Is there any question that this particular secondary tradition is not also entirely "Scriptural" from the standpoint of Evangelical tradition that can interpret the practice or concept via Scripture? The particular example of the sign of the Cross, however, is probably inherently weak when compared to *sola Scriptura*. How much more does *sola Scriptura* depict the Biblical revelation?!

Another historical analysis of ante-Nicene relationships between the Word of God and tradition states the following: "The apostles distinguish between vain traditions of the Jews, and their own Christian *padadosis*, the *tradita apostolica* (2 Tim. i. 13, 14; 2 Tim. ii. 2; 1 Cor. xi. 2; 2 Thess. ii. 15; 2 Thess. iii. 6; 1 Cor. v. 8; 1 Cor. xvi. 2). Among these were (1) the authentication of their own Scriptures..."²³ I bring this out because among all the other legitimate traditions, the most important relate to upholding the Scriptures themselves. A question springing from this observation is, what Evangelical tradition is better than *sola Scriptura* for upholding the very thing the apostles sought to establish and preserve?!

V. Conclusion

Marquart leads us to consider:

What, we may ask, are the "traditions"...which Paul "handed on," and in which we are to become his "mimics" as he was Christ's (1 Cor. 11:1,2)? We have clear and

²³ *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, p. 343.

concrete answers in 1 Cor. 11:23 and 15:3—Paul transmits, exactly as he himself has received it, the saving evangel (15:1) of the cross and resurrection of Jesus...²⁴

Sola Scriptura is quite possibly the single most important facet of Evangelical or Scriptural tradition. This confessional, normative principle leads us to the very source of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Sola Scriptura* is a tradition that serves the only salvation found in Christ, because it suggests that the best tradition of Christendom is reliance not upon multiple authorities, but *one* authority.

The critical questions raised in this paper served the purpose of challenging our assumptions. We have an exciting tradition, why would any Evangelical desire to shy away from it? This is the kind of holy, secondary tradition advocated by the early Church, a tradition verified and interpreted by Scripture's clear teaching that there is *one* body and *one* Spirit...*one* hope...*one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:4-6). In this light, should anyone be surprised to learn that there is but *one* saving revelation; that there is but *one* Word of God?

In criticizing Erasmus, Luther asked, "Is it not enough that you submit your opinion to the Scriptures? Do you submit it to the decrees of the church also? What can the church decree, that is not decreed in the Scriptures?"²⁵

Perhaps this is the best way to sum up the basic quality of our Evangelical tradition epitomized by *sola Scriptura*: "What can the church decree, that is not decreed in the Scriptures?" It thus appears that through His most loving providential care, the Lord allowed His Church to refine *sola Scriptura* in the context of a God-approved secondary tradition, so that through this tradition, we would always be led back to the Word of God.

The Lord by His Word alone calls us into His Church, the Body of Christ, but after we arrive we find that it is still by the Word alone that He continues to sustain us. "What

²⁴ Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church And Her Fellowship, Ministry, And Governance*, (Waverly, Iowa: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), p. 28.

²⁵ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1931), p. 22.

can the Church decree, that is not decreed in the Scriptures? Actually, nothing, for even her traditions must be tested and interpreted by the Word of God alone. This is why *sola Scriptura* is so important...take *this* away and the traditions become those of men. The difference between the Lord's tradition and man's tradition seems to be *sola Scriptura*.

References Cited

- Arand, Charles P., & Voelz, James W. (1995) "The Lutheran Confessions as Normative Guides for Reading Scripture" in *Concordia Journal*. 21:366-384.
- Beegle, Dewey M. (1973) *Scripture, Tradition, and Infallibility*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Catechism Of The Catholic Church*. (1995) New York: Doubleday.
- Coxe, A. Cleveland (1995) "Elucidations [Tradition]" in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. vol. 2:343.
- Engen, J. Van (1984) "Tradition." in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Ed. By Walter A. Elwell. Grand Rapids: Baker. 1104-1106.
- Gonzales, Justo L. (1984) *The Story of Christianity*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers. vol. 1.
- Luther, Martin (1931) *The Bondage of the Will*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Marquart, Kurt E. (1990) *The Church And Her Fellowship, Ministry, And Governance*, Waverly, Iowa: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research.
- Meyendorff, John (1978) *Living Tradition*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav (1984) *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. vol. 4.
- Pieper, Francis (1950) *Christian Dogmatics*. Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House. vol. 1.
- Preus, Robert D. (1980) "The View of The Bible Held by The Church: The Early Church Through Luther" in *Inerrancy*. Ed. Norman L. Geisler. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House. 357-382.

References Cited (continued)

Preus, Robert D. (1970) *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, Saint Louis/London:

Concordia Publishing House. vol. 1.

Schaff, Philip (1983) *The Creeds of Christendom*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books.

vol. 1.

Tappert, Theodore, ed. (1959) *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran*

Church. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Tertullian (1995) "The Chaplet, or De Corona" in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Eds. Alexander

Roberts & James Donaldson. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers,

Inc. vol. 3:93-103.

Ware, Kallistos (1996) *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press.

Co.