

Nicene Faith and Patristic Authority in the Theology of Johann Gerhard

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Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) lived about one hundred years after Martin Luther. He spent the first ten years of his ministry (1606–1616) as an ecclesiastical superintendent, with the oversight functions of a bishop—an office known in the Missouri Synod as a “district president.” Then from 1616 to the end of his life he was a professor of theology at the University of Jena in Saxony. He was highly respected by his contemporaries for his keen insights and his faithfulness to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. His theological writings were of two sorts: devotional and dogmatic. Among the dogmatic works, the most famous is his *Theological Commonplaces*, written in Latin and published from 1610 to 1625 under the Latin title *Loci Communes Theologici*.

All of Gerhard’s writings engage patristic sources. He includes insights from the early church fathers¹ nearly everywhere, and the early church fathers played an enormous role in his theology.² In fact, he is often credited (incorrectly!) with

¹ A “Father of the church” in this context means a teacher, that is, one who instructs people and generates faith by means of the word of God. Those we regard as Fathers of the church are ancient Christian authors whom we consider orthodox (right-teaching). Angelo Di Berardino, “Modern Patrologies,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics*, ed. Ken Parry (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 51.

² Erdmann Rudolph Fischer, *The Life of John Gerhard*, trans. Richard J. Dinda and Elmer M. Hohle (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2000); Erdmann Rudolph Fischer, *Vita Ioannis Gerhardi* (Leipzig: I. C. Coernervm, 1723); Johann Anselm Steiger, “Kirchenordnung, Visitation und Alltag: Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) als Visitator und kirchenordnender Theologe,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 55, no. 3 (2003): 227–252; and Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz, “Gerhard, Johann,” in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz, vol. 2 (Hamm: Bautz, 1990), 215–216.

Gerhard was styled “arch-theologian” during his lifetime by Matthias Hoë von Hoenegg Fischer; see Fischer, *The Life of John Gerhard*, 295, ch. 18, § 2. We shall normally use the definition of “early church fathers” provided by Johannes Quasten: “the theological authors of Christian antiquity,” especially “those authors who represent the traditional ecclesiastical doctrine” (Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 1 [Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1996], 1). See also Di Berardino, “Modern Patrologies,” 52. In countless places of his 1617 commonplace *On the Church*, Gerhard quotes no less than sixty-three of Saint Augustine’s works. By comparison, only thirty-eight of Martin Luther’s works are quoted in this commonplace. Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. 25, *On the Church*, by Johann Gerhard, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010).

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coining the word “patrology” in the title of his posthumous 1653 *Patrologia*,³ even though previous books had been printed with that title.⁴ He has also been credited with inventing the modern discipline of patristics.⁵ All of this shows that Gerhard was deeply steeped in the Fathers.

Therefore, if we want to consider the Nicene faith in the theology of Johann Gerhard, we should consider how he used and regarded the early church fathers. We thus have two questions: How did Johann Gerhard hand down to us the Nicene faith? And, learning from him, how should we regard the early church fathers?

Few have studied Gerhard’s teaching on the Trinity. In those few studies, it has been noted that Gerhard affirms divine simplicity and the numerical oneness of the divine essence (or substance) while also affirming real love between the really distinct trinitarian persons.⁶ This is standard orthodox Lutheran teaching on the Trinity, but is at odds with many modern theological accounts of this doctrine.

What about the contribution of Lutheran Orthodoxy⁷ as a whole to the doctrine of the Trinity? The twentieth-century German Lutheran theologian Werner Elert had both positive and negative things to say about it. On the positive side, Elert

³ Johann Gerhard, *Patrologia, sive De Primitivae Ecclesiae Christianae Doctorum Vita ac Lucubrationibus Opusculum posthumum*, ed. Johann Ernst Gerhard (Jena: Georg Sengenwald, 1653); Di Berardino, “Modern Patrologies,” 52–53; Irena Backus, “Patristics,” in *Brill’s Encyclopaedia of the Neo-Latin World*, ed. Philip Ford, Jan Bloemendal, and Charles Fantazzi, vol. 1 of *Renaissance Society of America: Texts and Studies Series 3* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 739; and Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 5.

This claim for Gerhard’s coinage of the term is qualified by Andreas Merkt, *Das Patristische Prinzip: Eine Studie Zur Theologischen Bedeutung Der Kirchenväter*, supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 58 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 147.

⁴ Raphael Custos, Πάτρολογία, *id est Descriptio S: Patrum Graecorum & Latinorum, qui in Augustana Bibliotheca visuntur* (Augustae Vindelicorum: [Custos], 1624); and Caspar Heunisch, *Patrologia Excertis fundamentis Historicis atque Chronologicis accurate deducta* (Rotenburgi: Author, 1639).

⁵ Backus, “Patristics,” 739.

⁶ Thomas H. McCall, “What’s Not to Love?: Rethinking Appeals to Tradition in Contemporary Debates in Trinitarian Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 25, no. 4 (December 31, 2023): 621–623; and Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 3 (Ft. Wayne, IN: The Luther Academy, 2016), *passim*.

⁷ I use the term “Lutheran Orthodoxy” to refer to the era of Lutheran theology spanning roughly from 1580 to 1700, during which German Lutheran theologians strove for unity of doctrine in the sense of the Lutheran Confessions, developed the doctrine in detail, and defended it against adversaries. See also Thomas Kaufmann, “Luther and Lutheranism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 160; Markus Matthias, “Orthodoxie: I. Lutherische Orthodoxie,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 25 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 464–465. Luther himself used the term “orthodox” to describe his teaching, and thus the term does not belong only to Lutheranism after the Formula of Concord, according to Jörg Baur, “Orthodoxie, Genese und Struktur,” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 25 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 501–505. Opponents of the term “Orthodoxy” in reference to Lutherans after the Formula of Concord include Robert Kolb; see his “Early Modern Lutheranism as (Still) a Research Frontier,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 38 (2024): 1–19.

noted how Lutherans like Gerhard “appropriated” the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, they worked hard to prove it and think through it from Scripture. He writes:

In the defensive action which all the churches of that time took against the anti-Trinitarian theology of the Socinians, the Lutheran dogmaticians stood in the very front rank. . . . The reason for their certainty in this matter was by no means their formal agreement with the old creeds; it was their conviction that they were standing on unimpeachably Biblical ground. They devoted an enormous amount of work to the Scriptural proof of the Trinity. *And this is the contribution which early Lutheranism actually made to a real appropriation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Western World. . . .* It was not a question of formal differences in rank between church doctrine and Scripture doctrine; it was a question of what gave rise to the doctrine of the Trinity. The struggle for Scriptural proof caused them to realize that it was not the historical heresies which gave rise to this doctrine . . . but the economy of divine revelation itself.⁸

Yet Elert was generally critical of all early Lutherans on the doctrine of the Trinity except for Luther. Elert thought all theological statements must always be related explicitly to justifying faith, and when he did not see this in the Lutheran Orthodox teaching on the Trinity, that, to him, was a problem. According to him, the only right way of talking about the Trinity is the way Luther did it in the Small Catechism, where faith in each of the divine persons is related to God’s benefits “for me.”⁹ Elert criticizes all doctrines that seem to lack this personal “for me” aspect, even the first article of the Augsburg Confession. What bothered him were the words “the decree [*decretum*] of the Council of Nicaea concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the Three Persons, is true and to be believed [*credendum esse*] without any doubting.”¹⁰ He writes:

[C]hurch doctrine as such can claim no “faith” for itself. . . . On the contrary, they all “must refer and point to the one and only Christ” . . . and should, therefore, only awaken faith in Christ. At the very outset the Augsburg Confession seems to put itself in opposition to this self-evident demand. . . . In the first place, the words “must be believed” (*credendum esse*) give one pause. Here a law of faith (*Glaubensgesetz*) seems to be proclaimed. A contradiction in itself! . . . But much worse than this, here the decree of a synod [i.e., a council] is designated as something to be believed. Here the ship of the Reformation, which has just recently departed from land, seems to be sailing back into the harbor

⁸ Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism: The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 219–220. Italics original.

⁹ Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 205.

¹⁰ In *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*, [ed. and trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau] (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 42–43, AC I 1.

of the medieval church, which produced laws of faith and demanded obedience to them. Faith itself, the most precious treasure, seems to be betrayed!¹¹

Elert then interprets the problematic words in such a way that “decree” does not mean a command of the church (even though it certainly did mean that at Nicaea) and “must be believed” means only “will be believed.” That is, Elert endeavors to understand the first article of the Augsburg Confession contrary to the words, taking away any idea that a requirement regarding faith is being stated here.¹² Elert goes on to criticize Melancthon and the rest of the early Lutheran dogmatic tradition, and even the Athanasian Creed with its statement that “whoever will be saved must, above all things, hold the catholic faith.”¹³

Elert raises an issue that we must address. He denies that there can really be a command of God to believe something simply because it is true and because he revealed it. For Elert, every point of faith must always arise from the personal, existential gospel “for me.” There can be no *credendum* (something that *must* be believed), only *creditum* (something that *is* believed). As we shall see, Johann Gerhard’s approach to the Trinity and to the early church fathers says the opposite. He, together with the early church fathers, believed everything that God has revealed in Holy Scripture simply *because* he has revealed it, not *insofar* as it deals with the gospel “for me.” Elert represents what can be called “neo-Lutheran theology,” which makes a point of distinguishing itself from Roman Catholic theology and medieval theology. This neo-Lutheran theology assumes that any theology that disagrees with its approach must be Roman Catholic and medieval. But is the paleo-Lutheran (i.e., old Lutheran) theology of Gerhard not also distinctly Lutheran and different from medieval and Roman Catholic theology? Maybe there was a way to be distinctly Lutheran in a classical sense, and not in Elert’s neo-Lutheran sense. We shall see that Gerhard’s paleo-Lutheran approach to the Fathers and the doctrine of the Trinity is by no means Roman Catholic, even though it is also not neo-Lutheran, since it does not relate everything always to the gospel “for me.” That is, for Gerhard and the early church fathers, it does not matter whether it is law or gospel or just facts. If God has revealed it, it is true and it must be believed.

Returning to our guiding questions, how did Johann Gerhard hand down to us the Nicene faith? And, learning from him, how should we regard the early church fathers? Are the Fathers an authority for our faith, or just a resource? Before the 1950s, the common consensus among scholars was that the Reformation set forth two different approaches to the relation of biblical authority and patristic authority: biblicism (set forth by Martin Luther) and traditionalism (set forth by Philipp

¹¹ Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 201–202.

¹² Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 202, 205–206.

¹³ Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 206–208, 217–218, 220–221.

Melanchthon).¹⁴ Since then, studies of this question have tended to treat the Reformers as representing basically the same viewpoint: Scripture alone was the formal norm for matters of faith, while the Fathers continued to be used as a resource.¹⁵ This point of view tends to emphasize the lack of patristic authority among sixteenth-century Protestants. According to Patrizio Foresta, Gerhard did not care about the form of a “council,” even the Council of Nicaea, but only cared about its doctrinal content.¹⁶ The council as such had no special authority for him. Regarding Nicaea, Gerhard stated that the Lutheran churches believe absolutely all that the council said about God but not what it said about the Eucharist.¹⁷ Carl Beckwith’s recent monograph on the Trinity likewise noted that Gerhard used the Fathers as resources: “I have found no clearer presentation of the Trinity among the dogmatists than these three works of Gerhard. These works offer extensive interpretation of the Old and New Testaments and present the best insights of the Fathers and medieval theologians on the Trinity.”¹⁸ So Gerhard held that the Fathers were

¹⁴ Otto Ritschl, *Dogmengeschichte des Protestantismus: Grundlagen und Grundzüge der theologischen Gedanken- und Lehrbildung in den protestantischen Kirchen*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1908), 400.

¹⁵ Peter Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melanchthon* (Geneva: E. Droz, 1961); Bengt Häggglund, “Das Verständnis der altkirchlichen Tradition in der lutherischen Theologie der Reformationszeit bis zum Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts,” in *Chemnitz - Gerhard - Arndt - Rudbeckius: Aufsätze zum Studium der altlutherischen Theologie*, ed. Alexander Bitzel and Johann Anselm Steiger, Texte und Studien zum Protestantismus des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts 1 (Waltrop: Spenner, 2003), 23–31; Scott H. Hendrix, “Deparentifying the Fathers,” in *Auctoritas Patrum: Zur Rezeption der Kirchenväter im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert/Contributions on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the 15th and 16th Century*, ed. Alfred Schindler, Markus Wreidt, and Leif Grane, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Europäische Geschichte Mainz, Beiheft 37 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1993), 55–68; Silke-Petra Bergjan and Karla Pollmann, eds., *Patristic Tradition and Intellectual Paradigms in the 17th Century*, Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation/Studies in the Late Middle Ages, Humanism, and the Reformation, 52 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Günter Frank, Thomas Leinkauf, and Markus Wriedt, eds., *Die Patristik in der Frühen Neuzeit: Die Relektüre der Kirchenväter in den Wissenschaften des 15. bis 18. Jahrhunderts*, Melanchthon-Schriften der Stadt Bretten 10 (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2006); Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation, 1378–1615*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought 94 (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Irena Backus, ed., *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Merkt, *Das Patristische Prinzip*; and Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 209.

¹⁶ Patrizio Foresta, “Die ekklesiologische Auseinandersetzung zwischen Roberto Bellarmin und Johann Gerhard anhand der *Loci De ecclesia* und *De conciliis*,” in *Konfession, Politik und Gelehrsamkeit: der Jenaer Theologe Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) im Kontext seiner Zeit*, ed. Markus Friedrich, Sascha Salatowsky, and Luise Schorn-Schütte, Gothaer Forschungen zur frühen Neuzeit 11 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2017), 142.

¹⁷ Foresta, “Die ekklesiologische Auseinandersetzung,” 141; Gerhard, *On the Church*, 434, § 216; and Johann Gerhard, “De Sacra Coena,” in *Loci Theologici Cum Pro Adstruenda Veritate Tum Pro Destruenda Quorumvis Contradictentium Falsitate Per Theses Nervose Solide Et Copiose Explicati*, ed. Ed. Preuss, vol. 5 (Berlin: Gust. Schlawitz, 1867), 193, § 197.

¹⁸ Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, xii n, 10–11. Beckwith refers to Gerhard’s commonplaces “De tribus Elohim,” “De Deo Patre & aeterno ejus Filio,” and “De Spiritu sancto.” Johann Gerhard, *Locorum Theologicorum cum pro adstruenda veritate, tum pro destruenda quorumvis*

resources, not authorities. This, in fact, is how the early church fathers wanted themselves to be regarded: as teachers of Holy Scripture.¹⁹

But are the Fathers more than that? Beckwith notes a misleading idea regarding the early church fathers and the doctrine of the Trinity. Modern scholars often claim that the early church fathers “hellenized” the Christian faith, that is, they made it “Greek.” It is said that they imported Greek philosophical concepts into the church in order to prove their doctrine of the Trinity. But the result of this accusation is that people feel they can ignore the scriptural exegesis of the early church fathers. Beckwith writes, “The derogatory phrase ‘the hellenization of Christianity’ accomplishes two things at once: it judges early Christian theological reflection as a Greek defecation from Scripture, and for this reason allows a person to dismiss the Fathers without engaging their commentaries and theological works.”²⁰ Against that modern dismissal of the Fathers, what we will see from Gerhard is something different. Yes, Gerhard and the Lutheran Orthodoxy said that the early church fathers had some errors, and their writings must be evaluated and tested according to Scripture. But does this mean their writings have no authority for us at all, and can be ignored? Not quite. An examination of Gerhard’s commonplace *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity* of 1625 and his *Method of Theological Study* of 1617 reveals some positive approaches to the Fathers’ authority that do not fit neatly into the prevailing models of understanding this issue.²¹ While Gerhard does not give divine authority to the Fathers, he still recognizes that they retain some positive authority among all who claim to be their heirs, namely, we have the Christian duty to hear their teaching and thereby to be confronted with Scripture. The Fathers are *lumina, non numina* (“lights, not divinities”).²²

contradictentium falsitate per theses nervose, solidè & copiose explicatorum, vol. 1 (Jena: Steinmann, 1610), 355–696.

¹⁹ Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, 127.

²⁰ Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, 125.

²¹ Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and the Divine Attributes* (1625 exegesis), in *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. exegesis 2–3, *On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007); Johann Gerhard, *Methodus Studii Theologici: Publicis Praelectionibus in Academia Jenensi Anno 1617. Exposita* (Jena: Tobiae Steinmanni, 1620); and Johann Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, in *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. 1–2, *On Sacred Scripture, On Interpreting Sacred Scripture, Method of Theological Study*, trans. Joshua J. Hayes, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 135–241.

²² Beckwith takes the same approach to the Fathers. He cites the early church fathers and the theologians of the Lutheran tradition so that their thoughts can be heard. They are teachers. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, 120.

The Fathers in *On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity* (1625)

In 1625 Gerhard published a “more copious” explanation of the Trinity than he had published in 1610.²³ He begins this “more copious” commonplace on the Trinity with an “Introductory Preface” in which he sets forth several theses about the doctrine of the Trinity, and especially about why we believe it.²⁴ Here our interest is in how Gerhard handed the Nicene faith down to us. I will mention some of his introductory theses in passing and explain others in more detail.

(I) “*All who are to be saved must know and believe the mystery of the Trinity.*”²⁵ Not only the denial of this doctrine but also ignorance of it removes a person from the number of the saved. Yet we do not require an equal level of understanding among all members of the church.²⁶ Gerhard proceeds by proving this from the scriptural definition of God, the union of the persons of the Trinity, the clear statements of Christ on this matter (Matt 11:27; John 5:23), the scriptural description of heathen outside of the church, the salvific nature of this mystery, and testimonies of the early church fathers.²⁷ Here the Fathers come in last place, after the matter has already been proved from Scripture.

(II) “*We must not only teach the mystery of the Trinity thetically in the Church but also argue antithetically against those who attack it.*”²⁸ In Gerhard’s time it was especially the unitarian Socinians (whom Gerhard calls “Photinians”)²⁹ who presented the main challenge to the doctrine of the Trinity. It is not enough to teach what is right; one must also refute what is wrong. “Adversaries of the truth are attacking this Acropolis of Christian doctrine with great effort. Therefore we must go out to meet their frenzy.”³⁰

(III) “*The mystery of the Trinity should and also can be proved not from the streams of the fathers nor from the murky pools of the Scholastic but from the utterly clear springs of the Holy Scriptures.*”³¹ The source and authority of doctrine is only the word of God, Scripture alone.

²³ The full title of the volume is “Exegesis, or A More Copious Explanation of Certain Articles of the Christian Religion (1625): On the Nature of God and On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity.” Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, i.

²⁴ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 267–297, §§ 2–37.

²⁵ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 267, § 2.

²⁶ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 267–268, § 2.

²⁷ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 268–269, §§ 3–8.

²⁸ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 272, § 13.

²⁹ The ancient Photinians were more radical even than the Arians. They taught that Jesus was a mere man and did not preexist the incarnation. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 956, book 19, ch. 23.

³⁰ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 272, § 13.

³¹ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 274, § 15.

Before proving that the doctrine of the Trinity is based only on Scripture, Gerhard first speaks of the positive value and importance of the early church fathers. “We do not deny that the unanimous agreement of the early Catholic Church concerning this mystery—a consensus that the most ancient writers of the Church confirm, even those who lived before the Council of Nicaea—has and also should have great weight among the devout and wise.”³² This “weight” or importance is not because the men were ancient or were bishops, but because it can be shown that they carefully preserved Scripture’s teaching on the Trinity. It is instructive for us to see the constant condemnation of the Antitrinitarians.³³ Gerhard refers here to the Fathers as teachers who must be heard and considered.

With a quotation from Basil of Caesarea, Gerhard indicates another reason why the Fathers are important. If they are removed, people will be open to accepting heresy, since they will not be thinking about the Fathers’ exegesis and arguments. Basil said, “Why do you say that we should not attribute too much to those who have gone before . . . but that with the eyes of our mind closed to everything and the memory of all the saints cast out of our mind, each of us must now subject his empty and purged heart to your inductions and sophisms?”³⁴ That is, if we neglect the writings of the Fathers, we are ignoring their teaching from Scripture and opening our hearts to every wind of doctrine (Eph 4:14).

Next, Gerhard says that the Fathers are important since by citing them we can show that our doctrine is not new. In Gerhard’s time “newness” had the sound of falsehood. If no one had ever believed some doctrine, if no one had ever read Scripture in this way, how could that doctrine and reading be true? In Gerhard’s time the Socinians claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity was a false doctrine invented by the papal antichrist. Against them, Gerhard wrote, “We also do not deny that the consensus of the early Church can and should be set against those insane cries of our adversaries who are not afraid to accuse us of novelty in our confession of the Trinity.”³⁵ Here the historical argument of continuity does not prove, by itself, that the doctrine is right. Instead, it guards against a false historical claim, namely, that the doctrine of the Trinity was a late invention, and thus shows that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be disproved on charges of novelty.

The next reason for using the Fathers’ writings is their usefulness as resources. Here Gerhard treats them as teachers and tools. “We also do not deny that with grateful minds we can and should use the labors of the fathers in correctly explaining the words of Scripture, in devoutly discussing them, and in urging them skillfully against the Antitrinitarians, because from the apostle’s precept, it is fitting for the

³² Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 274, § 15.

³³ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 274, § 15.

³⁴ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 274, § 15.

³⁵ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 274, § 16.

devout 'not to despise prophesying, but to test everything and to hold fast that which is good' (1 Thess 5:20–21).³⁶ That is, the Fathers are our teachers, and their writings are very helpful for teaching us well what Scripture says on the Trinity. Moreover, when doctrine is disputed, when there is controversy, Christians study Scripture much more carefully and precisely. This is what the Fathers did on the doctrine of the Trinity. Gerhard continues with the following:

The situation itself reveals that the Photinians today are using many arguments that the Arians and other heretics used formerly, but which, several centuries ago, Epiphanius, Athanasius, Cyril, Augustine, and other champions of Christ knocked down and hammered to pieces with the sledges of the heretics. Therefore who would want to deny that we can equip ourselves with the same weapons against our foes today and that we can have for ourselves the same hope of gaining victory with those weapons.³⁷

The Fathers thus are valuable teachers and resources, without which we would lack the insights, exegesis, and doctrines that were won by them through much labor and effort.

As his fourth point, Gerhard adds that the medieval scholastic theologians “at times supply some powerful and useful distinctions.”³⁸ Yet their writings are not as valuable as are those of the Fathers, because the scholastics often raise useless questions, try to answer them from philosophy, and in doing so bring more confusion than clarity.³⁹

In sum, Gerhard argued that the Fathers must be heard and studied on the doctrine of the Trinity not because they are authorities in themselves, but because they teach the true doctrine from the Scriptures. They lead us to Scripture and lead us to learn what Scripture teaches. They fought this fight on the Trinity already and left us important tools for learning and confessing it. They are the ones whom Scripture itself tells us to hear, but to hear them as people whose teaching must be tested (1 Thess 5:20–21).

Yet the authority is not the Fathers' but that of God himself, who spoke through the prophets and apostles, and whose words were recorded in the Holy Bible. Gerhard proves then that the doctrine of the Trinity should be confirmed from Scripture, which is “the only and proper principle of theology,”⁴⁰ that is, the only and specific, proper, actual source and norm of knowledge about God. Gerhard proves this (a) “*From the perfection of Scripture*. There is no dogma of the Christian faith that all must know to be saved that cannot and ought not be proved sufficiently from

³⁶ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 276, § 17.

³⁷ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 276, § 17.

³⁸ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 276, § 17.

³⁹ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 276, § 17.

⁴⁰ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 277, § 18.

Holy Scripture, as we have demonstrated elsewhere. But the dogma of the Trinity is such a dogma. Therefore.”⁴¹ What he means is not just that Scripture lacks errors, but also that it is sufficient: It teaches everything necessary for our salvation and life.⁴² “Perfection” or “sufficiency” is not an attribute of the Fathers, however. As he writes elsewhere, “Fewer literary works of theirs are extant than is necessary for a full and complete consensus about each and every controversy to be sought from them.”⁴³

Next, he says, it is proper to prove the Trinity from Scripture due to (b) “the condition of this mystery.” Here he says that if the doctrine is supernatural, then it must be proved from God’s revelation, “the voice of God as it sounds in the Scriptures.” The Fathers’ statements cannot give us this certainty.⁴⁴

Third, the Trinity should be proved from God’s word because this is what God has commanded:

(c) *From the command of God.* As in the other articles of faith, so also in this one, which concerns the foundation of salvation, we are sent back “to the Law and to the testimony” (Isa. 8:20; Luke 16:29; 2 Pet. 1:19). The heavenly Father sends us to listen to His Son, Christ (Deut. 18:18; Matt. 3:17; 17:5). Christ sends us back to the Scriptures (John 5:39) and bears witness through His apostle that Holy Writ “is able to instruct us sufficiently for salvation” (2 Tim. 3:15). Therefore it will also be able to instruct us about this mystery, which we must know for our salvation.⁴⁵

Here we should note that the Trinity is indeed something that must be believed and known for salvation. It is a *credendum*, not just a *creditum*.

Gerhard’s fourth reason for why we should prove the Trinity from Scripture comes “(d) *From the constant observation of the Church.*”⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that here he uses tradition as a reason for why we should use Scripture. Yet this is not the first argument; it is the fourth. After Gerhard proved his point from Scripture, then and

⁴¹ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 277, § 18.

⁴² Gerhard discussed this attribute of Scripture in *On Sacred Scripture* (1610) and *On Holy Scripture* (1625). Johann Gerhard, *On Sacred Scripture* (1610), in *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. 1–2, *On Sacred Scripture, On Interpreting Sacred Scripture, Method of Theological Study*, trans. Joshua J. Hayes, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 18–27, §§ 36–53; and Johann Gerhard, *On Holy Scripture* (1625 exegesis), in *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. exegesis 1, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, [rev. English ed.], by Johann Gerhard, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 321–350, §§ 367–393.

⁴³ Gerhard, *On Holy Scripture*, 419, § 463; see also Johann Gerhard, *On Interpreting Sacred Scripture* (1610), in *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. 1–2, *On Sacred Scripture, On Interpreting Sacred Scripture, Method of Theological Study*, trans. Joshua J. Hayes, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 80, §§ 90, 92; Gerhard, *On the Church*, 410, § 203.5–6.

⁴⁴ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 277, § 18.

⁴⁵ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 277, § 18.

⁴⁶ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 277, § 18.

only then does he turn to the Fathers. In this section Gerhard begins with John 2:5 to show that the kind of church practice he means is only the church practice that agrees with Scripture. “For just as in the doctrine of life and morals the constant voice of our spiritual mother, the Church, is ‘Whatever He says to you, do’ (John 2:5); so also in the doctrine of faith her constant voice is ‘Whatever He says to you, believe this.’”⁴⁷ Gerhard then quotes several Fathers who say we must learn about God from Scripture: Justin Martyr, Athanasius, and even Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicaea, who stated, “We have the books of the evangelists and apostles and the oracles of the early prophets that teach us clearly what decision we must reach on a divine subject and that we should take the answers to our questions from those divinely inspired words.”⁴⁸

In the introductory essay for *On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, we have seen that Gerhard treats the early church fathers as teachers, not authorities. They do not have their own independent authority. On the other hand, it is clear that we have an obligation to listen to them when they bring forth Scripture, and when we do this, we become stronger in our faith and confession of the Trinity. The Fathers must be heard.

The Rest of On the Trinity

In *On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, Gerhard’s main opponents are Socinian unitarians, who rejected the early church fathers completely. Citing the Fathers against the Socinians would not be convincing in any way. In the next section of *On the Trinity*, Gerhard explains trinitarian terminology,⁴⁹ and therefore includes many citations of the Fathers in order to clarify how the church has historically used terms such as *ὁμοουσιός* (“of the same substance,” Nicene Creed).

In the next part, chapters 4–7, Gerhard gives several arguments from the New Testament for the Trinity.⁵⁰ Here he argues mainly against the Socinians, and therefore citations from the Fathers are sparse. When he does cite the Fathers, it is not as proof but to give a further explanation of his argument. After his New Testament arguments, Gerhard turns to the Old Testament and gives several arguments to

⁴⁷ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 277, § 18.

⁴⁸ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 277, § 18.

⁴⁹ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 297–324, §§ 38–67.

⁵⁰ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 235–362, §§ 68–107.

prove the Trinity.⁵¹ Here he works closely with the original Hebrew text and almost never quotes the Fathers, though at times he mentions them.⁵²

Summary

Through most of his commonplace *On the Trinity*, Gerhard does not interact with the Fathers very much. His main focus is on Scripture. This shows clearly that the Fathers are not independent authorities for him. They are resources to be used when helpful, and when arguing against the antitrinitarian Socinians, quotations from the Fathers were not influential. On the other hand, Gerhard knew the doctrine of the Fathers on the Trinity. He heard the Fathers and referred to them, even though the Socinians would not accept them. Why? Because they are our teachers, and because Gerhard had learned much from them.

How to Read the Fathers: *Method of Theological Study* (1617)

In 1617, shortly after becoming a professor of theology at the University of Jena, Gerhard set forth a complete course of study for students of theology, the *Method of Theological Study*.⁵³ Gerhard expected that beginning theology students would already have learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and philosophy (and perhaps also Syriac and Aramaic).⁵⁴ After that, Gerhard set forth a five-year course of theological study. The first two years were devoted to the study of Holy Scripture, the study of *loci communes* (“dogmatic theology”), and participation in disputations.⁵⁵ In the third year the students added polemics against Roman Catholic theology. The fourth year was for the study of polemics against the Calvinists and Photinians (i.e., Unitarians, Socinians), and for the study of preaching.⁵⁶ Finally, for the last year of theological study, the program focused on reading church history in general and reading the

⁵¹ Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 362–415, §§ 109–165.

⁵² Gerhard, *On the Most Holy Mystery of the All-Hallowed and Ineffable Trinity*, 405, 414, §§ 155, 164.

⁵³ Regarding similar courses of study written by Wittenberg theologians, see Marcel Nieden, *Die Erfindung des Theologen: Wittenberger Anweisungen zum Theologiestudium im Zeitalter von Reformation und Konfessionalisierung*, Spätmittelalter und Reformation, neue Reihe 28 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006); Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Pastoral Formation in Lutheran Orthodoxy and the Method of Theological Study Proposed by Johann Gerhard,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 88, no. 2–3 (2024): 99–121.

⁵⁴ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 147–179.

⁵⁵ On the practice of disputations in Lutheran theological education, see Kenneth G. Appold, *Orthodoxie als Konsensbildung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

⁵⁶ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 180–210. On the teaching of homiletics in Gerhard’s *Method*, see Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “The Useful Applications of Scripture in Lutheran Orthodoxy: An Aid to Contemporary Preaching and Exegesis,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 83, no. 1–2 (2019): 111–135.

writings of Luther, the early church fathers, and the medieval scholastic theologians specifically.⁵⁷

Gerhard's section on Luther's writings is quite short, only two pages of our English version, whereas the section on the early church fathers is much longer, nineteen pages.⁵⁸ (The section on the scholastics is about eight pages.)⁵⁹ Gerhard presents his instructions on reading the Fathers in four "points."

Point I: A Negative Approach to the Fathers

In his first point, Gerhard asserts that the Fathers' writings are not norms of truth in the church.⁶⁰ That is to say, Scripture alone is the norm and rule of truth in matters of faith, and the Fathers' writings are not. This evaluation of the relative authority of Scripture and the Fathers rests on the doctrine that Scripture is perfect and perspicuous. The Holy Spirit attributes the title "norm and judge" to Scripture alone; God calls people back to his word alone; Christ and the apostles appeal only and uniquely to Scripture. The Fathers, on the other hand, deny that their writings are equal to the canonical Scriptures; they refer us back to the Scriptures as the only norm, and they allow everyone the freedom to judge the Fathers' writings on the basis of Scripture.⁶¹ The norm in matters of faith, Gerhard asserts, ought to be "credible in itself" (*αὐτόπιστος*), perpetual, immutable, free of all error, and internally consistent (*ἀκλιής*). Holy Scripture has all these characteristics, but the Fathers' writings do not. Gerhard backs up each of these points with copious citations from the Fathers themselves. This first part thus sets forth the *negative* approach to the Fathers, stating what they are *not*, and claiming that their authority is less than that of Holy Scripture.

⁵⁷ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 210–238. The same four groups of historical-theological writings in Gerhard's program were encouraged by Johann Förster. Nieden, *Die Erfindung des Theologen*, 170. Other theologians presented different patristic reading programs; see Nieden, *Die Erfindung des Theologen*, 221, 235; Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity*, 270–275.

⁵⁸ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 212–230.

⁵⁹ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 230–238. Discussing Luther, Gerhard on pages 211–212 encourages students to begin not with the *early* Luther writings but with Luther's German writings from the time of the Augsburg Confession (1530) until his death. Only then should they go back to read the earlier writings. The same method can be seen regarding Luther's Latin writings; students should start with the Genesis lectures (1535–1545) and only then read his other Latin writings. The chapter on the reading of the scholastics is mostly an examination of the scholastics' errors. The scholastics can be useful polemically, since many arguments against contemporary Roman Catholic doctrines can be found in them. Students are encouraged to read only Lombard's *Sentences*, Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, and the commentaries of Bonaventure and Biel on the *Sentences*.

⁶⁰ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 212–216.

⁶¹ Here Gerhard refers the reader to *On the Church*. Gerhard, *On the Church*, 411, § 204.6.

Point II: A Positive Approach to the Fathers

The second part sets forth a *positive* approach to the Fathers, stating in what ways they are useful and even make contributions to Lutheran theology.⁶² This part begins with the statement that, despite their lack of authority compared to the Scriptures, the Fathers' writings should not be eliminated from the church.⁶³ Gerhard typically understates his case; what he is arguing here is actually that the Fathers have a real value and that ignoring them would mean a great loss to the church. He states that they do, in fact, have some authority, though not divine authority. He writes, "Thus it is not the case that they should have no authority just because divine authority is denied them. They are not judges of the faith but witnesses and guides. They are not deities [*numina*], but luminaries [*lumina*]," that is, very bright lights.⁶⁴ He then proceeds to put the various patristic writings into three general categories: exegetical, elenctic, and proclamatory (*demegorica*).

Patristic Exegesis. Of these, Gerhard teaches that the Fathers' exegetical writings are of service to us if they are used as follows: (1) The true and genuine meaning of the biblical text needs to be sought from the scope, the context, the original languages, the analogy of faith,⁶⁵ etc. Only then can the conforming interpretations of the Fathers be added in order to show that our interpretation is not new. Sometimes also the Fathers' writings teach us a sense of Scripture that we would not have found by our own effort. Philipp Melancthon's use of Judges 14:18 is applicable here: "If you had not plowed with my heifer, you would not have discovered my proposition."⁶⁶

Here Gerhard gives reasons why students should read and note patristic exegesis. If God wanted to admonish wise Moses through Jethro the Midianite, then we should all the more allow ourselves to be instructed by the writings of so many very excellent men. Moreover, "Although the ancients' interpretations should not be considered authentic nor made equal to the canonical Scriptures, at the same time their efforts must be acknowledged and professed with a thankful and good conscience, for they were special instruments of the Holy Spirit and of the church who were brought together at that time by Christ and who discharged salutary ministries."⁶⁷ In connection with the claim that the Fathers were "special instruments of the Holy Spirit," Gerhard cites 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21: "Do not snuff out the Spirit.

⁶² Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 216–219.

⁶³ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 216.

⁶⁴ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 216.

⁶⁵ On the analogy of faith, see Bengt Häggglund, "Glaubensregel und Tradition bei Martin Chemnitz," in Bitzel and Steiger, *Chemnitz - Gerhard - Arndt - Rudbeckius*, 55–64.

⁶⁶ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217; cf. Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 234–238. The Bible translation is from Gerhard's quotation.

⁶⁷ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217.

Do not despise prophecies. Test everything. Keep what is good.”⁶⁸ Again, Gerhard reasons, if we use the exegetical writings of recent authors and benefit from them, then we surely should not reject the exegetical writings of the ancients. Although he concedes that “it is true that most of them did not know the holy language [Hebrew], which is why in their interpretation of Scripture they sometimes appear forced and depart from the proper, genuine meaning of a passage,” Gerhard affirms that “Nevertheless in most places they walk rightly according to the truth and stick to the right path.”⁶⁹ In summary, Gerhard says about patristic exegesis, “Therefore it is to be concluded that God did not preserve the writings of purer antiquity for nothing, but so that they might be a help for investigating the meaning of Scripture and so that the minds of the pious might be further strengthened, after perceiving the true meaning from the Scriptures.”⁷⁰ Thus Gerhard in this section continues to emphasize that the Fathers’ authority is less than Scripture’s, but at the same time he here not just emphasizes their usefulness as an exegetical resource but also ascribes a certain authority to them and obliges students to become familiar with them and learn from them. This is an authority more than that of a human teacher. It is the authority of *Fathers*.

Patristic Controversial and Didactic Literature. The next category of patristic writings, “elenctic,” or “refutatory,” also includes didactic works.⁷¹ This section is notable for Gerhard’s discussion on the “consensus of antiquity,” which he seems to take in the sense of a consensus of *evangelical Lutheran doctrine* with antiquity. This is significant because the idea of a “consensus of antiquity” can be taken in more than one way. One way is to assert that the early church fathers were in agreement on all important doctrines, and that their consensus should be an authority for how we read Scripture today.⁷² Gerhard’s way is different. For him the “consensus of antiquity” means that each point of our Lutheran doctrine can be found to be taught

⁶⁸ The translation is from Gerhard’s quotation of the Bible.

⁶⁹ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217.

⁷⁰ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217.

⁷¹ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217–219.

⁷² Georg Calixt, “Prooemius Ad Lectorem,” in *Sancti Patris Et Doctoris Avrelii Avgvstini . . . De Doctrina Christiana Libri IV; De Fide Et Symbolo Liber Vnvs: Vincentii Lerinensis Commonitorivm. Georgivs Calixtvs recensuit & edidit*, by Aurelius Augustinus and Vincent of Lérins, ed. Georg Calixt (Helmaestadii: Mullerus, 1629), I–CXLIV; Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Calixt, Georg,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017); Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Syncretism in the Theology of Georg Calixt, Abraham Calov, and Johannes Musäus,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 3–4 (July 1, 2004): 291–317; Christoph Böttigheimer, “Auf der Suche nach der ewig gültigen Lehre: theologische Grundlagenreflexion im Dienste der Irenik bei Georg Calixt,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 44, no. 3 (1998): 219–235; Johannes Wallmann, “Calixt, Georg (1586–1656),” in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1981); Johannes Wallmann, “Zwischen Reformation Und Humanismus: Eigenart Und Wirkungen Helmstedter Theologie Unter Besonderer Berücksichtigung Georg Calixts,” *Zeitschrift Für Theologie Und Kirche* 74, no. 3 (1977): 344–370; and Inge Mager, “Einführung,” in *Einleitung in die Theologie*, Georg Calixt Werke in Auswahl 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978), 9–28.

by and in agreement with some, if not most, of the early church fathers' writings. Our teachings are based on Scripture alone, but a comparison with the early church fathers shows consensus with at least some of their writings on every point. Gerhard states in his commonplace *On the Church*, "We are ready in every article in controversy to provide clear and manifest testimonies from the fathers in favor of our position."⁷³ He says the same here in his *Method of Theological Study*. Our doctrine agrees not just with Scripture (i.e., the writings of the most ancient prophets and apostles), but also with some, if not most, of the Fathers who lived after the apostles. He does not assume that there was complete unanimity and consensus among all the early Christians. Therefore, although the "consensus of antiquity" functions to exclude new doctrines, one must still distinguish right from wrong in the Fathers' writings.⁷⁴

Gerhard writes that "didactic works" are those in which the Fathers "teach and defend the articles of the faith" and "show a continuous consensus with us in the foundational articles of the catholic church."⁷⁵ He continues by both limiting the Fathers' authority and praising their writings: "Although we do not claim with the Papists that the fathers' writings are the norm of truth in articles of the faith, at the same time the consensus of antiquity in the truth should not be despised. For what can be more pleasing to the pious mind than to ponder 'the kinship of doctrine' our churches share with the primitive church (as Tertullian calls it, *De praescript.*)?"⁷⁶ Thus, according to Gerhard, when the papists accuse us of novelty in doctrine, it is not only correct to appeal to the "Ancient of Days" (Dan 7:13) and the most ancient writings of the prophets and apostles, but it is also correct to show the agreement of our doctrine with that of the early church fathers, especially those who lived closest to the time of the apostles. Our church, says Gerhard, has always done this. Once again, as he does so often, Gerhard supports his argument here with testimonies from Augustine and many other Fathers.⁷⁷

This twofold approach to the Fathers—sometimes negative (denying their authority) and sometimes positive (claiming their authority and support)—is found by Gerhard in Holy Scripture itself:

Therefore, when the testimonies of the fathers agree with the oracles of the Scripture, then the following advice has place (Deut. 32:7): "Remember the days of old. Ask your father, and he will show you; your elders, and they will tell you." Prov. 22:[28]: "Do not move the ancient boundary that your fathers have set up." Eccus. 8:[9]: "Do not ignore the explanation of your elders, for they learned from their parents; you will learn understanding from them." Jer.

⁷³ Gerhard, *On the Church*, 523, § 246.

⁷⁴ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217–219.

⁷⁵ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217.

⁷⁶ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217.

⁷⁷ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 217–218.

6:16: “Thus says Jehovah: ‘Stand on the roads, and see, and inquire about the ancient paths, as to which way is good; and walk in it. So shall you find rest for your soul.’”⁷⁸

But when the Fathers stray from the path of Scripture, then Ezekiel 20:18–19 applies: “Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers. I am Jehovah your God; walk in My teachings.”⁷⁹ Also Matthew 23:9–10: “Name no father for yourselves on earth, for you have one Father, who is in the heavens. Neither be called ‘teachers,’ because you have one Teacher, Christ.”⁸⁰ Also 1 Corinthians 7:23: “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.”⁸¹ Gerhard quotes Athanasius (*De sent. Dionysii*), who writes against the Arians, “Realizing that they cannot get anything from Scripture to support their heresy, they turn to the fathers, just as robbers, having a bad reputation from their pursuits, make for themselves upstanding, honest partners, or just as the Jews, when convicted by Scripture, flee to Abraham as their father.”⁸² Not only does Gerhard lower the Fathers’ authority, but his Roman Catholic opponents do this too, placing the Fathers’ authority beneath the authority of the pope, as the Catholic lists of banned books testify. But what Gerhard emphasizes in this section is the usefulness and authority of the Fathers (subordinate to Scripture). Another reason to read and know the Fathers is polemical in nature: to see the stages of how the Roman bishop embraced anti-Christian tyranny.

Finally, in a long quotation from Aegidius Hunnius (1550–1603), whose works he had studied avidly,⁸³ Gerhard returns to the claim that all fundamental Lutheran doctrines can be found in the early church fathers, and thus the Fathers’ writings can be used to identify novel (and therefore false) doctrines. He writes, “To crown our discussion on investigating the consensus of antiquity on the articles of the faith, I repeat a lovely passage from Hunnius.” He then quotes the following:

I do not deny that the fathers, or church writers, wrote differently on a variety of articles. Still, it remains true that some clear statements and testimonies can be cited from their writings to confirm all the articles of Christianity. Now, if (Huber’s teaching on a universal election)⁸⁴ had been revealed in Holy Scripture, then how could it be that over the course of so many centuries and so much time nothing about it was handed down to the Christian church? . . . We know that the fathers, or church writers, had their own blemishes and errors in

⁷⁸ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 218.

⁷⁹ The Bible translation is from Gerhard’s quotation.

⁸⁰ The Bible translation is from Gerhard’s quotation.

⁸¹ The Bible translation is from Gerhard’s quotation.

⁸² Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 218.

⁸³ Johann Anselm Steiger, “Johann Gerhards Bibliothek: ein neuer Fund,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 116, no. 2 (December 31, 2005): 243–246.

⁸⁴ See Gottfried Adam, *Der Streit um die Prädestination im ausgehenden 16. Jahrhundert: Eine Untersuchung zu den Entwürfen von Samuel Huber und Aegidius Hunnius*, Beiträge zur Geschichte und Lehre der Reformierten Kirche 30 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1970).

various articles, but at the same time it remains firm and fixed that one cannot find a single commonplace in all of theology that is without express witness found in erudite antiquity; if not in this father, then certainly in another; if not among all of them, then still among some. No instance at all can be given to break this assertion or even weaken it.⁸⁵

By quoting Hunnius without reproach, Gerhard indicates his approval for this approach to patristic authority: Patristic testimony plays an important role in excluding new, unheard-of doctrines. If the Fathers did not teach it, then it is false—which is not to say that everything they taught was right. This approach might be called *praescriptio novitatis*⁸⁶ or an “argument from patristic silence to exclude novel doctrines.”

But is it right? Gerhard indeed sometimes used this argument to exclude Roman Catholic doctrines in polemical contexts.⁸⁷ However, in his *Theological Commonplaces* he appears only to use this argument in the context of polemics against Roman Catholics, who, in his view, accorded the Fathers too much authority. That is, this argument functions on the basis of Gerhard’s opponents’ assumptions. But does it function outside of that context? This argument from patristic silence would function only if one held that the extant writings of the early church fathers have discussed every doctrine revealed in Scripture (i.e., revealed by God). That is, one would have to hold to some kind of doctrine of the sufficiency of the Fathers. Gerhard, however, does not believe that this is true. “Fewer literary works of theirs are extant than is necessary for a full and complete consensus about each and every controversy to be sought from them.”⁸⁸

When Gerhard uses the argument from patristic silence against his Roman Catholic adversaries, he is careful to stress that the judge and norm of truth in matters of faith is not the Fathers but Holy Scripture alone:

If “ancient doctrine and church” is taken to mean the apostolic doctrine and church, we readily admit that kinship with that ancient doctrine—or, what is the same, with the apostolic doctrine—is a true and proper mark of the church. . . . But we cannot and should not seek what that apostolic doctrine is, which the ancient apostolic church embraced, from the writings of the fathers who lived in later centuries. That would be preposterous. Rather, we should

⁸⁵ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 219; and Aegidius Hunnius, *Articvlvs De Providentia Dei, Et Aeterna Praedestinatione Sev Electione Filiorum Dei Ad Salutem: Per Quaestiones Et Responsiones . . . Pertractatus. Refvtatvr . . . Dogma Caluinisticum, Praesertim D. Danielis Tossani Theses de Pelagianismo . . . Cvi . . . Adiecta Est Epistola Rostochiensium, Ad Theologos Vitebergenses Exarata; Ad Retundendam D. Samuelis Huberi de Suo Cum Rostochiensibus Consensu Extremae Vanitatis Iactantiam* (Wittenberg: Georg Müller, 1607), 901.

⁸⁶ Fraenkel, *Testimonia Patrum*, 281–282.

⁸⁷ Gerhard, *On the Church*, 414–423, §§ 205–206.

⁸⁸ Gerhard, *On Holy Scripture*, 419, § 463; see also Gerhard, *On Interpreting Sacred Scripture*, 80, §§ 90, 92; and Gerhard, *On the Church*, 410, § 203.5–6.

look for it and learn it only from the actual writings of the evangelists and apostles. Indeed, it was for this purpose that those writings were given to the church through the singular benefaction of God and have been preserved until now.⁸⁹

Gerhard usually does not use an argument from patristic silence. He prefers instead to prove his doctrine from Scripture and then to appeal to a consensus of his doctrine with the early church fathers. In his locus *On the Church*, written in the same period of his life as the *Method of Theological Study*, he claims that all Lutheran doctrines are testified by the early church: “Are the Evangelical churches joined by a kinship of doctrine with the ancient church closest to the times of the apostles? We affirm this constantly and prove this consensus of doctrine in the individual controversies.”⁹⁰ That is, as mentioned previously, Lutheran doctrines can be found in the writings of the early church fathers. Gerhard does not claim that all the Fathers or even most of them agreed with each of our doctrines; he claims only that each of our doctrines can be found in the writings of the Fathers. This removes the Roman Catholic criticism that our doctrines are new.

Patristic Proclamation. Gerhard’s third category of patristic writings is “proclamatory” or “popular” (*demegorica*), which he subdivides into “admonishing” (*παρανειτικά*), “consoling” (*παραμυθητικά*), and “teaching” (*νουθετικά*). Students should read the Fathers and make excerpts of passages related to these practical topics. Gerhard shows here his interest in practical piety, writing, “I think it is beyond dispute that there was more piety, conscience, and zeal in the ancient times of the apostles than in the exhausted, feeble senility of the last days of men.”⁹¹

Points III and IV: Rules for Reading the Fathers

Point 3 of this section of Gerhard’s *Method* gives general rules for reading the Fathers, while point 4 gives specific rules. Nearly all these rules lead Gerhard’s students to read the Fathers critically. Only in this way will their reading be fruitful.

In point 3, Gerhard gives the following seven rules.⁹² First, one must use judgment when reading the Fathers, according to the norm of Scripture (1 Thess 5:21). Second, have a summary of the true doctrine in mind as a guide. This is why study of the Fathers was delayed until the fifth year of theological study. Third, distinguish the genuine writings of the Fathers from corrupt and spurious ones. Gerhard here

⁸⁹ Gerhard, *On the Church*, 409, § 203; cf. Gerhard, *On the Church*, 415, 417, §§ 205, 206.

⁹⁰ Gerhard, *On the Church*, 423, § 207.

⁹¹ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 219. Regarding Gerhard’s focus on piety in the *Method*, see Marcel Nieden, “Theologie - Rechtfertigung des Theologen?: Anmerkungen zur ‘Methodus studii theologici’ Johann Gerhards von 1620,” in *Zur Rechtfertigungslehre in der Lutherischen Orthodoxie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2002), 55–70. Regarding his use of Scripture for Christian life, including teaching, admonishing, warning, and consoling Christians, see Mayes, “The Useful Applications of Scripture in Lutheran Orthodoxy.”

⁹² Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 219–227.

gives a rather long discussion of the science of distinguishing pseudepigraphic (spurious, counterfeit) works from genuine. The results of his own lifelong work in this field were published after his death under the title *Patrologia*.⁹³ Fourth, distinguish philosophical writings from theological. Here Gerhard lists examples of errors that result when Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies are applied to theology. He also discusses the importation of pagan rituals into the church.⁹⁴

The fifth rule is about giving preference to the earlier Fathers. Even though the earlier Fathers have some erroneous opinions, nevertheless the earlier Fathers are by all means to be preferred to the later ones. The farther from the apostles, the more impure the stream of tradition becomes. Here Gerhard discusses various views of when the patristic era ended. Some say it ended around AD 600, at the time of Gregory the Great (since then the anti-Christian Roman pontiff was confirmed by Byzantine Emperor Phocas, according to Gerhard). Some extend the patristic era to AD 1000, when scholastic theology began to reign in the church. But if it is defined by complete purity of doctrine, Gerhard explains, then it ended not long after the times of the apostles. Rather than defining the patristic era in this way, Gerhard prefers to distinguish three classes of Fathers (so-called because they are distinct from the scholastics). The first class includes Fathers from the apostles to the Council of Nicaea, AD 325. The second class extends from Nicaea to the Second Council of Constantinople, AD 681. The third class continues from then until AD 1172, when Peter Lombard, the “Master of the Sentences,” lived. Before moving on, Gerhard gives a list of ecclesiastical authors in each century from the first to the twelfth, providing his students with the beginnings of a patrology here within the confines of his *Method of Theological Study*.

His sixth rule concerns the order in which students should read the Fathers. In his usual fashion, Gerhard first lists the opinions of others: a chronological order, or giving preference to Ambrose, or giving preference to Augustine. Then finally Gerhard gives his own suggestion (modestly introduced as being the position of “others”):

Others prescribe following still other orders for reading the writings of the fathers. It seems to me that the most suitable order for the fifth year of theological study is to read through the letters of Ignatius; Justin’s *Apologiae* and *Dialogus cum Tryphone*; Irenaeus’s *Adversus haereses*; Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*, *De praescriptionibus*, *De resurrectione carnis*, and *Adversus Marcionem*; Cyprian’s letters; Nazianzen’s *Orationes*; Cyril’s *Catecheses*; the didactic and refutative writings in volumes 3–7 of Augustine;⁹⁵ Damascenus’s *De orthodoxa fide*; etc.

⁹³ Gerhard, *Patrologia*.

⁹⁴ See Gerhard, *On the Church*, 451–457, §§ 227–228.

⁹⁵ Gerhard refers to the 1531 Paris edition of Augustine’s collected writings. For the contents of volumes 3–7, see Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 226–227, n. 38.

Afterward, if one wants and has time, he may follow a temporal sequence in [reading] the rest, with the sole exception of Bernard, who should be given sole preference above all others after Augustine, just as Augustine should be given sole preference above all others after the apostles.⁹⁶

Here the immense importance of Augustine is immediately obvious, along with the claim that after the apostles, Bernard is second best. This claim regarding Bernard is interesting, since in many of Gerhard's *Theological Commonplaces* he quotes other Fathers more often, such as John Chrysostom or Athanasius. But the primacy of Augustine for Gerhard's theology should be apparent to even a casual reader. He quotes Erasmus' praise of Augustine with obvious approval:

In Athanasius we admire a holy, tireless clarity of teaching. In Basil, besides keenness, we admire a pious, gentle sweetness of speech. In Chrysostom we cherish an abundantly fluent ability of speaking. In Cyprian we are in awe of a spirit worthy of martyrdom. In Hilary we marvel at eloquence grand as it is equal to its material and, so to speak, elevated in style. In Ambrose we love certain sweet stings and modesty becoming of a bishop. In Jerome we rightly praise the rich store of the Scriptures. In Gregory we acknowledge a pure, unpretentious sanctity. In Augustine are all of these.⁹⁷

His seventh rule is that exegetical, dogmatic, and moral comments should be excerpted in the student's commonplace books (blank books prepared by students for note-taking according to subject).⁹⁸

Point 4⁹⁹ adds more items to the list of rules for how to read the Fathers fruitfully. In these rules Gerhard is showing his concern that the accurate, genuine understanding of Scripture would be known. He is an exegetical theologian at heart. These rules are set forth mostly in the form of warnings. First, in the proclamatory and homiletical writings, the Fathers are rather free with their rhetoric; therefore not all of their statements should be taken too strictly. Second, in polemical and dogmatic writings, they sometimes seize on something and bend it too much against their adversaries. Third, in exegetical writings, their emotions are calmer, but they all (except Jerome) were ignorant of Hebrew. On account of their inexact version of the Bible they often "hallucinate" and depart from the genuine sense of Scripture, and sometimes they indulge their genius too much. Fourth, in homiletical, exegetical, and didactic writings they sometimes skip over the literal sense of a passage of

⁹⁶ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 226–227.

⁹⁷ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 225.

⁹⁸ On the use of commonplace books, see Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Mayes, "Loci Communes: A Theologian's Best Friend: Or, How to Make the Theological Tool of Your Dreams," *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 13, no. 3 (2004): 7–10.

⁹⁹ Gerhard, *Method of Theological Study*, 227–230.

Scripture, or touch upon it lightly, and immediately sink into allegories that are harsh, forced, and unfitting. Fifth, in poetic writings they indulge their own genius quite freely and follow the elegance of verse rather than the accurate understanding of Scripture. Sixth, when controversies had not yet arisen, they speak more securely. Seventh, sometimes they yield to the customs of their times. Eighth, sometimes they attribute too much to uncertain rumors and take expressions from the common people. In historical matters they follow the assertion and authority of their predecessors without any examination and judgment of discretion. Ninth, one must pay close attention to whether they are setting forth and confirming a dogma “explicitly and in its proper place” (*ex professo et in propria sede*), or whether they are just mentioning it in passing. One must also pay attention to whether they are disputing as from their own position or as from the position of someone else, and whether they are stating something as certain, or just as probable.

Summary

In the *Method of Theological Study*, Gerhard taught his students how to read the Fathers fruitfully. He impressed upon them the importance of using the best scholarly aids available. Spurious works and passages must be distinguished from the genuine. The Fathers must be read in the context of their ages and their controversies. That is to say, the Fathers must be approached within their historical contexts or they can be easily misunderstood.

Gerhard went into detail to make clear that the Fathers are not norms of truth in the church. But besides this negative approach to the Fathers, Gerhard also had a very positive approach. Constructively for Protestant theology, Gerhard recognized that without the writings of the Fathers many exegetical insights would be lost. Thus one cannot simply replace the Fathers with an appeal to *sola Scriptura*. The Fathers are irreplaceable. Without the Fathers, the church’s knowledge of Scripture would be decreased. The Fathers also play an important role in polemics for Gerhard. They were, after all, the common patrimony of the divided confessions, and an appeal to their writings was important and effective among discussion partners who wanted to be the successors of those revered Fathers. In the *Method* Gerhard also included the argument from patristic silence against new doctrines, although he rarely used the Fathers in this way. More often his polemical use of the Fathers simply demonstrated continuity between his teaching and some, if not all, of the Fathers.

Conclusion

The Fathers are *lumina, non numina*, “lights, not divinities.” Gerhard did not allow the Fathers to fall into the darkness. If his many rules seem to lessen the Fathers’ authority and discourage students from believing what they read, his actual use of the Fathers shows the immense importance they had in his theological system

throughout his life. Whatever criticism Gerhard had toward the Fathers, he criticized as one who stood within that very Christian tradition, who shared the Nicene faith. He criticized not all that the Fathers wrote, but only some; he criticized not from the outside, but from the inside; he criticized not on the basis of subjective whim or the spirit of the age, but on the basis of Holy Scripture. His theology continued to be intensely formed by the Fathers, since the tradition of the ancient church was not just his history but also a part of his own present.¹⁰⁰

As noted, scholars have said that for the Orthodox Lutherans, the Fathers were resources, not authorities. But considering Gerhard's position that their teaching and exegesis must be heard, perhaps we should nuance this: The Fathers are resources *that must be consulted*. On the other hand, the Lutheran Orthodox theologians were accused by Elert of being un-Lutheran in their acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity as a dogma that simply must be believed for salvation. It has been shown here that Gerhard indeed taught that the doctrine of the Trinity must be believed simply because it is true and God revealed it. Yet this is totally different from the Roman Catholic approach to the Fathers, as far as the East is from the West. For Gerhard, Scripture alone is the authority. The Fathers are evaluated according to Scripture. Often there is no consensus of the Fathers among themselves. Gerhard upholds the Reformation doctrine of "Scripture alone" even while he values the early church writers as Fathers in the faith. Despite Elert's neo-Lutheran discomfort with Gerhard's paleo-Lutheran teaching, the latter is solidly Lutheran.

What kind of authority do the Fathers have? The authority of a human teacher? More. The authority of a modern Christian pastor? More. They have the authority of *Fathers*. They are not without faults, but when they teach the Scriptures to us, they must be heard. If they are neglected and dismissed, the teaching of Scripture will be neglected and dismissed. From this may God preserve us.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Hägglund, "Das Verständnis der altkirchlichen Tradition in der lutherischen Theologie der Reformationszeit bis zum Ende des 17. Jahrhunderts," 53.