

# THE “REDEMPTIVE-MOVEMENT HERMENEUTIC” AND THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE IN LIGHT OF THE HISTORY OF DOGMA<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

THE THEME ANNOUNCED in the title of this essay invites us to reflect more deeply on the hermeneutical issues involved in using the Bible today. The impulse for this current discussion arose with I. Howard Marshall’s book, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology*.<sup>2</sup>

Near the end of his presentation, Marshall offers this as the second of seven summarizing conclusions:

There is an incompleteness in Scripture, seen in factors such as the diversity, the occasional nature of the teaching, and the impossibility of dealing with later questions and problems, all of which mean that doctrine can and must develop beyond scriptural statements.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was presented at the 51st meeting of the Midwestern Region of the Evangelical Theological Society on 24 March 2006, at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. See our review of this volume in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 16 (2005): 209-214.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 78.

This formulation is as provocative as it is puzzling, leaving us to wonder how we are to understand and confess the Reformational (and presumably evangelical) insistence on the *sufficiency* of Scripture as our rule for faith and life. The sufficiency of Scripture is tied closely to its authority, so that this perplexity deepens when we consider Marshall's third conclusion:

Since the revelation is given not simply in individual texts as units of meaning, but through the whole of Scripture, the individual texts must be seen in light of the whole, and some may be seen as staging posts on the way to fuller understanding; they are no longer valid in their original form, although they were once authoritative in that form, but continue to be authoritative in a different way.<sup>4</sup>

Although this formulation is not altogether clear to me, it seems to be suggesting that the canonical Scriptures function authoritatively in a way that is different from the way they functioned authoritatively in their original setting. Some individual texts—which ones, we're not told; how they are determined, we're not informed—may be staging posts en route to fuller understanding.

This essay hopes to further the discussion by interacting specifically with these two conclusions to Marshall's essay. I leave it to the reader to discover from his essay their background and supporting arguments. I propose to review in this study the notion of the sufficiency of Scripture, to trace it within the history of dogma, and to assess current hermeneutical proposals in the light of these considerations.

Current evangelical analysis of the use of Scripture in doctrine and ethics, including the analysis of Marshall, seems dominated by an image or metaphor that warrants close and patient analysis. Kevin Vanhoozer alerted us to this already in his brief response to Marshall, included in the book.<sup>5</sup> The title of Dr. Marshall's book

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<sup>4</sup> Marshall, *Beyond the Bible*, 78.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, "Into the Great 'Beyond': A Theologian's Response to the Marshall Plan," *Beyond the Bible*, 81-95.

involves a spatial metaphor, *Beyond the Bible*; he and others today refer to "trajectories" and "vectors," "zenith" and "apogee," "staging" and "movement." All of this belongs to the world either of spaceships or of astronomy. As it comes to be applied to the subject of the hermeneutics of the Bible, this metaphor guides our language and our vision, inviting us to peer "around," "beneath," "within," "outside," "inside," "above," and, of course, "beyond" the Bible.

Another metaphor is available to us, one that we believe may be more helpful, this one from the world of physiology. It too possesses features having to do with growth, development, latency, implicitness, outcome, product, and life. It is the metaphor of fetology, that branch of medical science concerned with the study and treatment of the embryo in utero. The image most relevant to this presentation is that of the umbilical cord. In placental mammals, the umbilical cord connects the developing embryo to the placenta, and the cord contains arteries and veins which enable the exchange of blood that is rich in nutrients and oxygen. We wish to suggest that the relationship between the Bible and its intended audience, the believing church, is nourished and strengthened by the Holy Spirit's use of the church's *regula fidei* or "rule of faith," commonly called creeds and confessions, which are the umbilical cord mediating the life of the living Word of God to the people of God. Please understand that every analogy, every metaphor, has limits and should not be over-pressed, including this one. But we trust that the points of comparison are both accurate and helpful in terms of the current discussion of hermeneutics.

### *What Is Meant by the Sufficiency of Scripture?*

Theologians speak of several attributes of Scripture, including the authority, necessity, clarity, and sufficiency of Scripture. This doctrine of the attributes of Scripture arose entirely within the Reformational context of conflict with Roman Catholicism and Anabaptism. It is important to recognize that this polemic involved the reformers on two fronts, and the doctrine of the

attributes of Scripture supplied answers to questions raised from both of these opponents.<sup>6</sup>

One well-known Reformational confession, the *Belgic Confession* of 1561, formulates a clear statement of this doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture, in Article 7, entitled “The Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures to be the Only Rule of Faith”:

We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an Apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: *nay, though it were an angel from heaven*, as the apostle Paul saith. For since it is forbidden *to add unto or take away anything from the Word of God*, it doth thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects. Neither may we compare any writings of men, though ever so holy, with those divine Scriptures; nor ought we to compare custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times or persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, with the truth of God, for the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule, which the Apostles have taught us, saying, *Try the spirits whether they are of God*; likewise, *If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For a clear presentation of the Protestant and Reformed understanding of these attributes, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, ed. by John Bolt, trans. by John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 449-494. Interestingly, Bavinck states that the reformers' doctrine of the attributes of Scripture was developed not by Zwingli, Calvin, and Melancthon, but later by Musculus, Zanchius, Polanus, Junius, and among the Lutherans, Gerhard, Quenstedt, Calovius, Hollaz, et alia.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds with Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1931 [reprint 1983]), 387-389.

This means that no church, no tradition, and no human being possesses an authority on a par with Scripture. In the words of The Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 (31.4):

All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as a help in both.<sup>8</sup>

As such, because Scripture itself is *sui generis*, the authority of Scripture is *sui generis*.

By the sufficiency or perfection of Scripture, then, theologians refer to that quality of Scripture that renders it alone adequate for communicating to the human race the divine revelation of truth and grace pertaining to faith and life in union with Jesus Christ. The sufficiency of Scripture does not mean that everything spoken and written by the prophets, by Christ, and by the apostles was incorporated in the Bible. Nor does it mean that all the articles of the Christian faith are found in finished form in Scripture. Because Scripture is sufficient, it requires no supplement, whether from other revelations of the Spirit or by tradition. Nor does the sufficiency of Scripture imply that the Bible contains all the practices and regulations required by the church for its own organization. This attribute or characteristic of Scripture means that the Bible contains "the articles of faith" (*articuli fidei*) or that the Bible teaches everything necessary for salvation. This feature does, however, leave room for the growth and development of doctrine, since it does not insist that the Bible contains Christian doctrine in the very words with which that doctrine is later formulated (e.g., the doctrine of the Trinity and of Christology). The attribute of Scripture's perfection or sufficiency claims only that the church's doctrines are contained either explicitly or implicitly in the Bible in such a way that they can be derived from Scripture solely by comparative study, without the help of another

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<sup>8</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:670.

source.<sup>9</sup> Within Scripture there is latent truth, latent meaning, which must be obtained through study and reflection, but without dependence on any other source. That is entailed in the attribute of the sufficiency of Scripture.

### *The Regula Fidei*

If it is the case that the doctrine of the attributes of Scripture, including the sufficiency of Scripture, was not articulated until the Reformation, then what did the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture look like before that time? The answer is found in what is called the *regula fidei*, or “rule of faith” (also termed the *analogia fidei* or “analogy of faith”).<sup>10</sup>

Although Scripture is alone adequate to communicate the divine revelation of truth and grace pertaining to faith and life in union with Jesus Christ, it is not alone in exercising its adequacy. Here we have in mind the commonly used distinction between Scripture as the *norma normans* or “norming norm,” on the one hand, and the church’s creeds and confessions as the *norma normata* or “normed norm,” on the other. Notice that each is characterized as *norma*; that is, each of them, Scripture and the creeds, possesses authority to govern, to regulate, to norm doctrine and life. But as the “normed norm,” the creeds and confessions are subordinate to and measured by the “norming norm,” Scripture itself.

Another phrase employed historically in this discussion is *regula fidei*, or Rule of Faith. This phrase is capable of several uses and meanings, some more strict and precise, others more general.

Strictly speaking, the church’s *regula fidei* is identical to Scripture itself. This usage and identity are clearly reflected in the

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<sup>9</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:488.

<sup>10</sup> For a general introduction to this vocabulary and usage, see Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6th ed., vol. 1, *The History of Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1931 [reprint 1983]), 3-11.

Belgic Confession (Art. 7), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1.2), and the Formula of Concord (Epit. Pr. 1).<sup>11</sup>

Properly speaking, the Rule of Faith (or Analogy of Faith) refers not to the interpretation of Scripture by means of Christian doctrine, but rather to an extended analogy of Scripture made from the text to the broader theological meaning of the whole Bible.<sup>12</sup> But this "analogy" enabling the move from the text to broader theological meaning consists of already-discovered textual meanings which the church has discerned through its faith-filled listening to the voice of God in Jesus Christ.

Yet, there is another, more general usage, whereby the church's *regula fidei* refers to the rudimentary content of the Christian faith, such as the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. One contemporary commentator describes the church *regula fidei* as "narrative in shape, trinitarian in substance, and relat[ing] the essential beliefs of Christianity together by the grammar of Christological monotheism."<sup>13</sup> This latter phrase, "the grammar of Christological monotheism," reflects the church's persistent interest in identifying Jesus Christ as the *fundamentum et scopus scripturae* (the foundation and scope of Scripture).<sup>14</sup> In a very important sense, therefore, *Jesus Christ himself* is the church's *regula*

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<sup>11</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 4, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeks and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Richard A. Muller, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology*, vol. 2 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 494.

<sup>13</sup> Robert W. Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. by Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 101. Despite Wall's helpful emphasis on the church as the addressee of Scripture and his observations concerning the "dislocation of Scripture from the church to the academic guilds of biblical and theological scholarship" (90), his claim that the church's *experience* contributes raw material for the Rule of Faith is problematic (101-102).

<sup>14</sup> For a thorough presentation of this component of Scripture's authority and sufficiency in Reformational and post-Reformational dogmatics, see Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 206-223.

*fidei*, since the redemptive significance of his person and work forms the heart of God's saving revelation in the Bible. Jesus Christ is the personal norm by which the Bible's message is known to be authoritative.

The relationship among these three uses and meaning of the phrase *regula fidei* could be explored further, but space does not permit that. We must suffice with saying that because Jesus Christ is the living Word of God who comes through Scripture to the church, there can be only a distinction without separation between the Living Word addressed to the church and the words of the text. The words of the text carry or mediate the meaning offered through revelation by the eternal Word and Wisdom of God, even Jesus Christ. This means, among other things, that only one who is united by faith to Jesus Christ can interpret the Bible aright. But it also means that this interpretation, to be right, must arise within the context of the church. Because Christ lived, died, arose, and ascended *pro nobis* (for us), the very Scripture which mediates this redemptive history is also essentially given *ad et pro nobis* (to and for us).

### *The Regula Fidei as Regula Interpretationis*

Throughout the church's history, the *regula fidei* has performed several functions. These include serving the church's liturgical needs in public worship, preaching, teaching, and sacraments. In addition, the church's teaching ministry required creeds as tools for catechesis. Defending the faith against heresies required creedal formulation, as did testifying to the faith in times of persecution and evangelizing others unto faith.<sup>15</sup> But the function that deserves special attention here is this: the church's *regula fidei*, as it came to be formulated in her creeds and confessions, functioned as a hermeneutical guide for biblical studies and theological formulation. The church's creeds and confessions

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of these functions, see John H. Leith, "Creeds, Early Christian," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1203-205.



function in relation to Scripture by defining the rules of biblical hermeneutics.<sup>16</sup>

Notice that already within Scripture we observe a "creed" functioning hermeneutically. Part of the apostle Paul's solution to the Corinthian dispute over eating idol food (1 Cor. 8-10) consisted of interpreting, expanding, and applying the confession found in Deuteronomy 6:4: "The LORD our God, the LORD is one"—from which the apostle drew, on the basis of divine revelation: ". . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:6). This confession of faith served two purposes: it summarized God's actions in history and it summarized the apostle's own teaching.<sup>17</sup>

This intra-biblical confessionality is picked up by the Nicene Creed, which cites 1 Corinthians 15 to the effect that the suffering and resurrection of Christ occurred "according to the Scriptures." By including the phrase "according to the Scriptures," the Nicene Creed requires us to confess that the Old Testament witnesses to Jesus Christ, and thereby requires an interpretation of the Bible "according to" the creed. "For," as Jaroslav Pelikan observes, "the two [Scripture and creed] are seen as correlative and interdependent."<sup>18</sup> By employing the distinction between "begotten, not made," the Nicene Creed exercises the hermeneutical function of clarifying and classifying biblical terminology.<sup>19</sup> The Christian reading of Scripture has always been a *regulated* reading, since the Bible is always read within an identifiable tradition, that is, in accordance with rules or guidelines embedded within that tradition.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Pelikan, *Credo*, 142; important for our discussion are especially pages 142-157.

<sup>17</sup> See Colin E. Gunton, "Creeds and Confessions: Introductory Essay," *The Practice of Theology: A Reader*, ed. by Colin E. Gunton, Stephen R. Holmes and Murray A. Rae (London: SCM Press, 2001), 101-105.

<sup>18</sup> Pelikan, *Credo*, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Pelikan, *Credo*, 143.

<sup>20</sup> Trevor Hart, "Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible As Scripture," *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and*

At first glance, this interdependence of Scripture, creed, and tradition may appear to have been challenged by the Reformation's insistence upon *sola scriptura*. A proper understanding of the Reformational doctrine of Scripture, however, shows a careful and nuanced perspective. En route to acknowledging the capacity of councils and multitudes to err, the Second Helvetic Confession, for example, declares, in Chapter 2, entitled "Of Interpreting the Holy Scriptures; and of Fathers, Councils, and Traditions,"

The apostle Peter has said that the Holy Scriptures are not of private interpretation (2 Peter 1:20), and thus we do not allow all possible interpretations. Nor consequently do we acknowledge as the true or genuine interpretation of the Scriptures what is called the conception of the Roman Church, that is, what the defenders of the Roman Church plainly maintain should be thrust upon all for acceptance. But we hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves (from the nature of the language in which they were written, likewise according to the circumstances in which they were set down, and expounded in the light of like and unlike passages and of many and clearer passages) and which agree with the rule of faith and love [*cum regula fidei et caritatis congruit*], and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation.<sup>21</sup>

These people were fully aware of the linguistic, historical, and cultural differences between the Bible and themselves. So they committed themselves to comparing Scripture with Scripture, accepting as orthodox only those interpretations which (1) were gleaned from Scripture, (2) agree with the rule of faith and love, and (3) contribute to God's glory and human salvation.

Even so, the church has throughout her history acknowledged that the *regula fidei* is derived from Scripture, such that the *content*

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*Systematic Theology*, ed. by Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 192.

<sup>21</sup> The English translation is available at [www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm](http://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm). For the Latin version, see Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:239.

of the *regula fidei* is acknowledged to faithfully summarize the content of Scripture. So creeds and confessions serve to echo Scripture; although they may not communicate the *ipsissima verba scripturae*, they do communicate the *viva vox scripturae*.

Throughout the church's history, then, the church's creedal tradition has functioned as the chief hermeneutical principle for interpreting Scripture *because the content of the tradition or regula fidei was not separated from biblical teaching*. According to Augustine, "Nothing less than the 'rule of faith' was necessary for directing an informed love of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in order that the truth of Scripture was successfully sought. In sum, the right interpretation of the Bible is indissolubly linked to the historic faith professed in the church and to the ordering of believers' loves."<sup>22</sup>

### *The Regula Fidei as Organic Norm*

At this point we are confronted with the danger of abstraction, of construing the *regula fidei* as an independent, self-contained, *Ding an sich*. One regrettable result of succumbing to this danger would be to place the church's creeds or tradition as a grid over the Scripture, so that the Bible is allowed to "say" only what the creeds "say." Often our construal of the relationship between Scripture and the *regula fidei* has been determined by the terms of the debate: Roman Catholicism says they are *coordinate*, the Reformers say the latter is *subordinate* to the former. These very words entail, once again, metaphors of space, of hierarchy, of rank—quite appropriate when solving issues of authority.

The Reformational recovery of the *regula fidei*, however, offers another set of terms or images, another metaphor, that of organic life. This metaphor has been picked up especially by Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), along with Dutch philosopher Herman

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<sup>22</sup> D. H. Williams, *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church*. *Evangelical Ressourcement: Ancient Sources for the Church's Future* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 95.

Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). Bavinck and Kuiper labored at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, refurbishing and reinvigorating church life and theological inquiry with their shared understanding of the organic essence of cosmic reality. As the most formidable Dutch philosopher of the 20th century, Dooyeweerd sought to explain the organic inter-relationships and differentiations within created reality. Again, we merely mention this emphasis of Dutch Reformed theological and philosophical thought upon the organic relatedness of all reality, for the purpose of exploring it with respect to biblical hermeneutics.

With regard to the sufficiency of Scripture, an important difference between Roman Catholicism and the Reformation was that the former placed tradition on a parallel track alongside Scripture, or rather, placed Scripture alongside tradition. The reformers, by contrast, saw Scripture as

an organic principle from which the entire tradition, living on in preaching, confession, liturgy, worship, theology, devotional literature, etc., arises and is nurtured. [Scripture] is a pure spring of living water from which all the currents and channels of the religious life are fed and maintained. . . . [T]he Holy Spirit . . . still guides the church into the truth (John 16:12-15) until it passes through all its diversity and arrives at the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph. 3:18, 19; 4:13). *In this sense there is a good, true, and glorious tradition. It is the method by which the Holy Spirit causes the truth of Scripture to pass into the consciousness and life of the church.*<sup>23</sup>

Scripture is *an organic principle from which the tradition* (communicated through preaching, confession, liturgy, worship, theology, etc.) arises and is nurtured. There is a good, true, and glorious tradition—what we are calling the *regula fidei*, what has also come to be known as the church's creedal and confessional tradition—by which the Holy Spirit causes the truth of Scripture to pass into the consciousness and life of the church. All of this sounds very much like the function, in another context, of an

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<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 493-494; italics added.

umbilical cord—to conduct, as in: transport, the sustaining nutrients and oxygen (the truth of Scripture) into the life and consciousness of the embryo (the church).

Again, we may turn to the Bible itself for confirmation of this construal of the relationship between the sufficiency of Scripture and the church's *regula fidei*. Earlier we observed the church's persistent emphasis on Jesus Christ as the *fundamentum et scopus scripturae*, the center and substance of Holy Scripture. Since the knowledge of God is the sum of everything needed for salvation, and since this knowledge was always needed for salvation, and since Jesus Christ is the meaning of all Scripture, then we must conclude that the Old Testament was sufficient—though obscure and shadowy, nevertheless sufficient—unto the salvation of our spiritual ancestors of that dispensation. The one unchangeable covenant of grace united the saints of both Old and New Testaments, even as it unites us today with them. Consequently,

the religion taught by Jesus Christ and the apostles was not a new religion, but the one true religion that was taught by God "before, under and after the Law since the fall of Adam."<sup>24</sup>

As Richard Muller observes, the post-Reformation Reformed orthodox understood the sufficiency of Scripture not as an *aggregate* concept, but as a *cumulative*—that is to say, an *organic*—concept. This means that Scripture's sufficiency did not come into existence with the completion of the canon, but always existed as a feature of special revelation itself.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, because the sufficiency of Scripture is tied directly to the unity of Scripture, both are endangered by the premises and practices of historical criticism being allowed into the bloodstream by some evangelicals.

This *cumulative* sufficiency of Scripture underlies the Reformational emphasis on the authority of properly derived,

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<sup>24</sup> Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 320 (citing Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity* [London, 1646], I.viii [p. 142]).

<sup>25</sup> Muller, *Holy Scripture*, 320.

inferred, and deduced doctrine and life. The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, for example, acknowledged:

We judge, therefore, that from these Scriptures *are to be derived* [*petendam esse*] true wisdom and godliness, the reformation and government of churches; as also instruction in all duties of piety; and, to be short, the confirmation of doctrines, and the rejection of all errors, moreover, all exhortations according to that word of the apostle, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof,” etc. (2 Tim. 3:16-17).<sup>26</sup>

The quality of this derivation cannot be restricted or reduced to logical inference or rational deduction, since what is to be derived are not only propositions, but practices as well.

#### *The Regula fidei as Ecclesio-organic Norm*

Before turning to assess the proposals being put forward by contemporary trajectory- or redemptive-movement hermeneutics, we must pause very briefly to clarify one more dimension of the *regula fidei*. The problems with which we wrestle today, in terms of moving from Scripture to theology, are not new problems. The church has always recognized that the Bible was written in ancient languages, in a variety of historical circumstances, to people belonging to vastly different cultures than ours. The Bible wears those beautiful wrinkles of age, wisdom, and dignity. The times have changed, and people have too. So the church has always needed a tradition, an umbilical cord, to preserve the vital connection between Scripture and itself. The church is tied to the Scripture, and cannot exist without that connection. Again, in the words of the Second Helvetic Confession:

And in this Holy Scripture, *the universal Church of Christ* has the most complete exposition of all that pertains to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God; and in this

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<sup>26</sup> For the Latin, see Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:237; italics added.

respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either added to or taken from the same.<sup>27</sup>

The church's tradition, properly understood, interprets and applies eternal truth in the vernacular of each generation. If we may compare Scripture and church to mother and child, we may say that Scripture has never existed without offspring, nor the progeny without its progenitor. *The church without such a tradition is impossible, because the Scripture without such a tradition is impossible.*<sup>28</sup>

### Assessment

1. *Giving credit where credit is due*: Clearly the spatial metaphor with its sense of "moving beyond Scripture" has become problematic. The recent history of debate within the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) illustrates that. William Webb's book (*Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*) appeared in 2001, and in 2004 Wayne Grudem replied with the question, "Should we move beyond the New Testament to a better ethic?"<sup>29</sup> In November 2004, Webb presented a response to Grudem at the annual meeting of the ETS, in which Webb acknowledged the confusion and danger of this "beyond the Bible" language and metaphor. Webb offered the significant though paradoxical formulation of needing to "go beyond" the Bible in order to "stay within" the Bible.<sup>30</sup> Webb employs an alternate formulation as well, insisting that our hermeneutic must show us how to move beyond *the concrete specificity* of the biblical text. Clearly, Webb has become sensitive to the misunderstanding occasioned by the spatial

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<sup>27</sup> For the Latin, see Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:237; italics added.

<sup>28</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 492-493.

<sup>29</sup> Wayne Grudem, "Should We Move Beyond the New Testament to a Better Ethic? An Analysis of William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals*: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/2 (2004): 299-346.

<sup>30</sup> William J. Webb, "A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic: Responding to Grudem's Concerns," [paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 2004].

language. Unfortunately, the title of the Marshall book perpetuates the metaphor.

2. *Where's the difference, then?* Webb appeals to the notion of *continuity* between the meaning of the words-on-the-page and the redemptive-spirit meaning of the Bible's words, the latter to be realized in the future as the Bible's ultimate ethic. Marshall seeks a principled way of moving beyond the Bible biblically. Webb insists that the text's meaning for today, even when it contradicts the text's meaning for yesterday, is nonetheless embedded within the text itself. Neither Webb nor Marshall, however, explain adequately the means of transporting the textual meaning of the living Word of God as the living address of God to his people united throughout all of history.

In point of fact, we need to overcome the repeated framing of the hermeneutical problem in terms of "then" and "now" with no thought given to the vital, throbbing, Spirit-indwelt, truth-confessing-and-living church of Jesus Christ as the trans-temporal, trans-cultural product of Scripture and the Spirit-guided custodian of meaning.

If Scripture is the divine source of revelational meaning, and if the *regula fidei* functions to transport that revelational meaning to the living church throughout history, then it seems fair to suggest that, insofar as the church accurately receives and faithfully embodies Scripture's divinely given revelational meaning, the church is the custodian of that meaning. By nature, custodians conserve, protect, keep intact what has been entrusted to them. This is not a negative exercise, but a positive and future-oriented (an eschatological) devotion.

Part of our theological warrant for this construal involves the fact that the same Spirit who inspired the Scripture now dwells in the church as the body (note the metaphor!) of Christ and therefore in believers who are vital members of that body. By neglecting precisely the Holy Spirit's ecclesial habitat, the hermeneutical discussion frequently, but erroneously, frames the issue as merely the Bible and the believer, or the text and the reader.



Yes, we are being helpfully encouraged to listen to the biblical text in terms of its contemporary extra-biblical historical context (the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world) and in terms of its own contemporary intra-biblical context (of Israel and the church). We wish, however, to identify another "voice" in the symphonic array, namely, the voice of the church-throughout-history. Among the most serious weaknesses in much of the recent discussion about hermeneutics is the general neglect of the history of exegesis within the church, thereby to learn "how others did it."

3. *A case study: the Fourth Commandment.* It may help us in our current hermeneutical discussions if we were to step back from the contemporary debate between egalitarians and complementarians, for example, to study what may have been in its day (and continues to be) an equally contentious exegetical and hermeneutical dispute. Answers to the important questions being raised in current discussions can be constructed with the aid of careful study of the church's approach throughout history to, for example, the meaning of the Fourth Commandment for post-apostolic church life.

Such a case study confronts us with the relationship between creation and redemption, between nature and grace. It compels us to think through the relationship between Old and New Testaments, between the moral and ceremonial "elements" of the law, between the general and specific, the perpetual and the temporary, and so many other nuances of biblical hermeneutics. With open Bibles we may sit in the classrooms of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zacharias Ursinus, and Heinrich Bullinger.<sup>31</sup> We may hear the *vox scripturae* in, among

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<sup>31</sup> Careful historical studies of the exegetical, hermeneutical, and theological components belonging to the "sabbath/Sunday" issue may be found in Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God." *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. by Charles G. Dennison and Richard C. Gamble (Philadelphia: The Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 33-52; J. Douma, *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the*

other confessions, the Belgic Confession of 1561, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, and the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647.

4. *Recovering the regula fidei*. It would be unfortunate if the appeal of this essay were dismissed by virtue of the fact that many evangelical churches have no confessional tradition, or by virtue of the prejudice that only some Reformed and Presbyterian groups have a confessional identity. The challenge of the current evangelical discussion of hermeneutics requires us to retrace our steps, to go back in search for the thread of the *regula fidei*, and pick it up as a guide for biblical interpretation. We must beware of a certain primitivist impulse to circumvent the Reformational confessions en route to recovering the early church's tradition—as though the Reformational confessions served a parochial polemic unrelated to the doctrinal and ecclesial concerns of either ourselves or the early church. As spiritual, doctrinal, and hermeneutical heirs of the reformers, we owe it to them and to ourselves to invite them into this conversation.<sup>32</sup>

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*Christian Life*, trans. by Nelson D. Kloosterman (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1996), 109-160; and Lyle D. Bierma, "Remembering the Sabbath Day: Ursinus's Exposition of Exodus 20:8-11," *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. by Richard A. Muller and John L. Thompson, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 255-261.

<sup>32</sup> In some respects, the appeal of this paper resembles a feature of theological exegesis identified by Joel B. Green, "Practicing the Gospel in a Post-critical World: The Promise of Theological Exegesis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/3 (September 2004), 387-97; note his insistence that the theological study of Scripture must inhabit the life of the ecclesial community, and not ". . .act as though the measure of validity in interpretation can be taken apart from the great creeds of the church, a concern with the Rule of Faith, and the history of Christian interpretation and its embodiment in Christian lives and communities (*Wirkungsgeschichte*)" (396).

## Conclusion

Advancing the current discussion requires, then, that we scrutinize the terms of the debate, the manner of framing of the question, and the metaphors of our discourse. Our concern is that the reading and understanding of Scripture have been deregulated, not by any federal agency or congressional legislation, but by premises and methods of exegesis that ignore the claims of ecclesial interpretation. Incorporating into the discussion of hermeneutics the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture, along with the function of the church's *regula fidei*, would provide a better account of the vital Spirit-wrought connection between Scripture and church. At the same time it would serve to rehabilitate our exegetical method for discerning the meaning of the biblical text, and would aid us in our calling to intentionally preserve the continuity of both exegetical method and exegetical result within the one holy catholic church.

