HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION, AND CHURCH AUTHORITY

What has the final word?

Reading Packet

1

Reading 1 - Irenaeus: Scripture, Apostolic Tradition, and Succession

Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III, Chapters 1-4 (late 2nd century) - condensed reading

Summary

Irenaeus argues against teachers who claimed access to a secret or superior Christian tradition. He points first to the public apostolic message preserved in the Scriptures and preached throughout the churches. The gospel is not an esoteric discovery but the faith openly handed down from the apostles.

He also appeals to the succession of bishops in churches founded by apostles, especially Rome, as a public historical witness to that same faith. Scripture, apostolic tradition, and succession therefore reinforce one another in his argument rather than functioning as three unrelated authorities.

Why it matters

Irenaeus shows why later Christians could appeal both to Scripture and to the Church's received tradition. His argument forces the course's opening question: when rival interpretations claim to be Christian, how should the public apostolic faith identify and correct error?

2

Reading 2 - Athanasius: The Canonical Books of Scripture

Athanasius, Festal Letter 39 (367) - condensed reading

Summary

Athanasius lists the books he regards as the divinely inspired Old and New Testaments. His New Testament list is the earliest surviving list that matches the twenty-seven books received by most Christians today. He distinguishes these canonical books from other useful church writings that may instruct new believers but do not carry the same authority.

The letter does not portray Athanasius as inventing a canon by personal decree. It reflects a process of reception, use, and discernment within the churches while drawing a firm boundary around the writings from which doctrine is proclaimed.

Why it matters

The authority of Scripture depends in practice on knowing what counts as Scripture. Athanasius provides a concrete historical window into how the Church recognized a canon and distinguished inspired books from valuable but noncanonical literature.

3

Reading 3 - Augustine: The Gospel and the Authority of the Catholic Church

Augustine of Hippo, Against the Epistle of Manichaeus, Chapter 5 (late 4th century) - condensed reading

Summary

Augustine contrasts the worldwide, historically continuous Catholic Church with the unsupported claims of the Manichaean teacher Mani. He explains that his confidence in the Gospel did not arise in isolation: the authority of the Catholic Church moved him to receive it as the Gospel.

His statement is not a dismissal of Scripture. It describes the ecclesial setting in which the biblical books are identified, transmitted, preached, and believed. The Church's public continuity gives Augustine a reason to trust the Gospel rather than a newly introduced rival revelation.

Why it matters

This passage became a classic text in debates over whether Scripture authenticates the Church or the Church authenticates Scripture. It highlights the unavoidable relationship between a sacred text and the historical community that recognizes and hands it on.

Augustine on Scripture and Reason

Augustine did not reject reason or limit all knowledge to what Scripture explicitly states. He believed reason could discover genuine truth and could help Christians understand, defend, and draw implications from revelation. But reason was not an independent source of new divine revelation or binding articles of faith.

> *“Scripture which is called canonical, which has paramount authority.” - City of God*, XI.3

Historical Context - Greek Philosophy Before Aquinas

The interaction began centuries before Aquinas. Second- and third-century Christian writers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen engaged Middle Platonic and related philosophical traditions. They used philosophical categories to explain and defend Christian claims, while also rejecting ideas they believed conflicted with revelation.

Augustine became the pivotal Western figure. His encounter with the “books of the Platonists” helped him conceive of God as immaterial and helped shape his account of evil as a privation of good. He nevertheless subjected philosophical claims to Christian revelation, especially where Platonism conflicted with creation, incarnation, grace, resurrection, and salvation in Christ.

Aquinas represents a later shift rather than the beginning. By the thirteenth century, the recovery of Aristotle had transformed medieval intellectual life. Aquinas built a largely Aristotelian philosophical framework into Christian theology while retaining important Augustinian and Platonic inheritances.

Course question: How much Christian doctrine was clarified through philosophical categories, and at what point might those categories begin to reshape the way Scripture itself is read? Greek philosophy was already interacting with Christian theology long before the medieval period.

4

Reading 4 - Thomas Aquinas: Sacred Doctrine and Revelation

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, First Part, Question 1 (13th century) - condensed reading

Summary

Aquinas argues that human reason, though genuine and valuable, is not sufficient for knowledge of every truth needed for salvation. God therefore reveals truths that exceed reason and also reveals some truths reason could reach only slowly, imperfectly, or with error. Sacred doctrine receives its first principles from God's revelation.

Because its source is divine knowledge, sacred doctrine possesses a certainty higher than disciplines grounded only in human reasoning. Aquinas nevertheless uses philosophy and other forms of knowledge as servants that clarify implications, answer objections, and help theology speak accurately.

Why it matters

Aquinas supplies a careful account of why revelation is necessary without treating faith as irrational. His approach frames the enduring question of how Scripture, theological tradition, and natural reason relate without becoming interchangeable authorities.

5

Reading 5 - Martin Luther: Councils, Creeds, and the Word of God

Martin Luther, On the Councils and the Church (1539) - condensed reading

Summary

Luther values the ancient councils when they defend biblical truth, but he denies that a council has authority simply because church leaders have assembled. Councils can err and cannot create new articles of faith. Their proper work is to confess, clarify, and defend what Scripture already teaches.

He therefore refuses both contempt for the historic Church and unconditional submission to ecclesiastical decisions. The Church remains necessary as the community in which the Word is preached and confessed, yet its teachers and councils stand under the judgment of that Word.

Why it matters

Luther illustrates the Reformation effort to preserve real church authority while denying that church authority is final. His position helps distinguish sola Scriptura from the idea that Christians should ignore creeds, councils, history, or teachers.

6

Reformation Synthesis - Luther and Calvin

Same basic Protestant authority structure, different emphases

Why Luther can affirm creeds

For Luther, sola Scriptura does not mean that creeds, councils, or teachers are useless. It means that Scripture alone is the infallible final norm. A creed has genuine ecclesiastical authority when it faithfully summarizes what Scripture already teaches; it does not make a doctrine true by declaring it.

> *“A council has no power to establish new articles of faith.”*
>
> Martin Luther, On the Councils and the Church (1539). He immediately adds that councils may suppress and condemn new articles according to Holy Scripture and the ancient faith.

Luther therefore receives the ancient ecumenical creeds because he believes they accurately confess biblical teaching about the Trinity and Christ. If a creed or council contradicted Scripture, Scripture would remain the final court of appeal.

Calvin: the same principle stated more systematically

Calvin agrees with Luther that councils deserve respect without possessing an independent infallibility. His distinctive emphasis is to explain why Scripture can function as the final authority: its authority comes from God rather than from the Church, and the Holy Spirit enables believers to recognize the divine voice in the biblical text.

> *“the highest place would be given to Scripture, everything being brought to it as a test.”*
>
> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV.9.8.

Core distinction

Luther emphasizes the limits of ecclesiastical power: the Church may confess and defend revealed doctrine but may not manufacture new articles of faith. Calvin emphasizes the structure behind that claim: councils have real weight, but Scripture is the superior norm by which even councils are tested.

Reading 6 - John Calvin: Scripture's Self-Authenticating Authority

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book I, Chapters 7-9 (1559) - condensed reading

Summary

Calvin teaches that Scripture receives its authority from God, not from a later decision of the Church. The Church recognizes Scripture; it does not make Scripture authoritative. He compares reliance on church approval alone to making eternal truth depend on changing human judgment.

Certainty comes through the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, who enables believers to recognize in Scripture the voice of God. Calvin also rejects claims that the Spirit leads Christians beyond or against the written Word. The same Spirit who inspired Scripture does not contradict what he has given.

Why it matters

Calvin states the mature Reformed answer to the problem of final authority: Scripture is self-authenticating, and the Spirit produces conviction of its truth. The reading also exposes a recurring difficulty - how a shared objective text and inward spiritual assurance relate in disputed interpretation.

Reading 7 - The Council of Trent: Scripture and Unwritten Traditions

Council of Trent, Fourth Session (1546) - condensed reading

Summary

Trent teaches that the saving truth and moral discipline of the gospel are contained in written books and in unwritten traditions received from Christ or handed down by the apostles under the Holy Spirit. The council receives both with reverence and affirms the Church's role in preserving and judging their authentic meaning.

The decree also identifies the biblical books received by the Roman Catholic Church, including the deuterocanonical books, and uses the Latin Vulgate as an authoritative text for public teaching and controversy. Its decisions directly answer Reformation disputes over canon and tradition.

Why it matters

Trent defines the Catholic response to sola Scriptura and fixes several boundaries that still distinguish Catholic and Protestant accounts of authority. It shows that the controversy concerns not only interpretation but also the sources and canon from which doctrine is drawn.

Catholic and Protestant Authority - Trent and Westminster

Two competing accounts of how apostolic truth is preserved and finally judged

Catholic model

Catholic theology understands Scripture and apostolic Tradition as transmitting one deposit of faith. The Magisterium - the teaching authority exercised by the pope and the bishops in communion with him - authentically interprets that deposit. It is not conceived as a separate source of new revelation, but as a continuing teaching office charged with guarding and explaining what has been handed down.

> *“these truths and rules are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions”*
>
> Council of Trent, Fourth Session (1546), Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures.

What is the Magisterium, and when did it begin?

The Magisterium is still a living teaching office, not a separate department with one officeholder. Catholic theology traces its origin to Christ commissioning the apostles and understands episcopal succession as the continuation of that teaching mission. Historically, bishops and councils exercised teaching authority from the early centuries, while the precise later Catholic doctrine, terminology, and relationship of pope, bishops, councils, Scripture, and Tradition developed gradually.

Westminster model

Westminster gives the mature Reformed alternative. The Church, councils, ancient writers, and teachers can genuinely assist interpretation, but none is an infallible final tribunal. Every ecclesiastical judgment remains subject to the Word of God.

> *“The supreme judge ... can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”*
>
> Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10 (1646).

The dividing line

The dispute is not simply Bible versus Church. Catholicism argues that Christ gave the Church a protected teaching authority within the one deposit of faith. The Reformation argues that because every human ecclesiastical judgment can err, Scripture must remain the only infallible final norm by which the Church itself is judged.

Reading 8 - Westminster Confession: The Final Authority of Scripture

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, Of the Holy Scripture (1646) - condensed reading

Summary

Westminster confesses Scripture as necessary because earlier forms of revelation were not sufficient to preserve and transmit the truth in every age. Its authority depends wholly on God, its author, while the Church's testimony can move believers to esteem it. The Spirit gives full persuasion and assurance of its truth.

The confession also teaches that Scripture contains everything necessary for God's glory, salvation, faith, and life, whether expressly stated or validly inferred. Councils, traditions, private revelations, and human opinions must finally be examined by the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.

Why it matters

Westminster is one of the clearest confessional formulations of Protestant biblical authority. It joins Scripture's sufficiency and finality to the real but subordinate roles of the Church, reasoned inference, translation, and the Spirit's illumination.

Reading 9 - Stephen Charnock: The Truthfulness of the Revealing God

Stephen Charnock, The Existence and Attributes of God, selections on divine truth and veracity (17th century) - condensed reading

Summary

Charnock grounds confidence in revelation in the character of God. Because God is perfectly true, he cannot deceive, be deceived, or contradict himself. Divine promises and declarations are dependable because faithfulness is not merely something God practices; it belongs to who God is.

Human speakers may err through ignorance, weakness, or dishonesty. None of those limitations belongs to God. When God reveals himself, the believer's ultimate confidence rests not in the brilliance of the messenger or interpreter but in the knowledge, goodness, and truth of the one who speaks.

Why it matters

Charnock moves the authority discussion beneath debates about institutions and documents to its theological foundation. Scripture can bind the conscience only because it is understood as the trustworthy Word of a God whose nature excludes falsehood.

Reading 10 - John Owen: The Divine Origin and Authority of Scripture

John Owen, selected writings on the divine origin, authority, and self-evidence of Scripture (17th century) - condensed reading

Summary

Owen argues that Scripture bears marks of its divine origin in its majesty, coherence, spiritual power, and revelation of God's glory. External testimony and historical arguments can answer objections and confirm faith, but they cannot create the highest kind of certainty that God's own Word deserves.

That certainty arises as the Holy Spirit enables the mind to perceive Scripture's divine qualities. Owen does not reduce faith to a private feeling: the Spirit opens believers to the character of the public text he inspired and applies its truth to the conscience.

Why it matters

Owen develops the Protestant claim that Scripture's final authority cannot depend on a higher human tribunal. His account also raises an important test: how can spiritual recognition of divine authority remain accountable rather than becoming an appeal to private certainty?

Reading 11 - J. I. Packer: Evangelical Confidence in the Word of God

J. I. Packer, Fundamentalism and the Word of God (1958) - condensed reading

Summary

Packer defends historic evangelical belief that the Bible is God's written Word and therefore truthful and authoritative. He argues that submission to Scripture follows from submission to Christ, who received the Old Testament as God's Word and authorized the apostolic witness that stands behind the New Testament.

He also distinguishes biblical authority from wooden literalism, anti-intellectualism, or indifference to careful interpretation. The task is to hear each passage according to its literary form and intended meaning while allowing the whole canon to govern Christian belief and practice.

Why it matters

Packer presents a modern evangelical response to criticism of biblical authority. He connects a high view of Scripture with Christology and responsible interpretation, showing why the debate cannot be settled merely by attaching the label fundamentalist or modernist.

Protestant Continuity After Calvin

One basic authority position developed with different emphases

The Protestant writers in this packet after Calvin are best read as developing one broad Reformed/evangelical authority structure rather than proposing a succession of fundamentally different systems. They share the conviction that Scripture is God's Word and therefore the final infallible norm, while Church, creeds, councils, reason, scholarship, and tradition possess real but subordinate roles.

Different emphases within that shared framework

Westminster
Formal confessional statement: Scripture is the supreme judge in religious controversy.

John Owen
Scripture's divine origin, self-evidence, and the Spirit's inward witness.

Stephen Charnock
The authority of revelation grounded in the truthfulness and character of God.

J. I. Packer
Modern defense of Scripture as God's written Word and responsible interpretation.

John Stott
Submission to Scripture as an expression of submission to Christ, while retaining secondary rules.

Kevin Vanhoozer
How sola Scriptura can remain tradition-aware and ecclesial without requiring an infallible earthly interpreter.

> *“Scripture is the only infallible rule to whose authority therefore all churches should humbly bow.”*
>
> John R. W. Stott, exposition of the Lausanne Covenant; Stott contrasts Scripture with secondary rules such as creeds, confessions, and traditions.

Teaching implication

Once Calvin and Westminster establish the basic Protestant authority structure, the later authors need not be treated as separate authority systems. They are most useful as focused illustrations of why Scripture is final, how the Spirit relates to that authority, why subordinate traditions still matter, and how Protestants answer the charge of interpretive individualism.

Reading 12 - John Stott: Authority, Revelation, and the Christian Mind

John R. W. Stott, Evangelical Truth, sections on Scripture and authority (20th century) - condensed reading

Summary

Stott describes evangelical faith as a response to God's initiative in revelation, redemption, and transformation. Christians do not invent the gospel from religious experience or cultural preference; they receive a message God has made known and to which Scripture gives normative witness.

Biblical authority therefore calls for humble listening, careful study, and obedient response. Stott resists both a church tradition that cannot be corrected and an individualism that treats interpretation as a private possession. The Word addresses the whole Church and summons it continually to reform.

Why it matters

Stott translates classic Protestant claims about authority into an accessible modern framework. He shows that biblical authority is not merely a theory about a book but a posture of submission that shapes preaching, discipleship, ethics, and the Church's willingness to be corrected.

Reading 13 - Vatican II: Scripture, Tradition, and the Word of God

Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (1965) - condensed reading

Summary

Dei Verbum presents revelation first as God's self-communication in history, culminating in Jesus Christ. Scripture and Tradition flow from the same divine source and together transmit the Word of God to the Church. The teaching office of the Church serves that Word and is not above it.

The document strongly encourages biblical study, translation, preaching, and access for the faithful. It teaches that Scripture reliably communicates the truth God intended for salvation while calling interpreters to attend to literary forms, historical settings, the unity of Scripture, living Tradition, and the analogy of faith.

Why it matters

Dei Verbum is the essential modern Catholic statement on revelation and authority. It corrects caricatures by placing Scripture at the heart of church life while still refusing the Protestant separation of Scripture from apostolic Tradition and the Church's teaching office.

Vatican II - Continuity and Development

Dei Verbum (1965) did not replace Trent with a new authority model

What remained

Vatican II retained the Catholic structure: Scripture and Tradition arise from the same divine source, the Church does not draw certainty about revelation from Scripture alone, and the living teaching office authentically interprets the Word of God. In that sense, Dei Verbum is substantially a restatement and development of existing Catholic doctrine rather than a reversal of Trent.

What changed in emphasis

Dei Verbum placed Scripture much more visibly at the center of Catholic life, strongly encouraged biblical reading and translation, gave explicit attention to literary forms and historical context in interpretation, and framed revelation more personally as God's self-communication culminating in Christ. It also stated with unusual clarity that the Magisterium serves revelation rather than standing over it.

> *“This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it.”*
> Second Vatican Council, Dei Verbum 10 (1965).

The same paragraph nevertheless says that authentic interpretation of the Word of God, written or handed on, is entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church. Thus Vatican II intensifies the biblical and Christ-centered emphasis without adopting sola Scriptura.

Best characterization for this course

Vatican II should be understood as a clarification and renewal of the Catholic authority model: strong continuity in doctrine, but a significant shift in theological presentation, biblical emphasis, interpretive method, and pastoral encouragement of Scripture reading.

Authority models in one line

Catholic: Scripture and apostolic Tradition transmit one deposit, authentically interpreted by the Magisterium.
Protestant: Scripture alone is the infallible final norm; Church and tradition are genuine but corrigible authorities under it.

Reading 14 - The Catholic Catechism: One Deposit of Faith

Catechism of the Catholic Church, sections 74-100 (current edition) - condensed reading

Summary

The Catechism explains that the apostles transmitted the gospel both orally and in writing, and that this apostolic Tradition continues through their successors. Scripture and Tradition are closely connected expressions of one sacred deposit of the Word of God entrusted to the Church.

The task of authentic interpretation belongs to the living teaching office, or Magisterium, exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet the Catechism also says that the Magisterium is a servant of the Word, listening to it, guarding it, and explaining it faithfully rather than creating revelation.

Why it matters

These sections give a concise present-day Catholic formulation of the threefold relationship among Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium. They clarify that the Catholic-Protestant disagreement is not simply Bible versus Church, but two different accounts of how Christ preserves apostolic truth.

Reading 15 - Kevin Vanhoozer: Biblical Authority After Babel

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Biblical Authority After Babel (2016) - condensed reading

Summary

Vanhoozer asks whether the Reformation's appeal to Scripture inevitably produces interpretive chaos and endless division. He argues that sola Scriptura need not mean isolated readers or contempt for tradition. Scripture has supreme authority, while creeds, confessions, teachers, and local churches serve as subordinate aids in faithful interpretation.

He describes the Church as a community learning to perform the script of Scripture together. Different Protestant traditions can preserve genuine insights, correct one another, and seek catholic unity without requiring a single infallible earthly interpreter.

Why it matters

Vanhoozer directly addresses a major modern objection to Protestant authority: if Scripture is final, why do Protestants disagree so much? His proposal tests whether a reforming, tradition-aware Protestantism can combine conviction, humility, accountability, and visible Christian unity.

Reading 16 - Eastern Orthodoxy: Scripture Within Holy Tradition

A current Eastern Orthodox statement on Scripture and Holy Tradition - comparative course reading

Summary

Eastern Orthodox teaching commonly describes Scripture as the central and uniquely authoritative written witness within Holy Tradition rather than as a source detached from it. Tradition is the continuing life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, expressed through Scripture, the ecumenical councils, liturgy, the Fathers, icons, and the Church's enduring worship and practice.

These expressions do not all possess identical weight, and authentic tradition must be distinguished from local custom or mere antiquity. Scripture is read ecclesially, especially in worship, and interpreted in continuity with the Church's received rule of faith rather than by an isolated individual or a single centralized teaching office.

Why it matters

The Orthodox approach prevents the authority discussion from collapsing into only Catholic and Protestant alternatives. It offers a third historical model: Scripture as the heart of a living apostolic Tradition discerned through the worship and consensus of the whole Church.