

...less of tradition and text occurred primarily in the context of the believing community. Canonical "testing" took place within the give and take of church life. James Sanders states the dynamic at work: "The community shaped the text as it moved toward canon and the text or tradition shaped the communities as it found its pilgrimage toward canon."⁷⁸ The infrequent references to a normative list of texts suggest that Christian churches were not looking to create a canon but were seeking to hear God's Word in the Scripture readings during worship and ascertain which readings conveyed this Word. Public reading of Scripture is mentioned explicitly by Paul in 1 Timothy 4:13 as an activity intended for the entire church. In the process of liturgically reading in assembly, authoritative weight was accrued by texts that lent to their canonization.⁷⁹ Though perhaps more inchoate and unpredictable than we would like, there was, nevertheless, discernment in the process. In this manner, the church, for example, came to reject the gospel of Peter and the gospel of Thomas, whereas it continued to embrace Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.⁸⁰



THE CONFLUENCE OF THE BIBLE, THE TRADITION, AND THE CHURCH

For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee
None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.

John Donne, *An Anatomie of the World*

IT MAY COME as a surprise to some readers that for most of church history Scripture and tradition were perceived as generally compatible with each other. The tradition, or the catholic teaching, was the distillation of biblical truth and theoretically always existed in an interrelated harmony with Scripture. In response to the religious leader of a group whose members vaunted themselves as true Christians but who rejected the truly human birth of Christ, Augustine said, "The catholic, which is also the apostolic, doctrine is that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is both the Son of God in his divine nature and the Son of David after

78. James Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), 163.

79. Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 70-71.

80. A fuller study on the canonical process will be forthcoming by Craig Allert in this same series.

the flesh. . . . This teaching represents the 'plainest statement in Holy Scripture.'¹ Like streams coming out of the same spring, the tradition and the Bible, represented by the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, were realized only in the presence of each other. The Bible, no less than the other two, was not to be understood in grand isolation because it had primal authority.

But for the last four centuries or so, the relationship between Scripture and tradition has been a matter of controversy, often posed as one of the major problem areas in Protestant and Roman Catholic relations. One can hardly discuss the rise of the Christian tradition without reference to its authority in comparison to the authority of sacred Scripture. Unfortunately, the moment we turn our focus to Scripture and tradition, especially for many evangelicals, the subject becomes charged with defensiveness. The theological concern goes like this: The Bible is revelation and therefore necessary and binding upon Christian belief and practice, whereas the tradition is human-made and therefore extraneous and nonbinding. The one is canonical and completely authoritative, while the other is noncanonical but has pretensions of such authority. In cruder descriptions, the Bible is from God, while the tradition is of human origination emerging from the church as it was before the Protestant Reformation.

Stress placed on the Bible's authority is often formulated in historical terms of an antithesis between what came before and what came after the Protestant Reformation. Only with the advent of the sixteenth-century Reformation was the Bible restored to its rightful place as the sole authority, distinguished from the various traditional practices of the church. An indirect example of this approach is found in an article published in the 1989 issue of a prominent evangelical journal. The early medieval period of the church is said to have become "entrenched in sacramentalism and moralism that did not promote a truly evangelical gospel message."² This was partially due to the growing emphasis on Latin as the language of the church in the early Christian era, replacing the Greek of the New Testament. The reason for the ascendancy of Latin, supposedly, was the growing domination of

1. Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* XXIII.5.

2. Wayne Strickland, "Seminary Education: A Philosophical Paradigm in Process," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 32 (1989): 229-30.

the Roman church, which was responsible for ushering in "unbiblical ideas" (such as sacramentalism). Because of the emphasis on Latin, the Scriptures and the Latin fathers were studied, while facility in Greek and Hebrew was lost. Just as bad, the article claims, was monasticism's stress on Latin, which helped foster "misconceptions regarding the true basis of salvation, especially since the [early] fathers were stressed over [i.e., emphasized] the Scriptures."³

This analysis contains disturbing features. The reader is confronted with dual presuppositions of sundering the history of Scripture from church history and the neat polarization of the church's history in terms of Reformation and pre-Reformation, the latter having its meaning only in the light of the former. Either way, we have here an all-too-familiar pattern of Scripture versus tradition (and church), the message of the first being corrupted by the second after the death of the apostles. At the heart of this paradigm is a restorationist view of church history that depicts Protestantism as the means of returning to the pure and original church of the apostles and thus legitimizing itself against the Roman Catholic claim to apostolic authority.

Since the seventeenth century, Protestant and Roman theologians have contested with each other over which "church" is the legitimate heir of the apostles and the legacy of the early fathers. Both sides have struggled to show that their faith stands in succession with what the early church held. Owen Chadwick tells the story of Sir Henry Wotton, an Anglican, visiting the church of a priest in Rome with whom he was friendly. The priest, seeing Sir Henry standing among the congregants, sent a choirboy to him with a small piece of paper on which he had written, "Where was your religion to be found before Luther?" In response, Henry wrote underneath, "My religion was to be found then, where yours is not to be found now, in the written Word of God."⁴ This exchange is characteristic of what has been happening for centuries, though in more heated terms. One side focuses on the virtue of its perpetuity through church history, while the other stresses its conformity to antiquity in relation to the earliest stages of church

3. *Ibid.*

4. Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 2.

history. Roman Catholics have attempted to argue for a more or less "steady-state" theory of doctrine, based on the unchanging character of its tradition and church, while Protestants have had to show, despite their criticisms of tradition and church, that they more truly represent the teaching of the ancient church. As it is, both sides have been compelled to accept the historical challenge of the other, especially since the conclusion of Vatican II. Both sides have also found that part of the challenge of history is to find points of connection with the mind of the early fathers in which Bible, tradition, and church took concrete shape.

Given that the tradition and the Bible did indeed take their first theological steps toward structure and design in the early centuries of the church, let us reconsider how these functioned as distinguishable parts and as a united authority within the church. Herein we can find some bridges over which Catholics and evangelicals may cross to the middle in conversation with each other and in respect of the future task of self-definition.

Scriptural Authority

With rare exception do the early fathers appeal to tradition independent of scriptural teaching.⁵ But even in such instances, these writers are not propounding a two-source theory of revelation. In the first place, the idea that extrabiblical traditions possess the same authority as Scripture is a development of the later Middle Ages.⁶ In the second place, tradition was not conceived as an addition to Scripture nor as a source that functioned apart from Scripture. No matter how much one relied on the role of the tradition to govern faith, it did not preclude the primacy of scriptural authority. The fifth-century Syrian bishop Philoxenus of Mabbug makes this clear when he says, "The truth, the accurate account, which is the lasting and steadfast, is revealed

5. Tertullian, *The Chaplet* 3; and Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 66–67. Most, however, exhibited sensitivity toward the differences that existed between the tradition that had been generally received by the church from antiquity and those traditional aspects that were more peripheral to its central teaching.

6. Heiko Oberman, "Quo Vadis Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis," in *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*, ed. H. Oberman, 269–96 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

only by the revelation of God. If one should seek something outside of these things which are set down in Scripture, one cannot understand."⁷

Under the aegis of the Holy Spirit, the Bible was the primary agent of God's ongoing work of transformation in and through the church. There was no question in the patristic mind that Scripture, in whatever version lay at hand, was the sourcebook for the wording of creeds as well as the substance for explaining the faith. Cyril of Jerusalem taught new believers that the creed (of Jerusalem) was *de facto* a summarization of Scripture. Indeed, one was to learn the creed because it represented an epitome of the whole Bible.

Learn the faith and profess it; receive it and keep it—but only the Creed which the church will now deliver to you, that Creed is firmly based on Scripture. . . . For the articles of the Creed were not put together according to human choice; the most important doctrines were collected from the whole of Scripture to make up a single exposition of the faith.⁸

Each article of the creed, as Cyril expounded it, was so thoroughly grounded in biblical authority that a recent commentator on the *Catechetical Lectures* refers to Cyril as one who "subscribed to a form of *sola scriptura* doctrine."⁹ Even as the bishop expounded the meaning of the creed, he insisted that his hearers not accept anything without reference to the sacred Scriptures. "Do not simply take my word when I tell you these things, unless you are given proof for my teaching from Holy Scripture."¹⁰ Of course, it was not Cyril's intention to defend a position of *sola scriptura*, though he did want to assure his listeners that nothing in the Jerusalem creed was contrary to the biblical message. Being schooled in the creed was the first step not only in learning what the Bible meant but also in preparing candidates to read the Bible with insight.

There was no question about the supreme authority of the Holy Scripture among the early fathers. For Origen, Scripture in all its texts was the "music" of God.

7. Philoxenus, *Fragment* 28.

8. Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 5.12.

9. Edward Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem* (London: Routledge, 2000), 56.

10. Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 4.17.

When a person acquainted with the music of God appears, one who is wise both in words and deeds (Lk 7:22) . . . then this person will produce the sound of the music of God, since he has learned from all this how to strike the chords at the appropriate time: now the chords of the Law, now the chords of the Gospels in harmony with them, and now the chords of the Prophets. And when what is reasonable demands it, he strikes also the Apostolic chords with them, and so also the Apostolic chords with the Gospels. For this person recognizes that all of Scripture is the one perfect and harmonious instrument of God which raises a single saving voice from the various different sounds for the benefit of everyone who desires to learn.¹¹

But authority of Scripture was not connected with a particular theory about the nature of the Bible. The truth and power of the Bible were not based on a view of its inerrancy or infallibility. Scripture possessed divine character because through Scripture the sovereign will of God was at work in the world through faith.

A critical difference between the patristic and post-Reformation perspectives is that the former was concerned to create a view of revelation that preserved the divine character of God, while the latter's way of defending the Bible as the sufficiency of divine revelation was to grant supreme authority to the text. To secure the Bible against the claim to authority by the Roman magisterium, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism (known as Protestant scholasticism) constructed biblical infallibility as the primary means of refutation.¹² Bibliology became the cornerstone of theology. Ultimate authority lay in the Bible, so the glory of God ought to shine through every word and syllable. Whereas for the earlier Reformers, *sola scriptura* was a consequence of *sola Christus* and *sola fide*, for the scholastics, *sola scriptura* was the first principle from which Christ and faith were derived. "Luther

11. Fragment II from the *Commentary on Matthew* as preserved in the *Philocalia*. The same author will appeal to the "canon of truth" as a necessary rule for determining orthodox faith and trustworthy biblical interpretation.

12. For a survey of this development within Protestantism, see D. H. Williams, "Scripture, Tradition, and the Church: Reformation and Post-Reformation," in *The Free Church and the Early Church: Essays in Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide*, ed. D. H. Williams, 101-26 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

believed in the Bible on account of Christ; Protestant scholasticism believed in Christ on account of the Bible."¹³

As a generalization about the patristic mind, it is fair to say that the fathers affirmed an infallible Bible, although it was not an infallibility of the text as much as it was an infallibility of the divine intention behind the text. Frederick Norris has observed that the fathers gave every evidence of critical intellects engaged with Scripture, as in the instance of Gospel accounts varying from one another.

Even the tiniest difference should be explained if at all possible, but this does not depend upon a wooden understanding of inerrancy. The Fathers' sense of the trustworthy character of Scripture can have them speak about its lack of errors, but they never protect the Bible with the doctrine of inerrancy that was developed in seventeenth-century Protestantism.¹⁴

The early fathers did not deny the existence of historical inconsistencies, legal and moral contradictions found in the Old Testament, or conflicting accounts of the biblical writers about an event. Noah's drunken nakedness (Gen. 9), the Lord sending an evil spirit upon Saul (1 Sam. 18:10), and divinely sanctioned genocide (Num. 33:51-52) are not themselves edifying or instructive and raise the question as to why such events were included in the divine record at all. Then there are matters of conflicting accounts among scriptural authors, such as Luke telling us that the transfiguration was eight days after Jesus' prediction of his death and Mark and Matthew saying it was six. But, says Origen, just as providence is not voided because some do not accept it,

13. Carl Braaten, "A Shared Dilemma: Catholics and Lutherans on the Authority and Interpretation of Scripture," *Pro Ecclesia* 10 (2001): 66-67.

14. Frederick Norris, "The Transfiguration of Christ: The Transfiguration of the Church," ed. in *Reading in Christian Communities: Essays on Interpretation in the Early Church*, ed. C. A. Bobertz and D. Brakke (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 191. Norris observes that early theologians were never so deeply absorbed with intra-Christian debate that they forgot their pagan audience. Defending a totally consistent scriptural text, the same in every account, would be derided by their pagan opponents as proof of dreadful complicity. For them, both unity in faith and diversity in detail were important. John Chrysostom says, "Wasn't one gospel writer enough to tell the whole [story]? Yes, but if four write, neither at the same times, nor in the same places, neither having met each other, nor having talked about it, and then they speak as if they were one mouth, [their agreement] serves as a great proof of the truth" (ibid., 191).

so "neither is the divine character of scripture, which extends through all of it, abolished because our weakness cannot discern in every sentence the hidden splendor of its teachings."¹⁵ In fact, such discrepancies were regarded as an opportunity for the Spirit to reveal God's power in the humble exterior of the biblical words. Divine verses could and did include literal errors since they were meant to lead to spiritual and eternal truths. We will return to the role of biblical allegory below. It is sufficient here to note that the divine character of Scripture was not dictated by trying to demonstrate the inerrancy of the text. Scriptural authority was based on the sovereign nature of God to work through the text—errors and all.

Reading Scripture by the Tradition

No matter what theory of inspiration was held, the practices of reading and hearing Scripture in the ancient church did not occur without the tradition. Again we recall the anonymous writer at the end of the first century who addressed the church at Corinth to encourage believers to avoid worldly practices and seek heartfelt repentance. Central to this exhortation, the church leaders were told to embrace "the glorious and holy canon of our tradition."¹⁶ Here and elsewhere the writer displays no cognizance of an operational scriptural canon apart from the Old Testament, which he frequently cites as declaring fully and unambiguously the gospel of Jesus Christ. Implicit to the writer's argument is that the apostolic understanding is achieved only when Scripture is read through the lens of the "canon of our tradition," and only then does a theological and spiritual interpretation become possible. The canon or rule "of our tradition" in this instance follows the pattern of life established by Christ, very much in the same vein as Paul lays out in Galatians.

Tradition was not from outside the faith; it was regarded as the essential teaching or purport of the Bible. Therefore, Tertullian maintained that the tradition had been kept "as a sacred deposit in the churches of the apostles. . . . Let us see what milk the Cor-

15. Origen, *On First Principles* IV.1.7.

16. *I Clement* 7.2-4.

inthians drank from Paul; to what rule (of faith) the Galatians were brought for correction; what the Philipppians, the Thessalonians, the Ephesians read by it; what utterance the Romans give."¹⁷ Tertullian, along with other second- and third-century writers, was convinced that the authors of Scripture shared an agreement about the particulars of the church's tradition or rule of faith for the simple reason that they believed the rule was the *ratio* or "scope" of scriptural revelation. This is precisely how Irenaeus understood the relationship between Scripture and the church's "rule of truth," both of which manifested the source (revelation) from which "we draw up our faith, the foundation of the building, and the consolidation of a way of life."¹⁸

Doctrinal historians have referred to this symbiotic relationship between Scripture and tradition as "co-inherence" (or "coincidence"),¹⁹ since the content of the church's confessional tradition co-inhered with the content of Scripture. In the patristic mind, tradition and Scripture were comprehended in reciprocal terms. While Scripture had primacy of place for the fathers, they did not believe that Scripture could or should function in the lives of believers apart from the church's teaching and language of worship (i.e., tradition). Scripture was the authoritative anchor of tradition's content, and tradition stood as the primary interpreter of Scripture. In other words, the tradition was not a novel set of beliefs and practices added to Scripture, as if it were a separate and second revelatory source. In this vein, Thomas Aquinas asserted that the value of the biblical writers should not be separated from the early fathers, since the latter are the reliable interpreters of Scripture and the organs that continue the tradition.²⁰ In effect, this approach interprets the Bible by investigating and following the ancient consensus of the fathers. Their resulting theology was a theology that accurately represented the message of Scripture.

17. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* IV.5.

18. Irenaeus, *The Apostolic Preaching* 6.

19. A. N. S. Lane, "Scripture, Tradition, and Church: An Historical Survey," *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1975): 37-55; and Richard Bauckham, "Tradition in Relation to Scripture and Reason," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason: A Study in the Criteria of Christian Doctrine*, ed. R. Bauckham and B. Dewey, 117-45 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988).

20. John Henry Newman, ed. and trans., *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels* (Oxford: J. H. Parker, 1841), reprinted with an introduction by A. Nichols (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999), vii.

The tradition or apostolic preaching formed the basis of the New Testament and served as the hermeneutical model for interpreting the Old Testament. As the body of this tradition developed over the next three to four centuries, it was understood as that which bears witness to and interprets Scripture. As one of my colleagues rightly said, to follow the tradition is to affirm the authority of Scripture. Whether it was the baptismal formulas, catechetical summaries, or later creeds, they were valued as accurately representing the purport of Scripture. When instructing new converts, Augustine taught, "For whatever you hear in the Creed is contained in the inspired books of Holy Scripture." Its content was to be written on their hearts once regenerated by grace so that "you may love what you believe and that, through love, faith may work in you and that you may be pleasing to the Lord God, the Giver of all good gifts."²¹

Even works of general historical purpose contained this sensibility of the coinherence of Scripture and tradition. The purpose of Jerome's *On Illustrious Men*, as he states, was to arrange a chronology of individuals since the time of the Lord's passion who made a significant contribution "on [our knowledge of] the Holy Scriptures."²² In other words, Jerome cataloged to the best of his knowledge the sources of all who published works of theology or exegesis that were faithful to the tradition. To describe the tradition was inevitably to speak about the message of Scripture.

Tradition also functioned as the chief hermeneutical principle for interpreting Scripture. Because tradition was not perceived as possessing a content separate from scriptural teaching, the former could act as an interpretive guide for proper use of the Bible.²³ Among his best-known works, Augustine wrote *On Christian Teaching* (*De doctrina Christiana*) as a guide for rightly handling and presenting the Bible. As Augustine states in the preface, there was a need for a clear-cut method of using the Bible because plenty of believers in his day insisted that all they needed for arriving at an orthodox understanding of Scripture was the personal working of the Holy

21. Augustine, *Sermon* 212.2.

22. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* preface.

23. More than one modern scholar has commented on the obvious circularity of such a process, and yet this dynamic was not a static one that brought the interpretive process back to the same place. There was continual development between the two that was always creating revisions of the tradition's content and understanding of Scripture.

Spirit. This may sound to some readers as a contemporary issue. Times may have changed, but the basic issues of arriving at an adequate knowledge of God are similar from age to age. Augustine acknowledged that some Christians would fault him for establishing certain rules (*praecepta*) for interpreting the Bible because such rules are unnecessary: "They see, or at least believe they see, that they have gained the ability to expound the holy books without recourse to any rules." Whatever illumination in understanding texts they possess, they claim it comes solely from "a special gift of God."²⁴

Augustine agreed that being led by the Spirit is pivotal for biblical and theological understanding. However, it is not something that works in spiritual isolation from the shared skills of interpretation and the direction of the church's faith. For "what do we possess that we have not received from another? And if we have received it from another, why give ourselves airs, as if we had not received it?"²⁵ Readers were encouraged to acquire numerous tools for exposition such as a knowledge of proper grammar, reliable versions of Scripture, the meaning of the names of God, history, figures of speech, and even certain sciences—animals, plants, numbers, and so on. But most central to the interpretive task was the way in which the church's faith functioned as a hermeneutical guideline for reading the Bible. Its aim was to reveal the centrality of a "double-love," love of God and love of one's neighbor, behind the scope of scriptural teaching. By "God" was meant the "supreme good which is Trinity," and one's "neighbor" was anyone made in the image of that Trinity. Loving God as Trinity and loving one's neighbor for God's sake were to be done "from a pure heart" and "a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5)²⁶ because an authentic love flows from a right faith. Nothing less than the "rule of faith" was necessary for directing an informed love of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in order that the truth of Scripture was successfully sought. In sum, the right interpretation of the Bible is indissolubly linked to the historic faith professed in the church and to the ordering of believers' loves.²⁷ Without the right

24. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* preface, 4.

25. *Ibid.*, 17.

26. *Ibid.*, I.95. Any Bible passage that does not overtly or implicitly support such an understanding, Augustine says, may be regarded as figurative or allegorical (*ibid.*, III.33).

27. *Ibid.*, III.3.

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faith, wrong interpretation of the Bible, especially in regard to ambiguous or difficult passages, could only result, and one's love, however sincere, would become misguided.

Sola Scriptura?

The fathers would not have appreciated the principle of Scripture alone, since the historical and theological issues that gave rise to it were particular to late medieval Christianity.²⁸ To treat the Bible in isolation from the tradition of the church, as it was located in the ancient rule of faith, baptismal confessions, and conciliar creeds, would have been incomprehensible to the Christian pastors and thinkers of the patristic era. From their perspective, a radically biblicist view might easily be driven by a desire to avoid the truth of the church's teaching.²⁹

One of the (unintended) hazards of "Scripture alone" is that it typifies Scripture as an isolated authority, completely independent of the church from which it emerged. Thus, *sola scriptura* has been construed by many Protestants as if finding the truth of Scripture is an enterprise best done without the church or even in spite of the church. Indeed, some parts of Protestantism have a long history of using Scripture with just such an understanding, seemingly cut off from church history.

This was, of course, not at all what the early Reformers sought to do with this theological principle. Just as Scripture is the reflection of the Word of God through Christ, so "the church has

everything which belongs to Christ . . . so that whatever belongs to the church belongs to Christ and whatever belongs to Christ belongs to the church."³⁰ Magisterial Reformers such as Luther and Calvin did not think of *sola scriptura* as something that could be properly understood apart from the church or the foundational tradition of the church, even while they were opposing some of the institutions of the church. The principle of *sola scriptura* was not intended to be *nuda scriptura*!

How should it then be understood? The early Reformers declared the Word of God, as it is communicated in Scripture, to be the final judge of all teaching of the church. But functioning as the norm of faith and practice did not mean that Scripture was the sole resource of the Christian faith. As its own history attests, Scripture is never really "alone." The church's tradition, reason, and experience are all legitimate resources that played teaching roles in the interpretation of Scripture.³¹ While these resources may not share the same authority as Scripture, the notion of Scripture alone was never meant to construct the Bible as an island, as if it were a solitary resource for faith and practice. Rather, the Bible as the primary revelation of God has a place within the broader context of the Spirit's work in the world, all bearing witness to their one source.

A balanced perspective can be found in the approach of John Wesley. As a true descendant of the Reformation, Wesley argued for the importance of asserting the *sola* in *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. He noted, however, that *solus* should be interpreted as "primarily" rather than "solely" or "exclusively." The guiding principles of Scripture and faith were never meant to be seen in isolation from the consensual and foundational tradition of the church. Wesley

30. Martin Luther, *Exposition of Psalm 45*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. T. G. Tapert and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 12.260. Unfortunately, Luther's penchant for hyperbole raises questions about his thought on the subject. For example, in *On the Babylonian Captivity*—a polemical work against papal authority—Luther said that the Word of God was incomparably superior to the church, and in this Word, "the church, being a creature, has nothing to decree, ordain, or make but only to be decreed, ordained, and made" (Martin Luther, "The Pagan Servitude of the Church" or "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. J. Dillenberger [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961], 341).

31. A. 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, 299–313 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

28. The beginning of the end of a coinherent understanding of Scripture and tradition (and the church) is seen by the fourteenth century. George Iavard points to Henry Ghent's *Commentary on the Sentences*, written in the thirteenth century, which raised the question whether Christians are mandated to believe Scripture ("authorities of doctrine") rather than authorities of the church. Ghent supposes that if the church taught anything contrary to Scripture, believers should not believe in her but in the words of Christ. George Iavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1959), 24–25. From this point, it was but a small step for the sixteenth-century Reformers.

29. This is what Augustine discovered in a public debate (in 427) with an "Arian" theologian named Maximinus. Maximinus was most insistent that his doctrine was derived solely from the Bible (Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus* 15.20). By stringing together "testimonies" (i.e., scriptural texts), Maximinus defended a subordinatist view that the Son could not be "true God" because the language in the Gospels was used only of the Father and because the Gospels spoke of the Son's nature in starkly human terms as the Word who became flesh.

writes of his own early spiritual pilgrimage, "But it was not long before Providence brought me to those who showed me a sure rule of interpreting Scripture, viz., 'Consensus veterum: quod ab omnibus, quod ubique, quod semper creditum.'"³² There was no question in his mind that the only responsible way of interpreting Scripture was through the faith of the early fathers and the historic expressions of the church. To use Scripture without this tradition was to make biblical understanding captive to every whim of personal interests and experience. He had learned from reading the fathers how often the concept of Scripture alone had been used as a platform for supporting heresy.³³

The Scripture-only principle is no guarantee for establishing Christian truth, nor is it immune to pious and well-intentioned believers whose use and presentation of the Bible hold little connection to historic Christianity, for the Scripture-only principle could and did backfire on its adherents in the form of heretical doctrine. The Congregationalist minister Thomas Worcester published a work of theology in 1813 based solely on the Bible as the sole and supreme authority.³⁴ Many of his arguments in defense of biblical authority can easily be found among evangelical writers today. Worcester declared that the church had abandoned the simplicity of the gospel since the time of the apostles and had lain in darkness, error, and degeneracy. Even Luther and Calvin, who were instruments of a "great reformation," had retained too many of the formulas and words of the church's fourteen-hundred-year corruption. The major creeds of the early church should be purged from Christian faith as illicit additions to divine testimony. Relying on scriptural words alone necessitated purging most of the church's history. In doing so, Worcester found warrant to defend the doctrinal legitimacy of Unitarianism.³⁵

32. A rewording of Vincent of Lérins's (*Commonitorium* II.6) well-known phrase "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by everyone." See John Wesley, "An Early Self-Analysis," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. A. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 5.

33. Against the Moravians, Wesley adamantly rejected the idea that personal union with God is a reliable guide to interpreting the Bible.

34. Thomas Worcester, *Divine Testimony Received without Any Addition or Diminution* (Hanover, N.H.: Charles Spear, 1813).

35. Antitrinitarian theology of this time was built largely on the platform of a "return" to the primitive or apostolic church, as the writings of John Locke, Isaac Newton, and

He was not the first or the last to use *sola scriptura* toward an end that none of the Reformers had imagined.³⁶ Small wonder that Roman Catholics have often expressed concern about the hazard of the principle. On account of what it perceived as abuses of Scripture by "Protestant" movements, the Council of Trent rejected *sola scriptura* for the way it had set the Bible adrift in a sea of competing voices all claiming to speak as its genuine interpreter. In opposition to anyone who interprets Scripture according to his own understanding, the Council of Trent insisted on the preeminence of the "holy mother church, whose it is to judge the true sense and interpretation of the holy scriptures."³⁷ Evangelicals may not subscribe to the decisions made at Trent, but it is true that once the Bible is detached from the church and its history, the Bible becomes susceptible to anyone who claims to be speaking according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Another related and unintended development that has grown out of *sola scriptura* is the rampant individualism common among evangelical churches today. John Henry Newman was right when he said that Protestantism is particularly vulnerable on this score. There are a great many Christians today who think of the Bible as the believer's Bible, not the church's Bible. The plethora of Bible versions—the Women's Devotional Bible, the Mom's Devotional Bible, the Men's Bible, the Couples' Devotional Bible, the Teen Study Bible, the Kids' Study Bible, the Student's Life Application Bible, and so on—lends weight to the prevailing idea that the primary purpose of Scripture is to cater to the needs of the individual and that it can be interpreted by the Christian privately just as well as within the believing community. The number of special interest groups with their own interpretive arrangement

Joseph Priestly bear witness. The famous philosopher John Locke had made a similar case for the same reasons. In accordance with the views of Isaac Newton and William Whiston, both of whom had been accused of Arianism, Locke was committed to the plain text of Scripture, referring to the Council of Nicaea as the representative episode of the church's "fall" into doctrinal corruption and loss of the gospel's simplicity.

36. Such a theological tradition had already established deep roots within Protestantism and sought to return to the primitive ideals of Christianity by cleansing it from the pollutions and superstitions of Roman Catholicism. Best known in the English-speaking world was Joseph Biddle, *A Confession of Faith: Touching the Holy Trinity according to Scripture* (London: n.p., 1648).

37. "Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures" (*Decretum de canonicis scripturis*), from the fourth session of the council (April 8, 1546).

of the Bible is just as dizzying.³⁸ One would think that the familiar admonition of 2 Peter 1:20 should be taken literally: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation." It appears, however, that this passage is claimed in a more oblique way by evangelicals as proving the divine character of Scripture, not condemning the privatization of biblical interpretation and application.

At the heart of this hyper-individualism are two interconnected perceptions about religion. The first is an abiding rejection of ecclesial authority. While one finds (very ironically) concrete examples of papal-like pronouncements among the Southern Baptists, most evangelicals and free churches have a morbid fear of anything episcopal. Pastoral or church authority is all very well until it makes specific demands on a believer's life and personal freedoms. The mistrust of authority has a strong cultural aspect that has as much to do with the current American mentality as it does with Christian spirituality. The key is that this symbiosis should be recognized and admitted by believers. Sociologists of religion have shown repeatedly how far a fierce individualism dictates American Christians' worldview. We are most motivated by a pattern of dispositions and practices that define life's goals in terms of personal choice, by a freedom that is framed in terms of being allowed to believe and act as one wishes, and by justice that is meant to be an opportunity for individuals to pursue happiness as each person has defined it for himself or herself.³⁹

The other perception is really a misperception: that the priesthood of every believer demands the rejection of almost all religious authority. In the name of soul liberty or freedom of the conscience, some Protestants have gone to the extreme of using the priesthood of the believer as the right of the individual to decide what the Bible teaches or what practices should be embraced in the church. In this scenario, both Scripture and the church have

38. Besides the Charles Ryrie Study Bible there is now available *The Iron LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, *The Women of Destiny Bible*, *The New Spirit-Filled Life Bible*, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, *The Maxwell Leadership Bible*, *The Men of Integrity Bible* (Promise Keepers), and *The Life Recovery Bible* (Twelve Steps).

39. Robert Bellah et al., eds., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Nathan O. Hatch, "The Right to Think for Oneself," in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, ed. Nathan Hatch, 162-90 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

separate spheres that need not overlap. And although Scripture is the more authoritative and binding of the two, what matters is how a believer is "called" to understand Scripture, an approach that confirms some of Trent's worst fears.

Though the Word in Scripture comes from God, it is revealed through a process in which the community of faith, appropriating both the Old and the New Testament, is profoundly involved. Indeed, it is fair to say that we will rightly hear God's Word only as we hear it in the corporate and historical voice of the church. In its final formation, the Bible came out of the life of the Christian community as it heard God's Word. What this means is that the Bible is foremost the book of the church.⁴⁰ Interpretation and realization of Scripture are ecclesiological events, and therefore the church and its tradition are integral to the handling of the Bible. This is not opposed to the principle of soul liberty as long as soul liberty does not become itself a canon of faith intended to thwart church authority as an encroachment upon religious freedom. Unfortunately, the protective aspect of soul freedom is exaggerated to distortion, admits one Baptist theologian, by the conjunction of contemporary American individualism and, since the seventeenth century, the prerogative of one's own conscience. We might concede the necessity of the latter point against a repressive hierarchy or domineering state church. "It is quite another thing, however, to witness the wholesale baptism of tendencies toward autonomous individualism by the dogma of soul freedom."⁴¹

In the end, believers do not believe and, more importantly, keep believing in isolation. The Bible is capable of being understood only in the midst of a disciplined community of believers whose practices embody the biblical story. As part of this embodiment, we are in need of "spiritual masters," namely, the venerable voices of the historical church whose journeys empower and enlighten our own pilgrimage toward what is authentically Christian. It is according to this understanding that the bishop Cyprian of

40. This is essentially the thesis behind a new series of patristic commentary on Scripture titled *The Church's Bible*, gen. ed., Robert L. Wilken (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). See the first volume, Richard Norris, ed., *The Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

41. Joel B. Green, "Biblical Authority and Communities of Discourse," in *Baptists in the Balance: The Tension between Freedom and Responsibility*, ed. E. C. Goodwin (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1997), 153.

Carthage adjured fellow clergy to instruct the congregation "according to the authority of Scripture [and] the discipline of the Church."⁴²

The most crucial point to make about the ancient tradition or a shared understanding of theological canonicity is that it was not a set of theoretical principles expounded in an atmosphere of intellectual detachment. Such concepts were, in practice, indissolubly hinged to the believing, worshipping, and responsive life of the churches. Tradition, by its very name and existence, implies the "activity of the church living its belief and consequently elaborating it."⁴³ The *lex credendi* (rule of faith) was not something received and transmitted in isolation from its exercise within the *lex orandi* (practice of worship) or vice versa. The one was formed by the other. No assembly of ecclesiastical officials or scholarily think tanks laid down a slate of beliefs from on high and then proceeded to foist it upon the churches as worthy of their acceptance.

Scripture as Divine Mystery

To appreciate the dynamic behind the early church's understanding of Scripture and tradition, we must make some brief observations regarding the ancients' approach to Scripture. At the very least, we can see two operations at work in the patristic use of Scripture: (1) the mystical character of Scripture, and (2) the way in which the divine nature of the text calls for transformation. In both cases, the tradition and Scripture work in tandem for the formation of faith and spirituality.

Westminster Abbey offers a breathtaking vision of height and depth of, if not God, at least the experience of God of those who built the structure ten centuries ago. Certainly, worshippers have continued to share in that experience in this place. The sheer amount of space between floor and ceiling, nave and altar, as well as the complication of artistry upon every wall and window, ushers us in before a truly awesome God. His goodness, mercy, and love notwithstanding, God will not be domesticated by our

42. Cyprian, *Epistle* 5.2.

43. Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and Theological Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 5.

warm religiousness or boxed-in by our intellectual conceptions. One thinks of the figure of Aslan in C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, whose goodness and grandeur defy containment because, as Mr. Tumnus once said, he's not a tame lion!

For many Protestants, one of the most problematic sides to patristic use of the Bible is the fathers' predilection toward allegorical and mystical interpretation of the text. Of all of Luther's problems with the early church, he saw its allegorizing of the Bible as the biggest obstacle to sound scriptural understanding. He especially objected to the works of Origen, who justified allegory as the exegesis of the mature and faithful believer. The imaginative interpretation of Scripture permitted by allegorical method could lead to its haphazard use in defense of seemingly any teaching. Ambrose of Milan, for example, tells his congregation that in the story of the cleansing of Naaman's leprosy (2 Kings 5:1-14), the captive girl who advised him to submit himself to the prophet Elisha is "the church of the Lord, once humiliated by the captivity of sin." Thanks to her (the church's) counsel, now "the foolish people of the pagans have listened to the prophetic word (the gospel) about which they had previously entertained doubts."⁴⁴

It was apparent, therefore, that the allegorizing of Scripture had to be harnessed by the more obvious or literal realities of the passage. Many Protestant thinkers after Luther followed suit: Allegorical or spiritual interpretation of the Bible lacks a clear method and the predictability that exegesis is supposed to supply. In whatever way the apostolic authors utilized allegorical and typological exegesis, it was not a model that could be readily emulated by those who came after them.⁴⁵ The result was an approach to the Bible and its preaching that stressed the historical and literal reading of Scripture to the point of making it ultimately normative. In Luther's eyes, the Holy Spirit is the simplest writer and advisor: "That is why his words [Scripture] could have no more than one simplest meaning which we call the written one or the literal meaning of the tongue."⁴⁶ Critical methods of exegesis

44. Ambrose, *On the Mysteries* 3.18.

45. As discussed in Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

46. Martin Luther, *Concerning the Letter and the Spirit*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. T. F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 78.

that emerged from the biblical studies of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries were built upon the normalizing of historical and literal interpretation.

Allegorical or spiritual interpretation of passages was frowned upon as an illegitimate use of the Bible since it seemed imposed rather than discovered. As the derisive saying goes, "Allegorical exegesis is like a picnic; one person brings the text and someone else brings the meanings, but the two are prepared in different kitchens."⁴⁷ Protestants worried that an allegorical use of the Bible could supply the warrant for any number of traditions that the church wanted to justify by Scripture. It was bad enough that Romanists had argued that early church traditions offered sanction for extra-scriptural teaching, but it was even worse to find scriptural support through exegetical gymnastics of meaning.⁴⁸ So Protestants came to identify the spiritual sense of Scripture with human teaching originating in the dogmas of the church rather than scriptural teaching.

For ancient Christian thinkers, every passage had more than one meaning precisely because it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, getting to the point of a text required careful deliberation and a submissive attitude. According to patristic writers, looking for a purely literal interpretation did not do justice to the sacred nature of Scripture. Instead, they claimed that points of obscurity or even contradiction within the Bible provided an opportunity for the Spirit to work in a Christian heart because the dilemma was more than the human mind could comprehend. Such problems were not obstacles to be overcome by manipulating the text but open doors by which only the faithful could discover the power of God in ways not obvious to the unconverted or a carnal believer. Augustine, for example, explained in one of his sermons that obscure or conflicting passages in Scripture exist not because God wants to conceal his mysteries from us but "because he only wants to open them up to those who are prepared to look for them." Such texts are meant "to spur us on, heart and soul,

47. Cited in Robert L. Wilken, "Interpreting Job Allegorically: The *Moralia* of Gregory the Great," *Pro Ecclesia* 10 (2001): 215.

48. J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianity and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1990), chap. 3.

to the search."⁴⁹ This is what Jesus meant, Augustine asserted, when he said, "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs" (Matt. 7:6).

A literal interpretation of the Bible was not an insurance policy against abuse of the Bible's meaning. It might serve as a means of determining a valid explanation in conjunction with other methods, but it should not stand alone. In his sermons on various scriptural passages, the fifth-century pastor Peter Chrysologus claimed, "The historical narrative should always be raised to a higher meaning (*intelligentiam*), and mysteries of the future should become known through figures of the present. Therefore, we should unfold by allegorical discourse what mystical teaching is contained beneath the outward appearance [of the text]."⁵⁰ The purpose of sound exegesis, therefore, is to "elevate its historical sense to a mystical and extraordinary sense which God gave it."⁵¹ While the literal meaning should not be cast aside as irrelevant, it was perfected by the spiritual understanding. Gregory the Great put it this way:

Allegory, after all, devises for the sake of the soul that is far removed from God, a stratagem that will elevate it to God. When the figurative language is interposed, the soul, even while it grasps in the words something on its own level, apprehends in their intelligible sense something that is not on its own level, and by earthly words is separated from what is earthly. . . . The divine teachings are clothed in things that are familiar to us; the things out of which allegories are made. And as we consider the exterior words, we achieve an interior discernment.⁵²

A literal or historical meaning can be perceived by anyone, but only a spiritually oriented believer can discern the spiritual depths that exist in a text. To know nothing but the letter of the text (the literal meaning), Origen once argued, is to be like one of the Pharisees or scribes on whom Jesus pronounced "woe" (Matt. 23:13). This is because one will construe the gospel in the same

49. Augustine, *Sermon* 60A.

50. Peter Chrysologus, *Sermon* 36.

51. *Ibid.*, 5.

52. Gregory the Great, *Expositio in Cantica Canticorum* 3, in *Song of Songs*, 8.

way as the law, not realizing that Jesus Christ as the Word is the fulfillment of God's promises. Instead, the reader should:

upon receiving a passage through the letter of the Scriptures, proceed to ascend higher to the spiritual matters, which are called the Kingdom of Heaven. . . . And only according as each thought is attained and perceived in an exalted fashion, and moreover demonstrated and revealed can one perceive the Kingdom of Heaven.⁵³

But just as significant was the recognition that the task of scriptural interpretation is dependent on the principles of the Christian faith as found in the rule of faith or the creed of one's baptism. When it comes to allegorical or spiritual interpretations, not any meaning ascribed to a text will do. A mystical rendering of biblical passages ought not to be at the beck and call of the interpreter such that a text will prove almost any teaching of the church. In various summary forms, this "faith" functioned as the hermeneutical center of the task of interpreting texts. The faith of the church both guided and was responsive to the text of the Bible.

Text's Mystical Character Shows the Depth and Greatness of God

The patristic hermeneutic could be haphazard, but it was not a matter of allegorizing this or that biblical passage as much as it was an entire theological vision. The various approaches to discovering meaning or "senses" thought to be inherent in Scripture were partly the basis of formulating this vision, which is what made it possible to discern relationships between God and history, Christ and the church, and theology and spirituality. These "senses" varied among three (literal, moral, and mystical or spiritual) or four (literal, moral, anagogical, and allegorical),⁵⁴ but the basic idea was the same: God "built" these possible interpretations into Scripture for the edification and growth of his

53. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* X.14.

54. There was no uniform approach in the ancient or medieval period; Origen and Jerome followed a tripartite division, whereas a quadripartite delineation is exemplified by Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, and John Cassian. For a description of the exegetical senses, see Susan Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 27-46.

people. Indeed, the scriptural senses reflected the nature of God himself. Ambrose explained at the beginning of his commentary on Luke that the "threefold wisdom" (natural or literal, moral, and spiritual) found in the Bible originates from the Trinity.

We must believe in that Father who of his nature begot for us the Redeemer; and in that moral Son who redeemed us, being obedient to the Father until death according to his manhood; and in that rational Spirit who instills in human hearts the rationale for worshipping the Deity governing our lives.⁵⁵

The art of writing comments on the biblical text in a line-by-line or passage-by-passage format began around the time of the mid-third century with Origen of Alexandria. Of course, Eastern and Western writers had previously commented upon the Bible with analytical and applicable goals in mind. At the end of the second century, Tertullian offered concerted remarks about the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 5 as he was writing about the subject of prayer. Cyprian did the same. Scripture was also the main tool used when it came to warding off pagan attacks or refuting Christian heresy. A number of scriptural commentaries came from the pen of Hippolytus or from his circle in Rome.⁵⁶ But it was Origen who singlehandedly made writing biblical commentaries a staple of understanding how the church's faith was informed by and informed the use of Scripture. By the time of his death, Origen had produced, besides works of theology and hundreds of homilies, passage-by-passage commentaries on the Pentateuch; the Major and Minor Prophets; Psalms and Song of Songs; the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John; and the Pauline Epistles. His writings soon became the standard that later commentators, East and West, emulated and by which they gauged the quality of their own contributions.

For Origen, Scripture is simultaneously plain and mysterious because it was given by God's hand. This double-sided character to Scripture is testimony to its divinity, though were it not for the depths of meaning that only an allegory can bring, one would never grasp the inspirational nature of the Bible, especially the

55. Ambrose, *Commentary on Luke* prologue, 5.

56. For the Hippolytan corpus, see *Patrology* II.165-94.

Old Testament.⁵⁷ In other words, the divine character of Scripture is revealed through a spiritual understanding inherent to the text.⁵⁸

Scriptural simplicity is such that anyone who lacks an education or is a new Christian can understand it for salvation. It also has a deep and profound side that carries spiritual and allegorical meaning that only a believer can fathom through the pursuit of wisdom and personal purity. This is no accident or mere philosophical arrangement in Origen's eyes. Both "sides" of the Bible are designed by God to work this way, marking the difference between the pagan or carnal Christian and the spiritually sensitive believer who is making good progress in the Christian faith. In fact, the divine authors of the Bible purposely inserted "certain stumbling blocks, as it were" (such as contradictions or ethical inconsistencies) into the text, prompting the discerning reader to search for the meaning that is hidden.⁵⁹ It follows that the hidden meaning will be concealed from many readers. Because "the Scriptures were composed by the Spirit of God, they have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers."⁶⁰

Many of my students are surprised by this approach to the Bible. One voiced her opinion by complaining that it did not seem democratic enough. It is unfair, she said, that not everyone who reads the Bible is equally able to comprehend it. She is not alone in this belief. For most Protestants, egalitarian and populist assumptions are at work when it comes to interpreting the Bible. Such a point is related to its translation into vernacular languages during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, thus releasing the biblical text from the privileged few who could read Latin or Greek. And while it is true that the Bible is "everyman's book," the basis of its deeper understanding is not at all a democratic enterprise.

57. Origen, *On First Principles* IV.1.6.

58. For richly faceted and many textured is the planting of the words contained throughout all of Scripture. And as for the treasure that was hidden in the field (Matt. 13:44), this means the thoughts that are concealed and resting beneath what is plainly visible: namely, the thoughts of the wisdom concealed in a mystery and in Christ (1 Cor. 2:7), in whom are the concealed treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3) (Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* X.5).

59. Origen, *On First Principles* IV.2.9.

60. *Ibid.*, I.8.

Origen declared that any interpretation of Scripture always requires God's assistance. But this is especially true for an interpretation that goes beyond the basic or literal rendering of a passage. Following the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:10, Origen taught that a penetrating look into the deeper meaning of Scripture is wholly beyond the power of man, requiring the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit reveals Christ to us in all matters, so just as no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God, no one knows the things spoken by Christ in proverbs and parables unless he shares in the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:11). With a sensitivity that divine wisdom comes to us through the working of the Trinity, Origen observed that all wisdom for understanding Scripture is given by God through the Spirit, who reveals Christ. What this means is that one's position of holiness before a holy God has everything to do with comprehending Holy Writ. Those more accustomed to looking upon divine things are better able to discern the divine hand in Scripture.

Divine Nature of the Text Calls for Transformation

Sharing in the mystical or allegorical reading of Scripture is to invite the Spirit of God to work in one's heart. As Origen stated in his Matthew commentary, "But whenever someone draws near so as to make room for the Word, then the kingdom of Heaven draws near to such a person."⁶¹ The use of spiritual or allegorical interpretation was not a hermeneutical "escape hatch" designed to help people get around the meaning of problematic passages without having to face them. The point of it, in the end, was to draw believers deeper into the life of God. As the "letter kills," the "Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6), a "life" of understanding that enables pilgrims to perceive the works of God for what they are. In effect, the purpose of the mystical or spiritual understanding of the Bible is the transformation of believers.

Because the early church did not bifurcate the intellectual and the practical to the same extent we do today, transformation of believers through Scripture was a moral and rational exercise. In a collection about ascetics' lives, a work known as the *Lausiac History*, Palladius says that the soul of the one who loves God

61. Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* X.14.

should desire to hear his Word. The proper approach to reading Scripture was first to purge the body of all uncleanness, feelings of pride, and boastfulness (Prol. 14). Holy Scripture must be read by those who are holy, which is the only way that some understanding of God will result.⁶² Without the pursuit of physical purity one can gain only the most superficial understanding of the Bible. In other words, one will be capable of grasping only the surface (i.e., literal) meaning of the text, which breeds shallowness.

Intellectual and spiritual purity were also necessary in order that the "eyes of the heart" may "see" God. This is a frequent refrain of Origen, who appealed to Matthew 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

For what else is "to see God in the heart" but to understand and know Him with the mind . . . for there are in us two kinds of senses, the one being mortal, corruptible and human [i.e., the literal sense], and the other immortal, intellectual and what is called the divine [i.e., the spiritual sense]. By this divine sense, therefore, not of the eyes but of a pure heart, that is, the mind, God can be seen by those who are worthy.⁶³

Origen's argument was not meant to undermine the sensible or surface realities of which the text speaks, as if he were creating a stark dualism between the sensible and the spiritual. Doing so would invite the spiritual meaning to become a free flight of interpretive fancy, confirming Luther's deepest misgivings. For Origen, however, there is a profound relationship between apparent and nonapparent scriptural meanings. This is because there exists in Scripture an inner "order" or "coherence" that links the two and presents a compatibility of these two dimensions of meaning.⁶⁴ While anyone can derive benefit from the surface narrative of the biblical text, as do the "the multitudes of sincere and simple believers," there is always the danger either that one will find the text satisfying as it stands and learn nothing truly divine (i.e., see the text as nothing more than a narrative) or that

62. Robert T. Meyer, "Lectio Divina in Palladius," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, vol. 1 (Münster: Verlag Aschendorff, 1970), 580–84.

63. Origen, *On First Principles* I.1, 9.

64. John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 58.

the morally questionable or illogical aspects of the narrative will drive the reader away as seemingly unworthy of God.

This is exactly what happened to Augustine when he first read the Bible as a young man. Its unattractive style of Latin, the accounts of Abraham's repeated lies about his wife, and bloody sacrifices as a means of appeasing God convinced him that catholic Christianity was a crude and base religion.⁶⁵ Not until Augustine heard the sermons of the bishop Ambrose and learned that the surface of the text was one dimension that could be opened by the spiritual did he begin to embrace the Bible as an authority and intellectually feasible.

Because of the ordered interrelationship between the sensible (surface) and the nonsensible aspects of the biblical narrative, the spiritually enlightened reader is able to find coherent connections in the text of Scripture (in words, images, stories, parables, etc.). Just as God prompted the human authors to write, so the Spirit's task is to bring the literal and sensible realities into alignment with the spiritual metanarrative. That is, the literal must be regarded in the light of the much broader narrative of God's creation, redemption, and re-creation. "The allegorical reader then reads the narrative of Scripture in order to discern this spiritual metanarrative (which is the deepest 'meaning' of the text and its inner coherence)."⁶⁶ Therefore, Origen asks, "How can one be said to believe the Scripture in the proper sense, when he does not perceive the meaning of the Holy Spirit in it, which God wants to be believed rather than the intent of the letter?"⁶⁷ There is every reason, therefore, for readers to look for deeper meanings and within the boundaries of Scripture's unity, to draw upon them. As readers make these discernments, they find themselves transformed by the true teaching of the Word.

In sum, the above inquiry is not an *apologia* for the use of allegory. Today's readers of the Bible should always have a respectful hesitation before engaging in spiritual interpretation of most biblical passages. Unfortunately, many Protestant expositors and contemporary writers of biblical commentaries have gone too far in the opposite direction. The flexibility of postmodern exegesis

65. Augustine, *Confessions* III.5, 9.

66. Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*, 59–60.

67. Origen, *Commentary on John* 10.300.

notwithstanding, evangelical writers tend to present the science of scriptural interpretation, implicitly or explicitly, in ways hostile to the allegorical. As a result, evangelicals often have little appreciation for, if not repugnance toward, the patristic use of the Bible. It is necessary, therefore, to reduce the alienation many evangelicals experience when they read the early fathers by discussing the rationale behind allegorical exegesis. More importantly, the point of this chapter has been to show how Scripture was functioning when methods of interpretation were at their formative stages and how that interpretation was shaped by Scripture's place within the church's tradition. Not all interpretations of a passage were acceptable to the ancients given the way the rest of Scripture and the tradition served as theological parameters that effectively limited the possible number of interpretations. Of course, there was latitude in the kinds of images and ideas a particular text could conjure, but there was a certain hermeneutical "fence" that kept the mystical use of the Bible relatively confined to the conceptual and terminological world of the canonical Scripture.⁶⁸

Affirming the Mystery

The Christian faith for the last millennium and a half has acknowledged and built on the wonderful mystery that is God and his revelation to us. While the frequently stated goal of evangelical piety is to "know" Christ as Lord and Savior, evangelicals must be mindful of what such knowledge does and does not mean. Confidence in attaining divine knowledge is easily threatened by the emphasis that other Christian traditions place on the mystery of God and our inability to apprehend his greatness. The Syrian Christian poet Ephraem of Nisibis reminds us:

Let us not allow ourselves to go astray
and to study our God.
Let us take the measure of our mind,
and gauge our thinking.
And as for our knowledge, let us know how small it is, and
Too contemptible to scrutinize the Knower of all.

68. See chap. 2 for the meaning of the canonical Scripture in the patristic age.

Seal your mouth with silence; let your tongue not act rashly.

Know yourself, a creature made, a child of one so fashioned,
That there is a great chasm
Between you and the Son, at the edge of scrutiny.⁶⁹

Notice that the "chasm" between creature and Creator is not something to be overcome or removed as problematic to the Christian life. God's sending his Son incarnate demonstrates that the chasm is one of (our) knowledge and not one of love. The incarnate Word of God becomes himself the "bridge," as Ephraem later calls him, to the Father. This is what one encounters in the whole teaching of Scripture, which itself enables our understanding of God's revelation. But Scripture too contains the mystery in the form of words, describing the works of God that are disclosed to human minds only by grace. Throughout the divine text are divine meanings and hidden realities that exceed our knowledge. "Religious thought or 'theology' then rightfully consists in the contemplation of the 'mystery,' the mystic symbols in which God reveals the truth about himself and the world."⁷⁰

For Protestants to read the early fathers, who will help them read their Bibles, the door to joyful mystery must be opened. Knowledge, even the knowledge that comes from Scripture, is not undermined but humbled as it is situated before the awesome depths of God.

69. Quoted from Sidney Griffith, "Faith Adoring the Mystery": Reading the Bible with St. Ephraem the Syrian (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997), 22.
70. *Ibid.*, 30.