
BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AFTER BABEL

Retrieving the *Solas*
in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER



BrazosPress

a division of Baker Publishing Group
www.BrazosPress.com

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Published by Brazos Press
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vanhoozer, Kevin J., author.

Title: Biblical authority after Babel : retrieving the solas in the spirit of mere Protestant
Christianity / Kevin J. Vanhoozer.

Description: Grand Rapids : Brazos Press, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016017619 | ISBN 9781587433931 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Calvinism. | Reformed Church—Doctrines.

Classification: LCC BX9422.5 .V365 2016 | DDC 230/.42—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016017619>

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16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To the faculty and principals of Moore College,
past and present

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Preface

Experience is not the primary norm for Christian theology, but events often serve as catalysts or occasions for theologizing. I was awakened from my pre-dogmatic slumbers one summer by a curious incident while ministering in southern France. I was there for a summer in partial fulfillment of my seminary internship requirement. The local pastor with whom I was working accompanied me to the *marché*, the weekly open-air market that is a staple of every town in Provence. We set up a bookstall with standard Christian literature: Bibles, Gospels of John, and assorted evangelistic tracts. Most people ignored us: it was hard to compete with freshly picked apricots, *herbes de Provence*, and ripened wheels of Camembert. Time passed, until eventually a man approached. “Bonjour, monsieur!”

The man thumbed through some of our pamphlets, checked the sign over our booth identifying us as an *Église Libre* (Free Church), and then said something unexpected: “Alors, vous êtes anarchiste?” (“So, you’re an anarchist?”). Several things went through my mind: first, did I hear him correctly; second, he wouldn’t be saying that if he knew my parents; third, if only my college friends could see me now! Seeing my surprise, he proceeded to set out what I would later discover was a customary Roman Catholic objection to Protestantism: “The Roman Catholic Church has a head [Gk. *archē*], a figure of authority who directs the body and says what the Bible means. You Protestants lack such a figure: you are headless [Gk. *an* + *archē* = “without a head/ruler”]—hence, anarchists.”¹

1. The *a(n)*- prefix is the alpha privative, which expresses negation or absence.

The man in the *marché* was the first to alert me to the perceived parallel between the Protestant Reformation and the babble that followed Babel (Gen. 11:9): both were events that apparently resulted in more rather than less confusion. The implication of his remark was that the Reformation resulted in a confusion not of languages but of interpretations, authorities, and interpretive communities. I don't remember how I responded that day, though I do recall being eager to complete my seminary training so that I could pursue this and other questions, such as: What does it mean to be biblical? Who can say, with authority, what the Bible means? How can the Bible have authority *after interpretive Babel*? How should Bible-believing Christians navigate the conflict of church interpretations?

My doctoral studies provided a second catalyst for this book. I will never forget the way Henry Chadwick, the Regius Professor of Divinity, peered at me over the rim of his glasses as I concluded my dissertation proposal hearing at the end of my first year at Cambridge University. I had gone to England to pursue further my life question: What does it mean for Christian disciples and theologians to be biblical? Professor Chadwick sighed, then rendered his judgment with classic British understatement: "Mr. Vanhoozer, I'm afraid that topic has been studied before." Indeed.

The problem of competing claimants to the mantle "biblically authorized" is older than Protestantism itself. Yet, for the reasons we will examine in this study, the Protestant Reformation exacerbated the problem, fanning scattered embers into a raging fire that engulfed the whole of European Christianity. The ashes are still smoldering. As arborists know, the impact of a fire on a forest depends on the forest's condition, and opinions differ on whether this conflagration was purely destructive or produced more ecological good than harm. *Sola scriptura* continues to generate much heat, but few would go so far as to describe the Reformation's effect on the church as a controlled burn.² On the contrary: the conflict of interpretations that has divided the church resembles a wildfire that is still only 10 percent contained.

It is widely assumed that the Reformers' careless play with biblical matches is responsible for the hermeneutical havoc that has been unleashed upon the modern world. Despite the abundance of supporting empirical evidence, the present work sets out to refute the *necessity* of this development. The accidental

2. The Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture warns: "Understanding fire is a science. The ability to know when an ecosystem is ready for controlled burning is science" (<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/dbnf/home/?cid=stelprdb5281464> [accessed August 29, 2015]).

truths of European history ought never become the proof of necessary truths of Protestant theology. Yes, Protestants have disagreed and split churches over divergent biblical interpretations; there is no disputing the course of church history since the Reformation. Yet things could and should have proceeded otherwise, and sometimes did. The burden of the present work is therefore to reclaim elements for a normative Protestantism from the ruins of present-day Protestantism by revisiting historical Protestantism (the Reformation *solas*). I argue that the *solas* provide not an alternative to orthodox tradition but rather a deeper insight into the one true gospel that undergirds that tradition.

I originally presented the contents of the present book in Sydney, Australia, as the Annual Moore College Lectures 2015 under the title “Mere Protestant Christianity: Why Singing *Sola* Renews and Reforms Biblical Interpretation, Theology, and the Church.” Though I have taken the liberty of editing and supplementing my lectures with extra material, not least in the footnotes, and changing the title, I have otherwise sought to preserve their original oral flavor. The expectation of the Moore College lectures was that they would “deal with some aspect of the Reformed and Evangelical faith either by way of biblical exposition or systematic theology.”³ I was pleasantly surprised to discover that previous lecturers included scholars such as F. F. Bruce, J. I. Packer, and my former dean, Kenneth Kantzer, who delivered the 1984 series on a theme similar to my own: “Reformation Theology at the End of the Twentieth Century.” I do not know what approach he took, but I would like to think he would have approved of what I set out in these pages.

I am pleased to acknowledge receiving helpful points and bibliographic suggestions from my Trinity colleagues David Dockery, David Luy, Scott Manetsch, and Doug Sweeney. I am indebted to my doctoral students—Isuwa Atsen, Kessia Reyne Bennett, Jeff Calhoun, Daniel Fleming, Austin Freeman, Geoff Fulkerson, Jonathan King, Matt La Pine, Paul Maxwell, Derek Rishmawy, Todd Saur, Brian Tung, and Paul Uyen—for their willingness to meet and discuss the manuscript chapter by chapter, and to Chris Donato for his insightful editorial comments. Finally, I owe a special thanks to Jim Kinney, editorial director of Baker Academic and Brazos Press, for both his advocacy of my work and his shrewd suggestions for improving it, including the revised title, and to Tim West, my editor at Brazos, for improving the wording of the manuscript more times than I care to acknowledge.

3. <https://www.moore.edu.au/annual-moore-college-lectures> (accessed September 6, 2015).

I am most grateful to the Rev. Dr. Mark Thompson, principal of Moore College, for the invitation to deliver the lectures, and to his family for their gracious hospitality (which included a memorable Sydney harbor ferry trip) during my stay. I wish, finally, to thank the several faculty members and their families who invited me to dinner, and the students who submitted handwritten questions after each lecture. In ways that I had not anticipated, the writings of several Moore College folk—in particular Graeme Goldsworthy, Peter O’Brien, David Broughton Knox, Peter Jensen, John William Woodhouse, and Mark Thompson—had a disproportionate influence on my preparation for the lectures. It is therefore only appropriate that I have dedicated this published version to the principals and faculty members of Moore College, past and present.

Introduction

Should the Church Repent or Retrieve the Reformation? Secularism, Skepticism, and Schism—Oh My!

“By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them”: Assessing a Revolution

“By their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt. 7:16 ASV). This is one of the key points in Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, and in context he is speaking of false prophets *in the church* who come in sheep’s clothing “but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15), leading disciples astray. The Reformation was a movement, not a person, a movement that gave birth to Protestantism “as a distinct form of Western Christianity,”¹ but the principle still stands: “Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit” (Matt. 7:17).

Five hundred years is more than enough time to assess the harvest, yet the jury is still out.² On the one hand, Protestants have indeed been fruitful and multiplied: the 2010 edition of the *Atlas of Global Christianity* estimates that there are more than four million congregations worldwide and thirty-eight

1. Mark A. Noll, *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

2. For an interesting survey of the ways that earlier anniversaries of the Reformation have celebrated it, see Thomas Albert Howard and Mark A. Noll, “The Reformation at Five Hundred: An Outline of the Changing Ways We Remember the Reformation,” *First Things* 247 (November 2014): 43–48.

thousand denominations.³ One therefore wonders whether Protestants have been not only fruitful but excessively so: If Charles de Gaulle could complain about the difficulty of governing a country that has 246 varieties of cheese, how much more difficult is it to achieve consensus among thirty-eight thousand Protestant denominations?

We need to do more than crunch numbers, however, to assess properly the Reformation's fruit. Jesus was concerned with truth and good deeds as criteria of authentic discipleship. Similarly, we need to assess whether and to what extent the Reformation encouraged faithfulness to God's Word and godly obedience—conformity to Christ. Christlikeness is ultimately the only fruit that counts. As C. S. Lewis says, "The church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs."⁴ If a fruitful church makes disciples (cf. Matt. 28:19–20), a fruitful movement makes disciple-making churches.

One need not be a historian to know that, on this scorecard, Protestantism gets mixed marks. The Reformation begat not simply disciples but Lutherans, Calvinists, Wesleyans, Zwinglians, Mennonites, and more. Some family lines have remained intact; others have suffered through various divorces. Critics of the Reformation (their name is Legion) accuse it of begetting a bevy of bastard children too, including capitalism, subjectivism, and naturalism (so much for practicing birth control). There are mainline and evangelical, conservative and liberal, Western and non-Western varieties of Protestants, and their disagreements on various points of faith and practice make it difficult to speak of *the* Protestant position on any doctrinal or social issue.

"Decentralization" is the Protestant watchword. In the beginning, decentralization took denominational form. At present, it is taking the form of *de*-denominating. Historians like Alister McGrath think it more accurate to speak of Protestantisms, in the plural.⁵ Some commentators think that Protestantism has no future. The tank is empty. On one telling of the story, Protestantism is like the fig tree that Jesus cursed (Matt. 21:18–19). It was meant to bear fruit, but when a hungry Jesus came to it, it had leaves only—and we know what fig leaves are good for: covering up nakedness (cf. Gen. 3:7). Sheer numbers

3. Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 171.

5. Alister McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution—A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 62–63.

cannot cover up Protestantism’s failure to display consistently the fruit of the Spirit: denominational love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and especially denominational faithfulness and self-control (cf. Gal. 5:22–23). Many of the thirty-eight thousand denominational grapes are indeed withering on the vine. Still, many Christians continue not only to identify with the Reformation but also to name their blog sites and their seminaries after its leading lights. Is Protestantism a cursed fig tree, or is it a tree “planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season” (Ps. 1:3)?

Narrating the Story of Protestantism

How can we tell the story of the Protestant Reformation? In this book I will make several claims, some of them counterintuitive, about the abiding significance of the Reformation for theology today. I am not a professional historian. I have unearthed no new facts about the Reformation, though I have sought to refresh our memory about certain things that we may have forgotten.⁶ The basic narrative (Martin Luther’s story) is well known: boy loves church; boy leaves church; boy finds new church friend. Wait a moment—is that the story? Is there such a thing as a “new” church? To repeat: I am not a historian, nor have I discovered new facts. However, I will dispute some interpretations of the facts, including popular ways of telling the story of the Reformation, in light of certain Reformation ideas and practices that tend to get passed over. Admittedly, these are deep waters: Isn’t all storytelling ideologically driven? Won’t my story simply reflect my location—my prejudices, my people, my power interests?

I acknowledge the dilemma. To make any claim is to risk having people suspect that it ultimately serves one’s own self-aggrandizing interests. In this case, however, I will be arguing not for the superiority of my own Reformed tribe but for “mere Protestant Christianity.” This refers neither to a lost “golden age” nor to a particular cultural instantiation of Protestantism, but rather to a set of seminal insights—encapsulated by the five *solas*—that represent a standing challenge, and encouragement, to the church. To borrow from G. K. Chesterton: mere Protestant Christianity (theological unity in ecclesial diversity) has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found arduous

6. To mention two examples to be developed in later chapters: the Reformers’ concern for the unity of the visible church (a catholicity rooted in the gospel rather than Rome); the sixteenth-century Genevan *congrégation* as an ecclesial institution and paradigm for biblical interpretation.

and left unfinished.⁷ Internecine tumult over non-Nicene theology—in other words, first-order discord over second-order doctrine—has been the bane of Protestant theology. But before I give my account, it may be helpful to examine other ways of telling the story.

To what biblical story may we liken the Reformation? Martin Luther cast himself as an Old Testament prophet leading Israel back to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, or alternately as a New Testament apostle (Martin Luther Paul) who had to confront the Galatian heresy all over again after its migration to Rome. Although Luther did not compare himself to one of Israel's kings, his rediscovery of Romans—the gospel according to Paul—and subsequent reform of the church parallel King Josiah's reform of the temple and rediscovery of the law (2 Kings 22:8–23:3; cf. 2 Chron. 34:8–33), namely, the book of Deuteronomy, “the Gospel according to Moses.”⁸ When Josiah heard the law, he tore his clothes; when Luther heard the gospel, his heart was set free. Of course, that is not the end of the story, which is why others are disposed to view the Reformation in terms of an earlier chapter in the book of Kings: the story of the divided kingdom (1 Kings 12).⁹

Other, less charitable storytellers cast Luther as the serpent in the church garden, tempting the bride of Christ to eat the forbidden fruit, namely, the power-knowledge of interpreting the Bible for oneself and thus to be “like God,” having textual knowledge of words and meaning. McGrath does not come right out and identify Luther with Lucifer, but he does call Protestantism—in particular, the notion that individuals can read the Bible for themselves—“Christianity's dangerous idea.”¹⁰

Protestantism's Progress? (Ernst Troeltsch)

Friedrich Schleiermacher praised the Reformers for introducing academic freedom into theology, namely, the critical (i.e., scholarly) principle that is the

7. The original reads, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried” (G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1912], 48).

8. Daniel I. Block, *The Gospel according to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

9. Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Radner argues that a divided church is a church without the Holy Spirit, and thus a church that is unable rightly to read Scripture.

10. Note the title of his book. Specifically, the dangerous new idea “was that all Christians have the right to interpret the Bible for themselves” (McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 2).

only antidote to (Roman Catholic) dogmatism.¹¹ The biblical scholar Wilhelm de Wette generalized the idea: “The spirit of Protestantism . . . leads necessarily to political freedom.”¹² Indeed, the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel viewed the Reformation as an essential step in the history of *Geist* toward freedom: “This is the essence of the Reformation: Man is in his very nature destined to be free.”¹³ Paul Tillich similarly depicted the “Protestant principle” as dialectical: a prophetic “no” to any earthly authoritarianism, and a creative “yes” to the ground of being (love) that empowers new shapes of human freedom.¹⁴

These optimistic narratives of Protestantism’s progress are perhaps best represented (and critiqued) by Ernst Troeltsch’s 1906 work *Protestantism and Progress: The Significance of Protestantism for the Rise of the Modern World*.¹⁵ Instead of hailing Luther as the pioneer of modern freedom, Troeltsch was more circumspect: “early” Protestantism (Luther’s) was a “second blooming” of medievalism, which led only indirectly to the “new” Protestantism that coexisted happily with secular science and the secular state.¹⁶ For Troeltsch, Protestantism’s progress is a matter of basing beliefs not on external authority but on inner personal conviction: “Protestantism became the religion of the search for God in one’s own feeling, experience, thought, and will.”¹⁷ The Reformation may have begun as a revival of medievalism, but it indirectly paved the way toward the individualism of the modern world—that is, a civilization freed from (church) authority.

“Constructive Protestantism” (H. Richard Niebuhr)

Richard Niebuhr’s 1937 work *The Kingdom of God in America* examines how Protestant pilgrims newly arrived in America, the land of opportunity,

11. Address to the theology faculty of the University of Berlin, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Reformation (November 3, 1817), cited in Howard and Noll, “Reformation at Five Hundred.”

12. Cited in Howard and Noll, “Reformation at Five Hundred,” 45.

13. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1956), 417. See also Merold Westphal, “Hegel and the Reformation,” in *Hegel, Freedom, and Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 149–64.

14. Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

15. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986. Originally published in German as *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1906).

16. “It was not until modern Protestantism had lost sight of the idea of a universal Church-civilization that it could characterise as genuine Protestant principles, the duty of historico-philological criticism, the organisation of Churches formed by voluntary association, independent of the State, and the doctrine of revelation by inner personal conviction and illumination” (Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*, 37).

17. *Ibid.*, 98.

used their freedom no longer to protest (the negative part of the Reformation) but rather to practice a positive citizenship of the gospel: “Whatever else then America came to be, it was also an experiment in constructive Protestantism.”¹⁸ Niebuhr devotes a chapter to “The Problem of Constructive Protestantism,” where he sets out the basic challenge. Protestants confessed the direct rule of God, apart from any institutional mediation, but it was not clear how God’s Word was to order society: “The new freedom was not self-organizing but threatened anarchy in every sphere of life.”¹⁹

Although Niebuhr does not mention it, what happened among the Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony makes for an excellent case study in the problem of constructive Protestantism. The Puritans distrusted any interpretive authority but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture; as Lisa Gordis notes, “Puritan interpretive practices privileged techniques that theoretically allowed the Bible to interpret itself.”²⁰ The preachers at Massachusetts Bay claimed simply to “open” the text, with the Spirit’s illumination, and assumed that a community that read “in the Spirit” would achieve interpretive consensus. Given this assumption, dissent over what God is saying in Scripture could not help but be troubling, not only practically but also theoretically.²¹ The “troubles” came to a head in 1636, in what is now known as the Antinomian or “Free Grace” Controversy. It is a sobering illustration of how Puritan hermeneutics generated, managed, and ultimately failed to contain interpretive diversity.

The story has everything one could want in a Hollywood blockbuster: courtroom drama, intrigue, religious figures coming to grief in public, and perhaps the first feminist in America. I refer to the trial of Anne Hutchinson, also known as the “American Jezebel.”²² Hutchinson was at the center of a theological controversy that took the Massachusetts Bay Colony to the brink of collapse and spurred a significant exodus of the disaffected. The particular issue—did God’s grace transform sinners?—is less important for present purposes than is the phenomenon of a Christian community that aspired to interpretive unity falling into greater and greater interpretive disarray. The

18. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937; repr., Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 43.

19. *Ibid.*, 30.

20. Lisa M. Gordis, *Opening Scripture: Bible Reading and Interpretive Authority in Puritan New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

21. *Ibid.*, 9.

22. An expression used in the title of chap. 10 in Michael Winship’s *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

explicit issue concerned the relationship of grace, transformation, and the work of the Holy Spirit, but the underlying question was this: Whose reading of the Bible counts, and, in particular, how are church members to proceed in the face of interpretive disputes?²³

Like the Bereans (Acts 17:11), Hutchinson searched the Scriptures, hosting meetings in her house to discuss, and dissect, the sermons being preached by John Cotton in the First Church of Boston, the most important in the colony. She worried that the preachers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony so emphasized moral obedience as evidence of salvation as to be guilty of teaching a covenant of works. In contrast, she believed that only an inner intuition associated with the sealing of the Spirit could provide assurance of one's election. In any case, the meetings at the Hutchinson home drew up to sixty people and rivaled the influence of the church's official ministers. What further complicated matters was the previously mentioned conviction that people who interpret Scripture in the Spirit ought to agree: "They [did not] have room in their theories of exegesis to account for legitimate differences of opinion about scripture-derived doctrine."²⁴

What to do with an intelligent woman who called into question the views of the established clergy in Boston, thus threatening to undermine the Puritan New England "holy experiment"? Answer: put her on trial for slandering ministers (and disturbing the peace of the commonwealth)! Governor John Winthrop presided over the trial in 1637. The climax of the trial came on the second day when Anne testified as to "the ground of what I know to be true," which apparently proved to be an immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit.²⁵ The verdict: banishment to Rhode Island—and the Baptists.

What Anne Hutchinson had opened in the Massachusetts Bay Company was the Pandora's box of Protestantism: "Left alone with her Bible . . . and with the Holy Spirit, Hutchinson interpreted the text in a way that put her at odds with her community."²⁶ Unlike Luther, she was a layperson, but like

23. "Leaders of the Bay Colony expected consensus: indeed, expectations of interpretive consensus enabled by the Holy Spirit were high enough that church polity rested on assumptions of unanimity" (Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 149).

24. *Ibid.*, 151.

25. "The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newtown," in *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History*, ed. David D. Hall, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 337.

26. Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 172. For example, at her trial Hutchinson appealed to Dan. 6:16–24, claiming that God had shown her that he would deliver her as he had delivered Daniel from the lion's den ("Examination," in Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 337–38).

Luther, she argued that her reading of the biblical text, illumined by the Spirit, was superior to that of the resident clergy, in her case the Boston pastors. This was an interpretive dispute that threatened civil unrest, even violence. John Winthrop worried that the different sides of the debate might come to use the Bible not as a source of isolated proof texts with which to refute one another but rather as a weapon with which to break the head of one's opponent.²⁷ The controversy eventually resulted in the second generation of New England's ministers "ground[ing] their authority in learning and expertise, emphasizing the need for academic training along with the assistance of the Holy Spirit."²⁸

"Christianity's Dangerous Idea"? (Alister McGrath)

Anne Hutchinson's case perfectly illustrates why McGrath can speak of "Christianity's dangerous idea." He is playing off the title of Daniel Dennett's book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*.²⁹ Darwin's dangerous idea was the supposition that we can account for the design that we discover in nature through the impersonal process of natural selection without positing a designer. McGrath, who has a PhD in molecular biology as well as one in historical theology, takes more than Dennett's title, for he goes on to compare Protestantism to a microorganism, a virus capable of rapid mutation, proficient at adapting, and thus surviving, under a wide range of diverse conditions.

McGrath identifies the priesthood of all believers as the key Protestant gene, or rather meme: an idea, value, or practice that spreads from person to person, culture to culture, nation to nation through not genetic but cultural replication, in the case of the Reformation thanks largely to the printing press.³⁰ To tell the story of Protestantism as the transmission of memes from one generation to the next may seem a nonstarter, but McGrath sticks with the metaphor, arguing that Protestantism's ability to mutate accounts both

27. See Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, 293–94.

28. Gordis, *Opening Scripture*, 10. See further Michael Winship, *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005). See also Marcus Walsh, "Profession and Authority: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Literature and Theology* 9 (1995): 383–98.

29. Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

30. Like genes, memes are packets of information that can be passed on to subsequent generations. Unlike genes, the information that memes encode is done via culture rather than biology. The term "meme" was coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), chap. 11.

for the unpredictability of new developments (such as Pentecostalism) and its capacity to adapt to new situations.

In invoking this evolutionary model, McGrath takes a stand on the question of the essence of Protestantism: “There was no single, unambiguous Protestant template, gene, or paradigm.”³¹ He rejects the idea that there is a moment in time that defines Protestantism once and for all. On the contrary, the essence of Protestantism is dynamic, consisting in “its constant self-examination in the light of the Bible and in its willingness to correct itself.”³²

To be Protestant is to strive to be biblical, yet no single way of being biblical can be used as a standard to judge the others. This, to McGrath’s mind, is what makes Protestantism dangerous, for what else should one call an uncontrolled division of cells that mutate and spread throughout a body but cancer? This is indeed how its critics regard the Reformation notion of the priesthood of all believers, a meme so dangerous it almost deconstructed Massachusetts! Luther got a taste of his own medicine too. The Peasants’ War in 1525 showed him a possible consequence of his position: radical religious individualism. McGrath writes, “Too late, Luther tried to rein in the movement by emphasizing the importance of authorized religious leaders, such as himself, and institutions in the interpretation of the Bible. But who, his critics asked, had ‘authorized’ these so-called authorities?”³³ Precisely.

We come, then, to the question that this book seeks to address: Should the church repent or retrieve this dangerous Protestant idea? Can the Protestant principle *sola scriptura* ever produce consensus, or is the result always chaos? Does Protestantism contain a fail-safe device that can be used to forestall or regulate the proliferation of divergent readings of the Bible that, left unchecked, are a cancer that ravages the body of Christ? Did the Reformation set loose interpretive anarchy upon the world, and, if so, should Christians everywhere file a class-action suit?

Repenting the (Unintended) Iniquities of Our Reformation Fathers

There is no merit in giving pat answers to complex questions. It is an uncomfortable fact that even those who are united in their affirmation of the supreme authority of Scripture often disagree over what the Bible says. The

31. McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, 463.

32. *Ibid.*, 465.

33. *Ibid.*, 3.

question is what to make of, and how to resolve, such interpretive disagreements. The subtitle that I chose for this chapter (playing off “Lions and tigers and bears—oh my!” in *The Wizard of Oz*) expresses the scope of the challenge. The cancerous Protestant meme combines the lion of skepticism (crouching at the door of modernity), the tiger of secularism, and the bear of schism. These are the alleged consequences, albeit unintentional, of the Reformation. Others have, of course, accused the Reformers of involuntary church slaughter and defamation of papal character. The particular charges for which I will seek their acquittal, however, are hermeneutical recklessness and criminal negligence of tradition. We begin by hearing testimony from three witnesses for the prosecution.

The Reformation Begat Secularization (Brad Gregory)

Surely the most important recent critique of the Reformation is Brad Gregory’s *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*,³⁴ a magisterial deconstruction of the magisterial Reformation. Gregory claims that we can understand our present “hyperpluralized” situation only by returning to the past, the scene of the crime. The “crime” in question is secularization, and Gregory lays the blame at the doorstep of Protestantism: the Wittenberg door to which Luther affixed his challenge to church authority. In doing so, Luther set in motion a series of events that has led to what Gregory believes is an unsustainable and unhealthy modern situation. The unintended consequence of the Reformation’s refusal of the church’s final say-so was the loss of “any shared framework for the integration of knowledge”³⁵—a loss whose effects continue to loom large.

Gregory readily admits that the Reformers did not set out to secularize the world. That is precisely why he speaks of the “unintended” Reformation. The Reformers worked an inadvertent Copernican revolution as concerns knowledge of God: instead of seeing Scripture as a planet that revolves around the system of theology, the Reformers made Scripture the sun that illumines the whole theological system. Instead of making Scripture conform to tradition, Scripture would speak for itself. In Luther’s words: “This is not a Christian teaching, when I bring an opinion to Scripture and compel Scripture to follow it, but rather, on the contrary, when I first have got straight what Scripture

34. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

35. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 327.

teaches and then compel my opinion to accord with it.”³⁶ The problem, as Gregory points out, is that from the 1520s onward, “those who rejected Rome disagreed about what God’s word said.”³⁷

Protestant churches in cities like Geneva, and later nation-states like Holland, appeared to enjoy consensus on doctrinal matters, but Gregory claims that these agreements often were politically motivated and backed by political authority, like the German princes who supported Luther. By way of contrast, in the hands of the Radical Reformers, *sola scriptura* “produced not even rough agreement, but an open-ended welter of competing and incompatible interpretations.”³⁸ Protestant pluralism—and eventually postmodernism—“derived directly from the Reformation’s foundational truth claim,”³⁹ namely, the dangerous idea that individuals read the truth out of the Bible for themselves, apart from church authority: *sola scriptura*.

Why call this interpretive situation “secularization”? Because, Gregory argues, the Reformers rejected the whole hierarchical worldview of late medieval Christianity and replaced it with a flattened-out picture of *sola scriptura* whereby each person claimed independent authority to interpret the supreme religious authority. This eventually led to religious wars over disagreements as to precisely what Scripture said and, eventually, to the Enlightenment’s elevation of *sola ratio* (reason alone) to the position of unbiased referee. Moreover, when reason became the privileged route to universal truth, faith was demoted to the realm of private (subjective) opinion.⁴⁰

Gregory wants his readers to appreciate the full extent of the Reformation’s failure. Not only did Protestants fail to agree about what the Bible said, they also failed to agree about the criteria to be used for deciding what was essential to believe and what was not, leading to the further problem of who gets to determine what true Christianity is, and how. Against their best intentions, “the church became the churches.”⁴¹ Gregory then fast-forwards to the present: “The Reformation is the most important distant historical source for contemporary Western hyperpluralism with respect to truth claims about

36. Cited in *ibid.*, 88.

37. *Ibid.*, 89.

38. *Ibid.*, 94.

39. *Ibid.*

40. “Christian doctrinal pluralism set the Western world on an unintended trajectory in which knowledge was secularized as faith was subjectivized” (*ibid.*, 327). See also Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

41. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 369.

meaning, morality, values, priorities, and purpose.”⁴² Gregory thus goes further than Max Weber: apparently, Protestants invented not only capitalism but consumerism too.⁴³ The net result of the Reformation was a proliferation of conflicting truth claims, each of which marketed itself as biblical and competed for the hearts and minds of Protestant church shoppers.

The Reformation Begat Skepticism (Richard Popkin)

The intellectual historian Richard Popkin opens his magisterial *History of Scepticism* with a chapter on “The Intellectual Crisis of the Reformation.”⁴⁴ Of course, skepticism has an ancient pedigree; it would be unjust to accuse the Reformers of inventing it. This is not Popkin’s claim. Rather, he argues that the Reformers let the skeptical views of antiquity into Europe through the back door of their dispute with Rome over the proper standard of religious knowledge.⁴⁵ Luther cracked open this back door in his 1519 Leipzig debate with Johann Eck by declaring *sola scriptura* to be the basis of Christian belief: Luther “took the critical step of denying the rule of faith of the Church and presented a radically different criterion of religious knowledge.”⁴⁶

For Luther, citing church tradition—the fathers—is not a sufficient argument: “For that which is asserted without the authority of Scripture . . . may be held as an opinion, but there is no obligation to believe it,”⁴⁷ much less count it as theological knowledge.⁴⁸ According to Popkin, Luther’s claim precipitated an intellectual crisis that shook “the very foundation of Western civilization.”⁴⁹ Luther had changed the rules of the legitimation game, namely, the criteria by which one determines something as true or false, and

42. *Ibid.* “Modernity is failing partly because reason alone in modern philosophy has proven no more capable than scripture alone of discerning or devising consensually persuasive answers to the Life Questions” (377).

43. In chap. 5 I discuss Max Weber’s hypothesis set out in his classic work, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*.

44. Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, rev. and expanded ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

45. *Ibid.*, 1.

46. *Ibid.*, 4.

47. Cited in *ibid.*, 4.

48. The Reformers did appeal to the church fathers as secondary authorities (because faithful expositors of Scripture), first, to justify their break from medieval scholasticism, but also, second, to authenticate their respective confessional traditions vis-à-vis one another. See further Esther Chung-Kim, *Inventing Authority: The Use of the Church Fathers in Reformation Debates over the Eucharist* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011).

49. Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 4.

his alternative criterion—“that which conscience is compelled to believe on reading Scripture is true”⁵⁰—was dangerously subjective. Popkin identifies the underlying crisis—in fact, an epistemological dilemma—as a dispute about the fundamental criterion to which people can nonarbitrarily appeal when trying to decide between two or more possibilities. How could one refute Luther’s claims if the ultimate appeal was Luther’s conscience? This was precisely what Luther’s Roman Catholic opponents were afraid of: a chaotic situation where the ultimate criterion is subjective, where everyone exercises the right to appeal to his or her own conscience rather than to the established objective authority of the institutional church. Erasmus went so far as to appeal to skepticism as a reason to remain Roman Catholic: in view of the difficulty in establishing the true meaning of the biblical text, he reasoned, is it not better to adhere to the age-old wisdom of the church? As Popkin observes, “The Reformers were continually occupied with trying to justify their own type of subjective, individual criterion and at the same time were using this criterion as an objective measure by means of which they condemned as heresies their opponent’s appeals to conscience.”⁵¹

The Reformation Begat Schism (Hans Boersma and Peter Leithart)

One adjective seems custom-made to describe the unintended consequence of the Reformation. It is a word that I never come across except in the descriptions or criticisms of Protestantism: “fissiparous”—“inclined to cause or undergo division into separate parts or groups,” from the Latin *fissus*, past participle of *findere* (to split; cf. “fissure”). Here, for example, is how Brad Gregory uses it: “The fissiparous particularity of Protestant truth claims, theology, and experiential knowledge was an insuperable problem.”⁵² Think of it as the centrifugal force or, more provocatively, the Big Bang behind interpretive pluralism.

It is largely because of its fissiparousness that Hans Boersma regards the Reformation “not as something to be celebrated but as something to be lamented.”⁵³ In particular, he laments the tearing of what he terms the “sacramental tapestry”—the premodern worldview where visible realities point

50. *Ibid.*, 5.

51. *Ibid.*, 7.

52. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 355.

53. Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 85. See also Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

to the invisible heavenly realities in which they sacramentally participate. Boersma sees the Reformers' insistence on reading for the literal (i.e., "natural") sense rather than the allegorical (i.e., supernatural, spiritual) sense to be symptomatic of the modern turn away from mystery to history and the grammatical-historical method for reading Scripture: "The rise of modernity corresponded with the decline of an approach that regarded the created order as sacramental in character."⁵⁴ This fissure between the natural sign (*signum*) and supernatural thing (*res*), between this-worldly history and its participation in heavenly reality, constitutes an *ontological* schism that encourages, as it were, an epistemological fissiparousness.⁵⁵

According to Boersma, the Reformers rent not only the sacramental tapestry that held together heaven and earth but also the previously seamless garment of the body of Christ: the church "was pulled apart by arguments over faith and works, Scripture and tradition, baptism and Eucharist."⁵⁶ In sum, Boersma views the Reformers as dividers rather than uniters in both an ecclesial and an ontological sense: "The reason the Reformation was a tragedy is that it split the unity of the church while it failed to address the problematic decline of the Platonist-Christian synthesis."⁵⁷

In a widely discussed article in *First Things* on "The Future of Protestantism," Peter Leithart decries the Protestant tendency to "just say *no*," that is, to identify itself oppositionally, in contrast to the "other" of Roman Catholicism.⁵⁸ He thinks that they (Protestants) protest too much. As T. S. Eliot put it, "The life of Protestantism depends on the survival of that against which it protests."⁵⁹ However, history does not stand still, and the Roman Catholic

54. Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 17.

55. Boersma locates the beginning of the tear in the sacramental tapestry in late medieval developments (e.g., nominalism) that began to separate the natural from the supernatural (*ibid.*, 84).

56. *Ibid.*, 84.

57. *Ibid.*, 87.

58. Peter J. Leithart, "The Future of Protestantism: The Churches Must Die to Be Raised Anew," *First Things* 245 (August/September 2014): 23–27.

59. T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1949), 75. Compare Friedrich Schleiermacher's famous formulation of the contrast:

Insofar as the Reformation was not simply a purification and reaction from abuses which had crept in, but was the origination of a distinctive form of the Christian communion, the antithesis between Protestantism and Catholicism may provisionally be conceived thus: the former makes the individual's relation to the Church dependent on his relation to Christ, while the latter contrariwise makes the individual's relation to Christ dependent on his relation to the Church. (*The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999], 103)

See also Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Touchstone, 1967), 228.

Church today looks quite different from what the Reformers had to confront. Leithart takes exception to Protestants who act as if the Reformation were the summit of church history: “But if God is alive, why would we think that the Church reached its final form in 1517 or 1640? . . . We cannot. Division *cannot* be the final state of Christ’s Church.”⁶⁰ Insofar as definitional opposition to Roman Catholicism is constitutive of Protestant identity, says Leithart, “Jesus bids Protestantism to come and die.”⁶¹ Protestantism seems all too willing to accept the call, if present trends in declining membership of the mainline churches are any indication.

As a sociological and historical phenomenon, Protestants are, of course, susceptible to the same kind of blind spots or myopic thinking that characterizes every other human group. However, contra Leithart, the fundamental gesture of Protestantism is not negative but affirmative. The Reformers did not view themselves as schismatics, nor were they. To protest is to testify *for* something, namely, the integrity of the gospel, and, as we will see, this includes the church’s catholicity. It also includes prophetic protest (the negative gesture) whenever and wherever the truth of the gospel is at risk. Unity alone (*sola unitas*) is not enough unless the unity in question is a *unitas* of *veritas* (truth).

What Luther objected to was not the church’s catholicity per se but the narrowness of its Roman qualifier—that is, to constricting catholicity to the city limits (so to speak) of Rome. In John McNeill’s words: “It was, then, the narrowness of Rome’s alleged catholicity that antagonized Luther.”⁶² C. S. Lewis concurs: “The Roman Church where it differs from this universal tradition and specifically from apostolic Christianity I reject. . . . In a word, the whole set-up of modern Romanism seems to me to be as much a provincial or local *variation* from the ancient tradition as any particular Protestant sect is.”⁶³ Continuing in this vein, the present work argues that the only true Protestant—a biblical, Christ-centered Protestant, whose conscience is indeed captive to the gospel—is a *catholic* Protestant.⁶⁴ For true Protestants, schism

60. Leithart, “Future of Protestantism,” 24.

61. *Ibid.*, 26.

62. John T. McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism: The Ecumenical Spirit and Its Persistent Expression* (Richmond: John Knox, 1964), 68.

63. Letter to Lyman Stebbins, May 8, 1945, in C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, vol. 2, *Books, Broadcasts, and the War, 1931–1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 646–47.

64. Compare Leithart’s “Reformational Catholicism,” where the accent is on Catholicism and what Protestants share with Roman Catholics. By way of contrast, my formula makes

is, as Matthew Henry put it, “an uncharitable distance, division, or alienation of affections among those who are called Christians, and agree in the fundamentals of religion, occasioned by their different apprehensions about little things.”⁶⁵ Be that as it may, the distinction between “fundamentals” and “little things” brings us back to what many consider the Achilles heel of Protestantism: the lack of centralized interpretive authority.⁶⁶ For who decides what belongs to the fundamentals and what to the little things?

Fine-Tuning the Problem; Deepening the Dilemma

To this point, I have said little that is edifying. In order to build, one must first clear the ground. We need to dig deeper before we can lay a positive foundation for construction. There are indeed positive insights from the Reformation to cherish: both the *material principle* (justification by grace alone through faith alone) and the *formal principle* (the supreme authority of Scripture alone). However, the present work focuses on what we could call the *material problem* of the Reformation (the conflict of biblical interpretation in the church and the lack of visible church unity) and the *formal problem* that generated it (the lack of a consensual criterion for discerning whose interpretation of Scripture is right). The problems are linked, and they derive from three inter-related crises, all allegedly by-products of *sola scriptura*.

An Interpretive Crisis: Which Biblical Meaning?

Saint Peter may not have had Protestants in mind when he wrote, but surely it is a good idea for every child of the Reformation always to be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks for a reason for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15)—namely, that we will one day all agree about what the Bible means. For the proliferation of opinions and disagreements over just about every single passage in the Bible is staggering. As the experiment of Puritan theology in North America revealed, the de facto diversity and individualism

“catholic” the adjectival qualifier and “Protestant” the noun that it modifies. In other words, “Protestant” stands for the core content of what is confessed (i.e., the five *solas*, themselves indications of the gospel), while “catholic” describes the scope of its confessors.

65. Matthew Henry, *A Brief Enquiry into the True Nature of Schism: Or a Persuasive to Christian Love and Charity* (London, 1690).

66. So Devin Rose, *The Protestant’s Dilemma: How the Reformation’s Shocking Consequences Point to the Truth of Catholicism* (San Diego: Catholic Answers Press, 2014), 213.

of Protestant truth claims about what Scripture says “could not be reconciled with the epistemological demands of science for universality and objectivity.”⁶⁷

Call it the “Protestant perplex,” so named after Frederick Crews’s wonderful little book, *The Pooh Perplex*, a brilliant parody of the multifarious means by which literary critics have their way with texts. The subtitle says it all: “In Which It Is Discovered That the True Meaning of the Pooh Stories Is Not as Simple as Is Usually Believed, but for Proper Elucidation Requires the Combined Efforts of Several Academicians of Varying Critical Persuasions.”⁶⁸ Whereas the *Pooh Perplex* pokes fun at various critical theories (Crews provides Freudian and Marxist readings of the Pooh stories, for example), the Protestant perplex describes the odd state of affairs where readers using no particular literary theory nevertheless produce a bewildering variety of readings.

Christian Smith’s *The Bible Made Impossible* does for Protestantism what Crews does for Pooh: it exposes the multifarious meanings that have been made by various readers.⁶⁹ Smith is clear that the problem is not the Bible but *biblicism*—a theory about the authority of the Bible that posits its clarity, self-sufficiency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability.⁷⁰ Smith, a sociologist, tries to demonstrate how the practice of biblicism belies the theory. Specifically, what falsifies biblicism is the *pervasive interpretive pluralism* that results: “It becomes beside the point to assert a text to be solely authoritative . . . when, lo and behold, it gives rise to a host of many divergent teachings on important matters.”⁷¹ Biblicists must be in denial, Smith thinks, if they cannot see what everyone else sees: “*On important matters the Bible apparently is not clear, consistent, and univocal enough to enable the best-intentioned, most highly skilled, believing readers to come to agreement as to what it teaches.*”⁷²

Devin Rose, an apologist for Roman Catholicism, makes a similar point with a simple syllogism: if *sola scriptura* is true, then Protestants should be

67. Gregory, *Unintended Reformation*, 355.

68. Frederick C. Crews, *The Pooh Perplex* (London: Robin Clark, 1979).

69. Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011).

70. The situation is somewhat more complex, for Smith goes on to acknowledge that the Bible is multivocal: “It can and does speak to different listeners in different voices that appear to say different things”; “The words of scripture themselves can and usually do give rise to more than one possible, arguably legitimate interpretation” (*ibid.*, 47, 53). In subsequent chapters I will argue that the way forward is not to abandon biblicism but to distinguish between a naïve and a critical biblicism, between a pervasive interpretive pluralism, on the one hand, and a unitive interpretive plurality, on the other (I will also refer to the latter as a plural interpretive unity).

71. *Ibid.*, xi.

72. *Ibid.*, 25 (emphasis original).

united in their interpretations of the Bible; Protestants are not united in their biblical interpretations; therefore, *sola scriptura* is not true. Strictly speaking the logic is impeccable (it is an example of *modus tollens*, or denying the consequent, a valid rule of inference), but everything rides on how one understands the premises: *sola scriptura* and Protestant unity. We will return to these notions in due course. Rose succinctly states the presenting problem of the Reformation's legacy: "No honest religious historian can deny that the result of *sola scriptura* has been doctrinal chaos."⁷³ Wittenberg, we have a problem.

A Legitimation Crisis: Whose Theological Authority?

The problem is not simply the sheer multiplicity of interpretations but the lack of a viable shared criterion or central authority to help sort through them. We're back to McGrath's dangerous idea of Christianity—the priesthood of all believers—namely, the right of each believer to interpret the Bible for himself or herself. This is the mutant gene in the Protestant DNA, the ultimately uncontrollable meme that spawned developments that the Reformers themselves could never have imagined.⁷⁴ As McGrath points out, "the nature of Protestantism makes it very difficult to use the term 'heresy' to refer to divergent schools of thought."⁷⁵ John Dryden's poem "Religio Laici" ("A Layperson's Religion" [1682]) exposes the Protestant nakedness at this point:

The Book thus put in every vulgar hand,
Which each presumed he best could understand,
The common rule was made the common prey,
And at the mercy of the rabble lay.⁷⁶

Elsewhere Dryden asks,

Have not all heretics the same pretence,
To plead the Scriptures in their own defence?⁷⁷

73. Rose, *Protestant's Dilemma*, 87.

74. McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 2.

75. *Ibid.*, 230.

76. John Dryden, "Religio Laici," lines 400–403, in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2001), 184.

77. John Dryden, "The Hind and the Panther," part 2, lines 154–55 (*ibid.*, 243).

The underlying issue is how to determine who has the authority to define the Christian faith and interpret its defining document.⁷⁸ According to Bruce McCormack, “The greatest theological problem confronting Reformed theology today—and I suspect that this is true not only for the American church but for other western churches as well—is the problem of ecclesial authority.”⁷⁹ Here is how Devin Rose paraphrases Luther’s principle of the priesthood of all believers: “If Protestantism is true, we all decide for ourselves what God’s revelation means.”⁸⁰ And, “If Protestantism is true, all we have is fallible opinions about infallible books.”⁸¹ Here, in a nutshell, is the Protestant dilemma: *sola scriptura*, coupled with the priesthood of all believers, seems to make each individual the final authority, and yet various Protestant individuals, each guided and illumined by the Holy Spirit, disagree with one another. That’s the bad news.⁸²

The good news—to be developed over the course of the next five chapters—is that God alone saves, and that he saves us even from this. As we will see, a misleading picture of the priesthood of all believers holds its critics captive. Make no mistake: the danger is real. Schism happens. I remember once asking my students in a doctoral seminar on theological hermeneutics, “What do you do when people in your church agree that the Bible is authoritative but disagree over its implications for doctrine and practice?” I had meant it as a rhetorical question, intended (like the present introduction) to create a sense of urgency about what I was planning constructively to propose. However, no sooner had I posed the question than a student from the Philippines raised his hand and said, “That’s easy. We start a new church.” It was (descriptively) and was not (normatively) the right answer. It was not the right answer because there is only one church. In any case, it provided an excellent teaching moment.

This misleading picture of the priesthood of all believers as granting every individual the right to start a church fits hand in glove with what we call *interpretive egoism*. Interpretive egoism is first cousin to the modern value

78. McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, 3.

79. Bruce McCormack, “The End of Reformed Theology?,” in *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity*, ed. Wallace M. Alston Jr. and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 54.

80. Rose, *Protestant’s Dilemma*, 89.

81. *Ibid.*, 95.

82. It is worth noting that John Dryden, himself an Anglican at the time, believed that Scripture’s truths are clear and distinct to all grace-enabled readers: Scripture “speaks itself, and what it does contain, / In all things needful to be known, is plain” (“Religio Laici,” lines 368–69 [p. 183]).

of individual autonomy that its critics want to blame on the Reformation. *Extreme interpretive egoism* is the view that privileges my interpretations simply because they are mine.⁸³ The question is whether Martin Luther and others who read the Bible under the rubric *sola scriptura* are interpretive egoists. I do not think that Luther, though (obviously!) an individual, was an interpretive egoist, and in chapter 4 I will refute the myth that the priesthood of all believers serves as a charter for mass interpretive egoism.

A Community Crisis: What Ecclesial Unity?

Most Christians probably do not worry about being interpretive egoists because they are members of a believing community, where there is both safety and sanctity in numbers. Church unity is here a function of unity of confession. Such complacency ignores the possibility of *communal interpretive egoism*—the attitude that regards the fact that other communities interpret the Bible differently as having no particular bearing on the interpretation by one’s own community.⁸⁴ Why should we care whether our local church is singing with a denominational or ecumenical choir? Because, says John Howard Yoder, “Where Christians are not united, the gospel is not true in that place.”⁸⁵ Yoder is no doubt thinking of Jesus’s high-priestly prayer, when he asks the Father in heaven to sanctify Jesus’s followers in the truth (John 17:17, 19) “that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (John 17:23).⁸⁶ What is ultimately at stake in repenting or retrieving the Reformation is the witness of the church, including its visible unity, and hence the integrity of the gospel.

We do not prosper the gospel when we pit unity against truth. Furthermore, *unity* is an elusive concept. As to what the unity of the church ought to be, there are several models, which raises the question of whether there can be such a thing as mere Protestant *polity* (see chap. 4). There is, first, the model

83. I am borrowing, and modifying, these categories from Linda Trinkhaus Zagzebski’s study *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). The modifications stem from my different starting point, namely, an attempt in the chapters that follow to give a dogmatic description of the pattern of interpretive authority.

84. Here too I am adapting what Zagzebski says about communal epistemic egoism (*ibid.*, 223).

85. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1994), 291.

86. I will argue in the conclusion that being “perfectly one” is compatible with a plural unity or “Pentecostal” plurality in which different churches make common confession in their own idioms.

of Christendom—the Holy Roman Empire—though the church has already been there, done that, and found it both coercive and divisive (absolute ecclesial power corrupts absolutely). A kinder, gentler version might be the Holy British Empire, a commonwealth of holy nations. Ecumenists might prefer a third model: the United Holy Nations (though which denominations get to sit on the Security Council would make for interesting debate). Then there is the American experiment, Puritan New England, and eventually the Wild West, with locally elected sheriffs in every town. Lastly, there is my favorite model: the Democratic Republic of Biblical Letters, about which more in due course.⁸⁷

In step with historical Christian orthodoxy, I take the Bible's authority as a given. The problem is not biblical authority but how to negotiate the conflict of interpretations of that authoritative source. The present book addresses the crisis concerning the authority not of the Bible but of its interpretation: Whose interpretation counts, and what makes one person's (or church's) interpretation more authoritative than another's?⁸⁸ "If there's a post-Reformation epistemological crisis in the West," says Peter Leithart, "we [are] all in it, not just Protestants. None of the strategies for building consensus—neither Protestant nor Catholic—have been successful in uniting the *whole* church."⁸⁹

In writing this book, I did what any right-thinking research professor of systematic theology would do: I searched amazon.com for books pertaining to "interpretive authority." There were 2,652 results. At the top of the list was a title I knew well: Stanley Fish's *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*.⁹⁰ Just under it was Mark Thompson's *A Sure Ground on Which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture*.⁹¹ I knew then that I was on the right track.

For Stanley Fish, a secular literary critic, textual meaning is a function of the interpretive assumptions that happen to be in force in a particular

87. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Interpreting Scripture between the Rock of Biblical Studies and the Hard Place of Systematic Theology: The State of the Evangelical (dis)Union," in *Renewing the Evangelical Mission*, ed. Richard Lints (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 201–25, esp. 217.

88. Compare Rupert Davies's statement of the problem of authority in religion: "Is there any accessible source of religious truth which is wholly authoritative? and, if so, what is it?" (*The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers: A Study in Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin* [London: Epworth, 1946], 9).

89. Peter J. Leithart, "Epistemological Crisis," *First Things*, August 9, 2013, <http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2013/08/epistemological-crisis>.

90. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.

91. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007.

interpretive community. Neither text nor reader is the self-sufficient source of meaning; rather, the interpretive community encompasses both: “There is no single way of reading that is correct or natural, only ‘ways of reading’ that are extensions of community perspectives.”⁹² In dethroning objectivity and subjectivity in favor of intersubjectivity, Fish follows philosophers of science like Thomas Kuhn, who claims that even scientists examine the world through paradigms that their interpretive community, the scientific community, treats as authoritative. How ought rival scientific or, for that matter, rival Protestant communities negotiate their interpretive disagreements? Is there anything that can arbitrate the conflict of communal interpretive paradigms? For those who swim in Fish’s school, there is no authoritative authorial voice in the text: it is community reading conventions all the way down.

Always Retrieving? “Ressourcing” the Debate about Interpretive Authority

Attentive readers may at this point think that my situation is hopeless. Surely the evidence is irrefutable: the Reformers agreed *that* Scripture is supremely authoritative yet routinely disagreed as to *what* it says. The case against *sola scriptura* seems insurmountable. Even Harry Houdini could not escape these chains.

Earlier I spoke of the Reformation as a “revolution,” which is the way many of its critics view it: a “radical and violent overthrow of an existing system,”⁹³ namely, Roman Catholicism. Philip Schaff disagrees. In his view, the Reformation was neither a revolution nor a restoration but “a deeper plunge into the meaning of the gospel.”⁹⁴ There is continuity with the past (this is what Schaff calls the Reformation’s “retrospective” aspect) and also forward progress (its “prospective” aspect).

Schaff does not use the word, but I will: the Reformation was a *retrieval*, first and foremost of the biblical gospel, particularly the Pauline articulation,

92. Fish, *Is There a Text?*, 16. McGrath says something similar: “It is important to note that biblical interpretation is partly a socially constructed enterprise that rests on inherited assumptions concerning what is ‘natural’ or ‘obvious’ within a community” (*Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, 468).

93. Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, trans. John W. Nevin, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology 1 (1845; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 57.

94. Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 1, *The History of Creeds* (New York: Harper, 1877), 204.

but also, secondarily, of the church fathers.⁹⁵ The Reformers were engaged in theology as retrieval long before it became trendy. Retrieval theology is the name for a “*mode or style of theological discernment* that looks back in order to move forward.”⁹⁶ In their book *Theology as Retrieval*, David Buschart and Kent Eilers argue that Christian theology has always been about receiving and transmitting the deposit of faith. For example, the apostle Paul sees himself as “passing on” (*paradidōmi*) what he had “received” (*paralambanō*) from the Lord (1 Cor. 11:23). Retrieval is a mode of “handing down”—traditioning—“the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). At the same time, retrieval does more than repeat: it reforms. And it reforms not according to the standard of a past formula but according to the living and active Word of Scripture: “Christian allegiance is not to a single tradition but to the gospel, not to the task of reform for reform’s sake but to Christ.”⁹⁷ Sometimes viewing the past from our present situation makes the past (and the present) come alive in new ways. That is what I hope to do with this book.

We typically associate retrieval with Vatican II’s and Henri de Lubac’s *ressourcement* of patristic theology.⁹⁸ *Ressourcement* describes a return to authoritative sources for the sake of revitalizing the present. Unsurprisingly (given the principle “scholar see, scholar do”), there is now a call for evangelicals to retrieve the patristic and medieval heritage, based in part on the realization that the Reformers too relied in important ways on the church fathers. To my knowledge, however, no one has called for a properly Protestant *ressourcement*—that is, a retrieval of distinctly Reformation insights—to address the problem of interpretive pluralism. Such is my purpose here. As the Reformers

95. See further Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999); Chung-Kim, *Inventing Authority*.

96. W. David Buschart and Kent D. Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 12.

97. William Stacy Johnson, “Theology and the Church’s Mission: Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, and Reformed,” in Alston and Welker, *Reformed Theology*, 67.

98. Michael Allen and Scott Swain survey ten other retrieving trends, including Thomas Oden’s “paleo-orthodoxy,” Robert Webber’s “ancient-future” Christianity, and Radical Orthodoxy’s Christian Platonism. They also commend their own model, reformed catholicity, in their *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 4–15. See also John Webster, “Theologies of Retrieval,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 583–99; and Webster, “*Ressourcement* Theology and Protestantism,” in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Theology*, ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 482–95.

retrieved the gospel to meet the challenges of their time, so I want to retrieve certain aspects of the Reformation to meet present challenges. The purpose is not to provide a full-fledged hermeneutical theory but to address the criticism that Protestant biblical interpretation is essentially uncontrollable—anarchic.

Some may think the idea of retrieving the Reformers old hat. There are whole denominations already devoted to that, committed to preserving not only the legacy but also the doctrines and confessional statements of the Reformation. Yes, there are. But we ought not to confuse retrieval with either retrenchment or repristination: retrieval is not a simple return to the past (it can't be done).⁹⁹ Nor is it primarily a matter of rehabilitating the reputation of the Reformers, though correcting certain caricatures would be a welcome secondary outcome.¹⁰⁰ No, the main purpose of retrieval is the revitalization of biblical interpretation, theology, and the church today. *To retrieve is to look back creatively in order to move forward faithfully.*¹⁰¹ In particular, what needs to be retrieved is the Reformers' vision for catholic unity under canonical authority, and also their strategy for making this vision visible through table talk: conciliar deliberation around not simply a conference table but a Communion table.

Andrew Walls, a historian of mission, views translation into vernacular languages as the principal means by which the gospel is transmitted. Walls's special interest is the rise of Christianity in the non-Western world, and though he does not mention Luther, I see no reason why we should not consider Luther as part of the gospel's missionary advance. Luther translated and contextualized the gospel—which is to say, *retrieved* it—into the vernacular language and cultural situation of his day.¹⁰² Theology is always missiologi-

99. For a criticism of retrenchment and repristination as models of retrieval, see Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*, 270–72.

100. Robert McAfee Brown helpfully distinguishes between looking *at* the Reformers (i.e., in admiration) and looking *through* them, “using them as a helpful means of looking at something else more clearly, namely that which the Reformers themselves looked at—the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ” (*The Spirit of Protestantism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965], 20).

101. Elsewhere I describe this looking back and moving forward in terms of theatrical improvisation. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 335–44. See also Vanhoozer, “Improvising Theology according to the Scriptures: An Evangelical Account of the Development of Doctrine,” in *Building on the Foundations of Evangelical Theology: Essays in Honor of John S. Feinberg*, ed. Gregg R. Allison and Stephen J. Wellum (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 15–50.

102. For a study of the ways in which sixteenth-century struggles over biblical translation were related to the issue of authority, see Allan K. Jenkins and Patrick Preston, *Biblical Scholarship and the Church: A Sixteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

cal to the extent that the search for understanding requires us to speak that understanding into new contexts. The Reformation thus appears in this light as a missiological retrieval of the gospel as set forth in the original languages of the Bible.

Walls's understanding of mission and transmission helps us to see better how retrieval looks back creatively in order to move forward faithfully. Vernacular translation—the attempt to contextualize the gospel in a particular language—results in a net conceptual gain for the whole church. We see this at Nicaea, when the West and East had to come together to articulate the Son's relationship to the Father. I think that we also see it in the Reformation. Consider the way Walls describes the process of transmitting the faith: “As Paul and his fellow missionaries explain and translate the significance of the Christ in a world that is Gentile and Hellenistic, that significance is seen to be greater than anyone had realized before. It is as though Christ himself actually grows through the work of mission.”¹⁰³

To retrieve the Reformation, then, is not to repeat but to *translate* it into our new cultural contexts, thus enlarging our understanding of its achievement.¹⁰⁴ *The present work contends that retrieving the five Reformation solas helps to address the contemporary problem of pervasive interpretive pluralism, and that retrieving the priesthood of all believers (ecclesiology) helps to address the problem of the authority of interpretive communities.* The retrieval of the *solas* constitutes the *material principle* of mere Protestant Christianity insofar as they summarize the economy of the gospel, while retrieving the priesthood of all believers (disciples under the domain of Jesus Christ's commissioned witnesses) constitutes its *formal principle*, especially as concerns the particular problem that is the focus of the present work: whose biblical interpretation counts, and why. Together, these two principles will enable us to retrieve a third, what I will call the *final principle* of the Reformation, namely, catholicity: a differentiated or “plural” interpretive community, a rich communion that is both creature of the Word of God and fellowship of the Spirit.

103. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), xvii.

104. Elsewhere I have distinguished between two kinds of sameness: *idem* (permanence in time; numeric identity) and *ipse* (continuity in time; narrative identity). Theology as retrieval in the sense that I intend here partakes more of *ipse* than of *idem* identity, though because the faith is “one” there are aspects of each. However, while what God has done remains the same, our understanding of it grows. See Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 127–31.

Retrieving the Solas: The Ontology of Interpretive Authority

I have written this book not to bury or even repent of the *solas* but rather to sing their praise. I realize that my claim is at first blush counterintuitive: How can *sola scriptura* save us from pervasive interpretive pluralism? Isn't *sola scriptura* the epitome of a mind-set that leads in anticatholic directions? Many people today, including some Protestants, consider *sola scriptura* to be toxic to the project of church unity. In this respect, it is like the Greek word for “drug,” *pharmakon*, which according to context can mean either “poison” or “remedy,” as Jacques Derrida famously pointed out in his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy.”¹⁰⁵ What first appears to be the poison of Protestantism (a cause of solitariness) proves upon further inspection, and retrieval, to be the cure (a cause of salutariness).

What exactly are the *solas*, the “alones”? We are familiar with the list: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. Some people call them “doctrines” insofar as they express key theological convictions about the essentials of the Christian faith, as when we conjoin *sola gratia* and *sola fide* to express the doctrine of justification by faith. Others view the *solas* as rallying cries summarizing the Reformers’ chief disagreement with the Roman Catholicism of their day: Scripture alone over tradition; grace alone over merit; faith alone over works. Still others view the *solas* as positive “principles.”¹⁰⁶ The Wesleyan theologian Albert Outler approaches the matter differently: “All the great Reformation watchwords—*sola Scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*—have one essential meaning: *solus Christus* . . . Jesus Christ is the Christian dogma.”¹⁰⁷

Outler raises an interesting point: Can we group the five *solas* into a single big idea? While books today commonly treat the five *solas* together, it was not until the twentieth century that they were mentioned collectively,¹⁰⁸ and

105. Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1981), 61–172.

106. See Terry L. Johnson, *The Case for Traditional Protestantism: The Solas of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004).

107. Albert Outler, *The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 128–29.

108. To be precise, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura* can be found in the sixteenth-century Reformers’ writings, but *solus Christus* and *solus Deo gloria* appeared somewhat later—the latter on a regular basis in the compositions of J. S. Bach. However, the absence of the actual phrase does not imply the lack of the concept, and I would argue that all five *solas* reflect core Reformation theological convictions. See Theodore Engelder, “The Three Principles of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides,” in *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation*, ed. W. H. T. Dua (St. Louis: Concordia, 1916), 97–109.

discussions about what links them together remain rare.¹⁰⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy's *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* is one of the few books that do.¹¹⁰ Also noteworthy is Herman Bavinck's 1917 reference (on the occasion of the Reformation's four hundredth anniversary) to three *solas* as expressing the essential Reformation confession: "*Scriptura sola, gratia sola, fides sola . . .* This was not a new principle, only the old Gospel."¹¹¹

Goldsworthy views the *solas* as basic hermeneutical presuppositions for reading Scripture.¹¹² He asks how there can be five "alones" and answers that "they are distinct emphases on the one essential truth of the gospel."¹¹³ And, because salvation is connected to the work of Father, Son, and Spirit, he suggests that the "alones" have their organic unity in the Triune God: "The gospel of our salvation through faith alone, in Christ alone, by grace alone, revealed in the Bible alone, is what it is only because God is the kind of God he is."¹¹⁴ From this insight Goldsworthy goes on to link the *solas* to the basic ontological, epistemological, and hermeneutical presuppositions that undergird Christian faith.

Thus encouraged by Bavinck's precedent and Goldsworthy's example, I make so bold as to suggest that the *solas*, taken together, represent what we might call the *first theology* of mere Protestant Christianity.¹¹⁵ *The solas are not isolated doctrines; they are theological insights into the ontology,*

109. Bruce Atkinson, "The Seven Solas: Toward Reconciling Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic Perspectives," *Virtue Online*, December 31, 2009, <http://www.virtueonline.org/seven-solas-toward-reconciling-evangelical-and-anglo-catholic-perspectives>.

110. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

111. Herman Bavinck, "De Hervorming en ons nationale leven," in *Ter herdenking der Hervorming, 1517–1917: Twee redevoeringen, uitgesproken in de openbare zitting van den senaat der Vrije Universiteit op 31 October 1917*, ed. H. Bavinck and H. H. Kuyper (Kampen: Kok, 1917), 7. Translation in Henk van den Belt, "The Problematic Character of *Sola Scriptura*," in *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Eric Peels, Arnold Huijgen, and Hans Burger (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

112. Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 39. Goldsworthy adopts John Frame's definition of a presupposition as "a belief that takes precedence over another and therefore serves as a criterion for another" (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987], 45).

113. Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 46. Strictly speaking, he focuses on only four of the *solas* but acknowledges that some, like me, add a fifth: *solī Deo gloria*.

114. *Ibid.*, 50.

115. Though it lies beyond the scope of the present chapter, I believe that there is a parallel of sorts between the way I propose to use the five *solas* here and what I call "strong Trinitarianism"—that is, an approach to theology that treats the Trinity not simply as one doctrine among others but as the lens through which all other doctrines are viewed. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Three (or More) Ways of Triangulating Theology: On the Very Idea of a Trinitarian System,"

epistemology, and teleology of the gospel. The *solas* are not a substitute for creedal orthodoxy but its servants. The *solas* do not develop the doctrine of the Trinity but presuppose it. Indeed, their special function is to preserve the integrity of the triune economies of revelation and redemption. As such, they are guides to theological judgment that both generate and govern mere Protestant theology. *They also provide resources with which to respond to the charge that the Reformation unintentionally loosed interpretive anarchy upon the world.* In subsequent chapters I argue that the *solas* provide a pattern for reading Scripture theologically that enables Protestant unanimity on theological essentials, and thus the possibility of genuine fellowship in spite of secondary and tertiary doctrinal differences.

My aim is to retrieve the Reformation *solas* in order to refute the all-too-common charge that *sola scriptura* generates pervasive interpretive pluralism. I want to take what many believe to be the Achilles heel of Reformation Protestantism and show that it is not a mortal weakness when connected to the rest of the body—that is, the other four *solas*.¹¹⁶ Though occasioned by the need to correct medieval excesses that misconstrued the church’s role in the plan of salvation, the *solas* are essentially positive, rather than negative, insights into the presuppositions, implications, and entailments of the gospel. Accordingly, the *solas* are the permanent Copernican revolution at the heart of the Reformation, a synopsis of the story that “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6), namely, the proclamation of the exclusive lordship of Christ, the crucified king.¹¹⁷

Retrieving the Royal Priesthood of All Believers: The Economy of Interpretive Authority

Retrieving the *solas* yields the material principle of mere Protestant Christianity: the triune economy of the gospel. “Economy” is the theological term for the work of Father, Son, and Spirit. It comes from two Greek terms, *oikos* (house) and *nomos* (law), and conveys the sense of “household management.”

in *Revisioning, Renewing, and Rediscovering the Triune Center: Essays in Honor of Stanley J. Grenz*, ed. Derek Tidball, Brian Harris, and Jason Sexton (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 31–58.

116. See also Arnold Huijgen, “Alone Together: *Sola Scriptura* and the Other *Solas* of the Reformation,” in *Sola Scriptura: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Scripture, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Eric Peels, Arnold Huijgen, and Hans Burger (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

117. See further Jeremy R. Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

To speak of the economy of the gospel is thus to highlight the ways in which the three divine persons manage to bring about the good news that Christ's death and resurrection make possible the reconciliation and restoration of the world. The *solas* summarize what the Father is doing in Christ through the Spirit to form a holy nation, and this summary—a rule of faith, hope, and love—functions as a hermeneutical tool with which to arbitrate the conflict of interpretations. However, in order to respond to the crisis of Protestant interpretation, we also need to recover a hitherto-underappreciated element in the pattern of Protestant interpretive authority: the principle of the priesthood of all believers. I call this the formal principle of mere Protestant Christianity for two reasons: first, the formation of a royal priesthood is part of the gospel's very content (the good news about Jesus includes the corporate dimension of being in Christ); second, discussions about biblical interpretation are “earthed” in local congregations.

Far from being a pathology that accords authority to autonomous individuals, the royal priesthood of all believers—briefly, the notion that all church members are ministers of God's Word—is actually part of a pattern of authority, indeed, part of a triune economy of authority. “*Royal*” signals authority; “*priesthood*” signals interpretive community; “*all believers*” signals that individuals are not autonomous agents but citizens of the gospel.¹¹⁸ I will therefore speak of the “royal priesthood of all believers” to signal my intent to retrieve not only the principle of authority (the Triune God speaking in the Scriptures) but also the pattern of authority, which is to say the pattern of interpretive authority, an economy that identifies Jesus Christ alone as king but accords pride of interpretive place to his royal priesthood.

To put it more provocatively: in retrieving the royal priesthood of all believers, I am pursuing what amounts to a virtual sixth sola: *sola ecclesia* (church alone).¹¹⁹ Before you light the match, hear me out. Church alone *what*? The short answer: *the church alone is the place where Christ rules over his kingdom and gives certain gifts for the building of his living temple.*¹²⁰ If we are to retrieve the promise of the Reformation but not its pathology, we must retrieve not merely the idea but the practice of the royal priesthood of all

118. In the Old Testament, one of the functions of priests was to teach and interpret the Torah, Israel's law (Deut. 33:10; cf. Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26).

119. I am aware that in the context of Roman Catholic theology, *sola ecclesia* refers to the church's final authority to interpret Scripture. I am here putting the phrase to a different, distinctly Protestant use.

120. See further Michael J. Glodo, “*Sola ecclesia*: The Lost Reformation Doctrine?,” *Reformation and Revival* 9, no. 4 (2000): 91–97.

believers, their place in the economy of triune communication. “Economy” is the operative term. There is a pattern, a divinely ordered way of being a people of the book, and this pattern helps explain whose biblical interpretation counts, why it counts, and in what way it counts.

Retrieving Catholicity: The Teleology of Interpretive Authority

The third theme to retrieve from the Reformation may be the most surprising of all: catholicity. Is this not what the Reformation was against? If you think that, you are not alone. Philip Schaff shocked his audience when, in an 1844 inaugural address on “The Principle of Protestantism” to the German Reformed Theological Seminary at Mercersburg (Pennsylvania), he declared the Reformation to be the “greatest act” of the catholic church.¹²¹ Schaff judged the Church of Rome to be subcatholic in refusing to acknowledge the Reformation as its legitimate child.¹²² This is not to say that he gave Protestant churches a free pass. He identified the great defect of modern Protestantism as its sectarianism: “the want of an adequate conception of the nature of the church and of its relation to the individual Christian.”¹²³ From his mid-nineteenth-century perspective, Schaff believed the greatest threat to the Protestant principle to be not Rome but an exaggerated subjectivism that fails to acknowledge the objectivity of the church. The way forward, he claimed, was Protestant Catholicism,¹²⁴ no doubt a conceptual ancestor of what I am calling mere Protestant Christianity.

Catholicity is the final principle of the Reformation insofar as it regulates the process of biblical interpretation and the end toward which it tends, not the monological institutional unity of Rome but a dialogical or “plural” unity. Catholicity is an “Ephesian moment”—Andrew Walls’s term for that quintessentially evangelical moment when churches take a step toward an even greater realization of the unity of the body of Christ.¹²⁵ “Ephesian moment” is Walls’s way of referring to those times in church history when we catch a glimpse of the summing up of all things in Christ. Walls is thinking, in particular,

121. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 224.

122. Robert McAfee Brown agrees: “For [the Reformers] the issue of the Reformation was precisely the issue of catholicity. They contended . . . that medieval Christendom had surrendered the notion of catholicity to a limited and distorted understanding” (*Spirit of Protestantism*, 19).

123. Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 227.

124. *Ibid.*, 230.

125. Buschart and Eilers list reconciliation as an outcome of retrieval (*Theology as Retrieval*, 273–74).

of Ephesians 2:14–16, which speaks of Christ creating in himself one new humanity in place of the two (i.e., Jew and gentile): “Christ takes flesh as he is received by faith in various segments of social reality at different periods, as well as in different places. And these different manifestations belong together; they are part of the same story.”¹²⁶ To the extent that different Protestant traditions are also different cultures that share their respective insights into the gospel, they too can experience Ephesian moments, moments when their diversity can be seen to be part of a larger unity. These Ephesian moments are often fleeting because of two dangers that Walls identifies as pride (the instinctive desire to protect our own version of Christian faith) and indifference (the postmodern decision that no one can know for sure, so why bother ruling some versions out). Catholicity is not chaos, however. It is the standing challenge for the church to display its unity in Christ despite its differences.¹²⁷

Mere Protestant Christianity is catholic Christianity inflected by the Reformation. The name is an obvious allusion to C. S. Lewis’s “Mere Christianity,” which Lewis in turn took from the seventeenth-century Puritan pastor Richard Baxter.¹²⁸ Baxter lived in the early heyday of Protestant denominationalism, but instead of the traditional labels (e.g., Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregationalist), he preferred to call himself a “meer” or “catholick” Christian.¹²⁹ As Baxter and Lewis use it, “mere” means not what is “barely” or “minimally” the case (as in lowest common denominator) but rather what is “centrally” or “essentially” the case. In Lewis’s words: “It is at her center, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to each other in spirit, if not in doctrine.”¹³⁰

Why Mere Protestant Christianity Matters

Does it matter if Protestants go the way of the dodo, eventually becoming extinct? Jacques Maritain once referred to the Reformation as “that immense

126. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 74.

127. The recent joining of Reformed and Lutheran churches in France may represent an Ephesian moment. The two churches are now L’église Protestante unie de France (the United Protestant Church of France). As we will see in later chapters, however, catholicity need not entail institutional unification.

128. Timothy George, “A Thicker Kind of Mere,” *First Things*, May 2015, <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/05/a-thicker-kind-of-mere>.

129. Baxter uses both terms on the same page of his *Church History of the Government of Bishops and Their Councils* (London: John Kidgell, 1680), 6.

130. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 8–9.

disaster for humanity,”¹³¹ and more recently Peter Leithart has called for the “end” of the kind of Protestantism that defines itself in opposition to Roman Catholicism.¹³² “By their fruits ye shall know them.” If we knew Protestantism only as a negative, critical gesture, then probably there would be no good reason to perpetuate it. Why waste water on a barren fig tree? It is my contention, however, that the Reformation was a key event, a precious Ephesian moment in the history and mission of the church, a moment in space and time that has yielded its fruit—a deeper theological insight into the gospel—in due season, a growth in understanding, and hence both a boon and a blessing to the *whole* church.

If mere Protestant Christianity indicates the way forward for the twenty-first-century church, it is not because it is a form of generic Christianity. This has sometimes been the tendency of the evangelical movement: to flatten out Protestant differences by locating identity in a common experience, spirituality, or ministry rather than a common confession (i.e., a definable set of doctrines).¹³³ The problem is that evangelicalism itself has become a fractious, fissiparous (there’s that word again) movement that began as a renewal movement of confessional Protestantism but that now too often attempts to maintain itself by seeking renewal by means other than confessional theology. However, renewal without a direct object—the gospel as articulated by the Protestant confessions—is energy poorly spent. Moreover, for many evangelicals the visible church is a matter of secondary or incidental importance. This becomes especially problematic in the face of rival biblical interpretations and doctrinal differences. Bereft of an institutional means to deal with difference, evangelical cells simply continue to split: not “divide and conquer” but “divide and rancor.” This is Protestantism’s dangerous idea at work—the dissolution of interpretive authority—generating division and disunity.

Mere Protestant Christianity is an attempt to stop the bleeding: first, by retrieving the *solas* as guidelines and guardrails of biblical interpretation; and second, by retrieving the royal priesthood of all believers, which is to say, the place of the church in the pattern of theological authority—the place where *sola scriptura* gets lived out in embodied interpretive practices. Lewis

131. Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944), 13.

132. Leithart, “Future of Protestantism.” See further his *The End of Protestantism: Pursuing Unity in a Fragmented Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016).

133. John Stackhouse gives a winsome presentation of this position in “Generic Evangelicalism,” in *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, ed. Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 116–42.

associated mere Christianity with the hall of a house: we meet others in the hall, but we live in the rooms. My own proposal is that we think of the various denominations, interpretive communities, or confessional traditions (“communions”) as houses, and Protestantism as the street—call it “Evangel Way.” The Roman Catholic Church is the seven-story yellow house at the end of the street, at the intersection of Evangel Way and Tiber Road. At the other end of the street is a vacant lot where a few families live in mobile homes (independent Bible churches). With this image in mind, think of mere Protestant Christianity as a block party—and the neighborhood watch. Mere Protestant Christianity provides space and parameters for plural unity: on my Father’s street there are many mansions.

To be a mere Protestant Christian, one must be not only a person of one book but also a person of one church. “Catholicity” belongs somewhere in the pattern of theological authority too: minimally, as the proper context for reading Scripture;¹³⁴ maximally, as a first earthly step in the triune mission “to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). The church’s catholicity—the scope of what is “in Christ”—is a parable of the cosmic unity that will obtain in the kingdom of God. Scripture is never “alone” in one sense because it is never without the communal domain over which it rules: the people of God. *Mere Protestant Christianity uses the resources of the solas and the priesthood of all believers to express the unity-in-diversity that local churches have in Christ.* It calls churches to enact, on some level and in tangible ways, the oneness for which Jesus prayed, as evidence of the gospel—a project that requires a mere Protestant ecclesiology.

In the chapters that follow I present the *solas* as seeds for a perennial reformation of the church. *The kind of Protestantism that needs to live on is not the one that encourages individual autonomy or corporate pride but the one that encourages the church to hold fast to the gospel, and to one another.* The only good Protestant is a catholic Protestant—one who learns from, and bears fruit for, the *whole* church. In light of this exacting standard, I submit that the Reformers were good Protestants.¹³⁵ Hence the project of the present work: to retrieve mere Protestant Christianity, enabling the lion of biblical fidelity (*sola scriptura*) to lie down with the lamb of ecclesial fraternity (*sola ecclesia*).

134. To coin a Latin phrase: “Exegesis *extra ecclesiam nulla unitas*” (Exegesis outside the church [will ultimately yield] no unity).

135. As we will see, a “good” Protestant is one who displays the humility that characterizes those who attend to God’s Word and the charity that characterizes those who walk in God’s Spirit.