How Did We Get Here?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

A brief course introduction, then:
Scripture, Tradition, and Church Authority



How We Will Approach the Class

Just enough framework to begin — then we start the first doctrine.

- Trace each doctrine through key historical debates and voices.
- Represent differing Christian traditions as fairly as possible.
- Return to Scripture to evaluate where we should land.

Course Outline

The doctrinal questions we will trace through Church history.

Lessons 1–5

1. Scripture, Tradition & Church Authority
2. The Nature of the Son
3. Justification
4. Grace, Free Will & Predestination
5. Ordinances / Sacraments

Lessons 6–9

6. Baptism
7. The Lord’s Supper / Eucharist
8. Mary, Saints & the State After Death
9. The Church & the State

LESSON 1

Scripture, Tradition, and Church Authority

What has the final word?

Three Questions for Lesson 1

Keep the lesson organized around these three controversies.

1. Which books?

Canon
How did Christians identify the writings that belong to Scripture?

2. What kind of books?

Inspiration
Are these writings God’s Word, human testimony, or somehow both?

3. Who has the final word?

Authority
Scripture, tradition, reason, councils, church office, or continuing revelation?

Irenaeus and Apostolic Teaching

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (c. 130–202)

Against Gnosticism, Irenaeus appeals to the public apostolic message: proclaimed openly, preserved in Scripture, and preached in the churches. He also points to churches founded by the apostles as public witnesses against secret teaching.



Question: When Christians disagree, how should the Church identify truth and error?

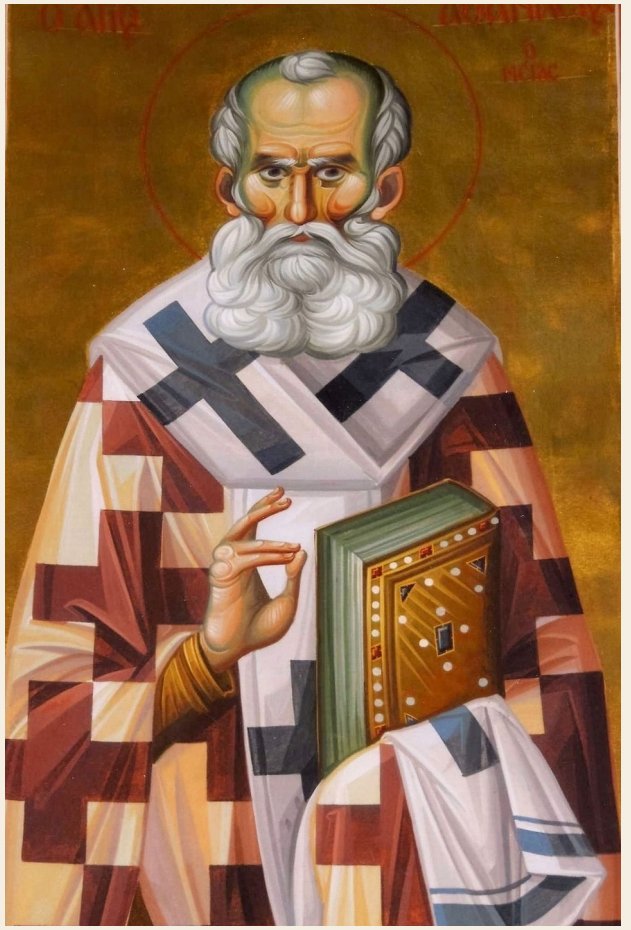
“handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be the ground and pillar of our faith.”

— Irenaeus, Against Heresies, III.1

Athanasius and the Canon

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (296–373)

In his Thirty-Ninth Festal Letter, Athanasius gives the earliest surviving list that matches the present 27-book New Testament. He distinguishes canonical books from other writings useful for instruction.



Question: What are the books that are to be considered Scripture?

“In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take ought from these.”

— Athanasius, Festal Letter 39, AD 367

How Did We Get 27 Books?

Question: Who decided which books belonged in the New Testament?

- The New Testament books were written in the first century and circulated among Christian churches.
- The four Gospels and Paul’s letters gained widespread acceptance very early.
- No single early council selected all 27 books at once.
- Churches gradually recognized the collection as they compared writings received and used.

Bottom line: the canon was recognized over time, not created in a single decision.

How Were Books Recognized?

Question: How did early Christians recognize a writing as Scripture?

Main marks

Apostolic connection
Written by an apostle or closely tied to apostolic testimony.

Orthodoxy
Consistent with the faith received from the apostles.

Reception over time

Widespread use
Received and read among churches in different regions.

Antiquity
Rooted in the apostolic era rather than later composition.

Disputed longer: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2–3 John, Jude, Revelation. Valued but not Scripture: 1 Clement, Shepherd of Hermas.

From Recognition to the 27-Book Canon

Question: When do we first see our exact New Testament?

- c. AD 180 — Irenaeus defends the fourfold Gospel and uses much of the eventual New Testament.
- Early 300s — Eusebius describes books as recognized, disputed, or rejected.
- AD 367 — Athanasius lists exactly the present 27 New Testament books.
- Late 300s — Hippo and Carthage affirm essentially the same New Testament canon.

Did the Church give the canon its authority, or recognize authority the books already possessed?

What Are These Books?

The canon question leads to a second question: what kind of writings have been recognized?

- God’s inspired written Word — divine and human authorship.
- Inspired but historically conditioned — authoritative, yet marked by human limitation.
- Witness to revelation — Scripture bears witness to Christ, the supreme Word.
- Human religious literature — profound and influential, but not uniquely revealed by God.

Key question: can Scripture be fully human writing and genuinely divine speech at the same time?

What Does “Inspired” Mean?

Christians often agree that Scripture is inspired while disagreeing about what that entails.

Terms to distinguish

Verbal inspiration
God’s work extends to the words, not merely the general ideas.

Plenary inspiration
All Scripture is God-given, not only selected parts.

Important balance

Human authorship
God uses real human writers, styles, purposes, and contexts.

Dictation is not the usual Christian model: Paul writes like Paul, Luke like Luke, and John like John.

All Scripture is breathed out by God… — 2 Timothy 3:16

Can Scripture Contain Error?

The inspiration question leads to the truthfulness question.

Inerrancy

Scripture is without error in what it truly affirms.

Debate often concerns scope: doctrine, morals, history, chronology, geography, and descriptions of the created world.

Infallibility

Scripture cannot fail in accomplishing God's purpose and is fully trustworthy in what God intends to teach.

Some use this term like inerrancy; others define it more narrowly.

Question: when someone says "the Bible is inspired," what exactly are they claiming?

Old Testament Canon Differences

Most major Christian traditions receive the same 27-book New Testament, but not the same Old Testament collection.

Historic Christian differences

Protestant — 39 OT + 27 NT.
Roman Catholic — includes the Deuterocanonical books.
Eastern Orthodox — generally a broader Old Testament collection.

Shared New Testament

Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox traditions all receive the same 27-book New Testament.

Their differences concern the boundaries of the Old Testament.

Authority question: how should Christians evaluate differing claims about the Old Testament canon?

Augustine on Philosophy and Truth

Augustine of Hippo, bishop of Hippo (354–430)

Augustine was deeply influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism. He believed Christians could use philosophy, logic, language, and secular learning to understand and defend revealed truth. These tools serve theology, but they do not correct or outrank divine revelation.

"*All truth is God's truth*" kind of thinking.

Question: How much can Christians use ideas from outside Scripture to interpret and formulate doctrine?

"If those who are called philosophers… have said aught that is true and in harmony with our faith… claim it for our own use."

— Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, II.40



Philosophy and Early Christian Theology

Why did Greek philosophical categories become important in Christian doctrine?

The setting

Many early Christian thinkers worked within an intellectual world shaped by classical education and Greek philosophy.

Justin Martyr
Clement of Alexandria
Origen
Athanasius
Augustine
Cappadocian Fathers

The usefulness

They often believed truth discovered outside Scripture could be used in service of the faith when it did not contradict revelation.

Platonism was especially attractive because it emphasized immaterial reality, the soul, transcendence, and eternal truth.

The Authority Question Behind Philosophy

When does theological reasoning serve Scripture, and when does it begin to control Scripture?

- The Church increasingly expressed biblical doctrine using philosophical categories not stated explicitly in Scripture.
- This did not necessarily mean philosophy was treated as revelation.
- The issue is how much authority theological conclusions have when derived by reasoning rather than explicit biblical statement.
- Later, Aristotelian philosophy became especially important in medieval theology through Aquinas.

Aquinas on Reason and Revelation

Thomas Aquinas, Dominican friar and theologian (c. 1225–1274)

Aquinas argues that human reason is genuine and valuable, but not sufficient for every truth needed for salvation. God reveals truths that exceed reason and truths reason might reach only slowly, imperfectly, or with error. Philosophy serves theology by clarifying implications and answering objections.

Question: Can human reason discover theological truth beyond what Scripture explicitly reveals?

“It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason.”

— Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I, Q.1, Art. 1



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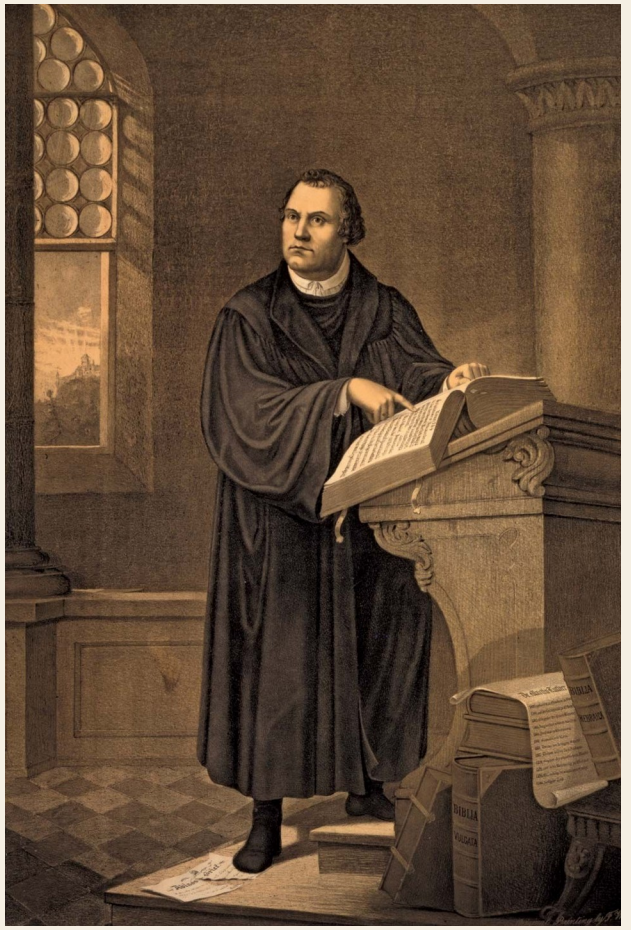
The Reformation Divide

The question shifts from canon formation to final authority.

Luther, Scripture, and Conscience

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

Luther valued councils when they defended biblical truth. But councils can err and cannot create new articles of faith. The Church is necessary as the community where the Word is preached and confessed, but its teachers and councils stand under Scripture.



Question: What happens when Scripture conflicts with popes and councils?

“I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

— Martin Luther, Diet of Worms tradition

Calvin on Scripture and the Spirit

John Calvin (1509–1564)

Scripture receives its authority from God, not from a later Church decision. The Church recognizes Scripture; it does not make Scripture authoritative. Certainty comes through the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, who enables believers to recognize God’s voice in Scripture.

Question: Can the Church speak with authority beyond what Scripture teaches?

“he presides only when he governs the whole assembly by his word and Spirit.”

— John Calvin, Institutes IV.9



What Sola Scriptura Does — and Does Not — Mean

Sola Scriptura is not “no teachers, no creeds, no councils.”

What it denies

No council may create new articles of faith.
No creed makes a doctrine true by declaring it.
No church office is an independent source of infallible revelation.

What it affirms

Creeds may faithfully summarize Scripture.
Councils may defend biblical truth.
Teachers serve the Church when they bring every doctrine to Scripture as the final test.

“the highest place would be given to Scripture, everything being brought to it as a test.”

— Calvin, Institutes IV.9.8

Trent on Scripture and Tradition

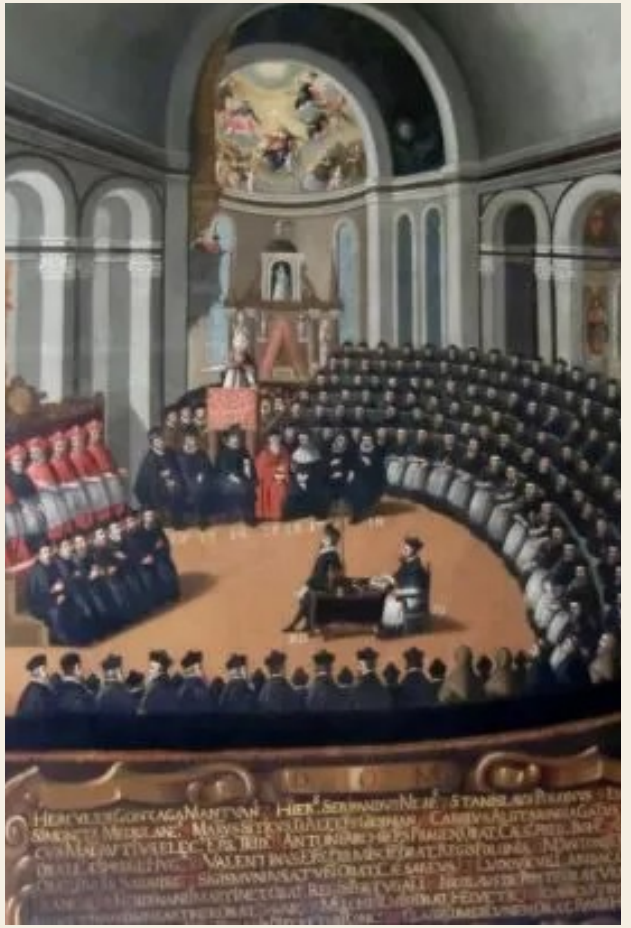
Council of Trent (1545–1563)

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

Question: Where does final authority reside: in Scripture alone, or in Scripture together with apostolic tradition?

“This truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and in the unwritten traditions.”

— Council of Trent, Fourth Session, 1546



Westminster and the Supreme Judge

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

Westminster gives a mature Reformed statement of Scripture's authority. Scripture contains all things necessary for God's glory, salvation, faith, and life — either expressly stated or by good and necessary consequence. The supreme judge in religious controversies is the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.

Question: What finally judges every council, tradition, teacher, and private interpretation?

"The Supreme Judge… can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."

— Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.10

Charnock on Divine Authority

Stephen Charnock (1628–1680)

Charnock emphasizes that Scripture carries divine authority because God is its author. The Church may witness to Scripture, preserve it, and commend it, but it does not make Scripture true. Confidence in Scripture rests ultimately on the God who speaks.

Question: Why should Scripture bind the conscience more deeply than merely human testimony?

“The Scripture hath a divine original, and therefore a divine authority.”

— Stephen Charnock, Discourses on the Word

Modern Case Studies

Same New Testament, different authority structures.

Latter-day Saints

Accept the 27-book New Testament, but add other scriptures and continuing prophetic revelation.

Key issue: is the biblical canon closed and sufficient?

Jehovah’s Witnesses

Accept the 27-book New Testament, but rely on the New World Translation and a distinctive interpretive framework.

Key issue: who controls interpretation and translation?

Agreement on the canon does not guarantee agreement on doctrine.

Where the Major Traditions Stand Today

The same Bible question produces several major authority models.

Scripture with Tradition

Roman Catholic
Scripture and Sacred Tradition form one apostolic deposit, authentically interpreted by the Magisterium.

Eastern Orthodox
Scripture is received and read within Holy Tradition: worship, Fathers, councils, and the Church's life.

Scripture as Final Norm

Protestant
Scripture is the final infallible norm; tradition, councils, and confessions have real but subordinate authority.

Mainline / liberal
Scripture may be authoritative as witness, testimony, or religious record without strict inerrancy.

Synthesis and Conclusions

What authority does Scripture itself claim?

- Scripture is God-breathed and equips the Church for faithful teaching. (2 Tim. 3:16–17; **2 Pet. 1:20–21**)
- Jesus treats the written Scriptures as enduring and authoritative. (Matt. 5:17–18; John 10:35)
- The Church teaches and guards the Word, but must also be corrected by it. (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim. 3:15)
- Tradition serves the Church when it witnesses to apostolic truth, but not as an independent final authority. (Mark 7:8–13; Col. 2:8)

Conclusion: the Church receives, recognizes, teaches, and confesses the Word of God, while Scripture remains the final norm that tests every doctrine.

Questions

- What gives Scripture its authority: God’s inspiration, the Church’s recognition, or both in different senses?
- Can a fallible Church reliably recognize an infallible canon?
- What is the proper role of tradition, reason, councils, and teachers?
- What should finally bind the Christian conscience?

Homework

1. Read Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, “Of the Holy Scripture,” sections 1–10.
   As you read, identify what the Confession says about:
   - Which books belong to Scripture
   - Where Scripture receives its authority
   - How the Church recognizes Scripture
   - What authority should finally bind the Christian conscience
2. Find three Scripture passages that support verbal, plenary inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture. Be prepared to explain what each passage teaches.
2. Ponder: “If God’s word is true and perfect in all the ways it claims to be, what are the things I ought to do to respond”

Next lesson: how these authority questions affected one of the greatest debates in Christian history — Who is Jesus Christ?