

Sola Scriptura* and the Church's Fathers: Arguments from the Lutheran Reformers

Carl L. Beckwith

I learned to show this reverence and respect only to those books of the scriptures that are now called canonical so that I most firmly believe that none of their authors erred in writing anything. And if I come upon something in those writings that seems contrary to the truth, I have no doubt that either the manuscript is defective or the translator did not follow what was said or that I did not understand it. I, however, read other authors in such a way that, no matter how much they excel in holiness and learning, I do not suppose that something is true by reason of the fact that they thought so, but because they were able to convince me either through those canonical authors or by plausible reason that it does not depart from the truth.¹

Augustine to Jerome, Letter 82

Martin Luther and his reforming colleagues maintained that Scripture alone determines the articles of faith. All that the church believes, teaches, and confesses rests upon the authority of the canonical Scriptures, upon the unique revelation of God himself through his prophets and apostles. Luther declares, “It will not do to make articles of faith out of the holy Fathers’ words or works. . . . [T]he Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel.”² Hermann Sasse, a faithful student of the Reformers, insists, nonetheless, “a church without the Fathers becomes a sect.”³ If the articles of faith depend upon the Scriptures alone, a point Sasse himself acknowledges, then why contend that the absence of the Fathers, the church’s tradition, leads to sectarianism? What is the relationship between Scripture and its faithful reception throughout the history of the church? For Sasse,

* An earlier version of this paper was published as “*Sola Scriptura*, the Fathers, and the Church: Arguments from the Lutheran Reformers,” *Criswell Theological Review* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 49–66.

¹ Augustine, Letter 82.3 in *Letters 1–99*, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), 316.

² Martin Luther, SA II II 15, trans. Theodore G. Tappert, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 295 (hereafter cited as Tappert), and *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, 12th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1998), 421 (hereafter cited as BSLK).

³ Hermann Sasse, “Credo Apostolicam Ecclesiam,” *Das Luthertum* 47 (1936): 264.

Carl L. Beckwith is Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. He can be contacted at carl.beckwith@ctsfw.edu.

something of inestimable value rests with the defense and clarification of the articles of faith, with the proper patterns of speech or theological grammar passed on or traditioned by the church's Fathers. Sasse's provocative statement suggests that a church expresses its orthodoxy in two necessary ways: what it believes and confesses, which derives solely from the articles of faith revealed in Scripture, and how it speaks, sings, and prays that confession among the fellowship of the faithful.

If what Sasse says is true, it is not enough that those committed to *sola scriptura* tolerate the reading of the Fathers; they must endorse the reading of the Fathers by the community of the faithful. Here difficulties arise. Reading the Fathers is a daunting task. For the first-time reader, the Fathers resemble more the eccentric John the Baptist than avuncular magi. Patient readers will discover a shared language with the Fathers but will struggle at times with what we might call the Fathers' provincial accent. Less patient readers may openly wonder if the Fathers are relevant for our Christianity and our church today. To think this, however, raises Sasse's concern: either the Fathers belong to our church or they do not. If they belong, they were gathered, according to Scripture, by the Holy Spirit through the word into the church, the body of Christ, to the glory of the Father. If they do not belong, then the spirit who gathered them is decidedly not the Spirit who gathered us: different spirit, different faith, different church.

Theologians throughout the history of the church have always had something to say about the authority of Scripture and the place of extra-scriptural authorities like the Fathers, the councils, or the pope in determining the faith of the church. During the sixteenth century, the different reforming parties vigorously debated these issues of authority and tied them to a proper understanding of the church. Here we see the issue raised by Sasse: your view of the Fathers says something about your understanding of the church. So too we could add that your view of *sola scriptura* for establishing the articles of faith necessary for salvation says something about your understanding of the church. The following essay will focus on the exchange between the Lutherans and their Roman opponents during the sixteenth century. Part 1 will briefly sketch the different positions among the Reformers on the Fathers, summarize the early debate between Sylvester Prierias and Martin Luther on the authority of Scripture and the church, and conclude with the settled position of Rome at Trent and the Lutherans with the Book of Concord. Part 2 will examine the claim made by the Lutherans that they, not their Roman opponents, represent the catholic position on these questions. We will test their claim by looking closely at Thomas Aquinas, a person with undisputed catholic credentials and a person with whom the Lutheran Reformers did not always agree.

Part 1: *Sola Scriptura*, the Fathers, and the Church

Andreas Hyperius (1511–1564), a Reformed theologian, observed that many people in his day found the works of the Fathers confusing and unsatisfying because their works had little to do with the issues of the day.⁴ Some went so far as to reject the Fathers entirely, arguing that they were harmful to the spiritual welfare of the believer. Sebastian Franck (1499–1542), a Spiritualist theologian, decried the history of the church catholic, along with its faith and worship, as the product of the anti-christ. Franck concluded that his ecclesial and theological identity had nothing to do with the church's long history, so he rejected it. Put in sharper relief, Franck's gospel was not the gospel proclaimed in the early and medieval church. He saw these two gospels as hostile to one another. In a letter to Johann Campanus, Franck named his enemies: Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, and Gregory the Great. He declared, "not even one knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. But rather all were the apostles of Antichrist and are that still."⁵ In Franck's estimation, Ambrose and Augustine, among others, embraced a false god and false gospel and therefore belonged to a false church.

Franck's construal of ecclesiology and the doctrine of God echoes the best insights of the Fathers, even if they were not his Fathers. Cyprian of Carthage once remarked, "A person cannot have God as Father who does not have church as mother."⁶ Augustine repeated Cyprian's comment and established its canonical status for the western church. By the sixteenth century, the Jesuit Peter Canisius would quote it as "the rule of Cyprian and Augustine."⁷ Luther too affirmed this rule in his Large Catechism. When someone asks you how the Holy Spirit makes you holy, you respond, explains Luther, "Through the Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." Luther especially emphasized the place of the church in delivering these saving gifts to the believer:

It [the church] is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God. The Holy Spirit reveals and preaches that Word, and by it he illumines and kindles hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it. . . . For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to

⁴ Andreas Hyperius, *Methodi theologicae* (Basel: J. Oporinus, 1567), 2–3, cited and discussed in Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 199.

⁵ Sebastian Franck, "Autobiographical Letter to Johann Campanus," in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, eds. G. H. Williams and A. M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 151.

⁶ Cyprian, *De Catholicae Ecclesiae Unitate* 6 in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL), vol. 3.1 (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1866–), 214, lines 23–24.

⁷ Peter Canisius, *Summa Doctrinae Christianae*, vol. 1, q. 18 (Augsburg: Carolus Kollman, 1833), 83. For the long quotes from Cyprian and Augustine, see 107–108.

create, call, and gather the Christian church, and outside it no one can come to the Lord Christ.⁸

Franck, with striking honesty, declared the mother who spiritually begat Augustine as alien to him as Augustine's God. Therefore, Franck rejected Augustine, his God, and his church.

Despite their shared commitment to *sola scriptura*, Luther and Franck arrived at very different understandings of the church and the place of the church's tradition for securing a proper interpretation of Scripture. Luther's commitment to the Fathers and the church's catholic tradition is even more noteworthy given the strong claims for tradition made by his Roman opponents. The cry often went out against Luther and his colleagues, "church, church, fathers, fathers, councils, councils."⁹ In a sermon before the faithful in Wittenberg, Luther reports, "the papists . . . shout: 'Church! Church!' They declare that everything the church has ordered and the fathers have said must be obeyed. . . . They flatly declare: 'The church has spoken! The fathers have spoken! Whoever refuses to believe is, without further ado, a heretic!'"¹⁰ In 1538, Albert Pighius, a Roman Catholic theologian, echoed these sentiments and went so far as to declare tradition a more reliable authority than Scripture. Pighius writes: "We easily and openly believe . . . that the authority of tradition is equal to or even superior to that of Scripture, in its certitude and its faith in undoubtable truth. For we do not believe Scripture except on the faith and authority of the witnessing church. . . . [Therefore] it is necessary for us that ecclesiastical authority be better known than that of scripture."¹¹ Luther and his colleagues could have spared themselves a great deal of hardship had they rejected the ancient creeds of the church and

⁸ Martin Luther, LC II 42–45 (Tappert 416, BSLK 655). Luther's final sentiment echoes yet another of Cyprian's comments: "there is no salvation outside the Church" (Cyprian *Ep.* 73.21 [CSEL 3.2, 795.3–4]). On the motherhood of the church, see further Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976), vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986), vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), 26:440–442 (hereafter cited as AE).

⁹ Johann Spangenberg, *Postilla Teutsch: Auszlegung der Episteln vnnd Euangelien* (Daubmann: Nürnberg, 1550), 27; cf. Johann Spangenberg, *The Christian Year of Grace*, trans. Matthew Carver (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), p. 43, q. 33. Luther gives numerous examples of this in his commentaries, dogmatic works, sermons, and letters. See, among others, Martin Luther, *Misuse of the Mass* (1521), in AE 36:163, 184; *Receiving Both Kinds of the Sacrament* (1522), in AE 36:240; *Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg* (1530), in AE 34:39; *Letter to Justas Jonas, George Spalatin, Philip Melanchthon, and John Agricola at Augsburg* (July 15, 1530), in AE 49:375; *A Letter of Dr. Martin Luther Concerning His Book on the Private Mass* (1534), in AE 38:228; and *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), in AE 41:12.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1537–39), in AE 22:271.

¹¹ Albertus Pighius, *Hierarchiae ecclesiasticae assertio*, sigs. B6–C1, C5–D2v, quoted in Ralph Keen, "The Fathers in Counter-Reformation Theology in the Pre-Tridentine Period," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West*, vol. 2, ed. Irena Backus (Brill: Leiden, 2002), 2:715.

the labors of the Fathers.¹² Why did they not champion Franck's radical position on Scripture alone? Why did they insist upon *sola scriptura* and, as Pighius puts it, the witnessing church?

Sylvester Prierias (c. 1456–1527), an Italian Dominican and theological adviser to the pope, was one of Luther's earliest critics.¹³ In 1518, using the Ninety-five Theses, Prierias wrote a fictional dialogue between Luther and himself on Scripture, the church, and papal authority. Prierias prefaced his *Dialogus* with four rules or foundations: (1) the universal church is the Roman church and the pope is the head of the church; (2) neither the Roman church nor the pope can err; (3) the doctrine of the Roman church and the Roman pontiff is the infallible rule of faith; and (4) the Roman church in both word and deed determines that which pertains to faith and customs.¹⁴ What place does Scripture have in the Roman church? According to Prierias, sacred Scripture draws its power and authority from the Roman church and pope.¹⁵ Only a heretic, concludes Prierias, would disagree with these four rules. Over twenty years later, Luther, who was just such a heretic, could still quote Prierias' rules from memory.¹⁶ Luther offered a feisty response.¹⁷ He argued that Prierias' four foundations contradicted not only Scripture but also the Fathers and canon law—both of which acknowledge Scripture as the norm for faith and morals.¹⁸ To argue, as Prierias does, that the church is its own norm is to equate the church with divine revelation, placing the pope over God.¹⁹ Luther, the Augustinian, cleverly

¹² Luther's opponents pointed to the doctrine of the Trinity as a product of the church's tradition. Therefore, all who confess the doctrine of the Trinity must also acknowledge the authority of the Fathers and the popes. Luther rejected this assertion and insisted that the Fathers demonstrated the doctrine of the Trinity from Scripture alone. On this issue, see Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity* (Fort Wayne: Luther Academy, 2016), 127.

¹³ Prierias served as master of the sacred palace. He provided theological opinions on issues of controversy for the pope, oversaw the Roman tribunal of the Inquisition, and granted or denied the imprimatur for all publications. Michael Tavuzzi, *Prierias: The Life and Works of Silvestro Mazzolini da Prierio, 1456–1527* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 75–78.

¹⁴ Prierias, *Dialogus Reverendi Patris Fratris Silvestri Prieriatis de potestate Papae in Lutheri conclusiones* (1518), in *D. Martini Lutheri Opera Latina*, ed. H. Schmid (Frankfurt am Main and Erlangen: Heyder and Zimmer, 1865), 1:346–347 (hereafter cited as MLOL).

¹⁵ Prierias, *Dialogus*, MLOL 1:347.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *The Licentiate Examination of Heinrich Schmedenstede* (1542), in AE 34:311; cf. Luther, *Table Talk* no. 3722 (February 2, 1538), in AE 54:265.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Ad dialogum Silvestri Prieriatis de potestate papae responsio* (1518), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Schriften)*, 73 vols. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–2009), 1:647–686 (hereafter cited as WA).

¹⁸ Cf. Gratian, *Decretum*, d. 9, c. 5 and d. 9, c. 9 in *Corpus iuris canonici*, ed. E. Friedberg (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1879; reprint Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1959), 1:17–18. Gratian's *Decretum*, from which Luther takes the Augustine quote below (see footnote 20), serves the double purpose of being canon law and providing patristic sources for Luther. For the role played by the canonists in establishing papal infallibility, see Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility: 1150–1350* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 14–57.

¹⁹ Cf. Yves Congar, "Church Reform and Luther's Reformation, 1517–1967," *Lutheran World* 14, no. 4 (1967): 353–354.

responds to his Dominican opponent by quoting a text from Augustine that Thomas Aquinas used to demonstrate the authority of Scripture over all other writers. Augustine writes, “I have learned to honor only those books, which are called canonical, as I believe most firmly that these writers have not erred in any way. As to all other writers, however great their holiness and learning, I do not believe them to be true because they have thought it so.”²⁰

Thomas Aquinas addresses this issue in his opening question on *sacra doctrina* at the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae*. For Thomas, the canonical Scriptures are authoritative and incontrovertible in matters of faith; church authorities—whether Fathers or councils—are only probable authorities. Thomas explains, “For our faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books, and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.”²¹ Thomas then quotes the above passage from Augustine. For Luther, Prierias’ “foundations” have no foundation in Scripture, the Fathers, or canon law.²² Luther’s point is clear: both Augustine and Thomas stand with me against you. Should Prierias wish to continue the fight, he must, quips Luther, “take care to bring your Thomas better armed into the arena.”²³

The argument between Prierias and Luther highlights two important and related issues of the Reformation. Luther’s concern is the authority of the canonical Scriptures for establishing the articles of faith. Prierias’ concern is the authoritative interpretation of those canonical Scriptures. Who or what determines the correct interpretation of the Scriptures? Even more to the point, since Scripture teaches some things explicitly and other things implicitly, who determines the correct interpretation of those things taught only implicitly? Are implicit teachings, like transubstantiation or the existence of purgatory, necessary to believe for salvation? These issues were continuously debated throughout the sixteenth century, and were very much part of the late medieval debates on Scripture and its interpretation.

²⁰ Augustine, Letter 82.3 (CSEL 34.2, 354.5–8, 354.11–13). Both Luther and Thomas elide the quotation in the same place. I have translated it as it appears in Luther (WA 1:647.23–25). For the full statement from Augustine, see the head of this article. Many years later Luther identifies Gratian’s *Decretum* as his source for this quotation. See Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), in AE 41:25 (= WA 50:524.14–15).

²¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.1.8 ad 2, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 1:12. In this opening question, Thomas presents his hierarchy of authorities: Scripture (infallible), church fathers (fallible and intrinsic), and philosophers (fallible and extrinsic). Thomas’ list differs from Gratian, *Decretum*, d. 20 (see also distinctions 17 and 19), where the hierarchy is Scripture, pope, councils, and Fathers. Prierias stands much closer to the strong papalist position of Gratian than to Thomas.

²² Martin Luther, *Ad dialogum Silvestri Prieratis de potestate papae responsio* (1518), in WA 1:647.32–33.

²³ Martin Luther, *Ad dialogum Silvestri Prieratis de potestate papae responsio* (1518), WA 1:686.30–31.

The Council of Trent settled the debate between Prierias and Luther for Roman Catholics by declaring the equal authority of unwritten traditions and Scripture.²⁴ Rather than understanding the church's tradition as guarding and proclaiming the proper interpretation of Scripture, Trent viewed tradition as an authoritative unfolding or explication of Scripture. For Luther and his colleagues, on the other hand, the church stands under the Scriptures as the creature of word and Spirit, nourishing the faithful as mother; for Trent, the church authors and authorizes the word by appeal to unwritten traditions. Apart from these unwritten traditions, which are said to be the secrets dictated by the Holy Spirit in addition to the canonical Scriptures, we could not know the purity of the gospel.²⁵ Yves Congar states Trent's position plainly: "certain truths necessary for salvation were not contained in the Scriptures."²⁶ According to Lutherans, the Holy Spirit works through and not apart from the external words of Scripture. Trent's separation of word and Spirit departed from the church's catholic tradition. No longer did Rome read Scripture in the tradition of the church as an act of kinship or baptismal identity but rather Rome sought an affinity with the catholic tradition insofar as that tradition accorded with the secret dictates of the Spirit as known and guarded by the church's magisterium. Trent's enthusiasm represents the opposite extreme of Franck's enthusiasm, and the Lutherans rejected both.²⁷

The Lutherans officially stated their position in the Book of Concord. They resolutely identified the substance of their faith, both confessed and sung, with the church's catholic tradition. In the Augsburg Confession, the Lutherans declared, "nothing has been received among us, in doctrine or ceremony, that is contrary to Scripture or to the church catholic."²⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan has argued that the condemnatory clauses (*damnant*) used throughout the Augsburg Confession indicate where

²⁴ Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1990), 663.22–24.

²⁵ Tanner, *Decrees*, vol. 2, 663.18, 663.28–30. Trent's position should not be understood only as a response to Luther and the other Protestant reformers. Trent's carefully worded position belongs to the lingering debates of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries on Scripture, tradition, and salvation. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 4 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 118–126, 276–277, and especially Ian Christopher Levy, *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority at the End of the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

²⁶ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 41.

²⁷ Cf. Martin Luther, SA III VIII 3–4 (Tappert 312): "In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts—that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure. . . . The papacy, too, is nothing but enthusiasm, for the pope boasts that 'all laws are in the shrine of his heart,' and he claims that whatever he decides and commands in his churches is spirit and law, even when it is above and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word."

²⁸ Tappert 95 (= BSLK 134); cf. Tappert 48 (= BSLK 84).

the Lutherans stand with the catholic tradition and where they think Rome has departed from it.²⁹ From the Lutheran perspective, their sixteenth-century Roman opponents had only a partial claim to catholicity.³⁰ Despite these strong assertions, the Lutherans knew their Roman opponents could cite as much, if not more, tradition in support of their theological positions. Although the Lutherans may seem to make an arbitrary distinction between what constitutes the genuine catholic tradition of the church and what departs from it, their argument has more to do with the question of authority. The Lutherans were not interested in indiscriminately accepting the teachings of the Fathers that stood in obvious tension and contradiction with Scripture. They firmly maintained a distinction between the authority of the canonical Scriptures and all other writings.

We believe, teach, and confess that the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged. . . . Other writings, [whether of the Fathers or] modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on par with the Holy Scriptures. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times.³¹

For the Lutherans, Scripture alone serves as the only judge, rule, and norm for all doctrine (*norma normans*). That insistence, however, does not lead them to reject all other writings. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and even Luther's catechisms serve as faithful witnesses to the teachings of Scripture. These writings are judged by Scripture (*norma normata*) and received by the church catholic as faithful expositions of the Scriptures. The norming authority for what is and is not catholic is Scripture. The closest relationship avails between the two. Scripture breathes life into the tradition of the church; this living tradition guards and defends the witness of Scripture by exposing false claims made about it from both within and without the church. Any doctrine or practice embraced contrary to Scripture, even if it is believed and celebrated for centuries and by a great number of holy and learned people, is not catholic because it is not scriptural.³²

²⁹ Jaroslav Pelikan, "Tradition in Confessional Lutheranism," *Lutheran World* 3, no. 3 (1956): 216.

³⁰ Tappert 47 (= BSLK 83c–83d): "Since [our] teaching is grounded clearly on the Holy Scriptures and is not contrary or opposed to that of the church catholic, or even the Roman church (insofar as the latter's teaching is reflected in the writings of the Fathers), we think that our opponents cannot disagree with us in the articles set forth above."

³¹ Tappert 464–465 (= BSLK 767–768). Translation in brackets has been slightly altered from Tappert's translation.

³² Cyprian of Carthage, *Ep.* 74.9 (CSEL 3.2, 806.23–24): "custom without truth is the antiquity of error" (*consuetudo sine veritate vetustas erroris est*); and Gregory of Nazianzus, *De Sua Vita* 585:

In 1536, Robert Barnes, an English Reformer and close associate of Luther's dear friend and pastor Johann Bugenhagen, published a collection of sayings from the Fathers that supported the theological position of the Reformers. Bugenhagen wrote a preface to Barnes' work and explained why the Reformers read the Fathers. We read them "because we are also in the very same church, having the same God, one Lord Christ, one gospel, the same sacraments, the same faith, the same calling to eternal life in Christ alone."³³ For Bugenhagen, the Reformers read the Fathers because they are the church's Fathers, because they are fellow believers gathered into Christ's church by the same Holy Spirit that gathered them into the church.

Part 2: The Catholic Position on Scripture and the Fathers

According to Luther and the Book of Concord, Sasse is right. A church without the Fathers becomes more and more unrecognizable, more and more sectarian, because it moves further and further from Scripture and the faithful patterns of speech used by believers to confess and defend those Scriptures. As a community departs from the catholic voice of the church, cultivating its own provincial accent, which is to say its own patterns of speech, worship, and prayers, it becomes more and more unrecognizable to the broader body of Christ.

At the same time, a clear distinction exists between the authority of Scripture and the witness of the Fathers and the church. To confuse this distinction also moves a community further and further away from the catholic voice of the church. From the perspective of Luther and the Lutheran Reformers, Franck and Prierias compromised their catholicity by wrongly understanding the relationship between Scripture and the Fathers, though in different ways and for different reasons. Although Franck had no interest in maintaining any catholic identity, Prierias certainly did. To what extent, we must ask, are the Lutherans *historically* right in identifying themselves with the catholic tradition of the church on the relationship between Scripture and the Fathers? If their position is catholic, it must be diffuse and readily found even where significant disagreement exists on the interpretation of Scripture. Since Luther pointed Prierias to Thomas Aquinas, we will focus on Thomas.

Many people today associate medieval theology with dense arguments, speculative questions, and convoluted commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. Although not wrong, such a description overlooks the principal task of the medieval masters. The foundation for teaching and learning during the medieval period was

"custom, backed by time, issues as law." For Gregory's Greek, see Carolinne White, ed. and trans., *Gregory of Nazianzus: Autobiographical Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 54.

³³ Johann Bugenhagen, *Preface to Robert Barnes, Sententiae ex Doctoribus collectae* (Wittenberg: Josef Klug, 1536), A6v: "... habere tales Patrum sententias, quibus saepe fidem suam confessi sunt, & suas Ecclesias docuerunt, ut confirmetur fides nostra, quod cum ipsis in eadem Ecclesia sumus, habentes eundem Deum, unum Dominum Christum, unum Evangelium, eadem Sacramenta, eandem fidem, eandem vocationem vitae aeternae in solo Christo."

the Bible. Bachelors pursuing advanced study in theology began by lecturing cursorily on the Bible (*cursor biblicus*) and then progressed to lectures on Lombard's *Sentences*.³⁴ After successfully completing lectures on the *Sentences*, a bachelor, at the recommendation of the other masters, received his license to teach (*licentia docendi*), completed an elaborate inception ceremony, and began his mastership as "master of the sacred page" (*magister sacrae paginae*).³⁵ Masters, generally speaking, did not continue lecturing on Lombard; that was the bachelor's responsibility. Masters were required to lecture on the Bible (*legere*), to resolve difficult questions arising from their reading of Scripture (*disputare*), and to preach regularly (*praedicare*).³⁶ James Weisheipl describes the typical approach of a master in the classroom:

The basis of the whole scholastic method was the text. A portion of the text, the sacred page, was read aloud in class. . . . After the reading of the text, the master divided the section into parts. This division was most important, for by division, it was held, the mind comes to understand the whole. Then a line-by-line and word-for-word explanation was given, with reference to other texts of Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and rational argument. Whenever conflicting statements appeared, either because of some apparent contradiction in the text of Scripture or in the comment of some ecclesiastical authority, the arguments from both sides would be debated briefly and a solution found.³⁷

Here we glimpse into the classroom and see the role played by the Fathers. The master read and taught Scripture along with and never apart from the church's Fathers. More to the point, the Fathers mattered to the master and to the students because Scripture mattered. The desire to understand the full significance of Scripture drove both master and student to the insights and interpretations offered by the Fathers.

Soon after Thomas became *magister sacrae paginae*, he began lecturing on the Gospel of Matthew. His biographer, William of Tocco, relays a famous story about Thomas that shows why the Fathers were important to him. One day Thomas and his students were returning to Paris after visiting the relics of Saint-Denis. As they paused to observe the beauty of Paris, one of the students, overcome with the grandeur of the city, declared to his master how wonderful it would be if Friar Thomas were lord of the city. Thomas, puzzled by the suggestion, asked the student what he

³⁴ The cursory lectures on the Bible focused on basic grammatical and textual issues and did not examine doctrinal questions or mystical senses. Only masters discussed these issues in their advanced courses on Scripture. Ian Christopher Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 195–196.

³⁵ James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought and Works* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 96–110. The inception ceremony began with a lecture (*principium*) by the aspiring master commending the study of Holy Scripture. For examples of these lectures, see Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation*, 197–261.

³⁶ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Volume 1: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2003), 54–74.

³⁷ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino*, 116–117.

would do with it. The student piously suggested that he sell Paris to the king of France and use the money for the needs of the Dominicans. Thomas replied, "I would rather have the homilies of Chrysostom on the Gospel of Saint Matthew."³⁸ It was not the homilies of Chrysostom that Thomas regarded as more valuable than Paris; it was the proper interpretation of the Bible that he valued. The Fathers mattered, Chrysostom mattered, because the interpretation of Scripture mattered.

Thomas frequently discusses the relationship between Scripture, the Fathers, and human reason in his writings. Toward the end of his first stay in Paris as regent master, Thomas began writing *Summa Contra Gentiles*, an extracurricular work that sought to present the truths of the Christian faith in an orderly and coherent manner. Thomas begins the work with a lengthy preface on the calling of the wise man, the pursuit of wisdom, the relationship between divine truth and human reason, and recommendations for how a person should engage unbelievers in theological discussion.³⁹ He explains with clarity and insight the relationship between Scripture—its authority, uniqueness, and purpose—and the various human attempts to clarify and defend those Scriptures with reason.

From the point of view of our knowledge, we may say, explains Thomas, that truth is twofold. On the one hand, there is divine truth accessible to human reason and available to demonstrative arguments. When dealing with this sort of truth (e.g., the existence of God), we may confront our adversaries and overcome their false arguments with human reason. On the other hand, there is divine truth that is above reason and available only to faith (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity). Here reason reaches its limit and cannot advance any arguments to prove the articles of faith revealed by Scripture. Thomas writes:

However, since such arguments are not available for the second kind of divine truth, our intention should not be to convince our adversary by arguments: it should be to answer his arguments against the truth; for, as we have shown, the nature of reason cannot be contrary to the truth of faith. The sole way to overcome an adversary of divine truth is from the authority of Scripture—an authority divinely confirmed by miracles. For that which is above human reason we believe only because God has revealed it.⁴⁰

Thomas takes up this same point a few years later at the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae*. He distinguishes between articles of faith (*articuli fidei*) and preambles to the articles (*praeambula ad articulos*).⁴¹ Articles of faith, necessary for salvation,

³⁸ William of Tocco, *Hystoria Beati Thomae* 43, quoted and discussed in Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino*, 121–122.

³⁹ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I:1–9, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 59–78.

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* I.9, p. 77.

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.2.2 ad 1.

transcend human reason, which is why God reveals them in Scripture.⁴² Some know the preambles to the articles of faith by reason (e.g., the existence of God) but others require Scripture to know even these. Thomas again specifies that reason may not prove these articles but only answer objections made against them.

If our opponent believes nothing of divine revelation, there is no longer any means of proving the articles of faith by reasoning, but only of answering his objections—if he has any—against faith. Since faith rests upon infallible truth, and since the contrary of a truth can never be demonstrated, it is clear that the arguments brought against faith cannot be demonstrations, but are difficulties that can be answered.⁴³ A person may argue from one article of faith to another but never from reason alone to the articles of faith. Scripture alone makes known the articles of faith and these we believe, as Thomas puts it, because God revealed them.⁴⁴ A person uses reason to defend the articles of faith, to answer objections to them, and to undermine arguments against them; a person never proves these articles with necessary reasons. As Thomas observes elsewhere, St. Peter exhorts us to defend the faith, not to prove the faith (1 Pet 3:15).⁴⁵ For Thomas a clear distinction exists between the authority of Scripture and all other authorities. Faith rests upon the incontrovertible authority of the canonical Scriptures and not on the probable insights of others like the Fathers.⁴⁶

Thomas left Paris for Italy in the spring of 1259. From 1261 to 1265, he served as lector at Orvieto and developed a close friendship with Pope Urban IV, who resided in the papal apartments at Orvieto. The resources of the papal archives, access to translators, and timely assignments from the pope enriched Thomas' reading of Scripture by providing greater access to the writings of the Fathers. Three events are especially noteworthy. First, Thomas discovered in the papal archives the acts and proceedings of the ecumenical councils from the early church, especially from the councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), and began using verbatim excerpts of these councils in his writings—something only Thomas did among his contemporaries.⁴⁷ Second, at the request of Urban IV, Thomas composed a continuous

⁴² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.1.1c.

⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.1.8c.

⁴⁴ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II.1.1c: Faith assents only to what is revealed by God.

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *De rationibus fidei ad Cantorem Antiochenum* 2.

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I.1.8 ad 2.

⁴⁷ Thomas may have discovered the acts of Ephesus and Chalcedon at the Abbey of Monte Cassino before arriving at Orvieto. Corey Barnes, "Thomas Aquinas's Chalcedonian Christology and its Influence on Later Scholastics," *The Thomist* 78, no. 2 (2014): 189–217, especially 189–190; M. Morard, "Thomas d'Aquin lecteur des conciles," *Archivum franciscanum historicum* 98 (2005): 211–365; and C. G. Greenan, "En marge du Concile de Chalcédoine. Les textes du Quatrième Concile dans les oeuvres de Saint Thomas," *Angelicum* 29 (1952): 43–59. For an example of how Thomas made use of this material in his patristic research, see Gilles Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2003), 238–240.

gloss, referred to as the *Catena Aurea*, “the golden chain,” on the four Gospels drawn from patristic texts. Weisheipl regards Thomas’ work on this commentary as the turning point in Thomas’ theology.⁴⁸ Ignatius Eschmann more exuberantly states that this work marks a turning point in the history of Catholic dogma.⁴⁹ Thomas tells us he employed translators to render excerpts from the Greek Fathers into Latin for the commentary.⁵⁰ For Jean-Pierre Torrell, the high praise by Weisheipl and Eschmann rests here. Thomas significantly enhanced his own reading of Scripture and that of his scholastic colleagues by providing excerpts from fifty-seven Greek authors and twenty-two Latin writers.⁵¹ Third, Urban IV asked Thomas to evaluate a pamphlet of Latin excerpts translated from the Greek Fathers that showed beyond any doubt that they agreed with the Roman position on the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (the *filioque*), the primacy of the pope, the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist, and the existence of purgatory. It is this final assignment that especially shows Thomas’ critical reception of the Fathers and his understanding of how their authority relates to Scripture.

Urban IV and Michael VIII Paleologus, the Byzantine emperor, sought to heal the division between the Latin and Greek churches. Toward this end, the Byzantine emperor invited Nicholas of Durazzo, a Greek by birth and bishop of Cotrone in southern Italy, to Constantinople to assist in these efforts.⁵² At some point, Nicholas assembled and translated a small book (*Libellus*) of excerpts from the Greek Fathers supporting the Roman position on the main issues of dispute between the two churches.⁵³ When the pope received Nicholas’ *Libellus*, he asked Thomas to comment on it. Thomas, who did not know Greek, could only evaluate the document based on the words attributed to the Fathers. Unknown to him was how poorly translated the excerpts were.⁵⁴ Although modern scholarship has shown the dubious character of these excerpts, Thomas knew none of this and assumed they were genuine.

Thomas divides his response, *Contra Errores Graecorum*, into two parts. Part 1 focuses on the difficult and questionable statements made by the Fathers and offers

⁴⁸ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d’Aquino*, 171.

⁴⁹ Ignatius Eschmann, “A Catalogue of St. Thomas’ Works: Bibliographical Notes,” in E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956), 397, quoted by Weisheipl.

⁵⁰ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d’Aquino*, 173.

⁵¹ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 139; see also pp. 136–141 for Torrell’s comments on Thomas’ use of the Fathers in the *Catena Aurea*.

⁵² For a helpful historical introduction to Nicholas’ *Libellus* and Thomas’ response, see Mark D. Jordan, “Theological Exegesis and Aquinas’s Treatise ‘against the Greeks,’” *Church History* 56, no. 4 (1987): 445–456.

⁵³ Nicholas of Durazzo, *Libellus de processione spiritus sancti et fidei trinitatis contra errores grecorum*, in *Opera Omnia*, Leonine edition (Rome: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, 1967), 40 A:107–151.

⁵⁴ Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas d’Aquino*, 169: “For some unexplained reason, a large part of the *Libellus* consists of falsifications, fabrications, and false attributions.”

an explanation or interpretation of what they must have meant. Part 2 highlights the agreement of the Greek Fathers with the Latin church on the disputed points in question. The value of Thomas' short treatise resides less with his engagement of these excerpts and more with the critical advice he offers in the prologue and epilogue. Thomas identifies a number of problems with Nicholas' pamphlet that all bear on the catholic reading of the Fathers. Although the translated texts are useful and generally affirm the church's faith, there are a number of perplexing statements made by the Fathers. Thomas worries that these incautious statements may diminish the value of the collection and provide an occasion for false claims. For example, some of the excerpts show that the Fathers sometimes spoke too freely before a controversy arose and they became more circumspect in their language only after the controversy. Thomas gives the example of Arius and Pelagius. Before these false teachers came along, the Fathers did not speak as clearly and prudently as they should have. Even Augustine, notes Thomas, had to change the way he talked about the human will when confronted by Pelagius.⁵⁵ Readers of the Fathers must keep these historical considerations in mind and read accordingly. If readers encounter statements from the Fathers that fail to express with caution the church's faith, readers should neither ridicule nor repeat those statements but rather reverently explain them (*exponere reverenter*).⁵⁶

Thomas also has a number of concerns with the translation and offers advice on the art of translation. A person should not translate word for word, from Greek to Latin, as this will only lead to confusion. The good translator conveys the ideas and intentions of the author in a representative idiom.⁵⁷ Thomas identifies a number of inappropriate expressions (*indecentes expositiones*) in the epilogue and concludes that they could not have come from the Greek Fathers but came only from the translator.⁵⁸ Thomas regrettably notes that the translator has incorporated these poor phrases into his own explanations of the disputed issues. Even worse, the translator has adopted some of the incautious statements of the Fathers that he should have reverently explained rather than endorsed by using. The translator has done this, Thomas suspects, because he misunderstands the relationship between the writings of the Fathers and the canonical Scriptures. Thomas further scolds the translator for esteeming the Fathers too much, forgetting that they are mere men and not the authors of our faith. Much to Thomas' dismay, the translator refers to them as the fathers of the faith (*patres fidei*), which Thomas takes to mean that they have in some

⁵⁵ For a good example of how Thomas explains unfortunate statements from Augustine's trinitarian theology, see *Summa Theologiae* I.39.5 ad 1.

⁵⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum* I, prologue, in *Opera Omnia*, 40 A:71. On the issue of reverent exposition or explanation, see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 124, fn. 25 and 26.

⁵⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum* I, prologue, p. 71.

⁵⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum* II, epilogue, p. 105.

sense authored our faith. This, however, is true only of Christ, who is the author of our salvation and faith (Heb 2:10). The Fathers usefully clarify and defend the articles of faith given to us in Scripture and are appropriately regarded as “teachers” and “expositors” of the faith, but not authors of it.⁵⁹

As much as Thomas insists that the canonical Scriptures alone establish the articles of faith and make known the necessary truths of salvation, he also just as clearly argues that the pope possesses the unique authority to determine the meaning of Scripture and to decide what pertains to the faith.⁶⁰ Thomas firmly believes the Scriptures establish the primacy of the pope and that it is necessary to be subject to him for salvation.⁶¹ In his later *Summa Theologiae*, he reiterates these sentiments and explains more thoroughly the relationship between the pope and Scripture. Jesus declared to Peter that his faith would not fail and that he would confirm the faith of his brethren (Luke 22:32). Thomas applies this to the pope, the successor of Peter. It is his particular duty as “the sovereign pontiff” to ensure that the church speaks with one voice and does not fall into schism (1 Cor 1:10). When any question of faith arises, the pope, who presides over the whole church, decides what the church believes and his authority is final.⁶² Does that mean that the pope adds to the substance of the faith revealed by God in Scripture? Thomas says no. The pope merely states more explicitly what Scripture teaches.⁶³ This often occurs through creeds issued by the authority and approval of the pope. The Nicene Creed, for example, does not add to Scripture but draws its truth from Scripture.⁶⁴

Final Reflections

The Lutherans distinguished their understanding of the Fathers and the catholic reading of them from their Roman opponents who clamored, “The church has spoken! The fathers have spoken. Whoever refuses to believe is, without further ado, a heretic!”⁶⁵ For Luther and the Book of Concord, a clear distinction exists between the authority of Scripture and the labors of the Fathers. The canonical Scriptures alone establish the articles of faith; the words of the Fathers never do. At the same time, the writings of the Fathers provide indispensable insights on Scripture and establish proper patterns of speech that clarify and guard the Scriptures. Here the Lutheran Reformers stood in continuity with the medieval masters. Both of them read the Fathers to better understand the Scriptures.

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum* II, epilogue, p. 105.

⁶⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum* II, 36, pp. 102–103.

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Errores Graecorum* II, 38, p. 103. Thomas appeals to Matt 16:16–19 and Luke 22:32 to establish the pope’s primacy and authority in matters of faith.

⁶² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II.1.10c.

⁶³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II.1.10 ad 1.

⁶⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II.1.9 ad 1.

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1537–39), in AE 22:271.

There is, of course, also a sense in which Luther's Roman opponents were in close agreement with the medieval masters. Although the Lutheran appeal to Scripture alone for the articles of faith and their use of the Fathers for reading Scripture agrees with the medieval masters, it does not resolve the enduring problem of competing interpretations. A persistent question debated throughout the medieval and late medieval periods had to do with who or what determines the authoritative interpretation of Scripture. Although the medieval masters shared a common position on Scripture and the Fathers, they did not agree on the meaning of those Scriptures. Lively exegetical debates prevailed on the Eucharist, penance, grace and merit, predestination, and the primacy of the pope. Masters variously appealed to the Fathers, church councils, canon law, and the pope to demonstrate their understanding of the biblical text but no consensus prevailed among them on the identity of that final and binding authority.⁶⁶ The medieval debates on the authoritative interpretation of Scripture raised questions about the authority of the church. Should a person believe Scripture or the church? Some said Scripture; others said church; still others said there is no difference between the two. For those in this last group, the church believes what Scripture reveals. This led to a more fundamental question. Do you believe Scripture because of the church or do you believe the church because of Scripture? If you believe Scripture because of the church, then it will never be possible for the church to say anything contrary to Scripture. Moreover, to depart from the church is to depart from Scripture and, as Prierias concluded, only a heretic would do that. Disagreement over the meaning of Scripture led many medieval masters to insist on the indefectibility of the church and ultimately papal infallibility. Luther, of course, disagreed with Prierias and his Roman opponents on this very point. He writes:

We have brought the papists to the point where they were obliged to concede that we have Holy Writ on our side. But now they bid us defiance and say that they side with the holy church. They shout: "Church! Church!" But that is nonsense. We, too, side with the Christian Church—but with that church which preaches that Christ, our Bridegroom, was born, was crucified, and died for us. If the church did not do this, I would not regard her as the church. For Christ says that the church and the fathers believe in Him; the church relies solely on Christ and teaches reliance on Him.⁶⁷

For Luther, the church's authority derives from its faithfulness to Christ. In his early *Lectures on Romans*, he declared that the whole of Scripture points to Christ and finds its "meaning" in him.⁶⁸ Likewise, toward the end of his life, Luther declares that all of Scripture is pure Christ. All points to him. Luther explains, "To him who

⁶⁶ Levy, *Holy Scripture and the Quest for Authority*, xi–xiv, 1–11, 23–53.

⁶⁷ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1537–39), in AE 22:269.

⁶⁸ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1515–1516), in AE 25:405.

has the Son Scripture is an open book; and the stronger his faith in Christ becomes, the more brightly will the light of Scripture shine for him.”⁶⁹ The church guards and defends this faith by pointing to Christ. Should the church no longer point to Christ, it would cease to be the church.⁷⁰ The Lutheran Reformers identified themselves with the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church precisely by confessing the unique and sufficient authority of Scripture in all matters of faith. Since the word of God alone makes something holy, tradition's holiness always depends upon its adherence to the word.

The Lutheran commitment to the church's catholic tradition, to the patristic and medieval writers who sought to clarify and defend the Scriptures in both writings and prayers, arises always from their commitment to Scripture. That commitment extends to wherever they find those Scriptures—whether it be the faithful exposition of the Scriptures by the Fathers or the prayers and hymns of the church's liturgy.⁷¹ This is the catholic spirit of the Lutheran Reformers: “our consciences are clear . . . for we know that our confession is true, godly, and catholic.”⁷²

⁶⁹ Martin Luther, *Treatise on the Last Words of David* (1543), in AE 15:339.

⁷⁰ For examples of Luther's view on the church, the holiness of the Roman church, and the objective character of the word and sacraments, see *Martin Luther's Basic Exegetical Writings*, ed. Carl L. Beckwith (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 211–213, 251–252, 314–317, 326–329.

⁷¹ Tappert 523 (= BSLK 877). Cf. C. F. W. Walther, “Church Fathers and Doctrine,” in *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 2:70: “A proper explanation of Scripture is precisely nothing else than Scripture itself.”

⁷² Tappert 214 (= BSLK 297).