

**SOLA SCRIPTURA AND HERMENEUTICS: TOWARD
A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE
METHODOLOGICAL GROUND
OF THE PROTESTANT
REFORMATION**

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Introduction

Hermeneutical principles and goals depend on the sources of data that theologians choose to base their theologies upon. Adventist theology and ministry depend on the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle (the Scripture only, in all its parts, and as the first principle of interpretation of natural revelation and the human sciences).

In this article, I will focus on the role of Scripture (the material condition) in relation to the hermeneutical principles of theological method to test the assumed compatibility of Adventist theology and ministerial paradigms with evangelicalism in general and the Emergent Church movement in particular.

This methodological comparison will attempt to answer the following questions: What are the grounding sources of evangelical doctrine—Scripture alone or Scripture understood through Christian tradition? In light of what is discovered, should Adventist theology continue to use evangelical doctrines uncritically and as faithful expressions of their beliefs?

Since both Adventist and evangelical theologies claim to build on a faithful application of the *sola Scriptura* principle, it would be helpful to analyze the application of the *sola Scriptura* principle in evangelical theology by considering the way in which this principle and Christian tradition relate to hermeneutical principles. I will make this analysis in the following way by (1) analyzing Luther's understanding of the *sola Scriptura* principle and his dependence upon the Augustinian approach to biblical interpretation and theological methodology; (2) surveying representative Protestant statements of faith in regard to their understanding of the *sola Scriptura* principle; (3) examining John Wesley's methodological use of Scripture as a representative case of evangelical theology; (4) studying the contemporary evangelical turn to tradition and the two levels at which evangelical scholars and laity experience the role of Scripture; (5) comparing these views to the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of *sola Scriptura* and seeking to understand how Seventh-day Adventists have recently come to view the meaning of *sola Scriptura*. Finally, (6) I will outline briefly Ellen White's presentation of Martin Luther's understanding of biblical interpretation.

The analysis that follows is by no means exhaustive; yet, it may help Adventists and evangelicals to reevaluate their assumptions about the use of the *sola Scriptura* principle in their theological constructions and ministerial paradigms. I will begin by asking what Luther meant by the *sola Scriptura* principle and how he applied it in his own writings.

Martin Luther and the sola Scriptura Principle

According to Martin Luther, Scripture is “clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings.” This fact determined for him that “Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth.”¹ In practice, this meant that Protestant theologians were “willing to fight each other, not by appealing to the authority of any doctor, but by that of Scripture alone.”² These pointed statements clearly outline the *sola Scriptura* principle. Hence, we can see why most Protestant and evangelical scholars believe Luther applied it to his theology.³ Yet a closer look shows that Luther was ambiguous and inconsistent in his application of the *sola Scriptura* principle.⁴

The clarity of Scripture led Luther to believe not only that Scripture stands *alone* against human tradition, but that it also stands *beyond* human interpretation,⁵ a conviction that is clearly challenged by postmodern thought, which proposes that nothing is beyond interpretation.⁶ It also helps to explain Luther’s use of justification by faith as his macro-hermeneutical presupposition for biblical interpretation and theological construction. His understanding and experience of justification by faith opened before him “a totally other face of the entire Scripture,”⁷ leading him to conclude that

¹“Holy Scripture must necessarily be clearer, simpler, and more reliable than any other writings. Especially since all teachers verify their own statements through the Scriptures as clearer and more reliable writings, and desire their own writings to be confirmed and explained by them. But nobody can ever substantiate an obscure saying by one that is more obscure; therefore, necessity forces us to run to the Bible with the writings of all teachers, and to obtain there a verdict and judgment upon them. Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth” (Martin Luther, *LW*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 32:11.

²*Ibid.*, 33:167.

³David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 131.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵“Thus the opponent, overcome by the bright light, must see and confess that God’s sayings stand alone and need no human interpretation. The foe who does not believe clear Scripture will certainly not believe the glosses of any of the fathers either” (*LW*, 39:165).

⁶“Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret” (David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], 9).

⁷“There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered

Christ was the only content of Scripture.⁸ This, in turn, led him to create his own canon within a canon of Scripture.⁹ Only those books that lead the seeker to Christ should be included in the canon, thereby leading him to propose that “In a word St. John’s Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul’s epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”¹⁰ Evidently, Luther’s *sola Scriptura* principle modifies the scope of Scripture by discarding the *tota Scriptura* principle. In practice, the real “battle cry of the Reformation” was “Christ/Grace alone.” How did he come to this understanding?

Luther’s hermeneutics came from the notion that not only Scripture leads to Christ, but also philosophy and the Fathers, especially Augustine. On one hand, he believed that philosophy belongs to the realm of nature and theology to the realm of grace or supernature.¹¹ For this reason, he was critical of philosophical contributions to theological issues. But he also believed that what Neoplatonism proposes about theological/supernatural matters concerning the natural realm was stolen from the Gospel of

paradise itself through open gates. There is a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. . . . Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter” (*LW*, 34:337).

⁸*Ibid.*, 52:173.

⁹Luther “applied what became known as the Christocentric principle. His key phrase was ‘what manifest Christ’ (*was Christum treibet*). What began as a laudable enterprise to see how Scripture points, urges, drives to Christ became dangerous as Luther came to the conclusion that not all Scripture did drive to Christ. This led him to consider some parts of Scripture as less important than others. Accompanying the Christocentric principle was a fourth: dualism between letter and spirit (law and gospel, works and grace). Much of the OT was seen as letter and much of the NT as spirit, although not all in the NT was gospel nor all in the OT was law. Both of these last two principles deny the principle of the totality of Scripture (*tota scriptura*) and lead to subjectivism. The interpreter’s own experience ultimately becomes the norm” (Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, *Commentary Reference Series* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000], 89).

¹⁰*LW*, 35:362.

¹¹According to Martin E. Lehmann, Luther “maintained that theological concepts often have a different meaning in philosophy. The road to understanding the incarnation was blocked for philosophy because it taught the way of the law and the meritorious character of works. In its own sphere, however, Luther conceded that philosophy had its independent meaning and was qualified to set forth the truth in the realm of nature. In the realm of grace, however, theology was to hold sway” (*LW*, 38:238).

John and then tainted by the philosophers' erroneous presuppositions.¹² Nevertheless, even though containing error, "philosophy leads to Christ."¹³

Luther did not perceive that his metaphysical presuppositions determined his understanding of grace as supernatural; nor that this understanding of grace consequently determined his interpretation of the gospel. His acceptance of Augustine's theological approach led him to uncritically accept Greek ontological principles that Augustine had incorporated into his hermeneutical methodology. In order to better understand how this happened and what it meant for future generations of evangelicals, it is helpful to examine Luther's relationship with Augustine.

Luther and Augustine and the sola Scriptura Principle

Luther stands on Augustine's shoulders. For him, Augustine was the greatest of all the Fathers. "No teacher of the church," he explained, "taught better than Augustine. . . . It would be too bad if we did not have Augustine; then the other church fathers would leave us in the lurch terribly. Augustine taught and guided us better than the pope with all his decretals. He leads me to Christ, not away from Him."¹⁴

Not surprisingly, Luther based his hermeneutics and theology on Augustine's teachings and in doing so accepted his approach to *sola Scriptura*. For him, Augustine was "the first and almost the only one who determined to be subject to the Holy Scriptures alone, and independent of the books of all the fathers and saints."¹⁵ As proof, he quotes Augustine's explanation of how to apply the *sola Scriptura* principle to the Fathers, noting, "I have learned to hold the Scriptures alone inerrant. Therefore I read all the others, as holy and learned as they may be, with the reservation that I regard their teaching true only if they can prove their statements through Scripture or reason."¹⁶

¹²"The Platonic philosophers have stolen much from the fathers and the Gospel of John, as Augustine says that he found almost everything in Plato which is in the first chapter of John. Therefore, those things which the philosophers say about these ecclesiastical matters have been stolen, so that a Platonist teaches the Trinity of things as (1) the maker, (2) the prototype or exemplar, (3) and compassion; but they have mixed philosophical thoughts with one another and have falsified them" (ibid., 38:276).

¹³Ibid. Because the Fathers introduce subtle errors that are difficult to recognize, Luther correctly advises that we should judge them from "Scripture alone" (ibid., 52:191). Therefore, the reader should not use the Fathers to throw light on Scripture, "but rather to set forth the clear Scriptures and so to prove Scripture with Scripture alone, without adding any of their own thoughts" (ibid., 52:176). Nevertheless, Luther accepts the Fathers as a source by which to introduce the reader to "Scripture alone." As philosophy, then, the Fathers also lead us to Scripture (ibid., 39:167).

¹⁴Ibid., 22:512.

¹⁵Ibid., 34:285.

¹⁶Ibid., 41:25.

Luther's invocation of "Scripture or reason" is revealing. Together with Scripture, reason plays a foundational role in theological hermeneutics, method, and construction. Thus Luther appears to place Scripture on the same level of importance as Christian tradition. "No book," he proposes, besides "the Bible and St. Augustine," has been discovered "from which I have learned more about God, Christ, man, and all things."¹⁷ Luther thus believed that Augustine applied the *sola Scriptura* principle in his biblical interpretation and theological writings and confidently turned to him for help in interpreting the Scriptures.

Augustine, a saint and doctor of Roman Catholicism, was instrumental in consolidating and merging together the philosophical and biblical ideas upon which Roman Catholic theology stands.¹⁸ By following the theological lead of Augustine, Luther's thought was grounded on this same philosophical and theological system.¹⁹ Following Luther, Protestantism and American evangelicalism share this same foundation. Not surprisingly, then, the new evangelical movement of the twenty-first century, the Emerging Church, also springs from this tradition and its Neoplatonic metaphysical foundation.

In sum, Luther's affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle is ambiguous. On one hand, he gives Scripture a unique place and role among all other writings. Scripture, he contends, is clear and stands beyond interpretation. Consequently, Scripture should be the judge of all other writings and should be read instead of theological treatises, even his own.²⁰ On the other hand,

¹⁷Ibid., 31:75.

¹⁸"One of the decisive developments in the western philosophical tradition was the eventually widespread merging of the Greek philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious and scriptural traditions. . . . Augustine is not only one of the major sources whereby classical philosophy in general and Neoplatonism in particular enter into the mainstream of early and subsequent medieval philosophy, but there are significant contributions of his own that emerge from his modification of that Greco-Roman inheritance, e.g., his subtle accounts of belief and authority, his account of knowledge and illumination, his emphasis upon the importance and centrality of the will, and his focus upon a new way of conceptualizing the phenomena of human history, just to cite a few of the more conspicuous examples" (Michael Mendelson, "Saint Augustine," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine>)).

¹⁹"The decisive role in the formulation of Luther's theology was played by St. Paul and Augustinianism. . . . Luther was, indeed (at least concerning the basic tenets of justification), a spiritual son of the bishop of Hippo and of the 'Doctor Angelicus'" (Norman Geisler, Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals Together: Agreements and Disagreements* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995], 96, 99).

²⁰"I'd rather that all my books would disappear and the Holy Scriptures alone would be read. Otherwise we'll rely on such writings and let the Bible go. Brenz wrote such a big commentary on twelve chapters of Luke that it disgusts the reader to look into it. The same is true of my commentary on Galatians. I wonder who encourages this mania for writing! Who wants to buy such stout tomes? And if they're bought, who'll read them? And if they're read, who'll be edified by them?" (*LJW*, 54:311).

he greatly qualifies the contents of Scripture and its methodological role as the source of theological knowledge. Scripture, for Luther, is not the whole of the OT and NT, but primarily a select group of Paul's, John's, and Peter's epistles. Finally, he employs Augustine and reason to judge the Fathers and to interpret Scripture, thereby creating a canon within a canon.

The significance of Luther's approach to the *sola Scriptura* principle laid an important foundation for Protestant hermeneutics that has not yet reached its climax. However, it is important to consider also, although briefly, the way in which the *sola Scriptura* principle was understood by the Protestant tradition. To this end I now turn my attention to representative and influential doctrinal statements on the *sola Scriptura* principle found in the Calvinist Belgic Confession of 1561, the Canons of Dort of 1618-1619, and the Lutheran Formula of Concord formulated in the years 1575-1577.

Protestant Creeds and the sola Scriptura Principle

According to the Belgic Confession, Scripture is *sufficient to be the only rule of faith*. Scripture fully and sufficiently contains the will of God and thus all that believers need for salvation.²¹ No human writing, such as customs, councils, decrees, or statutes, is of equal value to the Word of God. "Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us, saying, Prove the spirits, whether they are of God."²² In this statement, the Belgic Confession affirms the *sola Scriptura* principle. It does so by explicitly affirming the sufficiency of Scripture as the only source of revealed knowledge, implicitly rejecting the need for and role of the classical multiplicity-of-theological-sources paradigm. It even implies the hermeneutical primacy of Scripture over humanly originated traditions.²³ In practice, however, by embracing the statements on the Trinity made by the Creeds of the Apostles, Nicaea, and Athanasius, the Belgic Confession implicitly introduces the philosophical hermeneutics of the early Fathers, thereby condoning the role of tradition and philosophy in biblical hermeneutics and theological method.

By way of contrast, the Canons of Dort exhort "all their brethren in the gospel of Christ . . . to regulate, by the Scripture, according to the analogy of faith, not only their sentiments, but also their language, and to abstain from all those phrases which exceed the limits necessary to be observed in ascertaining the genuine sense of the Holy Scripture."²⁴ While the Canons of

²¹"The Belgic Confession" (1561), in *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), Art. 12.

²²Ibid.

²³"This doctrine of the Holy Trinity has always been affirmed and maintained by the true Church since the time of the apostles to this very day. . . . Therefore, in this point, we do willingly receive the three creeds, namely, that of the Apostles, of Nicaea, and of Athanasius; likewise that which, conformable thereunto, is agreed upon by the ancient fathers" (ibid., Art. 9).

²⁴The Canons of Dort (1618-1619), in *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, electronic

Dort give high place to Scripture, they fall short of affirming the *sola Scriptura* principle explicitly.

In the spirit of Luther, the Formula of Concord confesses that “the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged.”²⁵ This affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle, however, leaves room for the role of ancient official Catholic tradition as a help to combat heresies by proposing that “The ancient church formulated symbols (that is, brief and explicit confessions) which were accepted as unanimous, catholic, Christian faith and confessions of the orthodox and true church, namely, the Apostle’s Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. We pledge ourselves to these, and we hereby reject all heresies and teachings which have been introduced into the church of God contrary to them.”²⁶

After conceding the role of tradition in theological matters, the Formula of Concord cautions: “Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no further than as witnesses to the fashion in which the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times.”²⁷ The Formula then goes further to explain that tradition does not judge Scripture, but that Scripture judges tradition. Tradition merely witnesses and explains the way in which early generations of Christians interpreted the Scriptures and understood controversial doctrines.²⁸ In practice, however, the role of tradition calls for the multiplicity of theological sources and grows from the Roman Catholic methodological paradigm. That this is the case becomes apparent when, in discussing the issue of law and the keeping of the law, the Formula of Concord promises “later we shall assemble more testimonies on this subject, though they are obvious throughout not only the Scriptures but also the holy Fathers.”²⁹

ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc. 1997), Conclusion.

²⁵Theodore G. Tappert, ed., “Formula of Concord” (1575-1577), in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000), 464.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸“In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings is maintained, and Holy Scripture remains the only judge, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong. Other symbols and other writings are not judges like Holy Scripture, but merely witnesses and expositions of the faith, setting forth how at various times the Holy Scriptures were understood by contemporaries in the church of God with reference to controverted articles, and how contrary teachings were rejected and condemned”(ibid., 465).

²⁹Theodore G. Tappert, “The Apology of the Augsburg Confession” [1531],

Although the Formula of Concord presents a more nuanced and detailed affirmation of the *sola Scriptura* principle than the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort, it also explains in more detail the role of tradition as a complementary source of theological data to be used in conjunction with Scripture.

The partial review of evidence presented thus far explains the fact that, while mainline Reformers embraced the *sola Scriptura* principle, they held the Fathers in high esteem. “Quite simply,” Alister McGrath explains, “the mainline reformers believed the bible had been honored, interpreted, and applied faithfully in the past and that they were under *an obligation to take past reflections into account* as they developed their own.”³⁰ In reality, then, the “Bible alone” became the “Bible and tradition” as theology was constructed and carried out in practice. McGrath unpacks the way in which contemporary evangelicals retrieve, relate, and use the mainline Reformers’ views of the relation of Scripture to tradition, noting: “The magisterial Reformation thus offers an approach to engaging with the ‘great tradition’ that has immense potential for their evangelical progeny today. Theology is not simply about giving priority to the Bible; it is about valuing and engaging with those in the past who gave priority to the Bible, and valuing and interacting with the ideas they derived from that engagement.”³¹

Thus the *sola Scriptura* principle, as presented thus far in the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Formula of Concord speak about the role of Scripture and its relation to Christian tradition in four ways: (1) Scripture’s clarity and sufficiency became the basis from which Protestants criticized and tested the writings of the Fathers (methodological deconstructionism); (2) those Fathers who passed the critical test of Scripture became useful sources for understanding Scripture, constructing Christian teachings, and facing heresies (multiplicity of theological sources); (3) tradition *de facto* became the hermeneutical context from which the Reformers interpreted Scripture and constructed their teachings and practices;³² and (4) as mainline Reformers fell short of applying the *sola Scriptura* principle to the philosophical or scientific ideas assumed in the writings of the early

in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2000), 130.

³⁰Alister McGrath, “Engaging the Great Tradition: Evangelical Theology and the Role of Tradition,” in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 144, emphasis supplied.

³¹Ibid.

³²“The Reformers’ appeal to Scripture sufficiency was crafted on the assumption that the Bible was the book of the church’s faith. That faith of the church, New Testament and Patristic, was seen as contiguous with the biblical narrative, so that *the only proper way to read the Bible was within the framework of the church’s teaching and practice*” (D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Traditions and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 200, emphasis supplied).

Fathers, their hermeneutical principles began to flow implicitly from Greek philosophical thinking.

Until late in the twentieth century, most Protestant and evangelical theologians were unaware of the hermeneutical role that classical ontological, metaphysical, and epistemological interpretations play in the interpretation of Scripture and the construction of Christian doctrines. Philosophical developments of the last century,³³ which propelled the postmodern cultural revolution, also brought about a deeper and much less known “hermeneutical turn” that flows from the conviction that “to know is to interpret.”³⁴ Obviously, the Magisterial Reformers and the Protestant and evangelical movements worked under classical and modern assumptions that knowledge is objective, meaning that knowledge flows only from the available data, whether from natural or special revelation. Scientific knowledge does not depend on, include, or require preconceptions that the subject may bring to the formation of knowledge.

More recently, Presbyterian theologian Bruce L. McCormack has perceived and articulated clearly and correctly the hermeneutical dependence of evangelical theology on classical ontology rather than on the fundamental doctrine on which the Reformation stands or falls, justification by faith alone. He proposes “that the Reformers’ refusal to engage directly issues of theological ontology made them blind to the extent to which they continued to subscribe to ontological assumptions which could, logically, *only fund a Catholic ordering of regeneration and justification*.”³⁵ In short, McCormack demonstrates that the ontological assumptions used by Luther and Calvin to interpret biblical data on justification by faith were derived from the Greek ontological tradition they uncritically inherited via the early fathers of the Church³⁶ and thus were not derived from Scripture itself, but from tradition, thereby, in practice shying away from applying the *sola Scriptura* principle.

It appears then that the Protestant Reformation was not about restoring biblical thinking, but about reviving the “ancient catholicity of the church.”³⁷ How, then, does the emerging evangelical movement approach the question of *sola Scriptura*? A particularly helpful figure in this regard lies in the person of John Wesley.

³³Consider phenomenology, existentialism, and the birth of philosophical hermeneutics. See, e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley CA.: University of California Press, 1976).

³⁴“Interpretation seems a minor matter, but it is not. Every time we act, deliberate, judge, understand, or even experience, we are interpreting. To understand at all is to interpret” (David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987], 9).

³⁵Bruce L. McCormack, “What’s at Stake in Current Debates over Justification?” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates?* ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 84.

³⁶Ibid., 106.

³⁷Ibid., 201.

John Wesley and the sola Scriptura Principle

I will begin my examination of John Wesley's understanding of *sola Scriptura* by briefly reviewing how he related to the material of theological reflection (his view of Scripture and tradition) and the hermeneutical principles of theological method (his view of divine and human realities).

As with the mainline Reformers, Wesley held Scripture in high regard, stating: "My ground is the Bible. Yea, I am a Bible-bigot. I follow it in all things, both great and small."³⁸ His position appears then to affirm Scripture's clarity and sufficiency, leading him to believe that Scripture was inerrant.³⁹ He further affirmed the *sola Scriptura* principle by stating that he was committed "to study [that is, comparatively] no book but the Bible."⁴⁰ However, at the center of Wesley's commitment to study only one book, the Bible, he implies that he comes to understand Scripture with the help of other books, particularly tradition.

Methodists, Wesley explains, "desire and design to be downright Bible-Christians; taking the Bible, as interpreted by the primitive Church and our own, for their whole and sole rule."⁴¹ Consequently, Methodism is not something new, but "the old religion, the religion of the Bible, the religion of the primitive Church, the religion of the Church of England."⁴² He thus identifies tradition with the primitive church and the Church of England. Making explicit what Luther denied but implicitly embraced, Wesley takes for granted the role of tradition in interpreting the Scriptures. For him, tradition plays its hermeneutical role not only in theological, but also in the devotional matters of the heart.⁴³

Wesley seems to distinguish between the "bad" tradition of Roman Catholicism⁴⁴ and the "good" tradition of the early Patristic Fathers.⁴⁵ This

³⁸John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3d. ed., 14 vols. (Albany, OR: Ages, 1872), 3:240.

³⁹"Nay, if there be any mistakes in the Bible, there may as well be a thousand. If there be one falsehood in that book, it did not come from the God of truth" (ibid., 4:88).

⁴⁰Ibid., 3:197.

⁴¹Ibid., 8:387.

⁴²Ibid., 7:448.

⁴³"Our common way of living was this: From four in the morning till five, each of us used private prayer. From five to seven we read the Bible together, carefully comparing it (that we might not lean to our own understandings) with the writings of the earliest ages" (ibid., 1:31).

⁴⁴Ibid., 6:215).

⁴⁵Consider for instance the following statement: "So true is that well known saying of the ancient Fathers: *Fecisti nos ad te; et irrequietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te*. 'Thou hast made us for thyself; and our heart cannot rest, till it resteth in thee'" (ibid., 7:288; cf. Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, 5:408). Thomas Oden, a Wesleyan Methodist theologian, grounds his Vincentian/postmodern Theological Method to

distinction is misleading. A better way to categorize Patristic and Scholastic tradition would be to title them, respectively, “general” and “detailed.” In other words, early Fathers, such as Augustine, practiced the same methodological and hermeneutical principles as later Fathers, such as Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁶

overcome on this distinction. For an introduction to Oden’s method, see Kwabena Donkor, *Tradition, Method, and Contemporary Protestant Theology: An Analysis of Thomas C. Oden’s Vincentian Method* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003). Oden’s method is also followed in the Ancient/Future approach to ministry and liturgy in the Emergent Church movement of younger evangelicals. See, e.g., Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); idem, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

⁴⁶As noted above, the process of receiving, appropriating, and spiritually internalizing God’s word always involves interpretation. Due to many and complex historical reasons, early in its history the Christian church progressively adapted its teachings and liturgical forms to Greek ontological categories. Adolph Harnack describes the Christian church of the mid-third century as “a new commonwealth, politically formed and equipped with fixed forms of all kinds. We recognize in these forms few Jewish, but many Greco-Roman features, and finally we perceive also in the doctrine of faith on which this commonwealth is based, the philosophic spirit of the Greeks.” As a consequence, “The Christian Church and its doctrine were developed within the Roman world and Greek culture in opposition to the Jewish Church” (*History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. [New York: Dover, 1961], 1:45-46). Christian leaders facing the world of culture, science, and reason decided for various reasons not to reject the leading scientific Neoplatonic-based culture of their day. Historians of Christian theology label this process the “hellenization” (ibid.) or, alternatively, the “de-Judaization” of Christianity (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1971-1989). By adapting to the cultural trends, early Christians progressively and radically replaced the macro-hermeneutical presuppositions the NT writers took from the OT canon. Harnack popularized the notion of “hellenization” as a description of the gradual adaptation of Christian doctrine to Greek Neoplatonic ontological patterns (Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 1:41-50; see also Pelikan, 1:45). From a philosophical perspective, Jack Bonsor recognizes and describes the same phenomenon in some detail (*Athens and Jerusalem: The Role of Philosophy in Theology* [New York: Paulist, 1993], 25-26). Historians of Christianity seem to use the label “hellenization” in a different disciplinary connotation that does not deny, but affirms more precisely the broader philosophical connotation in which historians of theology and theologians themselves use this term. See, e.g., Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen against Plato* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 1-9. It becomes clear that, although true, there are theological developmental differences between the early and late church Fathers, although both followed the same general ontological principles derived from Greek philosophy in matters such as the being of God, humans, and the world. This phenomenon places the early Fathers within the same theological approach and tradition as the later Fathers. Specifically, Augustine was highly celebrated by Luther as a biblical Christian theologian, who gathered, systematized, and articulated the theological vision of the early fathers. Aquinas,

Thus it would appear that the tradition of both the early and later Fathers of the church stem from the same nonbiblical Neoplatonic philosophical principles. Consequently, in spite of Wesley's claim to follow the *sola Scriptura* principle, as with Luther he also fails to apply it fully, instead relying upon the Fathers as the basis of biblical interpretation.

In order to better understand the effects of Wesley's position, it is helpful to understand how his concept of *sola Scriptura* influenced his view of heaven, soul, and spirituality, which themselves build on Augustine's appropriation of Greek ontology. Although Wesley's reading of Scripture led him to conceive of God's eternity in terms of a temporal rather than timeless duration, he still understood reality from the perspective of Neoplatonic dualism. Thus, on one hand, he describes eternity from the perspective of the Scriptures—eternity is of an infinite temporal duration⁴⁷ and God, who is intently spatial,⁴⁸ created the universe within his eternal time.⁴⁹ However, due to an Augustinian influence, Wesley hints at the possibility that the time of infinite duration may not change at all and thus infinity may be timeless.⁵⁰ Following tradition, he assumes the existence of an ontological dichotomy between time

the major theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, is a further step in the same direction.

⁴⁷“Now, what a poor pittance of duration is this, compared to the life of Methuselah! ‘And Methuselah lived nine hundred and sixty and nine years.’ But what are these nine hundred and sixty and nine years to the duration of an angel, which began ‘or ever the mountains were brought forth,’ or the foundations of the earth were laid? And what is the duration which has passed since the creation of angels, to that which passed before they were created, to unbeginning eternity?—to that half of eternity (if one may so speak) which had then elapsed?” (Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 7:187).

⁴⁸“Nearly allied to the eternity of God, is his omnipresence. As he exists through infinite duration, so he cannot but exist through infinite space; according to his own question, equivalent to the strongest assertion,—‘Do not I fill heaven and earth? Saith the Lord?’ (heaven and earth, in the Hebrew idiom, implying the whole universe;) which, therefore, according to his own declaration, is filled with his presence” (ibid., 7:286).

⁴⁹“He began his creation at what time, or rather, at what part of eternity, it seemed him good. Had it pleased him, it might have been millions of years sooner, or millions of ages later” (ibid., 10:408).

⁵⁰“But this is only speaking after the manner of men: For the measures of long and short are only applicable to time which admits of bounds, and not to unbounded duration. This rolls on (according to our low conceptions) with unutterable, inconceivable swiftness; if one would not rather say, it does not roll or move at all, but is one still immovable ocean. For the inhabitants of heaven “rest not day and night,” but continually cry, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord, the God, the Almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come!” And when millions of millions of ages are elapsed, their eternity is but just begun” (ibid., 6:209-210).

and eternity,⁵¹ the visible and invisible worlds (earth and heaven),⁵² matter and spirit, soul and body.⁵³ Thus by embracing a Neoplatonic ontology, he believed that heaven and the spiritual life are not material realities and are qualitatively different from the materiality and flesh of bodily spatiotemporal existence prior to death.⁵⁴

Further, these hermeneutical principles are important to salvation. According to Wesley, humans experience a chasm between heaven and earth at death.⁵⁵ He asked, How will we “pass from things natural to spiritual; from the things that are seen to those that are not seen; from the visible to the

⁵¹“Of what importance is it to be continually sensible of the condition wherein we stand! How advisable, by every possible means, to connect the ideas of time and eternity! so to associate them together, that the thought of one may never recur to your mind, without the thought of the other! It is our highest wisdom to associate the ideas of the visible and invisible world; to connect temporal and Spiritual, mortal and immortal being. Indeed, in our common dreams we do not usually know we are asleep whilst we are in the midst of our dream. As neither do we know it while we are in the midst of the dream which we call life. But you may be conscious of it now. God grant you may, before you awake in a winding-sheet of fire!” (ibid., 7:346).

⁵²“It is a total studied inattention, to the whole invisible and eternal world; more especially to death, the gate of eternity, and to the important consequences of death, — heaven and hell!” (ibid., 7:284).

⁵³“But what am I? Unquestionably I am something distinct from my body. It seems evident that my body is not necessarily included therein. For when my body dies, I shall not die: I shall exist as really as I did before. And I cannot but believe, this self-moving, thinking principle, with all its passions and affections, will continue to exist, although the body be moldered into dust. Indeed at present this body is so intimately connected with the soul, that I seem to consist of both. In my present state of existence, I undoubtedly consist both of soul and body: And so I shall again, after the resurrection, to all eternity” (ibid., 7:246).

⁵⁴“The more reasonable among you have no doubt of this; you do not imagine the whole man dies together; although you hardly suppose the soul, once disengaged, will dwell again in a house of clay. But how will your soul subsist without it? How are you qualified for a separate state? Suppose this earthly covering, this vehicle of organized matter, whereby you hold commerce with the material world, were now to drop off! Now, what would you do in the regions of immortality? You cannot eat or drink there. You cannot indulge either the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eye, or the pride of life. You love only worldly things; and they are gone, fled as smoke, driven away for ever. Here is no possibility of sensual enjoyments; and you have a relish for nothing else. O what a separation is this, from all that you hold dear! What breach is made, never to be healed! But beside this, you are unholy, full of evil tempers; for you did not put off these with the body; you did not leave pride, revenge, malice, envy, discontent, behind you, when you left the world. And now you are no longer cheered by the light of the sun, nor diverted by the flux of various objects; but those dogs of hell are let loose to prey upon your soul, with their whole unrebated strength” (ibid., 8:208).

⁵⁵Ibid., 8:208-209.

invisible world? What a gulf is here! By what art will reason get over the immense chasm?"⁵⁶ In this way, he framed the ontological scenario for his understanding of the gospel as the way to the spiritual heavenly eternal life; the gospel is the way in which God's action bridges our passing from the natural to the spiritual realms of reality.

For Wesley, then, the knowledge of God is the cure for the soul facing death and hell, bringing him to the conclusion that "There is a knowledge of God which unveils eternity, and a love of God which endears it. That knowledge makes the great abyss visible; and all uncertainty vanishes away."⁵⁷ The question that remains is how the believer can know God from within her material body that hides him from our sight.⁵⁸ The answer is that God as Spirit reveals himself to the spirit of human beings.⁵⁹ This knowledge necessarily "generates love"⁶⁰ and thereby "*transfuses more and more of God's image into the human soul.*"⁶¹ As a result, "God's commandments are no longer grievous, but are the very joy of your heart; ways of pleasantness, paths of peace."⁶²

In sum, Wesley affirms Scripture, but uses macro-hermeneutical principles retrieved from tradition that are based upon philosophical imagination. In so doing, he falls short of the *sola Scriptura* principle. His methodological principles affect the entire edifice of Christian theology, leading Wesley to spiritualize the gospel and make it stand on a mystical⁶³ rather than biblical spirituality. How do contemporary postmodern evangelicals approach the question of *sola Scriptura*?

The Evangelical Postmodern Turn to Tradition

How do evangelical scholars at the beginning of the twenty-first century relate to the *sola Scriptura* principle? Have they overcome the ambiguities of the Reformation, or do they renew a commitment to tradition? The answer is crucial for Adventist scholars as an increasing number of Adventist leaders feel free to use evangelical theology and ministerial practices under the

⁵⁶Ibid., 8:16.

⁵⁷Ibid., 8:209.

⁵⁸"This veil of flesh now hides him from my sight; and who is able to make it transparent? so that I may perceive, through this glass, God always before me, till I see him 'face to face'" (ibid., 8:211).

⁵⁹"And why should this seem a thing incredible to you; that God, a Spirit, and the Father of the spirits of all flesh, should discover himself to your spirit, which is itself "the breath of God," *divinae particula aerae*; any more than that material things should discover themselves to your material eye? Is it any more repugnant to reason, that spirit should influence spirit, than that matter should influence matter? Nay, is not the former the more intelligible of the two?" (ibid., 8:211).

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid., 8:212, emphasis supplied.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³On Wesley's mysticism, see, e.g., ibid., 7:343, 51, 93-94.

assumption that they have been constructed on the *sola Scriptura* principle. In order to analyze this question, I will examine recent developments in American evangelicalism.

While many evangelicals continue to believe that the hermeneutical role of Scripture is the methodological watershed that divides Protestantism from Roman Catholicism,⁶⁴ by the twenty-first century a sector of American evangelical leaders, who became known as “Young Evangelicals,” was moving steadily toward embracing tradition intentionally. Clearly, this trend has intensified the evangelical ambiguity about the *sola Scriptura* principle. While some evangelical scholars still affirm the *sola Scriptura* principle,⁶⁵ the cultural and philosophical challenges of postmodernity are leading many others to depart from it. This latter group is so seizing the imagination of some “Young Evangelical” leaders that a serious rift is brewing in the evangelical movement.⁶⁶

In ecumenism, evangelical scholars are anxious to overcome their long history of theological divisions⁶⁷ that makes the very notion of “evangelicalism” a contested concept⁶⁸ and its very existence questionable.

⁶⁴“The perduring dividing line between evangelical Protestantism on the one hand and Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy on the other is the enigmatic relation between holy Scripture and holy tradition. The Catholic churches assign tradition a role virtually equivalent to that of Scripture. The final norm for faith is held to reside in Scripture, but tradition communicates and interprets this norm to all generations after Christ. Protestants who adhere to the tenets of the Reformation insist that Scripture interprets itself by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the role of the church is to be obedient to this interpretation. The Reformers upheld *sola scriptura*. Catholics and Orthodox generally affirm Scripture plus tradition as the ultimate authority for faith” (Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002], 86).

⁶⁵“We *reaffirm* the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches all that is necessary for our salvation from sin and is the standard by which all Christian behavior must be measured. We *deny* that any creed, council, or individual may bind a Christian’s conscience, that the Holy Spirit speaks independently of or contrary to what is set forth in the Bible, or that personal spiritual experience can ever be a vehicle of revelation” (ibid., 290).

⁶⁶Justin Taylor, “Introduction to Postconservative Evangelicalism and the Rest of This Book,” in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Accommodation in postmodern Times*, ed. Millard J. Erickson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 17-32.

⁶⁷“Evangelicals have clashed for centuries over the nature of biblical authority, the authority of the church, the nature of divine predestination, the work of the Holy Spirit, the relation between justification and sanctification, the scope of sanctification, the relation between reason and revelation, and the possibility of fellowship between evangelicals and nonevangelicals” (Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 172-173).

⁶⁸“The ample disagreements that divide modern evangelicals confirm that

The fundamentalist and evangelical coalitions implicitly assume that there is an untenable doctrinal diversity and confusion. This plurality originates from their failed attempts to interpret Scripture from the perspective of the *sola Scriptura* principle. This failure validates the Roman Catholic prediction that without tradition Christians cannot interpret Scripture correctly or achieve unity.⁶⁹ “Young Evangelical” scholars understand well that they must overcome this problem in order to achieve true ecumenism. Are they seeking to find correction by returning to Scripture or in reviving Roman Catholic tradition? It appears that they are employing both methods in their theology, spirituality, and ministerial practices.

During the early twentieth century, American fundamentalist evangelicalism, working from a Neoplatonic/Augustinian/Calvinist hermeneutical foundation, battled modernity by affirming the verbal inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture.⁷⁰ By the middle of the twentieth century, Billy Graham, who became perhaps the best-known face of fundamentalism, gave traditional evangelicals national and international recognition through his evangelistic crusades, which were based on Scripture, especially the evangelical interpretation of the gospel. Fundamentalism and evangelistic crusades, however, did little to overcome the Protestant ambiguity of the *sola Scriptura* principle.

By the last quarter of the century, Bill Hybels and the Willow Creek congregation’s adaptation of liturgical forms to contemporary culture in the megachurch context brought a new breed of “Pragmatic Evangelicals” to prominence. Liturgical pragmatism is grounded not in Scripture, but in the tradition of Christianity and the religions of the world, thereby creating a theological and spiritual vacuum.

Deep changes in theology and ministerial practices are continuing to transform evangelicalism in powerful ways. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, evangelicals, due to their prominence in society, have begun to exercise influence in the community at large. Adherents to this new breed of evangelicals have come to be known by several titles: “Younger Evangelicals,” “Post-Conservativists,” and the “Emerging Church” (2000 and beyond).⁷¹

‘evangelicalism’ is an inherently contested concept. Its meaning cannot be defined precisely, because it is claimed by groups that bear fundamental differences from one another in the ways in which they define themselves” (ibid., 169).

⁶⁹For a detailed evaluation of the Roman Catholic view of the *sola Scriptura* principle as advanced by evangelicals, see Robert A. Sungenis, ed., *Not by Scripture Alone: A Catholic Critique of the Protestant Doctrine of Sola Scriptura* (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing, 1997).

⁷⁰James Barr, “Fundamentalism,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Erwin Fahlbusch and Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999-2003), 2:363.

⁷¹Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 21. For a concise introduction to evangelical postconservatism, see Taylor, 17-32.

The Emerging Church “began with concerns about church growth and retention of young people in a postmodern culture.”⁷² It is a broad eclectic, ecumenical, and experientially minded movement taking place in postconservative American evangelicalism,⁷³ that seeks to preach the gospel by adapting it to the postmodern culture of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Emergent Church authors doubt Scripture and resist its authority. They follow and build upon church tradition.⁷⁴ Notable leaders in the movement include the late Stanley Grenz (theoretical and doctrinal theology),⁷⁵ Brian McLaren (practical theology),⁷⁶ and Robert Webber (liturgy).⁷⁷

The Emergent Church embraces ecumenism and postmodernity, believing that the Protestant Reformation is over and a new spiritual, pluralistic, ecumenical reformation based on tradition is underway. Emergent Church scholars overcome Protestant ambiguity regarding the *sola Scriptura* principle by affirming explicitly that the “sources of theology include not only the Bible, but also Christian tradition, culture, and the contemporary experience of God’s community.”⁷⁸ For example, although Donald Bloesch affirmed the *sola Scriptura* principle theoretically in 2002,⁷⁹ twenty-five years earlier he had joined Emergent Church leader Robert E. Webber in “a conference of evangelical leaders and scholars that issued an appeal, known as the Chicago Call, for a more catholic and historically rooted evangelicalism. . . . It called for a new evangelical movement that affirmed the historic creeds, sacraments, and ecclesial ethos of classical Christianity.”⁸⁰ Postconservative evangelicals then

⁷²Larry D. Pettergrew, “Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 17/2 (2006): 165.

⁷³Richard L. Mayhue, “The Emerging Church: Generous Orthodoxy or General Obfuscation,” *The Master’s Journal* 17/2 (2006): 194-203.

⁷⁴For an introduction to the Emergent Church and its primary leadership, see Taylor, 17-32. For an introduction to the notion of “emerging” as integrating evolutionary process thought and tradition, see Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional + Evangelical + Post/Protestant + Liberal/Conservative + Mystical/Poetic + Biblical + Charismatic/Contemplative + Fundamentalist + Calvinist + Anabaptist/Anglican + Methodist + Catholic + Green + Incarnational + Depressed-yet-Hopeful + Emergent + Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

⁷⁵See, e.g., Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994); Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

⁷⁶See, e.g., McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*; idem, *The Secret Message of Jesus Christ: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville: W. Publishing Group, 2006).

⁷⁷See, e.g., Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*.

⁷⁸Taylor, 19.

⁷⁹See nn. 62 and 64.

⁸⁰Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 170. “The Chicago Call was

“argued that Luther and Calvin belonged to the great tradition of classical Christian orthodoxy, and that the hope of a genuinely catholic evangelicalism lies in the modern evangelical recovery of the catholic elements⁸¹ in Lutheran and Calvinist Christianity.”⁸² This proposal, then, calls evangelicals to build their movement on the basis of the supposed “universality” (catholicity) of early Church tradition (approximately the first five centuries of Christianity). Although this early “catholicism” is by no means identical to Roman Catholicism as we know it, it already contains the ontological, metaphysical, hermeneutical, and methodological basis on which the theological synthesis of the Roman Catholic Church stands. If evangelicals build on this basis they will unavoidably draw nearer to Roman Catholic theology and ecclesiology.

However, not all evangelical scholars embrace this turn to tradition. Some conservative scholars, recognizing tradition has been wrong many times and cannot be trusted implicitly,⁸³ continue to embrace the Reformation *sola Scriptura* principle. Other pastors, leaders, scholars, writers, and seminary professors of established mainline Protestant and evangelical denominations build their theologies upon the Roman Catholic principle of the multiplicity of sources of theology and use Catholic tradition, philosophy, and science as macro-hermeneutical principles for understanding Scripture and to construct Christian doctrine.

Thus, on one hand, Emergent Church postconservative evangelical leadership openly embraces Catholic tradition and religious pluralism; on the other, conservative evangelical scholars implicitly assume that Protestant

issued in the form of an eight-point manifesto that urged evangelicals to affirm the roots and catholic heritage of Christianity, the authority of scripture, the identity-conferring authority of the historic creed, the holistic character of salvation, the value of sacramental practices and theology, the centrality of Christ’s redemptive work to Christian spirituality, the need for church authority, and the hope of Christian unity” (ibid.).

⁸¹Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng recognizes the existence of a underlying continuity between macro theological schools of Christian theology through the centuries. “Elements of the old paradigm can be taken over into the new paradigm, unless they contract the primal, basic testimony. In this way steps have been taken in advance so that, not only between Origen and Augustine, but also between Augustine and Thomas, and even between Thomas and Luther, an upheaval does not lead to a total break; what happens, rather, is that with the common bond of Christian faith a certain amount of common theological ground is also preserved” (*Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View*, trans. Peter Heinegg [New York: Doubleday, 1988], 158).

⁸²Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology*, 171.

⁸³“The creeds are often wrong. . . The Nicene Creed contains Origenist concepts; Chalcedon conferred on Mary the title ‘Mother of God’; the Fourth Lateran Council endorsed Cyprian’s dictum that outside the church there is no salvation; the Augsburg Confession prescribes the Eucharistic doctrine of consubstantiation; the Marburg Articles teach baptismal regeneration; and the Westminster Confession identifies the pope as the Antichrist” (ibid.).

theologies cannot stand on the basis of the *sola Scriptura* principle. The difference between the two competing mindsets within evangelicalism is not qualitative in nature, but quantitative. The difference then revolves around how much church tradition, philosophy, science, and experience may serve as hermeneutical principles for interpreting Scripture and constructing Christian theology.

There is a further division, however, among evangelical scholars and lay members. For example, John Sanders recognizes that when evangelical lay believers become “theologically informed” they come to understand Scripture in a different way from evangelical scholars.⁸⁴ What causes this difference in interpretation? While the former understanding flows from scriptural texts and canonical contexts, the latter is derived from Scripture and tradition, including philosophy, science, and experience. Thus it would appear that there is a significant hermeneutical gap between theologically well-informed evangelical scholars and the world of evangelical church members. If Sanders is correct, evangelicalism conceals a fateful foundational division in its own ranks that separates the laity, who retain the *sola Scriptura* principle, from the theologians and ministers, who hold to a Scripture plus tradition hermeneutic.

Where do Seventh-day Adventists stand on the issue of *sola Scriptura*? Do they share the Protestant and evangelical understanding found among most scholars, in which *sola Scriptura* includes not only Scripture, but a carefully guarded tradition as the foundation of theological hermeneutics? Or do they attempt to retain a true understanding of this principle?

Adventism’s View of sola Scriptura

While the statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Beliefs begins with the implicit affirmation of the *tota* and *prima Scriptura* principles, it falls short of articulating the *sola Scriptura* principle:

The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God [*tota Scriptura*], given by divine inspiration through holy men of God who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this Word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for Salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history [*prima Scriptura*]. (2 Peter 1:20, 21; 2 Tim. 3:16, 17; Ps. 119:105; Prov. 30:5, 6; Isa. 8:20; John 17:17; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 4:12).⁸⁵

Some Adventist scholars, however, clearly affirm and articulate the *sola Scriptura* principle. According to Peter van Bemmelen, “no other holy books, sacred traditions, ecclesiastical pronouncements, or creedal statements may be

⁸⁴John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 59.

⁸⁵General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Church Manual*, 17th ed. (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2005), 9.

accorded authority equal to that of the Bible. This also means that conscience, reason, feelings, and religious or mystical experiences are subordinate to the authority of Scripture. These may have a legitimate sphere, but they should constantly be brought under the scrutiny of the Word of God (Heb. 4:12).⁸⁶ Since biblical prophets taught and lived by the *sola Scriptura* principle, we should not consider it a modern category imposed on Scripture, but the cognitive principle given by God to the biblical writers.⁸⁷ *Tota*⁸⁸ and *prima Scriptura*⁸⁹ principles are also recognized by Adventist scholarship.

Adventists readily and correctly recognize that the *sola Scriptura* principle originates with Luther and the early Reformation movement. Accordingly, they believe that Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the Anabaptists “consistently upheld the Bible and the Bible alone as the standard of truth and sought to utilize Scripture, instead of tradition or scholastic philosophy, to interpret Scripture.”⁹⁰ Moreover, Adventists believe that the Reformers developed their theologies by applying Bible knowledge as the only and final norm for truth. *Sola Scriptura* means that “all other sources of knowledge must be tested by this unerring standard.”⁹¹

However, van Bemmelen correctly warns the reader about assuming that evangelical theologians follow their claim to *sola Scriptura* in their teachings, noting that “The *sola Scriptura* principle is as much in danger of opposition now as at any time in the past. Through exalting the authority of human reason, tradition, and science, many have come to deny or to limit the authority of Scripture.”⁹²

⁸⁶Peter Maarten van Bemmelen, “Review and Inspiration,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, *Commentary Reference Series* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 42.

⁸⁷On the biblical nature of the *sola Scriptura* principle in Adventism, see Richard M. Davidson, “Biblical Interpretation,” 60.

⁸⁸“All Scripture—not just part—is inspired by God. This certainly includes the whole OT, the canonical Scriptures of the apostolic church (see Luke 24:44, 45; John 5:39; Rom. 1:2; 3:2; 2 Peter 1:21). But for Paul it also includes the NT sacred writings as well. Paul’s use of the word ‘scripture’ (*graphē*, ‘writing’) in 1 Timothy 5:18 points in this direction. He introduces two quotations with the words ‘scripture says’: one from Deuteronomy 25:4 and one from the words of Jesus in Luke 10:7. The ‘scripture’ thus is used to refer to both the OT and the Gospel of Luke. Peter, by noting that some ignorant people ‘twist’ Paul’s writings ‘as they do the other Scriptures’ (2 Peter 3:15, 16), puts the apostle’s writings into the category of Scripture. Thus the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul are understood as ‘Scripture’ already in NT times” (*ibid.*, 61).

⁸⁹“Scripture thus provides the framework, the divine perspective, the foundational principles, for every branch of knowledge and experience. All additional knowledge, experience, or revelation must build upon and remain faithful to the all-sufficient foundation of Scripture” (*ibid.*).

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 89.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 61.

⁹²Van Bemmelen, “Revelation and Inspiration,” 43.

How then should Adventist theologians respond to those who have gone before them in the upholding of the *sola Scriptura* principle? Have Adventists moved successfully beyond Protestants and evangelicals, or have they, too, succumbed to the same types of problems?

Adventist Perspectives on sola Scriptura

As a historical phenomenon, Seventh-day Adventism is, at the present time, far from united on the *sola Scriptura* principle. In the last thirty years, the conviction that Adventism should build its theology and practice on the multiplicity-of-sources paradigm has been embraced by many and implicitly endorsed by self-denominated Progressive Adventists, such as Fritz Guy.⁹³ Some other Adventist writers have argued in favor of switching from the *sola Scriptura* to the *prima Scriptura* principle. For example, Tim Crosby and Woodrow Whidden suggest various arguments in favor of this foundational change in the cognitive principle of Adventist theological methodology.

Crosby believes Adventists should move from the *sola* to the *prima Scriptura* principle because he wants to make room for the writings of Ellen White. He agrees that the Reformation *sola Scriptura* principle is useful for affirming Scripture against the role of tradition, but is not so helpful when dealing with the authoritative role of postcanonical prophets such as, notably, White.⁹⁴ Crosby leans on the side of *prima* rather than *sola Scriptura* as a “better” option for Adventist theology because it does not rule out theological discourse and contributions of postcanonical prophets.⁹⁵ At the same time, he does not clarify whether or not *prima Scriptura* opens the door to philosophy, science, tradition, and experience alongside canonical and postcanonical inspired sources.

Whidden argues in favor of *prima Scriptura* for a different reason. He assumes, not without reason, that the *sola Scriptura* (no creed but the Bible) of the Protestant Reformation led evangelicalism to embrace an individualistic hermeneutical perspective that, in turn, produced theological divisions and ecclesiological fragmentations. To solve this problem, he suggests that other sources are necessary to guide evangelical thinkers to a unifying hermeneutics

⁹³“In recent years Guy has positioned himself at the cutting edge of progressive Adventist theology.” Wikipedia article on Fritz Guy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fritz_Guy

⁹⁴“With its all-or-none implications, the term *sola scriptura* creates an unnecessary dilemma. Some who accept it believe they must reject any post canonical claim to inspired authority. Others with different theological leanings conclude that because of this doctrine they must elevate the writings of Ellen G. White to a position of equality with Scripture” (Tim Crosby, “Why I Don’t Believe in *Sola Scriptura*,” *Ministry*, October 1987, “Introduction.”)

⁹⁵“In conclusion, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* should never be used to disallow contemporary prophetic authority. The term *prima scriptura* is better, as it is less likely to be abused in this way. In matters of faith and religious practice, the Bible must be our final authority. Yet—and there is a certain tension here—later prophets may advance beyond it, though not to the point of contradiction” (ibid., “Conclusion”).

that may bring about theological and spiritual unity. On this basis, he sees the so-called Wesleyan Quadrilateral⁹⁶ of theological sources as the necessary methodological tool to overcome this situation. In consonance with the basic view of the Protestant creedal formulations on Scripture outlined earlier, the Quadrilateral includes Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience with a strong emphasis on the authority of Scripture.⁹⁷

This approach requires that in theological methodology Scripture should function not as the *sola*, but *prima Scriptura* principle.⁹⁸ On one hand, this proposed switch from *sola* to *prima Scriptura* fits well with the traditional Protestant approach as affirmed in the Belgic Confession and the Formula of Concord, in which the higher authority is given to Scripture, but, at the same time, other extrabiblical sources play an unspecified “formative” role in Christian theology. On the other hand, this view does not fit well with the first Fundamental belief of Adventism, White’s consistent call to faithfulness to the *sola Scriptura* principle, or the generalized use of Scripture during the first one hundred years of Adventist history.

As with Whidden, Guy dismisses the *sola Scriptura* principle of the Reformation as a “polemical exaggeration” and approves of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.⁹⁹ According to him, these sources work together by mutually complementing each

⁹⁶For an introduction to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, see, e.g., Donald A. D. Thorsen, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁹⁷Woodrow W. Whidden, “*Sola Scriptura*, Inerrantist Fundamentalism and the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Is ‘No Creed but the Bible’ a Workable Solution,” *AUSS* 35 (1997): 211-226.

⁹⁸Whidden, 216-217, notes: “The major implication of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral would be *prima scriptura*. I would urge that such slogans as *sola Scriptura* and especially “No creed but the Bible” be laid aside and that a renewal of theological discourse be sought within the *prima Scriptura* framework. Such a term certainly reflects the conservative Protestant concern for the *normative* finality of biblical authority, but it realistically acknowledges that other factors (such as tradition, reason, and experience) play powerfully *formative* roles in interpretative and doctrinal development. As has already been suggested, the other options essentially come down to the numerous varieties of sterile ‘traditionalism’ or naive ‘biblicism.’”

⁹⁹“Strictly speaking, the Reformation motto *sola scriptura*, ‘By scripture alone,’ popularly interpreted as ‘the Bible and the Bible only,’ has always been a polemical exaggeration. It was originally intended to oppose the Roman Catholic emphasis on the authority of ecclesiastical tradition for the proper interpretation of scripture, but more recently it has often been used to avoid questions that secular knowledge raises for traditional interpretations of faith. Historically and experientially, a more accurate motto is *prima scriptura*, ‘By scripture first of all.’ Perhaps even better would be an affirmation of something like the ‘Wesleyan quadrilateral’ consisting of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience” (Fritz Guy, *Thinking Theologically: Adventist Christianity and the Interpretation of Faith* [Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1999], 137).

other.¹⁰⁰ Such harmonious complementation is determined by the claim that, epistemologically, Scripture works at a different level of reality. While Scripture deals with religious issues within the “ultimate” level of reality in which religious questions about the theological meaning of God, the world, and humans belong,¹⁰¹ the other sources deal with scientific and historical questions within the immediate level of historical realities. Consequently,

in principle, Scripture no more competes with the other sources of knowledge about reality than science competes with art or philosophy. Its function is to provide content that is *beyond* the competence of the research, artistic, and theoretical disciplines. Scripture does not dispute the facts of the natural and human sciences; it provides an understanding of humanity, nature, and God in which all knowledge has its ultimate significance. It is precisely its difference from science, art, and philosophy that gives to scripture its unique and essential function in theological thinking and in human existence.¹⁰²

However, Guy moves on, leaving behind the classical Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and suggests that an “Adventist interpretation of faith should embrace three poles or bases. He identifies these three poles as “the *Christian Gospel*, which is our spiritual center; our *cultural context*, which is where we live, worship, witness, and serve; and our *Adventist heritage*, which is the foundation of our theological identity.”¹⁰³ The *Christian gospel* includes the understanding of God and his work of salvation.¹⁰⁴ This pole implies a primary role for Scripture. The *cultural context* is the contemporary world in which Adventism

¹⁰⁰“Most Christians believe that scripture, as another source of knowledge about reality, offers cognitive content and possibilities of understanding that are not otherwise available. The relationship of this source to the others is again, quite literally, one of complementarity, of *completing*” (ibid., 144, emphasis original).

¹⁰¹Guy, 144, unfolds with more precision his view of the essential “complementarity” of theological sources: “More specifically, the function of scripture is not to provide a shortcut to the knowledge that is also available through the factual-research, creative-artistic, or theoretical-constructive disciplines. Nor is it the function of scripture to judge, correct, or control the knowledge that results from these disciplines. For scripture has a pre-eminent purpose and providence of its own: to enable us to answer the ultimate, that is, religious, questions—questions about the nature of the ultimate reality (God), about the ultimate nature of all other reality (the ‘world,’ that is, the created universe), and about the ultimate meaning of human reality, including our own individual reality. Scripture is theologically central and normative because it is our most direct source of knowledge about the self-revelation of God in the person and mission of Jesus the Messiah; it is, in other words, our best clue to God’s character, relationship, and activity, which are the center of theological thinking.”

¹⁰²Ibid., 46, emphasis supplied.

¹⁰³Ibid., 225, emphasis original.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 227-228.

lives “with its ideas, understandings, interests, and concerns.”¹⁰⁵ By its description, this pole implicitly includes the teachings of science, philosophy, and contemporary popular culture. The *Adventist heritage* includes the distinctive contributions of Adventism to Christianity, such as “the Sabbath, Advent hope, the continuing ministry of Christ, human wholeness, and truth.”¹⁰⁶

Guy’s tripolar source of theology evokes a close resemblance to the dipolar sources of theology David Tracy uses to advance his postmodernist revisionist model of Christian theology. “In its briefest expression,” explains Tracy, “the revisionist model holds that a contemporary fundamental Christian theology can best be described as philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in *common human experience and language*, and upon the meanings present in the *Christian fact*.”¹⁰⁷ According to him, “*Christian fact*” includes the texts of Scripture and tradition, with primacy given to Scripture over tradition, which fits well with the *prima Scriptura* principle. The “*common human experience*” includes science, philosophy, culture, and personal religious experience.¹⁰⁸ Guy’s “*Christian gospel*” and the “*Adventist heritage*” correspond to Tracy’s “*Christian fact*.” Likewise, Tracy’s “*common human experience*” corresponds to Guy’s “*cultural context*.” Finally, we should keep in mind that, according to Guy, theology is the “interpretation of faith,”¹⁰⁹ a definition that he drew approvingly from modernist American theologian Langdon Gilkey.¹¹⁰ This means that theology is the interpretation of language generated by religious experience¹¹¹ rather than by divine revelation and inspiration. For all practical purposes, this definition places all the sources of theology outlined in the Quadrilateral and the tripolar scheme within the realm of human tradition, philosophy, science, and culture.

Crosby, Whidden, and Guy represent three positions regarding recent uses of *sola Scriptura* in Seventh-day Adventist thought. We will now turn to the earlier perspective of Ellen White.

Ellen White on Luther’s Concept of sola Scriptura

Ellen White’s high praise for Luther’s application of the *sola Scriptura* principle against Roman Catholic theology and tradition may be one of the reasons why Adventists generally assume that Protestant theology generates from the faithful and consistent application of the *sola Scriptura* principle.

For instance, White explains that “When enemies [of Luther] appealed to custom and tradition, or the assertions and authority of the pope, Luther

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 231.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 237.

¹⁰⁷David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 43, emphasis supplied.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁰⁹Guy, 3-4.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 4, n. 4.

¹¹¹Ibid., 5.

met them with the Bible, and the Bible only.”¹¹² “God had a work for him to do, and angels of Heaven were sent to protect him.”¹¹³ Moreover, many “received from Luther the precious light.”¹¹⁴ Thus Luther is “a champion of the truth, fighting not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places.”¹¹⁵ Notably, Luther’s advocacy of biblical truth includes justification by faith.¹¹⁶

Yet, is White’s description of Luther’s pivotal role in the Reformation an endorsement of his entire theology? The answer to this question is no. Although White chose to underline the many positive contributions of Luther to the Reformation, she did not agree with all of Luther’s and the Reformers’ theological positions. According to her, their role was “to break the fetters of Rome, and to give the Bible to the world; yet there were important truths which they failed to discover, and grave error which they did not renounce.”¹¹⁷ Further, she proposes that “the Protestants of the nineteenth century” were “fast approaching the Catholics in their infidelity concerning the Scriptures.” Because Protestants found it “difficult to prove their doctrines from the Bible,” they were beginning to look to Rome with much favor. Their failure to apply the *sola Scriptura* principle would lead Protestantism to change its theology and eventually to unite hermeneutically with Roman Catholic theology.¹¹⁸ As

¹¹²Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1907), 132.

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴“Nothing but repentance toward God and faith in Christ can save the sinner. The grace of Christ cannot be purchased. It is a free gift. He [Luther] counsels the people not to buy the indulgences, but to look in faith to their crucified Redeemer. He relates his own painful experience in vainly seeking by humiliation and penance to secure salvation, and assures his hearers that it was by looking away from himself and believing in Christ that he found peace and joy unspeakable. he urges them to obtain, if possible, a copy of the Bible, and to study it diligently. It is those who do not learn and obey its sacred truths that are deceived by Satan, and left to perish in their iniquity” (ibid.).

¹¹⁵Ellen White, “The First Blow of the Reformation,” *Signs of the Times*, 14 June 1883, 7.

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷“Luther and his co-laborers accomplished a noble work for God; but, coming as they did from the Roman Church, having themselves believed and advocated her doctrines, it was not to be expected that they would discern all these errors. It was their work to break the fetters of Rome, and to give the Bible to the world; yet there were important truths which they did not renounce” (Ellen White, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, 4 vols. [Battle Creek: Seventh-day Adventist Publishing Association, 1869], 4:180).

¹¹⁸“And this [Roman Catholicism] is the religion which Protestants are beginning to look upon with so much favor, and which will eventually be united with Protestantism. This union will not, however, be effected by a change in Catholicism; for Rome never changes. She claims infallibility. It is Protestantism that will change. The adoption of liberal ideas on this part will bring it where it can clasp the hand of Catholicism. “The

indicated above, this is precisely what some evangelicals are advancing in our times and that some sectors of Adventism are embracing.

The Protestant lack of success in conceiving and applying the *sola Scriptura* principle for the last five centuries seems to indicate that progress in this area may not come from evangelical theologians. This fact should motivate Adventists to serious and creative methodological and constructive reflections. After all, according to White, “God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms.”¹¹⁹ Is it possible to build a Christian Synthesis on the basis of the *sola Scriptura* principle?

Conclusion

The brief and incomplete survey of evidence considered in this study suggests the following conclusions:

(1) Adventists correctly recognize that the *sola Scriptura* principle originates with Luther and the early Reformation movement, and incorrectly assume that the Magisterial Reformers (Luther and Calvin) developed their theologies by consistently applying the *sola Scriptura* principle. They believe these views find support in White’s positive description of Luther’s pivotal role in the *Great Controversy*. However, although White highly praised Luther for his use of Scripture against tradition, she did not endorse his theology because there were many important truths yet to be discovered.

(2) Luther affirmed and partially used the *sola Scriptura* principle. Yet, he did not follow it consistently because explicitly and implicitly he still gave a guiding hermeneutical role to tradition, notably to Augustine, thereby denying the sufficiency of Scripture. Further, Luther did not abide by the *tota Scriptura*

Bible, the Bible, is the foundation of our faith,’ is the foundation of our faith,’ was the cry of Protestants in Luther’s time, while the Catholics cried, ‘The Fathers, custom, tradition.’ Now many Protestants find it difficult to prove their doctrines from the Bible, and yet they have not the moral courage to accept the truth which involves a cross; therefore they are fast coming to the ground of Catholics, and, using the best arguments they have to evade the truth, cite the testimony of the Fathers, and the customs and precepts of men. Yes, the Protestants of the nineteenth century are fast approaching the Catholics in their infidelity concerning the Scriptures. But there is just as wide a gulf today between Rome and the Protestantism of Luther, Cranmer, Ridley, Hooper, and the noble army of martyrs, as there was when these men made the protest which gave them the name of Protestants” (“Visit to the Vaudois Valleys,” *Review and Herald*, 1 June 1886, 13).

¹¹⁹“But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines, and the basis of all reforms. The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plan ‘Thus saith the Lord’ in its support” (White, *The Great Controversy*, 595).

principle choosing to value the portions of Scripture that better fitted his theological interpretation of justification by faith.

(3) The Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Formula of Concord speak about the role of Scripture and its relation to Christian tradition along the same lines established by the Reformers. Tradition and its Greek philosophical assumptions became the implicit hermeneutical context from which Protestants interpreted Scripture and constructed their teachings and practices.

(4) John Wesley did not alter the pattern established by the Magisterial Reformers and the confessions of faith. While he affirms Scripture, Wesley also used macro-hermeneutical principles retrieved from tradition that were based on philosophical imagination. In so doing, he falls short of the *sola Scriptura* principle.

(5) During the twentieth century, American evangelical leaders retained the traditional Protestant ambivalence on the *sola Scriptura* principle. Implicitly, they continued to embrace tradition and its philosophical assumptions as did Luther, the Protestant Confessions, and Wesley and Methodism.

(6) By the end of the twentieth century, in the context of the advent of postmodernity and Roman Catholic ecumenical evangelization initiated by Vatican II, Young Evangelical leaders reassessed their ministerial patterns and theological positions. As a result, at the turn of the twenty-first century, an increasing number of evangelical leaders are turning for inspiration and guidance to Catholic tradition and world religions instead of Scripture. Yet, there is still a remnant within evangelical denominations still committed to the *sola Scriptura* principle. Unfortunately, their doctrines and practices continue to stand on tradition and nonbiblical philosophical hermeneutics.

(7) By way of contrast, Adventism came into existence by affirming and building on the sufficiency of Scripture as expressed in the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle. Nevertheless, for some this original methodological conviction is slowly changing in the direction of *prima Scriptura* as a sector of Adventist leaders in the developed countries of the West, intentionally or unintentionally, embrace new evangelical theological, ministerial, and missiological trends. Thus the sufficiency of Scripture is surrendered for a hermeneutical guidance outside of Scripture, be that in postcanonical inspired sources (Ellen White) or other humanly originated sources such as tradition, philosophy, science, culture, and experience.

This, then, is a call to Adventists and evangelicals to reappraise the value of the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle in the construction of theology.