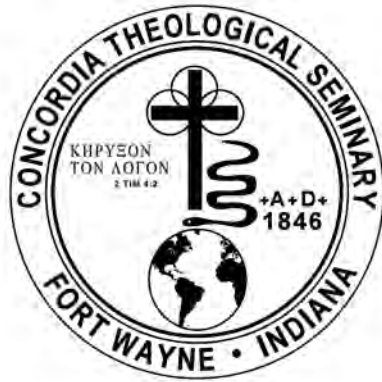


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On the Sufficiency and Clarity of Scripture

Korey D. Maas

It remains impossible to spend much time in Lutheran circles without hearing invocations of Scripture's sufficiency and, very much related, its clarity. Each is often encompassed in the phrase "Scripture alone," which is of course one of the famous *solas* that would become a slogan of the Reformation. Like most oft-repeated slogans, it has even become something of a cliché. To say so need not be to disparage, however; clichés, after all, only become clichés because they concisely and helpfully express a recognized truth. But precisely because they are so concise, it is not always possible for slogans or clichés to express the relevant truth clearly or fully. More problematic, as George Orwell emphasizes in his famous essay on "Politics and the English Language,"¹ clichés very easily become substitutes for actual thought, and so discourage or prevent clear thinking. Their ready use can prevent one from seriously thinking about and thinking through the original ideas they were meant to convey. If and when this is the case, misunderstanding inevitably arises. The kernel of truth expressed in a concise formula can be mistaken for the whole truth. Even those invoking the slogan might begin to forget what the whole truth is, why it is true, and why it was articulated and defended in the first place.

Such forgetfulness is of course problematic for a whole host of reasons, not the least of which is that the attendant misunderstandings might make it especially easy for Lutherans to have their faith shaken if and when they encounter some fairly standard objections. Some of the more common objections to the Lutheran profession of Scripture's sufficiency and clarity will be addressed below, but it is worth noting at the outset that many of them are indeed predicated upon what are quite obviously caricatures of the Lutheran confession. Or, at least, their nature as caricatures would be obvious if we—clergy and laity alike—better remembered and understood the truths intended to be conveyed by concise references to Scripture's sufficiency or clarity. By way of attempting to recover this understanding, then, it will be worth asking some relatively straightforward questions of each doctrine. The first is simple: "What does this mean?" What, exactly, is meant by the Lutheran claim that Scripture is sufficient, or that it is clear? Addressing that question will then allow clarification with respect to a second: "What does this not mean?" What

¹ George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in George Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1981), 156–171.

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mischaracterizations of these teachings should one be wary of accepting or (even unintentionally) promoting? Beyond these basic definitional questions, it will be further helpful to address some of the implications suggested by their answers. Namely: “What does the Lutheran confession intentionally and necessarily exclude, or prevent us from saying and believing?” and “What does it not necessarily exclude?” In light of the answers to these questions, then, brief attention can be given to some of the more popular objections to these fundamental Lutheran doctrines of Scripture.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

Because the Lutheran confession of Scripture’s sufficiency is so frequently summarized with the phrase *sola scriptura*, an obvious point deserves to be made even more obvious. Namely, the phrase is precisely that: a phrase. Because it is not a complete sentence, it does not express a complete thought; it does not provide a coherent propositional statement to which one might actually say, “yes, that is correct,” or “no, that is incorrect.” This perhaps becomes clearer if, rather than “Scripture alone,” one uses the equally legitimate translation, “only Scripture.” The slogan can be repeated as often and as loudly as one likes, but it invites only one logical response. Only Scripture . . . well, what, exactly?

What Does This Mean?

This is the question the Smalcald Articles answer when, for example, Luther writes that “the Word of God—and no one else, not even an angel—should establish articles of faith” (SA II II 15),² and when the Formula of Concord more fully states, “We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according to which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testament alone” (FC Ep Rule and Norm 1).³ In short, the Lutheran confession of *sola scriptura* is that only Scripture can “establish articles of faith,” and that only Scripture is the standard by which such articles are to be judged. Not only is Scripture necessary for defining and judging doctrine, but Scripture, all by itself, is sufficient for these tasks.

Though both of these claims were debated in the sixteenth century—and remain contested today—it was the latter that received the greater attention. No contemporary Catholic doubted or denied that Scripture was an inspired revelation, and so an important source for establishing and judging doctrine. The disputed

² Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 304.

³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 486.

question, however, was whether Scripture by itself was a sufficient source for doing so, or whether additional, and equally authoritative, sources such as tradition or the church's magisterium might be necessary in addition to Scripture. Similarly, no sixteenth-century Catholic doubted or denied that Scripture was an infallible source of doctrinal authority. But again, the disputed question was whether Scripture is the only infallible authority by which doctrine might be established or judged, or whether other authorities, such as popes and councils, might also and equally be deemed infallible.

It is something like this latter question that the Formula addresses when it declares that "other symbols" and "other writings" are "not judges, as is Holy Scripture, but they are only witnesses and explanations of the faith" (FC Ep Rule and Norm 8).⁴ The fact that "other symbols" and "writings" can be and indeed are cited in the Formula indicates that its authors did recognize them to be authorities in some sense. When the authors appeal to early church fathers, to the Augsburg Confession, or even to Luther's own writings, what they are quite clearly doing is making an appeal to authority. Such authorities are understood to be important witnesses to true doctrine. But because one might speak truthfully even if not possessing infallibility, such witnesses cannot be ultimate judges of doctrine, "as is Holy Scripture." It is because only Scripture is recognized as having infallible authority that Scripture alone must establish and judge articles of faith.

Finally, what is already implicit in the Formula is made further explicit by Martin Chemnitz, one of its authors, when he writes in his *Enchiridion* that Scripture contains "the sum of the whole heavenly doctrine, as much as is necessary for the church and suffices for the faith by which believers obtain life eternal."⁵ Though Scripture may not contain within its pages all that is true, it preserves and proclaims those truths that are both necessary and sufficient for salvation. Though perhaps an obvious point, it is especially important for avoiding misunderstanding or caricature. The properties and effects of certain chemical compounds, for example, are truths that can be discerned, and to be licensed as a pharmacist one might even be required to assent to those truths. But because they are not revealed in Scripture, their acknowledgment is not necessary for salvation; assent to them cannot be required of Christians as Christians. Or, to use an example a bit closer to home, a congregation's use of synodically approved worship materials might legitimately be deemed a necessary requirement of membership in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. But since Scripture itself speaks neither of hymnals nor

⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 487.

⁵ Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981), 41.

of the Missouri Synod, one is not at liberty to say the use of certain hymnals is a requirement of salvation. In view of the above, then, what, precisely, do Lutherans mean by their confession of *sola scriptura*? Simply this: Scripture alone, being the infallible revelation of God, is both necessary and sufficient for establishing and judging the doctrines necessary for salvation.

What Does This Not Mean?

Articulating *sola scriptura* in this fuller and more precise manner not only encapsulates the various emphases of the Lutheran Confessions; it also thereby helps to clarify what the phrase does not and cannot mean when used by Lutherans. In so doing, it therefore reveals the erroneous assumptions of critics, such as the popular Catholic apologist Karl Keating, who does battle with a straw man when he describes the doctrine as a belief that “anything extraneous to the Bible is simply wrong or hinders rather than helps one toward salvation.”⁶ Keating is surely aware that the Bible nowhere explains that, at sea level, water comes to a boil at 100 degrees Celsius. But equally surely he has never met a Lutheran who says this non-biblical datum is therefore “simply wrong.” Similarly, one very much doubts there are many Lutherans who have felt their salvation hindered by the process of making spaghetti or boiling an egg.

Unfortunately, though, it is not simply Catholic polemicists who mischaracterize this doctrine, intentionally or otherwise. Even an astute Protestant academic like Alec Ryrie can give the wrong impression when writing that “Protestantism was in the truest sense a fundamentalist movement; it only accepted a single authority, Holy Scripture.”⁷ It is instead the case that, while acknowledging many authorities (from the Council and Creed of Nicaea, through the Book of Concord, and down to the local parish pastor), Lutherans, at least, accept only a single authority as infallible, and so capable of establishing those doctrines necessary to salvation. A final example, from another academic, manages to combine the errors of both Keating and Ryrie when presuming *sola scriptura* to mean that non-scriptural writing “lacks all authority or truthfulness.”⁸ No, a second grade math book, despite lacking the infallibility of divine inspiration, does not lack all

⁶ Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on “Romanism” by “Bible Christians”* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 121.

⁷ Alec Ryrie, “The Problem of Legitimacy and Precedent in English Protestantism, 1539–47,” in *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol. 1, *The Medieval Inheritance*, ed. Bruce Gordon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996), 78.

⁸ Thomas Betteridge, *Tudor Histories of the English Reformations, 1530–83* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 97.

truthfulness when it teaches that $2 + 2 = 4$. Nor do similarly non-biblical traffic laws lack all authority when they prohibit drag racing in residential neighborhoods.

What Does This Exclude?

If the confession of *sola scriptura* was never meant to prohibit belief in extrabiblical truths or to reject any and all authorities other than Scripture, what exactly was it intended to safeguard against? The answer to this question is not difficult to discern in light of the previous clarification of the phrase as a concise manner of professing that, since only Scripture is infallible, only Scripture is to establish and judge Christian doctrine. Since the confession was initially articulated this way in controversy with Rome, however, its implications might become even clearer in view of what Rome taught—and continues to teach—on this point.

Again, since no medieval theologian doubted or denied that Scripture was the inspired and infallible word of God, and therefore an important source for establishing and judging doctrine, the question that came into dispute was whether Scripture is the only inspired and infallible word of God, and so whether it is the entirely sufficient source for establishing and judging doctrine. Whatever freedom pre-Reformation Christians might have had to debate these questions, it was in part the reformers' own affirmative answer that finally informed Rome's official answer in the negative. The Council of Trent, for example, though emphasizing the veneration due Holy Scripture on account of its divine inspiration, does not allow that Scripture is the only source of divine revelation. It therefore speaks of the same veneration being due also to "the traditions, whether they relate to faith or to morals, as having been dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church in unbroken succession."⁹

Trent's manner of speaking is illustrative of what historians and theologians have referred to as the "two-source" theory of revelation, the proposal that God has revealed and preserved his word in two forms: written Scripture and unwritten tradition. The late Heiko Oberman would bluntly offer that this was a theory formulated because Rome came to recognize that some of her teachings "could not be found explicitly or implicitly in Holy Scripture."¹⁰ That is, rather than this teaching being itself part of an "unbroken" tradition, it was an *ad hoc* theory developed to avoid the otherwise undesirable implications of requiring the faithful

⁹ Council of Trent, "Decree concerning the Canonical Scriptures," in *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. H. J. Schroeder, OP (Rockford: Tan, 1978), 17.

¹⁰ Heiko A. Oberman, "Quo Vadis, Petre? Tradition from Irenaeus to Humani Generis," in Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 294.

to believe extrabiblical doctrines. Whatever its original impetus or motivation, what is clear is that Rome continues to embrace the theory even into the present. *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, ratified and promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965, is emphatic on the point: "It is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything that has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence." Further, and more explicitly, Scripture is to be held "together with sacred tradition, as the supreme rule of faith."¹¹

Clearly, then, Rome insists even today that Scripture is not sufficient. If Trent and Vatican II are understood to claim that some binding doctrines were communicated "orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost" and yet not recorded in Scripture, it further follows that Rome denies, at least in some cases, that scriptural revelation is even necessary for defining doctrine. Precisely such claims are what the Lutheran confession of *sola scriptura* originally and most specifically intended to exclude. And the implications of not excluding tradition as an authority by which doctrines might be established can briefly be illustrated with reference to Rome's formal definition of the bodily assumption of Mary, promulgated only as recently as 1950. In that year, Pope Pius XII officially proclaimed it to be a "divinely revealed dogma." Note first the explicit claim that, despite nowhere being recorded in Scripture, the ostensibly traditional teaching of the assumption is to be regarded as a divine revelation. This being the case, therefore, it is not merely entertained as a possible historical fact, or even encouraged as a pious opinion, but defined as a conscience-binding article of faith, "dogma." Finally, since the assumption is so defined, it can further be decreed that any who doubt or deny it have "fallen away completely" from the faith.¹²

A conscientious Lutheran must of course find this all very problematic. But the precise reason a Lutheran deems it problematic deserves emphasis. It is certainly not problematic to believe God capable of assuming someone into heaven, body and soul, before the final judgment. In fact, not only will a Lutheran acknowledge that he could do so; any sincere Christian must confess that God has in fact done so, as with the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11). Nor is it necessarily problematic to believe that God did so—or at least might have done so—with Mary herself. If the Lord had some good reason for already assuming Elijah to his side, there is no *prima facie* reason to insist he could not have had a good reason to do the same with Mary, even if he did

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 2.9 and 6.21, in Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 919, 927.

¹² Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus*, in Denzinger and Hünermann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 809.

not consider it necessary to reveal his doing so in the Scriptures. But that, of course, is the rub; he did not tell us he did so in the Scriptures. The fundamental problem with the doctrine of the assumption, then, is not simply that it permits one to believe something not found in Scripture, but that it requires one to believe it. More specifically, it requires one to believe it as necessary to salvation; to doubt or deny it, says Rome, is to incur damnation. This is precisely what the Lutheran confession of *sola scriptura* intends to prohibit or exclude—making extrabiblical beliefs conscience-binding articles of faith, necessary for salvation.

What Does This Not Exclude?

In light of the above, then, it also becomes clearer what need not be excluded by the confession that Scripture, being infallible, is both necessary and sufficient for establishing and judging those doctrines necessary to salvation. Such a confession does not exclude, for example, the acknowledgment and use of extrabiblical authorities, such as creeds and confessions, pastors and parents—understanding, of course, that such authorities, not being infallible, cannot be ultimate norms of doctrine. It does not exclude respect for and use of extrabiblical customs or traditions, such as the church calendar, liturgy, or vestments—understanding that such are not, strictly speaking, “necessary for the church” or absolutely necessary to “the faith by which believers obtain life eternal” (Cf. Ap XXIV). It does not prohibit articulations of biblical teaching by use of extrabiblical vocabulary, such as the terms *Trinity* or *homoousios*—understanding that such articulations, like the phrase *sola scriptura* itself, simply serve as concise expressions of fuller doctrines that are found in Scripture. Nor need it prevent the entertainment or embrace of “pious opinions” that, while not expressed in Scripture, do not contradict Scripture—understanding that, since such opinions are not clearly expressed in Scripture, they may not be made “articles of faith,” or deemed necessary for salvation.

Objections Considered

Better understanding what the Lutheran confession of *sola scriptura* means and does not mean, what it excludes and does not exclude, makes clearer how and why commonly heard objections to the doctrine lose their force. Space does not permit treating all of these, or any of them in detail; but a few might be addressed at least briefly by way of example. One of the more clever of these is the claim that “Scripture alone” cannot be found in Scripture alone, and so is inherently self-contradictory. This, though, is (as the British say) too clever by half once it is acknowledged that the phrase “Scripture alone” is merely meant (like the term *Trinity*) to encapsulate

in concise form a fuller teaching that is found in Scripture. So, for example, Paul reminds Timothy that “from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15; see also vv. 16–17).¹³ Since he mentions nothing in addition to the Scriptures being necessary for this purpose, he seems clearly to think they are sufficient for this purpose. It is Paul who likewise exhorts his readers “not to go beyond what is written” (1 Cor 4:6). And it was going “beyond what is written” for which even Jesus himself rebuked the traditionalism of the Pharisees, who were “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7). Such passages testify to the central tenet of *sola scriptura*: that Scripture alone is necessary and sufficient for establishing those doctrines which are themselves necessary and sufficient for salvation.

A second objection, however, counters that Scripture itself acknowledges that it does not contain all that Christ or his apostles said and did. John concludes his Gospel, for example, with the reminder that it is not exhaustive, but that “there are also many other things that Jesus did” (John 21:25). That is of course true, and John had already said the same in the previous chapter, when he wrote that “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book.” He continued, however: “But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31). In other words, what is written might not be exhaustive, but it remains nonetheless sufficient. Thus, already in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Martin Chemnitz acknowledged that “it is clear that though not everything . . . was written, nevertheless, whatever of the doctrine and miracles of Christ is necessary and sufficient for true faith and eternal life has been written.”¹⁴ It is worth simply adding in passing that, if Scripture is deemed insufficient merely because it is not exhaustive, then oral tradition quite obviously becomes equally problematic, since no church claims to have preserved even in unwritten form everything Jesus said or did.

A further objection, however, perhaps carries a bit more weight, and deserves greater attention. This is the claim that Scripture actually requires the faithful to hold extrabiblical teachings. Paul is invoked here, when he tells his audience to “stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thess 2:15). The first thing that might be said here

¹³ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV[®] Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

¹⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), 93.

is that there is no immediately obvious reason to assume that Paul taught something by his “spoken word” that he had not also taught in writing. More importantly, though, there is a specific context in which Paul speaks this way. The opening verses of his epistle’s second chapter make clear that someone was teaching the Thessalonians contrary to what Paul had taught them. More specifically, Paul mentions that this teaching occurred in “a letter seeming to be from us” (2 Thess 2:2). That is to say, someone was teaching error, but claiming to teach with apostolic authority. This in itself serves as a warning that a simple claim of apostolic tradition or authority is no guarantee of the fact. The New Testament elsewhere reports similarly erroneous teachings circulating with at least implied claims of apostolicity (e.g., John 21:23; Acts 15:24), and the congregations at Corinth and Galatia amply demonstrate that even those founded by the apostles themselves were not immune to error. In each of these cases, though, actual apostles remained alive and able not only to correct the errors mentioned, but also to confirm that certain teachings claiming their authority actually had no such thing. With the death of the last apostle, however, it would be presumptuous—and indeed dangerous—to claim with dogmatic confidence that “the apostles taught X,” unless one can point to that teaching in their actual writings.

What the objections thus far share in common is that, despite their attempts to refute the doctrine of Scripture alone, those attempts appeal only to Scripture. They are tentatively willing to concede the point for the sake of attempting to show why it is ultimately untenable. One final objection is different, moving from the field of Scripture onto the ground of tradition itself. This objection is simply that *sola scriptura* is not part of the church’s tradition, but is instead the novel invention of the sixteenth-century reformers. Here, though again simply for the sake of argument, the Lutheran might also provisionally concede the premise—namely, that tradition might authoritatively determine a matter—for the purpose of demonstrating that the conclusion drawn from that premise is itself untenable. One might appeal to the patristic tradition, and the example of Cyril of Jerusalem, who insisted that “concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures.”¹⁵ Athanasius similarly confessed that “the sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth,”¹⁶ and so criticized those who “run about with the pretext that they have

¹⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechetical Lectures,” 4.17, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, 14 vols.*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952–1957), vol. 7:23. Hereafter *NPNF*².

¹⁶ Athanasius of Alexandria, “Against the Heathen,” 1.3, in *NPNF*² 4:4.

demanded Councils for the faith's sake; for divine Scripture is sufficient."¹⁷ Augustine likewise professed that "among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith."¹⁸ Examples could be multiplied.

Earlier than any of these, though, and even more revealing, is Irenaeus's teaching against the Gnostic claim that Scripture was insufficient. This was the case, Gnostics proposed, because, in addition to Scripture, Jesus had given his original disciples further teachings that had not been committed to writing, but which had been transmitted via oral tradition. Irenaeus explicitly rebuked the doctrine of the Gnostics because they "gather their views from other sources than the Scriptures."¹⁹ In view of the debates inaugurated with the Reformation, the irony here is difficult to miss. The earliest heresy with which the church had to contend was predicated on the idea that Scripture is insufficient, and that salvation required the embrace of doctrines not revealed in Scripture, but which were ostensibly preserved in unwritten tradition. Equally as significant as the patristic testimony, however, is its endorsement even by esteemed medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, who similarly insisted, "We believe the successors of the apostles only in so far as they tell us those things which the apostles and prophets have left in their writings."²⁰ Though he certainly did not dismiss extrabiblical authorities such as councils, church fathers, and philosophers, he nevertheless explained that "sacred doctrine makes use of these authorities as extrinsic and probable arguments; but properly uses the authority of the canonical Scriptures as a necessary demonstration." In support of this position, he cites Augustine's conclusion that "only those books of Scripture which are called canonical have I learned to hold in such honor as to believe their authors have not erred in any way in writing them."²¹ If patristic and medieval theologians alike could testify to Scripture's necessity and sufficiency, and ground those claims in Scripture's unique infallibility, any objection that the Lutheran confession of the same is a sixteenth-century novelty clearly falls flat. Indeed, not only does Irenaeus confirm the Lutheran suspicion that the real novelty is any appeal to an authoritative unwritten tradition; Aquinas's invocation of

¹⁷ Athanasius of Alexandria, "De Synodis," 1.1.6, in *NPNF*² 4:453.

¹⁸ Augustine of Hippo, "On Christian Doctrine," 2.9.14, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1969–1976), vol. 2:539. Hereafter *NPNF*¹.

¹⁹ Irenaeus of Lyon, "Against Heresies," 1.8.1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), vol. 1:326. Hereafter *ANF*.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on Truth*, Q. 14, Art. 10, repl. to 11, trans. James V. McGlynn, *Truth*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Regnery, 1953), 258.

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q. 1, Art. 8, repl. to 2, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), 1:14.

Augustine further suggests that, even in the thirteenth century, he understood that the “Lutheran” teaching is just the church’s traditional teaching.

The Clarity of Scripture

By way of transition to the Lutheran confession of Scripture’s clarity, it is worth emphasizing that, while Scripture’s sufficiency and its clarity are indeed intimately related, they are also in fact distinct concepts. If for no other reason, this deserves emphasis because a number of popular objections to *sola scriptura* are, upon closer examination, not so much objections to Scripture’s sufficiency as they are to its purported clarity. One often hears, for example, that Scripture alone is self-evidently untenable because the various Protestant traditions all confess *sola scriptura*, all read the same books of Scripture, and yet all reach different conclusions about the doctrines professed by Scripture. This is a potentially cogent critique of any claim that Scripture is clear in what it teaches; but it does not actually touch the confession that Scripture is the only source from which doctrine is to be drawn and by which it is to be judged. The premillennialist, for example, might be wrong to say that, according to Scripture, Christ will return to reign on earth for a thousand years before the final judgment; but his error is not that he believes this doctrine must stand or fall on the testimony of Scripture alone. He can be criticized for misreading Scripture; but he is to be commended at least for attempting to ground his doctrine in Scripture, rather than by appeal to an unwritten tradition or the simple fiat of an extrabiblical authority.

Because one of the claims earlier made with respect to the Catholic teaching of Scripture’s insufficiency might itself be open to the charge of caricature, it should be clarified that some Catholic theologians do understand the distinction between Scripture’s sufficiency as the source of doctrine and the question of its clarity when it comes to discerning what the doctrines of Scripture actually are. Some ecumenically minded Catholics, for example, will suggest that the distinction between Scripture and tradition discussed above is not best understood as entailing two separate sources of doctrine. Instead, they will grant that Scripture is doctrine’s only source; by “tradition,” then, they simply mean the church’s traditional interpretation of Scripture, which interpretation—being traditional—acquires dogmatic status and so prevents alternative interpretations. The claim, in effect, is that the authoritative status granted tradition (and the magisterium) is not a rejection of *sola scriptura* per se, but a complement to it, necessitated by Scripture’s lack of clarity; tradition and the magisterium only repeat what is in Scripture, but only tradition and the magisterium can clarify what it is that Scripture actually says.

In some instances, to be sure, this is a plausible explanation. In others, however, it quite clearly is not. Nor does it seem to be a position officially endorsed by the magisterium itself.²²

The point, nonetheless, is that if even some critics of Lutheran doctrine rightly recognize the distinction between Scripture's necessity and sufficiency as the source of doctrine, and Scripture's clarity in its expression of doctrine, Lutherans especially should not allow the two to be confused or conflated. Having made the point, however, the two are, again, very much related. If the purpose of God's self-revelation of his person, work, and will in Scripture is—as Christ and the apostles regularly reiterate (e.g., John 5:39; 20:31; 2 Tim 3:15)—to effect salvation, it is eminently reasonable to assume that he actually wants readers to understand that revelation, and so it is further reasonable to assume that he has made it clear enough to do so.

What Does This Mean?

But what exactly do Lutherans mean when they speak of Scripture's clarity? The Formula answers, first, by concisely restating Scripture's sufficiency: "In his Word [God] has revealed as much as is necessary for us to know in this life." Not everything has been revealed, and not even as much as the Christian might want to know, but that which is necessary for the accomplishment of its proclaimed purpose. The Formula continues, then: "In this case we have the clear, certain testimonies in the Scripture, which we should simply believe" (FC SD VIII 53).²³ Note well that the claim here is not that "everything is clear in the Scriptures," but that what is "necessary" in "this case" is clear and certain. If such phrasing might appear to leave open the possibility of obscurity in "other cases," Luther himself had made such a qualification even more explicitly. Already in 1521, four years before the famous dispute with Erasmus in which he made some of his boldest claims about Scripture's perspicuity, Luther was insisting that the Scriptures are "clear enough in respect to what is necessary for salvation." Not on all points, perhaps, but on those necessary for salvation. And even then, perhaps not crystal clear or clear in every respect, but "clear enough." Luther then concludes by granting that the Scriptures do in fact

²² E.g., Cardinal Gerhard Müller, former Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has recently written that "for 2,000 years, the Catholic Church has infallibly taught that Holy Scripture and Apostolic Tradition are the only *sources* of Revelation" (emphasis added). See "Full Text of Cardinal Müller's Analysis on the Working Document of the Amazon Synod," National Catholic Register, July 16, 2019, <https://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/full-text-of-cardinal-muellers-analysis-on-the-working-document-of-the-amaz>.

²³ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 626.

remain, at least in some respects, or in some places, “obscure enough for inquiring minds.”²⁴

In light of the straw-man arguments being forwarded already in the immediate wake of the Reformation, it is this relatively modest definition of scriptural clarity that will constantly and consistently be reiterated, even by subsequent generations of Lutheran dogmatists. Johann Gerhard is entirely representative when he writes, “Our intent is merely this: The dogmas that everyone must know for salvation are presented in the Scriptures so clearly and perspicuously that one need not abandon the Scriptures and run for help to traditions, to the judgment of the Roman Church, to the statements of the fathers, to the decrees of the councils, etc.”²⁵ What Gerhard offers is, in effect, a corollary to Scripture’s sufficiency. Just as the doctrines revealed in Scripture alone are necessary and sufficient for salvation, so also are the doctrines necessary and sufficient for salvation clearly revealed there. He reduces this claim to a concise informal syllogism: “Knowledge of Christ and faith in Him are sufficient for our salvation. But now, the knowledge of Christ and faith in Him are taught clearly in Scripture. Therefore those things that one must know for his salvation are set forth in Scripture clearly.”²⁶

By way of further supporting the “logic” of Scripture’s clarity, Gerhard both highlights and expands upon a point noted above. “God, who is the principal author of Holy Scripture, was able and wanted to speak clearly to us in it. Therefore Scripture is clear.” It would of course be impious to think God incapable of speaking clearly. But given the purpose for which God speaks, it would be no less impious to believe he did not want to speak clearly. “That He *wanted* to speak clearly is revealed from the end for which He recorded Scripture, that He wanted holy men to write

²⁴ Martin Luther, *Against Latomus (1521)*: vol. 32, p. 217 in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE. Luther’s was a point that had long been commonplace. Already in the sixth century, Gregory I had emphasized that Scripture both “nurses the simple-minded” and “exercises the understanding of the wise” by likening it to a river, “which is both shallow and deep, wherein both the lamb may find a footing, and the elephant float at large.” Gregory the Great, *Morals on the Book of Job*, vol. 1, ed. Charles Marriott (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1844), 9. Gregory’s imagery, and variations on it, were frequently invoked in subsequent centuries. See, e.g., Thomas More, *A dyaloge of syr Thomas More*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 6/1, ed. C. H. Miller et al. (New Haven: Yale, 1963–1997), 152, who describes Scripture as “so mervaylously tempered / that a mouse may wade therin / & an olyphaunt be drowned therin.”

²⁵ Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, Theological Commonplaces: Exegesis I, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 388.

²⁶ Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 376.

the revelation of His will for the sake of our instruction to salvation.”²⁷ Thus, the Lutheran confession of Scripture’s clarity might concisely be explained to mean “merely” that whatsoever is necessary for salvation is revealed with sufficient clarity in the pages of Scripture itself. Given this modest definition, it becomes more evident what this confession does not and has never meant for Lutherans.

What Does This Not Mean?

First, as Luther himself already acknowledged, it does not mean that everything in Scripture is clear; portions remain “obscure enough for inquiring minds.” Luther reiterated this point and added two more in his dialogue with Erasmus. “The subject matter of the Scriptures, therefore, is all quite accessible, even though some texts are still obscure owing to our ignorance of their terms,” he wrote; however, “if the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another.”²⁸ With respect to the first of these points, it is entirely possible that Scripture itself is clear, though it appears less than clear to individual readers, “owing to our ignorance.” By way of analogy, though the sun might be shining brightly and clearly, this might not be at all evident to someone who happens to be cleaning a windowless basement at the time. Similarly, even a written text as simple as “Spot is a dog,” though its meaning is blindingly obvious to readers of English, will remain entirely obscure to a toddler not yet able to read or to an individual with no facility in the English language, those who remain in a particular sense “ignorant.” With more explicit reference to the text of Scripture itself, when the Renaissance humanists revived a knowledge of the Greek language, and also of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, it quickly became evident that some of what had originally been clear in those manuscripts was subsequently obscured in the Latin translation used throughout the Middle Ages. An example well known to Lutherans, because it appears right at the beginning of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, is Jesus’ exhortation to “repent” in Matthew 4:17. That is what Matthew’s Greek says: repent; have a change of heart. But in Latin, this was subsequently rendered not as “repent,” but as “do penance,” a very different idea. The clear teaching of the original became obscured in translation. Or, put differently and perhaps better, while the teaching of Scripture remained clear in itself, it was only clearly perceived by those with the ability to read Scripture in its original language. Concisely, then, in addition to acknowledging that not *everything* is clear in Scripture, Luther and the Lutheran tradition also acknowledge that portions of Scripture will not necessarily be clear to *everybody*.

²⁷ Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 374.

²⁸ Luther, *Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:26.

The second and related point Luther makes—“if the words are obscure in one place, yet they are plain in another”—might be summed up by saying that not everything in Scripture will be *immediately* clear. One might need to read a bit more widely to contextualize the particular vocabulary, themes, and concepts of any passage of Scripture. This is, of course, the case when interpreting any text or document, and to say that Scripture is perspicuous is not to grant it an exception to the rules common to all literature. This is the point made in the Apology, when Melancthon notes, “It is necessary to consider passages in their context, because according to the common rule it is improper in an argument to judge or reply to a single passage without taking the whole law into account. When passages are considered in their own context, they often yield their own interpretation” (Ap IV 280).²⁹ Gerhard effectively encapsulates all of the above when he writes, “We do not deny that some passages of Holy Scripture are difficult and obscure; we add, however, that these are given light from other clear passages or an exact knowledge of them is not absolutely necessary for salvation.”³⁰ Similarly, he repeats, “The question is not whether some things in Scripture are said rather obscurely and are rather difficult to understand, but whether the dogmas of faith, the knowledge of which is necessary to all for their salvation, have been set forth clearly in Scripture.”³¹ So, again, the Lutheran confession of Scripture’s clarity does not mean that everything is clear, that what is clear will be immediately clear, or that it will be clear to everyone.

One final clarification is perhaps more obvious, but nonetheless merits emphasis. To confess that Scripture is clear does not mean that what is clearly stated, and even clearly understood, will actually be believed. As St. Paul already proclaimed, “If our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing” (2 Cor 4:3). This point informs Luther’s distinction between the “inner” and “outer” clarity of Scripture,³² which roughly parallel the distinction between faith and knowledge. He provides a vivid example of this distinction in his *Confession* of 1528, where he writes that “these words, ‘This is my body,’ etc., are clear and lucid. . . . How otherwise could the heathen and the Jews mock us, saying that the Christians eat their God, if they did not understand this text clearly and distinctly?”³³ Such mockery proceeds from unbelief (a lack of that “inner clarity” only provided by the

²⁹ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 149.

³⁰ Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 376.

³¹ Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 373.

³² Luther, *Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:28.

³³ Luther, *Confession concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), AE 37:272.

Holy Spirit); but at the same time it would not be possible without the “outer clarity” of the biblical words themselves.

What Does This Exclude?

The above suffices to explain what is and is not meant when Lutherans confess Scripture’s clarity. It remains, then, to say a few words about what this confession is intended to exclude and what it is not intended to exclude. Reference to the historical context in which it was originally articulated will again highlight certain specific claims it was meant to exclude. First, it was intended to prevent the claim that Scripture remains so obscure that the right and duty of interpreting belongs exclusively to, for example, an ecclesiastical magisterium. Relatedly, it was meant to exclude the claim that only such a magisterium, endowed with the gift of infallibility, can be presumed to interpret it correctly. Because it is well known that Luther himself often spoke in unhelpfully exaggerated and hyperbolic terms to get his points across, one might be inclined to think he was being less than accurate when he complained, for example, in his 1520 address *To the Christian Nobility*, that “when the attempt is made to reprove them [i.e., Rome and her theologians] with the Scriptures, they raise the objection that only the pope may interpret the Scriptures.”³⁴ In this particular instance, however, Luther was not greatly exaggerating.

Even into the second half of the sixteenth century, for example, the theology faculty of the University of Cologne could condemn the doctrine of perspicuity by arguing that not just some, but “each and every matter included in the Scriptures is covered up with such obscurities that not even the most learned could gather definite knowledge from them unless they borrowed this from another source.”³⁵ The Catholic polemicist Johann Pistorius identified the nature of that source when he wrote that “the Church brings to Scripture a light, without which all Scripture is obscure and dark.”³⁶ This, then, raises the question of what, exactly, is meant by “the Church.” And here one need not refer back to the sixteenth century, but can look to what the Catholic Church continues to maintain. According to its catechism, “The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him.”³⁷ In other words, even today Rome essentially concedes that Luther was

³⁴ Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), AE 44:126.

³⁵ *Censura . . . Theologica facultate Universitas Coloniensis*, 9, quoted in Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 384.

³⁶ Johann Pistorius, *Guide for All Seduced Christians [Wegweisser für alle verführte Christen]*, c. 3, quoted in Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 384.

³⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 100 (New York: Image, 1995), 35.

correct in understanding her position to restrict “authentic” interpretation to the papacy.

To be sure, some check on arbitrary magisterial interpretation is ostensibly maintained by insisting that no interpretation may contradict that of “tradition.” Thus, Pope Paul VI with Vatican II insisted that “sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church . . . are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others.”³⁸ By so saying, however, Vatican II not only reiterates Rome’s claim that Scripture alone is insufficient, but also implies that even if it were sufficient as a “source” of doctrine, its necessary doctrines could not be sufficiently understood without recourse to tradition and the magisterium. With respect to tradition, its authoritative status as an “authentic” interpreter of Scripture was made evident in a particularly clear but problematic way in the Profession of Faith required by Pope Pius IV and the sixteenth-century Council of Trent: “I shall never accept nor interpret them [i.e., Holy Scriptures] otherwise than according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.”³⁹

The problem here, quite simply, is that there is no such thing as the “unanimous consent” of the fathers, and this is the case even with respect to claims about the ostensibly authoritative magisterium of which the pope is presumed to be the infallible head. Origen of Alexandria, for example, denied that Peter or the Petrine office is the “rock” of Matthew 16, on which Christ promised to build his church. Instead, he says that “a rock is every disciple of Christ.”⁴⁰ Theodore of Mopsuestia concludes, “This is not the property of Peter alone. . . . Having said that his confession is a rock, he stated that upon this rock I will build my church.”⁴¹ Augustine similarly confessed that “Christ, you see, built his Church not on a man but on Peter’s confession.”⁴² Indeed, as even the prominent twentieth-century Roman Catholic scholar Yves Congar acknowledges of Matthew 16: “Except at Rome, this passage was not applied by the Fathers to the papal primacy,”⁴³ never

³⁸ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 2.10, in Denzinger and Hünemann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 922.

³⁹ Council of Trent, *Iniunctum nobis*, in Denzinger and Hünemann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 436.

⁴⁰ Origen of Alexandria, “*Commentary on Matthew*,” 12.10, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9, ed. Allan Menzies (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1896), 456.

⁴¹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Fragment 92*, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 1b, Matthew 14–28*, ed. Manlio Simonetti (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 45.

⁴² Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 229 P.1*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine, Sermons*, vol. 3/6, ed. John Rotelle (New Rochelle: New City Press, 1993), 327.

⁴³ Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (London: Burns & Oates, 1966), 398.

mind to papal infallibility. For present purposes, it is not especially urgent to determine whose interpretation of Matthew 16 is the best interpretation. It needs merely to be observed that, unless one wants to deny that Origen, Theodore, Augustine, and many others are fathers of the church, one cannot say that there is a “unanimous consensus” of the fathers on this question. Therefore, if Trent is to be taken seriously when it forbids biblical interpretations other than those with unanimous patristic consent, Rome effectively forbids its own interpretation of Matthew 16 as establishing the primacy and infallibility of the papacy.⁴⁴

What Does This Not Exclude?

While the Lutheran confession of Scripture’s clarity excludes granting tradition or a magisterium any ultimate or exclusive interpretive authority, it does not exclude—as previously noted—a respect for and use of tradition as a kind of authority. Nor does it exclude recognizing that the successors of the apostles (which Lutherans rightly understand to be all pastors, not only popes and bishops) are in a certain sense authoritative—if not exclusively or infallibly so—interpreters of Scripture. It is to them that the authority of public proclamation is granted, and all proclamation inevitably involves interpretation. Gerhard, for example, explains that “when we assert that Scripture is perspicuous, we wish to exclude neither the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit nor the external work of the ecclesiastical ministry in interpreting Scripture.”⁴⁵ The profession of Scripture’s clarity similarly does not preclude respecting and welcoming the interpretive insights passed down from forefathers in the faith. The wheel need not be reinvented with every generation, and so, as Chemnitz remarked, “We also gratefully and reverently use the labors of the fathers who by their commentaries have profitably clarified many passages of the Scripture.” Indeed, he adds, “We confess that we are greatly

⁴⁴ It also deserves noting that appeals to patristic consensus ring especially hollow in light of the manner in which real consensus is often blithely dismissed. E.g., despite the unwavering patristic testimony to Matthew’s authorship of the first Gospel, no less a body than the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops can bluntly call that consensus “untenable.” See “The Gospel according to Matthew,” USCCB, <http://www.usccb.org/bible/matthew/0>. Conversely, the patristic consensus on the above-discussed assumption of Mary is one of complete silence. As even the traditionalist Ludwig Ott acknowledges in his standard reference work, “the idea of the bodily assumption of Mary is first expressed in certain *Transitus narratives* of the fifth and sixth centuries,” which narratives are both “apocryphal” and “legendary.” “The first Church author to speak of the bodily ascension of Mary, in association with an apocryphal *Transitus B.M.V.*, is St. Gregory of Tours (†594).” Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Oil City: Baronius Press, 2018), 226–227.

⁴⁵ Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 388.

confirmed by the testimonies of the ancient church in the true and sound understanding of the Scripture.”⁴⁶

In summary, then, to say that Scripture is clear is simply to say that what it proclaims as necessary for salvation is sufficiently clear. It is not to say that everything is clear, immediately clear, or clear to everyone. And while it does exclude granting sole or infallible interpretive authority to either tradition or select clergy, it denigrates neither the Office of the Ministry nor the church’s tradition as important factors in biblical interpretation. Understood in this historically Lutheran light, the most common objections to the confession of biblical perspicuity also lose their force.

Objections Considered

Though certain biblical passages are often cited as evidence that the Scriptures themselves acknowledge their lack of clarity, these are hardly as problematic as is frequently implied. Paul, for example, testifies that God’s judgments are “unsearchable” and his ways “inscrutable” (Rom 11:33). And of course they are—unless and until he chooses to reveal them. Those he has revealed, in Scripture, are sufficient—and sufficiently clear—for our salvation. Similarly, Peter grants that even some of Paul’s own writings are “hard to understand.” And of course they are. Which is why Peter goes on to complain about the “ignorant and unstable,” who “twist [them] to their own destruction,” and to warn his readers not to be “carried away with the error of lawless people” (2 Pet 3:16–17). To call something “hard to understand,” however, is not at all the same as saying (as the Cologne faculty alleged) that it is “covered up with such obscurities that not even the most learned could gather definite knowledge from” it.⁴⁷ Rather, a warning against the errors of the ignorant and unstable itself implies that stable and informed readers will be able to discern which interpretations are twisted and erroneous.

Another common objection is to imply that even Lutherans and other Protestants do not really believe in Scripture’s clarity, as evidenced by their interminable production, purchase, and perusal of so many footnoted study Bibles, verse-by-verse commentaries on Scripture, and popular treatments of myriad Bible “difficulties.” This is a rhetorically clever and potentially effective jibe, unless one recognizes—as one should—that there is a real and important difference between sufficient understanding and exhaustive understanding, or even fuller understanding. No sufficiently literate reader, for instance, fails to understand the

⁴⁶ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1:208.

⁴⁷ See p. 52 above, including note 35.

simple narrative of the parable of the prodigal son: an ungrateful and profligate child is lovingly received back into his father's house. In its broader biblical context, almost all recognize also the deeper meaning of the story, its illustration of God's own gracious and forgiving love of his sinful children. Few would dispute that this sufficiently captures the essential point of the parable. But those who have read a work such as Kenneth Bailey's *Poet and Peasant* will know some of the illuminating details of Semitic culture that further enrich one's understanding in significant but not absolutely essential ways.⁴⁸ That the father runs to greet his returning son, for example, is particularly noteworthy for a story told in a culture where running brings humiliation to an adult man. The father is not just expressing his love for his son; he humbles himself, and so pays a real price in effecting reconciliation. Though this is unquestionably noteworthy, the parable does not remain obscure to those unaware of such a detail.

Perhaps the single most common—and pointed—objection, though, is that which was noted already in the introduction to this section. Namely, the multiple contradictory interpretations of Scripture amply testify to its lack of clarity. Certainly none can deny, and all should lament, the many disagreements over Scripture's interpretation. At the same time, however, one must ask whether and how many of these interpretations actually contradict one another on the fundamental articles necessary to salvation. Do Lutherans, Calvinists, Arminians, Catholics, and Orthodox interpret Scripture in such contradictory manners that any of their interpretations compels them to reject the ecumenical creeds, for example? Of course, one should not and cannot say that doctrines other than those of the creeds are unimportant. Certainly, also, it is understood that less central doctrines might imply premises that, if pressed to their logical conclusions, would undermine more central articles of the faith. But to return to the example of the premillennialist, the Lutheran will want to say that a premillennial interpretation of the eschaton is wrong; but he does not say that the premillennialist, as such, forfeits salvation.

By way of contrast, if one were to claim, as Rome has historically done, that submission to the papacy is "absolutely necessary" for salvation,⁴⁹ then one would have to grant that not everything necessary for salvation is found clearly in Scripture. If one held, as Rome holds, that doubting or denying Mary's bodily assumption does indeed forfeit salvation, then one would have to conclude that not everything necessary to salvation is found clearly in Scripture. But such claims are not and never have been Lutheran claims. The Lutheran can and does lament the disunity of the

⁴⁸ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

⁴⁹ Pope Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*, in Denzinger and Hünermann, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 287.

visible church; he can and does insist that agreement in all articles of faith is necessary to establish visible unity and full communion. But this is not the same as saying that full agreement in all articles is necessary for salvation. Thus, even the honest acknowledgment that some diversity exists with respect to some interpretations of biblical teaching does not fatally undermine what Lutherans mean to express by Scripture's clarity.

Yet because Lutherans do indeed desire a full and visible unity in the faith, and so the prerequisite agreement in all articles of the faith, Catholic critics will further press this point by insisting that such desires simply cannot be fulfilled without conceding that ultimate and infallible interpretive authority resides in only one place: the Roman magisterium. The explicit argument is that since Scripture is not clear, popes and councils must clarify it for the church. Implicit in and necessary to the argument, however, is the claim that magisterial teaching, unlike Scripture, is clear. Anyone paying even the slightest attention to Roman affairs well knows, however, that this claim is hardly credible. To cite only one of the most recent and most public examples, Catholic theologians have been scrambling for two years now to explain—or explain away—what exactly Pope Francis meant when he ordered the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* revised to state that “the Church teaches, in light of the Gospel, that ‘the death penalty is inadmissible because it is an attack on the inviolability and dignity of the person.’”⁵⁰ On its face, this quite clearly appears to contradict not only Scripture, but also the two-thousand-year tradition of the church, including multiple statements of the Roman magisterium itself.⁵¹ And some Catholic theologians frankly admit that it does, and that Francis's revision is therefore deeply problematic. Most, however, are inclined to say that Scripture, tradition, previous magisterial pronouncements, or the newly revised catechism's text—or all of these—might be interpreted in such a way as to prevent contradiction. And they offer multiple (and contradictory) theories to explain how this is to be done. Examples could be multiplied to include the disparate interpretations of what this pope or that council truly and actually meant to say about any number of topics. To suggest that Scripture's lack of clarity necessitates tradition and the magisterium is therefore not to solve the problem, but only to push it back one step. Because highly educated and credentialed Catholic theologians cannot agree on what

⁵⁰ See the Vatican press release, “New Revision of Number 2267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the Death Penalty,” Holy See Press Office, August 2, 2018, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/08/02/180802a.html>.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Edward Feser and Joseph M. Bessette, *By Man Shall His Blood Be Shed: A Catholic Defense of Capital Punishment* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017).

tradition or the magisterium say and mean, neither of them is apparently clear either.

The final objection here noted simply echoes one of those raised against Scripture's sufficiency, namely, that the doctrine of Scripture's clarity must be dismissed as a novel invention of the sixteenth-century reformers. The response to this objection might therefore also echo that previously provided, by appealing to the patristic tradition itself. Perspicuity is implied by Justin Martyr, for example, when he says that the Scriptures "do not need to be expounded, but only listened to."⁵² Anticipating Gerhard, Lactantius also asks whether God was incapable of speaking clearly, and replies, "Rather, with the greatest foresight, He wished those things which are divine to be without adornment, that all might understand the things which He Himself spoke to all."⁵³ Epiphanius insisted that "everything in the sacred Scripture is clear, to those who will approach God's word with pious reason,"⁵⁴ and Chrysostom similarly remarked that "all things are clear and open that are in the divine Scriptures; the necessary things are all plain."⁵⁵ Augustine, as previously noted, also declared that "among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters that concern faith,"⁵⁶ and, again, even into the High Middle Ages Aquinas could acknowledge that "the truth of faith is sufficiently explicit in the teaching of Christ and the apostles."⁵⁷ Once again, however, it is Irenaeus in contest with the Gnostic heresy who is perhaps most ironically revealing. He complains that when "they are confuted from the Scriptures, they turn around and accuse these same Scriptures, as if . . . they are ambiguous, and that the truth cannot be extracted from them by those who are ignorant of tradition."⁵⁸ Irenaeus himself, however, contends that "the entire Scriptures, the prophets, and the Gospels, can be clearly, unambiguously, and harmoniously understood by all, although all do not believe them."⁵⁹ As with Scripture's sufficiency then, so, too, with its clarity the Lutheran confession is neither more nor less than that of the church from its earliest days.

⁵² Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," 55, in ANF 1:222.

⁵³ Lactantius, "The Divine Institutes," 6.21, in ANF 7:188.

⁵⁴ Epiphanius, "The Panarion," 76.7.7, in *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III. De Fide*, trans. Frank Williams, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 518.

⁵⁵ John Chrysostom, "Third Homily on Thessalonians," in NPNF¹ 13:388.

⁵⁶ Augustine, "On Christian Doctrine," 2.9.14, in NPNF¹ 2:539.

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second Part of the Second Part, Q. 1, Art. 10, repl. to 1, in *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2:1073.

⁵⁸ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 3.2.1, in ANF 1:415.

⁵⁹ Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," 2.27.2, in ANF 1:398.

Conclusion

Understanding and articulating the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture as actually taught by Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and the orthodox dogmaticians, and so recognizing their harmony with the patristic tradition and even with prominent medieval doctors, is not simply an exercise in theological pedantry. Though a clearer understanding of Lutheran theology and the Lutheran theological heritage is of course a good in itself, it serves also to safeguard against the kind of reductionism too often made possible by the simple repetition of slogans. That the regular invocation of pious clichés might allow Lutherans to misunderstand or mischaracterize their own doctrine would be lamentable enough; it is more regrettable still that such reductive misunderstandings are encouraged and then easily exploited by Lutheranism's critics. If the profession of Scripture's sufficiency really did require the affirmation that "anything extraneous to the Bible is simply wrong or hinders rather than helps one toward salvation,"⁶⁰ then Lutherans could justifiably be charged not only with the invention of a theological novelty, but with embracing an obviously untenable position. If the profession of Scripture's clarity really did require the affirmation that everything in Scripture is immediately clear to all people, the same charges could be made to stick. As made evident above, however, neither implication is entailed by the Lutheran confession. Rather, in the words of the Augsburg Confession, "there is nothing here that departs from the Scriptures or the catholic church" (AC, Conclusion of Part 1, 1).⁶¹

⁶⁰ Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, 121.

⁶¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 59.