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**Authority of Scripture and the Doctrine of Salvation
in the Patristic Period**

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Introduction..... 1
A. Concepts of Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church..... 2
B. Canon of Scripture in the Early Church..... 9
C. Biblical Inspiration in the Early Church 15
D. Soteriological Trajectories in the Early Church: Baptism, Penance, and Theosis 18
E. Soteriological Trajectories in the Early Church: Augustine and the Pelagian Crisis 24
Conclusion 28

Introduction

Within post-Reformation Christianity, two of the greatest areas of controversy have been the doctrines of authority and justification. Rome holds a threefold view of the authority: Scripture, unwritten tradition, and magisterium.¹ By contrast, the Churches coming out of the Reformation have consistently asserted the supreme authority of the Bible (*norma normans non normata*), with all other authorities serving as secondary and dependent witnesses (*norma normata*).² Likewise, whereas Roman Catholics teach that one is justified by both being forgiven and supernaturally sanctified by infused grace (a process that begins in baptism), broadly speaking Protestants hold that justification comes through faith’s reception of Christ’s righteousness and atoning work. Christ’s righteousness is imputed to the believer, not infused.³

¹ Peter Huff, “Authority in the Catholic Tradition,” in *By What Authority? The Vital Question of Religious Authority in Christianity*, ed. Robert Millet (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2010), 1-19.

² See good summary in Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 157-284.

³ See Anthony Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (London: T & T Clark, 2002).

With respect to these central questions, the Reformers of the sixteenth century and their Roman Catholic opponents not infrequently invoked the authority of the Patristic theologians against one another. In effect, both sides of the Reformation era conflict insisted that the other made innovative theological claims out of keeping with the ancient heritage of the Church-catholic. This can be observed on the Roman Catholic side in works like Robert Bellarmine's *Controversies of the Christian Faith*.⁴ On the Protestant side, this can be seen in works like Martin Chemnitz's *Examination of the Council of Trent* and Calvin's *Letter to Sadoletto*.⁵ Unfortunately, Protestants and Catholics of the Reformation era equally had a tendency to oversimplify the theology of the early Church for their polemical uses.

Below, we will examine the teaching of the early Church on the central questions of theological authority and justification. It will be our argument that the theology of the early Church was neither exactly Catholic nor Protestant per se. The Church Fathers held their own distinct theology and faced their own unique challenges which were different than the Reformers or early Modern Catholics. Moreover, there was a significant range of opinions on these subjects in Patristic period.

That being said, we will nevertheless argue that much of what the Church Fathers teach on the subjects of authority and justification is more supportive of the positions held by the Magisterial Reformation. Although Roman Catholics can find the beginnings of some of their positions in the early Church (i.e., the doctrine of penance, etc.), they find fewer mandates than later Reformation Christians for their theology.

A. Concepts of Scripture and Tradition in the Early Church⁶

We will begin with the question of authority in the early Church. There have been a variety of models for understanding the question of

⁴ Robert Bellarmine, *Controversies of the Christian Faith*, trans. Kenneth Baker, S. J. (Saddle River, NJ: Keep the Faith Publications, 2016).

⁵ John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, ed. John Olin (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000); Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4 vols., trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971-1986).

⁶ Much of the material in this section is covered in a similar (though not absolutely identical) manner in my forthcoming: Jack Kilcrease, *Holy Scripture*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics Series, vol. 2 (Ft. Wayne: Luther Academy, 2017).

authority in Church history.⁷ Although we cannot discuss all of them, one popular and useful model is the system of classification developed by Heiko Oberman in his essay “*Quo Vadis Petre?: Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis.*”⁸ In this essay, Oberman identifies three main paradigms regarding the distinction between Scripture and Tradition within the historic Christian tradition: Tradition I, Tradition II, and Tradition III.

Beginning with Tradition I, Oberman holds that this concept of Scripture and Tradition was broadly shared by both the early Church Fathers and the Magisterial Reformers. Tradition I is defined as the claim that although Scripture is the supreme authority within the Church, subsequent Church tradition is good insofar as it witnesses to the content of Scripture within the post-apostolic Church. Hence, Tradition in no way supplements the revelatory content of the Bible. It is simply a restating or application of the content of Scripture in a different form. Ultimately, no doctrine can be affirmed as true if does not have a basis in the content of the Bible.

In discussing the nature of Scripture and Tradition in the early Church, it should be noted that issues surrounding authority largely began to take shape in the late second century. By the mid to late second century, the Church became increasingly aware of the new distance that had emerged between itself and the apostolic generation. Even in the early second century figures like Bishop Papias of *Hierapolis* possessed a living connection with the apostles.⁹ Consequently, he saw little difference between what the Church taught and what was written down in the New Testament. Indeed, both were simply voice of the apostles themselves.¹⁰ Lacking the living voice of the apostles, subsequent generations began to have to distinguish between what Church leaders taught and what was written in the Bible.

Another issue that led the Fathers of the second century to examine the issue of Scripture and Tradition was the emergence of the Gnostic

⁷ For example, see alternative model in: Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: A Historical and Theological Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

⁸ 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* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 269-98

⁹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 37.

¹⁰ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39; Paul Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History, A New Translation with Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishers, 1999), 127-30.

heresy.¹¹ The Gnostics claimed to be the true heirs of the apostolic tradition. They occasionally forged their own Scriptures, but more often they wrote commentaries on actual apostolic Scriptures and corruptly expounded them.¹² In order to bolster the authority of these false interpretations, the Gnostics claimed that they possess a secret oral tradition handed down to them by the apostles through lines of succession.¹³ Whereas the content of the New Testament documents and the public teaching tradition of the Church contained part of the apostolic kerygma, the Gnostics themselves possessed the secret master key with their unwritten supplemental tradition.

In responding to the Gnostics, the early Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons in some respects simply inverted their arguments.¹⁴ The Gnostics had claimed to be able to disclose the secret meaning of the Scriptures on the basis of their secret apostolic succession and a secret tradition. Irenaeus claimed to have a knowledge of the correct understanding of the Scripture based on his very public apostolic succession.¹⁵ As a student of Bishop Polycarp, who had likewise sat at the feet of John the Apostle, Irenaeus asserted that he had direct access to the Church's public teaching tradition and therefore the true understanding of the Bible.¹⁶

Many Roman Catholics would like to claim that Irenaeus is here anticipating the later Tridentine two-source theory,¹⁷ or what Oberman calls "Tradition II." According to this theory, some of the content of revelation was written down by the apostles in the form of the New Testament, while the rest of the content was handed down orally by the institutional Church. Indeed, Irenaeus does speak of an oral tradition

¹¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 36.

¹² Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine*, trans. F. Ernest Stoeffler (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 32.

¹³ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 37; Williston Walker, *History of Christian Church* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 74-5.

¹⁴ Alberto Ferreiro, *Simon Magus in Patristic, Medieval, and Early Modern Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 43.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 3.2-3 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson, 2004), 1:415-7. Hereafter "Ante-Nicene Fathers" will be abbreviated as "ANF."

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 5.33.4; ANF 1: 563.

¹⁷ See example in: Joseph Gallegos, "What Did the Church Fathers Teach about Scripture, Tradition, and Church Authority?" in *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura*, ed. Robert Sungenis (Santa Barbara: Queenship Publishing, 1997), 389-486.

that he has received from the apostles in the form of the *regula fidei*, that is, a creedal summary of the key teachings of the faith. Nevertheless, a closer examination of Irenaeus suggests that he is in no way validating the Tridentine theory of Scripture and Tradition. Unlike the Gnostics, Irenaeus does not view his oral tradition as supplementary. Rather, the oral tradition handed-down from the apostles possesses a content that is identical with as the apostolic Scriptures.¹⁸

Hence, Irenaeus does not endorse anything like the two-source theory propagated by the Council of Trent.¹⁹ Indeed, it was the Gnostics and not Irenaeus, who promoted the idea of a second and supplementary source of revelation beyond the Bible. For Irenaeus, the Bible is both completely clear and the foundation of the Christian faith.²⁰ The public teaching tradition of the Church handed down from the apostles is merely a condensation and public confession of the content of Scripture.²¹

Moreover, possessing the office of bishop and standing in succession with the apostles, Irenaeus does not claim any special spiritual powers to infallibly interpret the faith. He does indeed often speak of his possession of the “charisma of truth” (*charisma veritatis certum*). Nevertheless, what Irenaeus means by this “charisma” is merely a general guidance by the Holy Spirit (not infallibility) and the reception of teaching tradition of the Church due to his historical connection to Christ through the apostles.²²

This therefore also suggests both medieval Roman Catholic theory of magisterial infallibility (formally codified at Vatican I in 1870) and what Oberman calls “Tradition III” lacks a basis in the theology of Irenaeus.²³ Tradition III is the idea found in many modern Catholic

¹⁸ R. C.P. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: SCM Press, 1962), 102-10. This is even attested by Roman Catholic scholars. See Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, trans. John Austin Baker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), 152-3.

¹⁹ See H. J. Schroeder (trans.), *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1978), 17-20.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 2.27.1; ANF 1: 398.

²¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 38-9; Oberman, “*Quo Vadis Petre?*” 272; Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 1.10.1; ANF 1:330-1.

²² Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.26.2; ANF 1:497. See Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1953), 120-22.

²³ Oberman, “*Quo Vadis Petre?*” 294-6.

theologians and apologists (most notably in John Henry Cardinal Newman) that the Roman Church as a *charismatically* guided institution is capable not only of infallibly preserving the truth, but positively developing and expanding the body of doctrine. This is sometimes called the “theory of the development of doctrine.”²⁴ Ultimately, Tradition III sees the deposit of the faith given to the apostles as being like seeds that eventually flowered into all the truths taught by the contemporary Catholic Church. Nevertheless, not only is such a view utterly absent any of the major theologians of the early Church, but the closest one gets to such a charismatic view of authority is the heretical and schismatic Montanist movement. The Montanists claimed a special Spirit-inspired authority for its leadership, but such claims were certainly not taken serious by the mainstream of the early Church.²⁵

Turning to another early Church theologian, Tertullian in his *Prescription against Heretics* claims that the Scriptures are authoritative because of their agreement with the public teaching tradition of the Church (*regula fidei*) going back to the apostles (*apostolorum traditio, apostolica traditio*).²⁶ While from the Reformation perspective this construal of the relationship between Scripture and Tradition puts the cart before the horse, it is nevertheless important to recognize that in this statement Tertullian also shows his basic agreement with Irenaeus’ view that Scripture possess the same content as the oral apostolic tradition. Indeed, Tertullian gives a description of the orally transmitted *regula fidei* that is identical with that of Irenaeus and the later Apostles’ Creed.²⁷ Again, just as in the case of Irenaeus, Tradition in no way serves a supplementary source of revelation to Scripture.

Although we do not have the space to detail every figure in the ancient Church, the key point is that for the majority of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, there could be no valid doctrine that was not contained in the Scriptures. When the Ante-Nicene Fathers speak of Tradition, they almost invariably mean the same apostolic teaching found in the New

²⁴ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁵ See Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

²⁶ Tertullian, *Prescription against the Heretics*, 19-20; ANF, 3:251-2.

²⁷ Tertullian, *Prescription against the Heretics*, 13; ANF, 3:249; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 39.

Testament handed down in an oral form (something, which at their point in Church history they would have had greater access to than later generations), or simply the Church's public confession of what the Scriptures teach. The most important implication of this is that there is no sense in which unwritten tradition supplements Scripture, or contains more apostolic truths than what one finds in the Scriptures in the manner of the later Council of Trent. For the early Patristic authors, this view would have been anathema insofar as it was identified with the Gnostic heresy which they so vociferously opposed.²⁸

The one exception to this may be found in figures like Clement of Alexandria, who speaks in his *Stromata* of a *disciplina arcani* ("Discipline of the Secret" or "Discipline of the Arcane").²⁹ This *disciplina arcani* seems to constitute a secret mystagogic teaching tradition of the Church supplemental to Scripture. Indeed, in *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, Cardinal Newman made a great deal out of the *disciplina arcani* as an implicit parallel to the Tridentine theory of a supplemental unwritten apostolic tradition.³⁰ Nevertheless, what Clement means by the *disciplina arcani* is not entirely clear. In the *Stromata* he makes statements commending the *disciplina arcani* along with others that seem to suggest the sufficiency of Scripture.³¹

There is also some evidence that the *disciplina arcani* was simply parts of the Scripture that the early Church thought that it was appropriate for the baptized alone to know. For example, Hippolytus reports that unbaptized catechumens were dismissed before the liturgy of the sacrament and therefore were not permitted to hear the words of institution.³² Moreover, even if Clement is referring to an unwritten tradition of the Church supplemental to Scripture, as Jaroslav Pelikan once observed, it is at times tempting (though ultimately not fully

²⁸ Flesseman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church*, 191.

²⁹ "And the *gnosis* itself is that which has descended by transmission to a few, having been imparted unwritten by the apostles." Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 6.7; ANF, 2:494; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 43.

³⁰ John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2001), 51-7.

³¹ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 7.16; ANF, 2:550-4.

³² Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, 18.1, 19.1; Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 104.

tenable) to see Clement and his student Origen as the far left-wing of the ancient catholic Church, or the far right-wing of Gnosticism.³³

Another example that some have claimed as an exception to the almost uniform acceptance of Tradition I in the early Church can be found in the writings of Basil of Caesarea. Indeed, according to Oberman, Basil of Caesarea is one of the main creators of the concept of Tradition II.³⁴ In his book *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil appeals to the authority of an unwritten apostolic tradition handed down to him.³⁵ Nevertheless, it should be noted that Basil considers this tradition to be made up largely of liturgical customs bequeathed to the Church by the apostles. It is therefore difficult to identify this unwritten tradition as a second source of divine revelation.

It should also be noted that the Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz (one of the main defenders of *Sola Scriptura* in the Reformation's second generation) did not consider what Basil wrote in this section of *On the Holy Spirit* as in any way being inconsistent with the scriptural principle of the Reformation. In his book *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Chemnitz places Church Tradition into eight distinct categories. Among these, seven of these categories of Tradition are theologically valid in that they do not conflict with the supreme authority of the Bible: (1) The oral preaching of Christ and the apostles; (2) The written form of the apostolic tradition, that is, the New Testament; (3) Oral version of the apostolic tradition handed down to the churches; (4) The Church's tradition of faithful exposition of the Scriptures in its public ministry; (5) Doctrines inferred from the teaching of Scripture, but not explicitly stated therein; (6) The consensus of the ancient Church regarding the teaching of Scripture; (7) Rites and liturgical customs handed down by the apostles or other persons in the ancient Church.³⁶

Chemnitz only condemns the eighth category of Tradition, namely, Trent's supplemental unwritten tradition. This category of Tradition is not valid because it teaches things contrary to Scripture and is therefore obviously late and invented. In Chemnitz's treatment of the Tradition,

³³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971- 1989), 1:96.

³⁴ Oberman, "Quo Vadis Petre?" 277.

³⁵ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 66; NPNFb, 8:40-43.

³⁶ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 1:217-71.

the bottom line is that Church tradition is valid to the extent that it is in harmony with Scripture.³⁷ Since Basil's notion of liturgical customs handed down from the apostles in no way sets up supplemental basis of doctrinal judgment, it is an acceptable form of Tradition.³⁸

Ultimately then, for the most part the Patristic theologians held that Scripture was the single source of revelation, or, at minimum, exhaustive of the content of revelation without any need of supplementation. This being said, their conception of Scripture and Tradition is not exactly absolutely identical with that of the Magisterial Reformers of the sixteenth century. Since the Reformers lived many centuries after the apostles, they do not posit (like Irenaeus and Tertullian) that the preaching of the apostles has come down to them completely in both an oral and written form. Moreover, since they were attempting to reform the Church's theology and practice within their own context, they often juxtapose the authority of the Bible over against the teaching of the contemporary Church. As we have already seen, Irenaeus and Tertullian were more inclined to see the public preaching of the Church and the Bible as unproblematically and seamlessly mirroring one another.

Nevertheless, these differences have to do with the historical environments and polemical situations faced by these theologians, rather than the fact that they operated according to fundamentally different concept of authority. Therefore, the Reformation view stands in greater harmony with the early Church than does the Roman Catholic view.

B. Canon of Scripture in the Early Church

Roman Catholic apologists frequently argue that the fundamental contradiction at the heart of Protestantism is that the authority of the Bible hinges on the Church's establishment of Scripture through its act of canonization.³⁹ Hence, many claim that it is logical to believe that authority of the institutional Church is superior to the Bible, since the former established the latter's authority. Moreover, since the canon was only established in the councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, it must have been the case that prior to possessing the Bible, Christians

³⁷ Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, 1:272-307.

³⁸ Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, 1:267-71.

³⁹ See an argument of this nature in Peter Kreeft, *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Beliefs based on the Catholic Catechism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 100.

exclusively relied in the early centuries on no other authority than that of the institutional Church.

In looking at the theology of the early Church we have already partially seen there are little basis for these claims. At the heart of the problematic polemic of the aforementioned Catholic apologists lies a basic category confusion. Among contemporary scholars of the canon it is common to distinguish between “scripture” and “canon.” The former refers to a community recognizing a series of texts as divinely authoritative, while the latter refers to the official act of institutional authorities ratifying previously recognized inspired texts in an official list.⁴⁰ As we will see below, the early Church clearly possessed a Scripture long before it had an official canon.⁴¹

Regarding the Old Testament, there is a clear witness to authority of the Hebrew Bible in the books of the New Testament. Christ and the apostolic authors affirm that the Jewish Scriptures are the Word of God repeatedly (Mt. 5:18, 24:35; Mk 8:38; Lk 24:44; Jn 5:46, 6:63; Acts 10:43, 2 Tim 3:16-7; 2 Pt. 1:21). Hence, Christians, much like their Jewish predecessors, simply accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God without any council bidding them to do so. Indeed, orthodox Christians reacted very violently when early heretics such as Marcion and the Gnostics claimed that the Old Testament should be rejected as the product of an evil or inferior god.⁴² Beyond this, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (which assumes the authority of the Old Testament) was a major source of early Christian apologetics. This is strongly evidenced not only in the New Testament itself, but in early apologetic works such as Justin Martyr’s dialogue with Trypho the Jew.⁴³

Turning to the authority of the New Testament writings, there is clear and early evidence for their acceptance as Scripture. Beginning with the Gospels, C.E. Hill has documented that acceptance of the canon of the four Gospels from a very early period and defused across a very wide geographical area. Physical evidence for this can be found

⁴⁰ See the classical article: Albert Sundberg, “Towards a Revised History of the New Testament Canon,” *Studia Evangelica* 4, no. 1 (1968): 452-61.

⁴¹ Harry Gamble, *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 23-72

⁴² Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 75-98.

⁴³ See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*; ANF, 1:194-270.

in the manuscript fragments of the ancient garbage pits of Egypt. In spite of Egypt being known as a hotbed of heresy within the early Church, fragments of the canonical Gospels outnumber non-canonical Gospel three-to-one. Among the codices of the four Gospels that survive from the early Church, the four canonical Gospels were consistently bound together, and never with any other texts, including apocryphal Gospels. Lastly, the four Gospels often survive in codices that might be described as large “pulpit” editions, designed for public readings of the texts as Scripture. By contrast, there is not a single surviving example of non-canonical Gospels existing in this form.⁴⁴

In terms of the written witness of the early Church, long before the council of the fourth and fifth centuries, we possess a fragment from Bishop Papias (preserved in a fragment in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*) which testifies to the authority and origins of at least two of the Gospels (Matthew and Mark).⁴⁵ According to Hill, there is also good evidence that Eusebius’ account of the origins of the two other Gospels (Luke and John) are based on Papias’ writings.⁴⁶ Since Papias wrote sometime in the first decades of the second century, this would suggest that the four Gospels were viewed as constituting something of a canon by the end of the apostolic era.⁴⁷ Also in support of this, there are paraphrases and near-citations of the Gospel of Matthew in both the Epistle of Barnabas and the Didache, writings also from the early second century. In both cases, Matthew is implicitly treated as Scripture.⁴⁸

Midway through the second century Justin Martyr describes how in early Church services there were readings of the “memoirs of the apostles” (*moneumata ton apostolon*).⁴⁹ It seems not unreasonable to interpret this statement as a reference to the public reading of the texts

⁴⁴ C.E. Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels? Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7-33.

⁴⁵ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 3.24; Paul Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History, A New Translation with Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishers, 1999), 113-5.

⁴⁶ Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 219.

⁴⁷ Hill, *Who Chose the Gospels?*, 207-26.

⁴⁸ See James D.G. Dunn, *Neither Jew nor Greek: A Contested Identity, Christianity in the Making*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 434; Hubertus Waltherus Maria van de Sandt, ed., *Matthew and the Didache: Two Documents from the Same Jewish-Christian Milieu?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005).

⁴⁹ Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, 67.3; ANF, 1:186.

of the four Gospels as Scripture. In the late second century, we see the canon of four Gospels firmly attested as Scripture in both Irenaeus and as well as the Muratorian fragment.⁵⁰ Finally, in the third and fourth centuries, authors from a wide variety of theological orientations such as Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, and Athanasius (notably in his Festal Letter of 367 A.D.) all affirm the authority of the four Gospels.⁵¹ Again, they do so long before any of the Church councils of the fourth and fifth centuries.

Turning to the epistles of the New Testament, one finds a similar phenomenon. Among the Apostolic Fathers of the very early second century one finds many allusions and seeming almost direct citations to Paul's letters and Catholic Epistles.⁵² By the end of the second century, Irenaeus and the Muratorian fragment explicitly affirm the Paul's letters, some (though not all) of the Catholic Epistles, and the book of Revelation as being Scripture.⁵³ Just as with the four Gospels, this same attitude is taken by the aforementioned authors of the third and fourth centuries.⁵⁴

Although as we have seen the New Testament canon was more or less firmly established from very early on, this fact should be qualified by the fact that the boundaries Scripture were are far more permeable than in later periods of Church history. For example, Tertullian considered the pseudepigraphal 1 Enoch to be Scripture.⁵⁵ The previously mentioned Muratorian fragment of the late second century designates both the canonical Apocalypse of John as well as the extra-canonical Apocalypse of Peter as Scripture.⁵⁶ Irenaeus cites the apocryphal Shepherd of Hermas as being canonical Scripture.⁵⁷ Beyond this, it should be noted that there were mixed opinions regarding the canonicity of the Apocrypha. Augustine accepted the

⁵⁰ C. E. Hill, "The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon," *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 2 (1995): 437–52.

⁵¹ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 151-64. 229-38.

⁵² See Andrew Gregory and Christopher Tuckett, eds. *The Reception of the New Testament in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵³ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 191-200.

⁵⁴ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 151-64. 229-38.

⁵⁵ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, 1.3; ANF, 4:15.

⁵⁶ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 194-9.

⁵⁷ David Ewert, *A General Introduction to the Bible: From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 126.

books of the Apocrypha as being canonical,⁵⁸ while Jerome and Athanasius rejected them as non-canonical.⁵⁹

Because of these permeable boundaries of canonicity in the early Church, Eusebius tell us in the *Ecclesiastical History* that the New Testament books exist on three different levels of authority: There are those books which are undisputed (the *homologoumena*: Gospels, Acts, Paul's letters, 1 Peter, 1 John, Revelation), disputed books (the *antilegomena*, Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude), and those books which all parties within the catholic and orthodox Church reject (i.e., Gospel of Peter, Shepherd of Hermas etc.).⁶⁰

Eusebius' distinction makes in the passage between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena* largely disappeared during the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, it was revived during the Renaissance, and, as a result, was influential on the thinking of the early Reformers.⁶¹ Although Roman Catholic apologists frequently accuse Luther of subjective picking and choosing because of his rejection of the book of James,⁶² his rejection of the work was the result of his acceptance of Eusebius' distinction between *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena*. Beyond the fact that the Reformer considered the book out of harmony with known apostolic writings on the question of justification (i.e. Paul), he agreed with the judgment of the early Church that the text may not have been written by James and therefore lacked apostolic authority.⁶³ Seen from this perspective, Luther was the one who stood in harmony with the early Church, whereas the Roman Catholic Church relied on the medieval innovation of erasing the distinction between the *homologoumena* and the *antilegomena*.

⁵⁸ Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 2.8 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 14 vols. (Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson, 2004), 2:538-9. Here after "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers" will be cited as "NPNFa."

⁵⁹ Edmon Gallagher, "Writings Labeled 'Apocrypha,' in Latin Patristic Sources" in *Sacra Scriptura: How "Non-Canonical" Texts Functioned in Early Judaism and Christianity* eds. James H. Charlesworth and Lee Martin McDonald (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13.

⁶⁰ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History*, 3.25; Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History*, 115.

⁶¹ J. A. O. Preus, "The New Testament in the Lutheran Dogmaticians," *The Springfielder* 25, no. 1 (1961): 8-9.

⁶² Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on "Romanism" by "Bible Christians"* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 132.

⁶³ Martin Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament," in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 55 vols. (St. Louis/Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House/Fortress Press, 1955-1986), 35:395-6. Here after "Luther's Works" will be cited as "LW."

The ancient Church finally shored up the permeable boundaries of the canon through a series of local synods in the fourth and fifth centuries (Hippo, Carthage, etc.).⁶⁴ In dealing with the question of the canon, these various synods used three main criterion to decide the canonicity of the New Testament: apostolicity (was it written by an apostle, or one authorized by an apostle?), church usage (i.e., is it publicly read in Church services?), and finally agreement with the apostolic faith (does it form a harmonious theological whole with the other books of the New Testament?).⁶⁵ If these criterion were not met, then the book could not be deemed canonical. Here it should be observed that the authority and validity of the canon was based on the intrinsic qualities of the books, and not on the authority of the Church to decree them canonical.

In light of all this, it should be observed that if Ante-Nicene Fathers were capable of acknowledging the Scriptures without the authority of an infallible council, then it is clear that their belief in Scripture or its authority did not rest on the authority of the magisterium of the institutional Church. This suggests a continuity of the ancient Church and the Reformation in their common belief in the independence of biblical authority from the decisions of the institutional Church.

Indeed, logically Catholics themselves must acknowledge that Scripture's authority is independent of the authority of the Church. After all, the first council which Catholic regard as making an infallible decree on the canon of Scripture was the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. The early Christian councils of Carthage and Hippo were merely local synods that the Roman Catholic Church does not regard as infallible.⁶⁶ Indeed, their canonical lists even somewhat differ from Trent.⁶⁷ Therefore, if Catholic authors legitimately cited the Bible 1,500 years prior to their being an official sanctioned by Trent, then it follows that Scripture's authority is necessarily independent of any Church decisions regarding it.

⁶⁴ Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 312-5.

⁶⁵ See summary in Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 251-4.

⁶⁶ Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), 315-8.

⁶⁷ James White, *Sola Scriptura: Exploring the Bible's Accuracy, Authority, and Authenticity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 116.

C. Biblical Inspiration in the Early Church⁶⁸

In order to round out our discussion of authority in the early Church, it is important to engage the question of the inspiration of Scripture in the writings of the Church Fathers. Although the inspiration of the Bible was not a point of controversy during the time of the Reformation, such a discussion is necessary to give a full picture of authority in the Patristic period. Moreover, such a discussion adds further point of agreement and continuity between the ancient and Reformation Churches on the question of authority.

As men of their time and cultural milieu, the earliest Ante-Nicene Fathers (notably, the Apologists) often borrowed their concepts of inspiration from earlier Jewish and Hellenistic sources. Within the Palestinian Jewish tradition, the pseudepigraphal intertestamental book of Jubilees (second century B.C.) speaks of Moses receiving the Torah as a whole on Mt. Sinai in the form of heavenly tablets.⁶⁹ This suggests an extraordinarily crude notion of inspiration as a kind of literal dictation.

Likewise, pagan Hellenistic culture possessed a concept of prophecy that was manic. That is to say, inspiration was understood as a state wherein the rationality and self-consciousness of the individual disappeared and was replaced by the divine agent, whatever form that might take.⁷⁰ Taking over this conception as part of their cultural assimilation, some Hellenistic Jews (notably Philo of Alexandria) came to think of Moses and the prophets as entering a kind of trance state brought on by the power of the Spirit.⁷¹ Similarly, the early second century apologist Athenagoras describes God playing the prophets and

⁶⁸ This material may be found in a somewhat modified form in following forthcoming work: Jack Kilcrease, *Holy Scripture*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics Series, vol. 2 (Ft. Wayne: Luther Academy, 2017).

⁶⁹ Leslie Baynes, *The Heavenly Book Motif in Judeo-Christian Apocalypses 200 BCE-200 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 110.

⁷⁰ See Christopher Forbes, *Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and Its Hellenistic Environment* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 124-42.

⁷¹ For example Philo writes of prophecy: “No pronouncement of a prophet is ever his own; he is an interpreter prompted by another in all his utterances . . . when knowing not what he does he is filled with inspiration, as the reason withdraws and surrenders the citadel of his soul to a new visitor and tenant, the Divine Spirit which plays upon his vocal organism and dictates words which clearly express its prophetic message.” Philo, *De specialibus legibus* 4.49. Cited in Henri Blocher, “God and the Scripture Writers,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 503.

apostles like a flute.⁷² Although Hellenistic Jews and the later Ante-Nicene Fathers generally did not think that the prophets and apostles had behaved in an unhinged manner in the state of inspiration,⁷³ they nevertheless did speak of God taking over their minds during prophecy.⁷⁴

The early Church's view of the inspiration of Scripture gradually began to change in the second and third centuries. Living in the mid to late second-century, Montanus, claimed to be the Paraclete of John 14 sent to prepare the world for the millennium and the descent of the New Jerusalem. Montanus, along with the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla, embodied the manic conception of inspiration found in Greek paganism and Hellenistic Judaism. In the fragments of prophecy that survive from Montanus, he and his companions regularly speak in the first-person as the Holy Spirit.⁷⁵

For this reason, many of the later Ante-Nicene Fathers backed away from the manic conception of inspiration. For example, Origen rejects it in stating: "Moreover, it is not the part of the divine spirit to drive the prophetess [or prophet] into such a state of ecstasy and madness that she [or he] loses control of herself [or himself]"⁷⁶ Instead, the Holy Spirit enlightens and evaluates the rational capacities of those whom he inspires, so that they can more clearly see the truth:

Accordingly, we can show from an examination of the sacred Scriptures, that the Jewish prophets, who were enlightened as far as was necessary for their prophetic work by the Spirit of God, were the first to enjoy the benefit of inspiration; and by the contact- if I may so say- of the Holy Spirit they became clearer in mind, and their souls were filled with a brighter light.⁷⁷

Hence, Origen places a much higher emphasis on human agency in the production of the Scriptures. He nevertheless still appears to believe

⁷² See Leslie William Barnard, *Athenagoras: A Study in Second Century Christian Apologetic* (Paris: Beuchesne, 1972), 76.

⁷³ Charles Hill, "'The Truth Above All Demonstration': Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine," in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, 81-3.

⁷⁴ Henri Blocher, "God and the Scripture Writers," 503-4; Preus, "The View of the Bible held by the Church," 363.

⁷⁵ See Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁷⁶ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.3; ANF, 4:612.

⁷⁷ Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.4; ANF, 4:612.

that the Holy Spirit is determinative the verbal content of the text of the Bible.⁷⁸

For this reason, the later Church Fathers came to view the inspiration of the Bible as not destroying human rationality and agency, but rather enhancing it. Augustine and others spoke of inspiration as an event wherein the prophets and apostles were enlightened by the Spirit so as to be able to see the truth and write it down in an inerrant and trustworthy manner.⁷⁹ This understanding of inspiration was carried on into the Middle Ages and was largely retain by the Reformers.⁸⁰

The main difference between the early Protestant tradition and the medieval theologians on the issue of inspiration was the belief of the former in the doctrine of verbal inspiration (*verbalinspiration, suggestio verbi*). This doctrine is implied in many of the statements of the Reformers⁸¹ and was more rigorously and explicitly developed in the theology of the Protestant Scholastics of the seventeenth century.⁸² According to this understanding, God is able to determine the very grammar and word choice of the prophets and apostles, without destroying the integrity of their human agency. This view stands in contrast with that of the medieval theologians, such as Thomas

⁷⁸ See Michael Holmes, “Origen and the Inerrancy of Scripture,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 24, no. 3 (1981): 221-4.

⁷⁹ Wayne Spear, “Augustine’s Doctrine of Biblical Infallibility,” in *Inerrancy and the Church*, ed. John Hannah (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 37-66; Charles Hill, “‘The Truth Above All Demonstration’: Scripture in the Patristic Period to Augustine,” 59-61.

⁸⁰ Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 2:243-5; Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the Seventeenth Century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 39-46; idem, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970-1972), 1:281-6.

⁸¹ For example, Luther. See: LW 12:279; LW 26:92. In reference to a particular passage in Paul: “The Holy Spirit does not observe this strict rule of grammar.” (LW 26:139). Cited from: Mark Thompson, *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method of Luther’s Approach to Scripture* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 116. See Thompson’s full discussion on pages 115-7. Also see Calvin’s statements in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.8.6, in *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. and ed. John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 2:1154.

⁸² For an overview of the views of Scripture held by the Reformers and the Protestant Scholastics, see: Robert Kolb, “The Bible in the Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 89-114.

Aquinas. While Aquinas held the Scriptures were without error,⁸³ he seems to imply that the inspired prophets and apostles were free to select their own words in composing the Scriptures.⁸⁴

D. Soteriological Trajectories in the Early Church: Baptism, Penance, and Theosis⁸⁵

Although the doctrine of justification was central to the great theological debate the sixteenth century, Alister McGrath correctly notes that the doctrine is very rarely spoken of in the Ante-Nicene period.⁸⁶ That being said, justification was always implicitly present as a theological issue. In its essence the doctrine represents the perennial Christian theological question of how believers stand as righteous before a holy God.

The issue of justification and the use of the term specifically find their origins in the Pauline corpus (notably in Romans and Galatians). Justification became the chief way for Latin Christian discussed salvation in Christ as a result of Augustine's debate over free will, grace and original sin with Pelagius in the fourth and early fifth century.⁸⁷ In order to properly contextualize the debate we will first examine the main soteriological motifs of Ante-Nicene Church. As we will see, prior to the Pelagian crisis, soteriological issues in early Christianity center around the questions of baptism, penance, and what later Eastern theologians would call *theosis* or deification.

We will begin with the question of baptism and penance in the early Church. Since the New Testament repeatedly speaks of baptism as the renewed person of faith's definitive break with the old age of sin and death (Jn. 3:5, Rom. 6:4, Col. 2:12), the logical question arises as to how actual sins can continue subsequent to this apocalyptic break.

⁸³ "It is heretical to say that any falsehood whatsoever is contained either in the gospels or in any canonical Scripture." Cited in Preus, "The View of the Bible held by the Church," 370. Originally taken from *Iob.* 13, lect. 1.

⁸⁴ For example see: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2a2æ, q. 171, art. 1 in *Summa Theologiae*, Blackfriars Edition, 60 vols. (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1964-1973), 45:5-9.

⁸⁵ Much of this material appeared in a slightly different form in the following publications: Jack Kilcrease, "Baptism and the Problem of Time" *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 26, no. 4 (2017). [Forthcoming]; Jack Kilcrease, *The Self-Donation of God: A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Christ and His Benefits* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 200-4.

⁸⁶ Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33.

⁸⁷ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 38.

Indeed, this problem drove much of the discussion of baptism in the early Church.

For many Christians in the Ante-Nicene period, the idea that one could be saved once one had committed post-baptismal sin was absurd. If baptism is the definitive eschatological break with the old age, then Christians must live a life that is sin free. Baptism justifies by wiping one's slate clean, and sanctifies in that it gives the Holy Spirit. Through this, the Christian is sealed in righteousness for the Last Judgment. According to this view, it is then the Christian's responsibility to preserve this holiness until the Last Judgment or temporal death. If one sins again, they obviously cannot be rebaptized. Neither can one jump across the gulf of time and reenter the reality of baptism.⁸⁸ Indeed, in support of this, many took Hebrews 6:4-6 as directly teaching that post-baptismal sin dooms one to eternal damnation.⁸⁹

In light of this concern, many early Christians (incidentally, including the Emperor Constantine) remained unbaptized until moments before their death.⁹⁰ This reflected the theory that one could successfully avoid sin after baptism if the period between baptism and death was shortened to a few minutes. Still other groups (most notably schismatics like the Montanists and Novatians) argued that those who were baptized and yet fell into sin by denying the faith during periods of persecution had permanently lost their salvation and should be removed from the Church. To prove this they frequently cited Matthew 10:33 and similar texts.⁹¹

Conversely, for a sizeable number of Ante-Nicene theologians held that the idea that post-baptismal sin would automatically damns a believer was false. Nevertheless, most of these thinkers continued to labor under the assumptions shared by their opponents that eschatological interruption of baptism was in a sense canceled by post-baptismal sin. Therefore, books like the Shepherd of Hermas (often

⁸⁸ F.F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame: The Rise of Christianity from Its First Beginnings to the Conversion of the English* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 200.

⁸⁹ Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, 200.

⁹⁰ Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought: From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 137.

⁹¹ Ronald Heine, "Articulating Identity," in *The Cambridge History of Early Christianity*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 208-16; James Papandrea, *Novatian of Rome and the Culmination of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 69.

numbered in collections of the Apostolic Fathers) suggests that those who fell away after baptism possess the possibility of restoring themselves through a single penance.⁹² Penance in this mindset could serve as something of a second baptism, since baptism itself was a onetime event and could not be returned to.

After the Decian Persecution (ca. 250 A.D.), penance increasingly became the main option for Latin theologians who sought a means of dealing with post-baptismal sin. In the wake of this attack on the Church, Cyprian argued in favor of the prescription of penance. By contrast, Novatian and others argued in favor of a hard line of banning even the most repentant permanently.⁹³ Again, legitimate baptism could not be repeated, neither could its reality be reentered into. Nevertheless, perhaps penance could be a means of repairing its reality. Such a notion came to dominate the theology of the Latin Church during the Middle Ages. As Jerome would later say: “Penance is a second plank after shipwreck.”⁹⁴

The second concept that dominated the Ante-Nicene Church was the notion of *theosis* or deification. The New Testament writings speak of the eschatological destiny as being glorified with Christ (Rom. 8:17), possessing the same divine incorruptibility as Christ in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15), and indeed becoming “partakers in the divine nature” (2 Pt. 1:4, ESV).

In opposing the Gnostics, Irenaeus adapted these ideas to describe the redemptive work of Christ and its connection with human destiny. Fundamental to the Gnostic myth was the claim that humans were at their core divine beings who had fallen into the world of matter. In this world of matter, humanity had become enslaved to the evil or inept creator god. Jesus represented a higher and purely spiritual god, who gave humans the secret knowledge of their true identity as divine and

⁹² Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 216.

⁹³ J. Patout Burns, “On Rebaptism: Social Organization in the Church of the Third Century,” in *Forms of Devotion: Conversion, Worship, Spirituality, and Asceticism*, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishers, 1999), 116; Justo González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 88-90.

⁹⁴ Cited in Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 65.

helped them move past the world of matter, thereby restoring their fleshless divinity.⁹⁵

Much like his interpretation of the doctrines of Scripture and Tradition, Irenaeus effectively inverted the Gnostic myths in his treatment of Christology and soteriology. First, the creator God was not an evil or inept imposter. Rather, the creator God was the Father of Jesus. From this it followed that there was within the Bible a coherence between creation and redemption. Unlike the Gnostic myth, the same god was agent of both. Creation was therefore not evil, but good. That being said, the created order was of course fallen and enslaved to the dark powers of sin, death, and the Devil. It was therefore in need of redemption.⁹⁶

Contrary to the Gnostics, for Irenaeus humans were not by nature divine. Nevertheless, by his grace it was God's goal to make humans participants in divine incorruptible at some point in the future. This would occur after humanity had passing through various stages development.⁹⁷ Unfortunately, Adam and Eve had fallen into sin and become enslaved by demonic forces, thereby disrupting this process. Drawing on the Pauline concept of Christ as the second Adam (Rom 5, 1 Cor. 15, etc.), Irenaeus spoke of Christ as being the recapitulator of creation.⁹⁸ As a second Adam, Christ freed humanity by overcoming the destructive elements of the old creation. This atonement motif is often described as *Christus Victor*. He fulfilled this task by entering into the stages of creation's development and persevering where humanity had previously failed. He thereby brought human existence

⁹⁵ Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), 53-204.

⁹⁶ See: J. T. Nielsen, *Adam and Christ in the Theology of Irenaeus of Lyons: An Examination of the Function of the Adam-Christ typology in the Adversus Haereses of Irenaeus, Against the Background of the Gnosticism of His Time* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1968)

⁹⁷ Jeffrey Finch, "Irenaeus on the Christological Basis of Human Divinization," in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co., 2006), 86-103

⁹⁸ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 16-35. Also see Eric Osborn, "Irenaeus of Lyons," in *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church*, ed. G. R. Evans (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 121-6; Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959).

to its natural completion through his glorification in the resurrection from the dead.⁹⁹

Later in the fourth century Athanasius picked up on the theme of deification and the freeing of humans from demonic forces in his theology of the Incarnation and atonement. Indeed, during the Arian controversy, Athanasius' main argument against his opponents was that the Logos could not be a mere creature since he had overcome demonic forces and transmit the divine life humans. In his short work *On the Incarnation of the Word*, he argues that the Incarnation occurred in order to overcome the fetters that had held humanity back from its own movement towards participation in the divine life.¹⁰⁰ Hence, with Irenaeus, Athanasius shared the *Christus Victor* motif of atonement. In order for God to accomplish this transformation, the divine Son entered the human story, deified his assumed humanity, and defeated death and the Devil.¹⁰¹ The form the Messiah's death had taken was necessary because "the devil, the enemy of our race, having fallen from heaven, wanders about in the lower atmosphere." Therefore, "It was quite fitting that the Lord suffered this death . . . being lifted up he cleared the air of the malignity both of the devil and of demons of all kinds . . . and made a new opening of the way up into heaven."¹⁰²

For Athanasius, this was not the only reason for Christ's work on the cross. In Jesus' death, the curse of death was exhausted: ". . . all being held to have died in him, the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (insofar as its power was fully spent in the Lord's body, and had no longer holding ground against men, his peer)." Beyond this, Athanasius also understood Jesus' death as a sacrifice of sin: "by offering unto death he himself had taken as an offering and sacrifice free from stain, straightway he put away death from all his peers by offering an equivalent."¹⁰³ Therefore, contrary to the claims of many, the motif of conquest does not exclude the idea that Jesus died in order

⁹⁹ For a relatively short and very-easy- to read summary of Irenaeus' position see Irenaeus of Lyons, *On Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (New York: St. Vladimir Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 4, in *The Christology of the Later Fathers*, trans. and ed. Achidbald Robertson, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1954) 58.

¹⁰¹ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 13, in Robertson, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 67-68.

¹⁰² Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 25, in Robertson, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 80.

¹⁰³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 9, in Robertson, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 63.

to pay for the sin of humanity. Nevertheless, for Athanasius the substitution motif is a subplot in a larger drama of God's conquest of death and the Devil.

In these soteriological motifs, we can observe some continuities and discontinuities with the Reformation. On the one hand, the Reformers uniformly rejected the notion of penance as a form of works-righteousness without any basis in Scripture.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, whereas the much of the early Church saw baptism as a reality canceled by sin, Luther argued that baptism was a visible form of the promise of the gospel.¹⁰⁵ As an unconditional promise, baptism could be returned to throughout one's life. This destroyed the rationale for penance, which by the sixteenth century had developed into a vast and complex system within the medieval Church. Generally speaking, the Reformed and Anabaptist tradition solved the problem of post-baptism sin by reducing baptism to a mere symbolic washing (Zwingli, Anabaptists) or a genuine sign of the invisible grace (the actual catalyst of salvation) that nevertheless does not contain grace in itself (Calvinism).¹⁰⁶

In contrast to the concept of penance, the motif of deification and union finds much resonance in the theology of the Reformers. In Luther's early treatise *Freedom of a Christian* (1520), the Reformer speaks of the union between Christ and believers. This results in an exchange of realities between Christ and the believer, thereby giving the believer a share in Christ's divine life and righteousness (the "happy exchange," *commercium admirabile, der fröhliche Wechsel*). Although ultimately hinged on God's forensic judgment of the sinner for the sake of Christ, subsequently the believer is sanctified by union with Christ.¹⁰⁷ Late Lutheran Orthodoxy picked up theme of union and referred to this reality as "mystical union" (*unio mystica*).¹⁰⁸ It should likewise also be noted that Luther, in a similar manner to

¹⁰⁴ C. Scott Dixon, *Contesting the Reformation* (Malden, MASS: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 174.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism IV*, in *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 551-3

¹⁰⁶ See James V. Brownson, *The Promise of Baptism: An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 2007); John W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: A Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

¹⁰⁷ See LW 31:333-77. Also see Jack Kilcrease, "The Bridal-Mystical Motif in Bernard of Clairvaux and Martin Luther" *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 65, no. 2 (2014): 243-79.

¹⁰⁸ Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Hay and Henry Jacob (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 495-502.

Irenaeus and Athanasius, highlights the *Christus Victor* motif when discussing atonement in his Small Catechism (1529).¹⁰⁹

On the Reformed side, newer scholarship on Calvin has highlighted the notion of salvation through union with Christ in the Genevan Reformer's writings. Calvin sees faith as a means of believer's entering into union with Christ. The result is the "dual grace" (*duplex gratia*) of justification and sanctification.¹¹⁰

E. Soteriological Trajectories in the Early Church: Augustine and the Pelagian Crisis

As previous noted, the main catalyst for the early Church's discussion of justification was the Pelagian crisis. Pelagius was a monk from Britain, who later traveled to Rome and made a strong impression on the local Christian elites by teaching a program of moral rigor. Part of the rationale for his belief in extreme moral rigor was his concept of human free will and its soteriological possibilities. According to Pelagius and his associates, human nature was not damaged by original sin. Adam and Eve had merely provided a bad example for their progeny and they had in no way transmitted their guilt or a defective human nature to them. Because humans do occasionally use their free will to sin, they certainly do need the atoning work of Jesus to cancel their guilt. Nevertheless, apart from any supernatural assistance or regeneration, they are capable of morally perfecting themselves and earning their own salvation.¹¹¹

Augustine's response to Pelagius' claims was to strongly affirm the doctrine of original sin and the necessity of divine grace. Whereas previous Ante-Nicene theologians had affirmed that Adam and Eve's sin had genuinely affected their relationship with God, most of their writings possessed different points of emphasis or less intense formulations than Augustine's. The early Patristic theologians either focused on the fact that the Fall had cause humans to become enslaved to death and other demonic forces (as was discussed above), or held

¹⁰⁹ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism* II.2, in *Concordia Triglotta*, 545.

¹¹⁰ See J. Todd Billings, "John Calvin's Soteriology: On the Multifaceted 'Sum' of the Gospel," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 4 (2009): 428-47.

¹¹¹ See several relevant studies: Robert Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury, 1968); John Ferguson, *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study* (Cambridge, UK W. Heffer, 1956); B. R. Rees, *Pelagius A Reluctant Heretic* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1988).

that while human nature was damaged by sin, was not completely morally incapacitated.¹¹² Later Christian theologians have often called this position “Semi-Pelagianism.”¹¹³

By contrast, Augustine taught the human nature was completely morally incapacitated by sin. Humans were of course in some sense still free, but their freedom lay in their ability to follow their corrupt desires without any outside force coercing them into their actions. In light of this, for salvation to come about God in his grace had to intervene in a special way to turn human the human heart toward pure desires. Through God’s *prevenient grace*, human agency could be regenerated in such a manner that it could gain a true and authentic freedom by spontaneously willing the good, thereby freely cooperating with God’s offer of salvation.¹¹⁴

Moreover, Augustine’s teaching on these point also logically led to his revival of the Pauline theme of predestination (Rom. 8-9, Ephesians 1, etc.). Since all humans are incapacitated in their ability to achieve salvation by original sin, the question must be raised as to why some are converted to the faith and not others are not. The answer cannot lie in human free choice, since fallen human agency is incapable of choosing God apart from the special intervention of divine grace. Augustine believed it logically followed from these facts that only some receive this special divine intervention and others do not. Hence, such an election to grace must be part of a plan of salvation that God had determined from all eternity, as Paul affirmed in Romans 8-9 and Ephesians 1.¹¹⁵

Ultimately, Augustine’s positions on sin and grace were affirmed by the Second Council of Orange (529 A.D.) in a moderated form.¹¹⁶ Likewise, this theology of original sin, election, and grace was also largely shared by the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Although we

¹¹² See summary in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1978), 344-57.

¹¹³ Conrad Leyser, “Semi-Pelagianism,” in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 761-6.

¹¹⁴ See Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will* in NPNFa, 5:436-467. Hereafter “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series” will be cited as “NPNFa.” See good summary of Augustine’s position in: Justo González, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian between Two Cultures* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 138-46; McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 41-2.

¹¹⁵ See Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*; NPNFa, 5:493-520.

¹¹⁶ Heinrich Denzinger *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Roy Deferrari (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto, 2002), 75-80.

do not have the space here to give a lengthy discussion of their doctrines of grace, original sin, and predestination in the sixteenth century context, on the whole, the Magisterial Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, etc.) accepted that humans were morally incapacitated by sin and therefore could not be saved apart from God's radical grace and act of eternal predestination.¹¹⁷ This being said, these ideas were by no means novel during the Middle Ages. Although there certainly were a range of opinions on the issue of original sin and predestination, significant and influential figures such as Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Brandwardine, and Gregory of Rimini all affirmed that original sin left humans incapable of saving themselves and that salvation came by God's predestinating choice of the number of the saved.¹¹⁸

This finally brings us to the question to the doctrine of justification, which was central to the Reformation. Here, in spite of his similarities with the sixteenth century Reformers, Augustine is in many respects at odds with them. There are a number of reasons for this, but one the chief ones was the barrier of language. One limitation Augustine possessed as a theologian was his inability to read Greek.¹¹⁹ For this reason, Augustine was confined to reading Paul only in the Old Latin translation of the Bible (*Vetus Latina*). Much like in Jerome's later Vulgate, the Old Latin edition translated Paul's word for "justification" as *justificare* (to "make righteous"). This translation was unfaithful to the original Greek text, where Paul had used the word *dikaioo* (meaning to "judge righteous").¹²⁰

Although the linguistic barrier is probably not the only reason that Augustine misread Paul on this point, Alister McGrath convincingly argues that it was a significant contributing factor to Augustine's misunderstanding. Whereas Paul and the later Reformers had understood that humans are imputed as righteous for the sake of Christ,

¹¹⁷ See good summary in Harry Buis, *Predestination and Historic Protestantism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007).

¹¹⁸ See summary in James Ginther, "Predestination," in *The Westminster Handbook to Medieval Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), 153-4; Heiko Oberman, *Archbishop Thomas Bradwardine: A Fourteenth Century Augustinian: A Study of His Theology in Its Historical Context* (Utrecht: Kemink & Zoon, 1957); Joseph Peter Wawrykow, "God's Knowledge," in *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 83-4.

¹¹⁹ Peter Brown, *Augustine: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 83-4.

¹²⁰ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 19-20. 47-8.

Augustine taught that grace was primarily a supernatural power that regenerated humans so that they became righteous in and of themselves.¹²¹ This made it possible for humanity to merit their own salvation, albeit on the basis of God’s supernatural assistance alone. As Augustine put it: “when *God crowns our merits*, he crowns his own gifts.”¹²² This doctrine of justification became the basis of the medieval discussion and was largely the position ultimately adopted by the Council of Trent.¹²³ By contrast, as heirs of Renaissance Humanism and its zeal for understanding texts in their original languages (*ad fontes*),¹²⁴ the Reformers were able to correct Jerome’s translation mistake and revive Paul’s actual teaching on justification.

Although if taken in isolation, these facts may make it appear that there is a supreme discontinuity between the teaching of the early Church and the Reformers, Augustine’s support for position somewhat similar to that of the Tridentine position should be qualified in a number of ways. First, there is some suggestion that Augustine at the end of his life might have been sensing the limitations of his own understanding of justification. In his late book *The Retractions*, Augustine writes of his earlier discussions of Romans 7, where the Apostle Paul speaks of his personal struggle with sinful impulses. Augustine notes that earlier in his career he had read the passage as being about Paul before his conversion. Augustine at the end of his now states that he believes that Paul is speaking of his life as a Christian.¹²⁵ Nevertheless, if it is the case that Paul’s inner desires stand before God is impure, how can justification be based on the internal renewal of the Christian? Would it not be logical to draw the conclusion that justification is based on the righteousness of Christ *extra nos*, as Paul himself seems to suggest that the end of the chapter (Rom. 7:25)? Augustine does not actually draw this conclusion, but it is notable that his treatment of his passage would imply an alternative

¹²¹ See contrast in Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, trans. Gene Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 138-9.

¹²² Cited from Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 329.

¹²³ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 318-44.

¹²⁴ Robert A. Baker and John M. Landers, *A Summary of Christian History* (Nashville: B & H Publishers, 2005), 165-6.

¹²⁵ Augustine, *The Retractions* 2.27; Augustine, *The Retractions*, trans. Mary Inez Bogan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1968), 119.

understanding of justification to the one that he formulated during his struggle with Pelagius.

Another thing to consider when evaluating the continuity between the early Church and Magisterial Reformers is the fact that while Augustine is one of the first theologians to systematically discuss justification, he is not the only one to mention the doctrine. There are numerous theologians in the early Church who in fact speak of justification, albeit largely in passing. Among them, there are quite a few passages in these authors in which either directly state, or seemingly imply that justification comes by grace through faith.¹²⁶

This being said, there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the Patristic theologians and the Magisterial Reformers. As previously noted, their statements on justification are rarely developed in any systematically in any meaningful way. Also, unlike many of the Reformers of the sixteenth century (particularly Luther) these theologians do not treat justification as possessing a hermeneutical function as a loadstar for the exposition of Scripture.¹²⁷

Conclusion

In this essay we have engaged the complex and wide ranging question of authority and soteriology in the theology of the early Church. Due to limitations of space, we have not been able to give an exhaustive account of the teaching of the early Church on these subjects. Nevertheless, from the short account that has been given below, we may discern a number of important things.

First, much as in the contemporary Church, there was a spectrum of opinions within the early Church about key questions of authority and salvation. Secondly, in spite of this range of opinions, generally speaking there is a greater continuity between the early Church and the Magisterial Reformation of the sixteenth century than there is with

¹²⁶ See a few of many examples in the following: John **Chrysostom**, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, trans. R. C. Hill (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 167; idem, *Homilies on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 7; NPNFa, 11:375-85; idem, *Homilies on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, 8; NPNFa, 11:385-95; idem, *Commentary on Galatians*, 3:8; NPNFa, 13:26; idem, “Homily on Galatians 3.9-10” in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, the New Testament: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, vol. 6, ed. Mark J. Edwards (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 40; Clement of Rome, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 32; ANF, 1:13; Mathetes, *Epistle to Diognetus*, 9; ANF, 1:28. Many thanks to my friend and former student Rev. David Jay Webber for directing me to these citations.

¹²⁷ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 189-91.

post-Tridentine Catholicism. This of course must be qualified by the fact that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the Church Fathers and the post-Reformation western Church. Similarly, the continuity between the Reformers and the early Church occurs in various degrees. For example, regarding the issues of sin and predestination, the Reformers stand in many better continuity with Augustine than modern Catholics. By contrast, with regard to justification, modern Catholics possess a greater continuity with Augustine than do the Reformers.

Nevertheless, on the whole we have found that there is a much greater precedent for Reformation teaching than Roman Catholic. With regard to the question of authority, the Church Fathers accepted that the Bible was the Word of God. Even if some held that one could know the teachings of the apostles to an extent through oral tradition, unlike the Council of Trent, they did not believe that this tradition supplemented the Bible. With regard to the doctrine of salvation, Reformation teaching on the believer's relationship to Christ stands in significant continuity with Irenaeus and Athanasius' teaching that Christ exchanged realities with fallen human beings, thereby overcoming the Devil, conquering death, and atoning for sin. Lastly, there was a basic agreement between the Magisterial Reformers and Augustine on the radical nature of original sin, grace, and predestination.



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