

# **Scripture and Tradition**

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## **Introduction**

Sola Scriptura is the hallmark of the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It acknowledges the Scripture as sole infallible and supreme authority over all matters of faith and life, in contrast to the Roman Catholic conviction which accepts both Scripture and church tradition as the highest authority. Protestantism does not disregard and in fact still emphasizes the importance of church tradition. However it adopts quite a different view of the role of tradition from Roman Catholicism.

This paper attempts to introduce various views pertaining to the relationship between Scripture and tradition, especially how appealing to the authority of church tradition fits in with the Protestant concept of Sola Scriptura. Further, this paper will also study the role of the Holy Spirit in the students of the Scriptures, on how the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and an appeal to church tradition or church heritage with regards Bible interpretation, are harmonized. Finally, the limitation of tradition will be briefly explored for further thought.

### **1. Role of Tradition in Early Church**

In the first century, matters of faith and doctrine were brought to and settled by the apostles because they were directly appointed by Christ as the authoritative teachers to propagate His teaching. As such, there is a qualitative difference between the teaching authority of the apostles and that of other believers, in that God used the apostles to set the foundation of the church. The church “was built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.” (Ephesians 2:20)

After the death of the last apostle, the question arose on how controversies on matters of faith and doctrine should be handled rightly. In particular, the Gnostic debates caused a

lot of controversies to the church in the second century. This led to and marked the beginning of the emphasis and appeal to apostolic tradition.

Irenaeus was the earliest author who wrote against heresy. Responding to the Gnostics' claim that some of them received in private the secret teaching of the apostles, Irenaeus argued that the apostles taught not secretly but publicly, to the whole church and not to a select few<sup>1</sup>.

Over and against the Gnostics' claim of extra-biblical revelation, which is purely subjective and unverifiable, Irenaeus demonstrated that there is a continuity of Christian teaching which could be traced back through the succession of bishops from the apostles to his own time. He maintained that the Gnostics had interpreted the Scripture in their own way, which was unknown to the church and alien to the apostolic tradition. What was passed down was not merely the Scripture texts, but also the manner of interpreting those texts. Tradition therefore does not innovate, but preserves the original teaching of the apostles, which is "the faith that was once and for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) and safeguards it against heresies. The Gnostics' interpretations were heretical because they were not in accordance with the rule of faith<sup>2</sup>.

The rule of faith, or the '*regula fidei*', is the interpretive context of the Scripture. It is a summary of the tenets held in common by the churches of the apostolic foundation: it is closely related to what is called 'apostolic tradition'.<sup>3</sup> This concept was later developed in the fifth century by Vincent of Lerins as the rule of interpretation of the Scripture. In his famous quote, "*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*", or "that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all"<sup>4</sup>, he summarized catholicity, antiquity and consensus as the criteria for Scripture interpretation, which implies that the

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<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.1. ANF 01. Accessed at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.iv.html>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.3.6

<sup>3</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p.150

<sup>4</sup> Vincent of Lerins, *Commonitorium* 2.6. Accessed at [http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/main/vincentoflerins/catholic\\_faith\\_and\\_heresy.shtml](http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/main/vincentoflerins/catholic_faith_and_heresy.shtml)

true interpretation of the Scripture belongs to the universal Church, to whom the Scripture has been entrusted. The understanding of the Scripture is necessarily and tightly connected to tradition. Tradition, therefore, encompasses the theological reflections and spiritual insights that are examined and established throughout the history of the church.

## **2. Different Concepts of Authority of Tradition**

In his book “Dawn of the Reformation”, Heiko Oberman observes that the bitter polemics between the Catholics and the Protestants in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is not so much the issue of “Scripture or tradition?” but it is more due to the clash between two different concepts of tradition.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to what is often assumed, the Protestant slogan of Sola Scriptura does not equate to the denial of the importance of tradition. Rather, it views the relationship between Scripture and tradition differently from the Roman Catholic position. There are many different approaches to tradition, which are broadly summarized by Oberman into three categories, Tradition 2: dual-source theory, Tradition 1: single-source theory and Tradition 0: rejection of tradition.

### **2.1. Tradition 2: Dual-Source Theory**

This theory holds that there is a distinct and separate source of divine revelation in addition to the Scripture. *Prima Scriptura*, as the term suggests, states that Scripture is the main source of authority but not the only one. Both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy hold *Prima Scriptura* as opposed to *Sola Scriptura*.

Eastern Orthodoxy takes other sources of authority such as liturgies, councils’ consensus and the teaching of the early fathers as authoritative. All these can be simply summarized as church tradition. Similarly, Roman Catholicism also views church tradition as a

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in C. Matthew McMahon, *The Bible and Tradition in the Reformation*, Audio Lecture 55 in *Highlights in Historical Theology* [CD], (A Puritan’s Mind ministry)

source of divine revelation in addition to the Scripture. In reaction to the ecclesiological and theological challenges of Protestant reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Council of Trent ruled that both Scripture and tradition are inspired by the Holy Spirit. The argument was that unwritten tradition is part of God's providence to supplement the lack of clarity of the Scripture in many matters. Thus the Scripture cannot be taken as the only source of divine revelation and appeal to unwritten tradition is warranted<sup>6</sup>. This later developed into the dogma of papal infallibility in the First Vatican Council in 1870. Papal infallibility rests on the premise that there is a tradition handed down by the apostles to the church through papal succession. Therefore when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, or from the Petrine chair of authority, it is binding on matters of faith and practice for all people.

## **2.2. Tradition 1: Single-Source Theory**

Single-source theory is the Protestant position and is the concept of tradition that is consistent with Sola Scriptura. The tradition here is often associated with the little 't', instead of the capital 'T' (Roman Catholic concept of tradition) which implies a separate source of revelation. The tradition (small letter 't') is however derived from the teaching of the Scripture. It means that there is a true tradition that is faithful to the Scripture.

“Scripture could not be allowed to be interpreted in any arbitrary or self-serving way: it had to be interpreted within the context of the historical continuity of the Christian Church. The parameters of its interpretation were historically fixed and ‘given’. This is a single-source theory of theology: theology is based upon Scripture, and ‘tradition’ refers to a ‘traditional way of interpreting Scripture.’”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom, Council of Trent, Session IV, Decree concerning the Canonical Scripture*. As accessed on e-Sword.

<sup>7</sup> Alister E. Mc Grath, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p.138

No doubt this manner of explanation has its weakness and opens up a lot more questions because every major division in Christianity has its own way of interpreting history to stay consistent with its own tradition. It is difficult to determine the definition of the orthodox tradition, or which tradition is faithful to historical Christianity. Studying the criteria for determining historical Christianity is a major topic on its own, but for the purpose of this paper, it suffices to distinguish the existing different concepts of tradition with relation to the Scripture. Simply stated, single-source theory of tradition holds church tradition not as another distinct source of revelation, but as an interpretation or response to God's revelation which comes in Scripture and the Person of Jesus Christ.

This concept is similar to what Irenaeus and Tertullian meant when they fought to defend the early church against heresy through appealing to apostolic tradition. Their demonstration of the succession of bishops from the apostles to their own time should not be taken as their belief in literal apostolic succession the way the Roman Catholics understand it today. In the context of the early church, they were defending the manner of interpreting the Scripture that had been held since the days of the apostles as opposed to the innovative Scripture interpretation of the Gnostics.

The early church could trace the bishops and elders who had received and passed down the same teaching since the foundation of the New Testament church because they were not too far from the apostles' time. Moreover, as the Scripture had yet to be canonized, such an appeal to apostolic tradition through actual succession of bishops and elders had special significance at that time. But this kind of appeal would tend to lose its credibility and meaning if extended to many generations down history, which necessitates a better way of preserving the true tradition from error down through all generations<sup>8</sup>. It is the historical context of this need that led to the canonization of the Scripture, which culminated at the Council of Carthage in the fourth century. And the universal Church believes that the canonized Scripture is the providential work of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>8</sup> Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, Westminster Confession of Faith, Of the Holy Scripture, Chapter 1.1.

### **2.3. Tradition 0: Rejection of Tradition**

Traditionally, the Protestant view of *Sola Scriptura* comes with the implication of single-source theory of tradition instead of total rejection of tradition. In contrast, the radicals believe that every individual has the right to interpret the Scripture on their own *apart* from the church. As will be elaborated in the next section, this is very different from the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Anabaptists broke away from tenets that have always been held in the church, such as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. This theory against tradition encourages individualism and naturally develops into rationalism and liberalism as it begins to appeal to human reason in order to break away from tradition. “A respect for tradition was thus seen as capitulation to the authority of the past, a self-imposed bondage to outdated social, political, and religious structures.”<sup>9</sup>

In reality, it is impossible to escape tradition totally because all reasoning is always influenced by tradition of some sort. No view is built from scratch. But the point of emphasis in this theory is a reluctance to be associated with any established tradition and to practice private judgment above corporate traditional judgment concerning Scripture interpretation. Whenever any of these views begin to gain audience, they develop to become new traditions of their own, which break away again in later generations to produce new variants of traditions. Thus as history progresses there are bound to be more and more sects and divisions resulting from this theory of tradition. (It is noteworthy that diversities result not purely because of rejection of tradition, but differences also naturally happen because there is always a gap between the truth and interpretation of the truth, and different people have different levels of understanding.)

### **3. Tradition and Scripture Interpretation**

As introduced in the previous section, *Sola Scriptura* does not imply the negation of tradition but rather implies a certain concept and role of tradition (that is, single-source

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<sup>9</sup> McGrath, p. 140

theory of tradition) which is different from that of *Prima Scriptura*. This section explores the role of tradition in Scripture interpretation where *Sola Scriptura* is the premise.

### 3.1. The Elements of *Sola Scriptura*

That Scripture is the only infallible and highest authority does not necessarily mean that the individual, the Holy Spirit and the Bible texts are all that are needed to interpret the Scripture rightly. The principle of the authority of the Scripture, or *Sola Scriptura*, is expounded by J.I. Packer as a complex construction of 7 elements namely, inspiration, canonicity, witness of the Spirit, sufficiency and clarity, mystery of the Scripture, and finally obedience to intellectual and ethical rule of the Scripture<sup>10</sup>. These elements are presuppositions related to *Sola Scriptura* that greatly determine the manner of approaching Scripture interpretation. Each element is a huge subject of study and is interrelated with all the others. *Sola Scriptura* therefore is a complex construct that should be distinguished from the simplistic “me and my Bible alone are enough” hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, “*Sola Scriptura* does not rely ‘on the Bible alone’ but also on the accepted Christian truths that God has so filtered through the church through able exegetes through the centuries.”<sup>12</sup>

This statement seems similar but is different from the Catholic view of the relationship between Scripture and tradition. At least, there are two fundamental differences. They are with regards to authority of tradition and the conference of this authority. Firstly, *Sola Scriptura* maintains the Scripture as the only supreme authority and tradition as authoritative only so far as it is in line with the Scripture and this is the ‘*regula fidei*’ of the universal Church. Alister McGrath states that in the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, the

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<sup>10</sup> J.I. Packer, *Biblical Authority, Hermeneutics and Inerrancy*, in *The Works of Cornelius Van Til* [CD] (Logos Bible Software).

<sup>11</sup> C. Matthew McMahon, *The Illumination of the Holy Spirit and Theological Traditionalism*, in *Highlights in Historical Theology* [CD], (A Puritan’s Mind ministry)

<sup>12</sup> McMahon, *The Bible and Tradition in the Reformation*

Scripture has supreme and primary authority, while church tradition such as creeds and confessions have derivative or secondary authority<sup>13</sup>.

Secondly, such authority is not automatic via some kind of visible succession, but rather it is based on the faithfulness of the teaching to the Scripture. Whoever teaches faithfully according to the Scripture, teaches with authority. This is explained by William Whitaker in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, “For we also say that the church is the interpreter of Scripture, and that the gift of interpretation resides only in the church: but we deny that it pertains to particular persons, or is tied to any particular see or succession of men.”<sup>14</sup>

Francis Turretin speaks of three aspects implicit in the doctrine of Sola Scriptura, i.e. the Scripture, the Holy Spirit and the universal Church. “Hence, if the question is why, or on account of what, do I believe the Bible to be divine, I will answer that I do so on account of the Scripture itself which by its makes proves itself to be such. If it is asked whence or from what I believe, I will answer from the Holy Spirit who produces that belief in me. Finally if I am asked by what means or instrument I believe it, I will answer through the church which God uses in delivering the Scriptures to me.”<sup>15</sup>

### **3.2. Basis for Appeal to Church Tradition**

The Scripture reveals that the *unchanging* God *progressively* reveals Himself and His purpose in the history of redemption through the written Scripture and the Person of Jesus Christ, and that He faithfully guides His *Church* into the right understanding by His Holy Spirit. The natural implication is that God’s revelation cannot be understood in isolation from history and that God’s guidance for each individual is not disconnected from the covenantal community of believers. This community is the universal Church which includes believers not only in the present generation but also from all ages past. At

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<sup>13</sup> McGrath, p. 62

<sup>14</sup> William Whitaker, *A Disputation on Holy Scripture* (Cambridge: University Press, 1849), p.411

<sup>15</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol 1, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: 1992), p.32



different times in history, God has appointed different people to certain offices to discharge various ministries needed in the Church. What God gave to the Church in the past is also meant for the edification and growth of believers today. This is the foundation upon which appeal to church tradition stands.

Along with *Sola Scriptura*, the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century also fought to defend the priesthood of all believers. This doctrine states that through the atonement of Christ, every believer is now priest before God. It rejects the need for other mediators such as church priests, magistrates or the saints, because Christ alone is the Mediator between God and man. Therefore, every regenerate Christian can learn and understand the plain sense of the Scripture on his own as led by the inward witness of the Holy Spirit. This doctrine does not deny the importance of appeal to church tradition, however it does emphasize the necessity for every believer to discern tradition, to reject tradition which is not in accordance with the Scripture and to honor tradition that does as the heritage of the Church. What it means is that every believer is responsible to search the Scripture on his own and it takes for granted that the result of a proper study will lead to the unity of understanding in the Church, because there is one Holy Spirit who guides the believer personally and the Church universally.

The next question that revolves around *Sola Scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers is a practical one. That is the issue of how a student of the Scripture can properly study and interpret the Scripture. Firstly, one has to acknowledge that there will always be a gap between the actual meaning of Scripture and interpretation of the Scripture, and next, one has to consider what should be the right and best methodology to interpret the Scripture.

While a regenerate believer is illuminated by the Holy Spirit to understand the Scripture, he is also at the same time still a fallen sinner who can err and is limited in his understanding. This is also the point where church tradition established through the history serves as a helpful check to one's understanding. Based on the premise that the Holy Spirit does not contradict Himself and He guides believers into all truth, an

individual will eventually unite in his understanding with the universal Church, but not without first engaging in his personal study and Scripture interpretation. Therefore, the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, the priesthood of all believers and *regula fidei* of the Church should converge in harmony rather than conflict with one another.

The question of methodology is a very fundamental issue in Scripture interpretation. Every methodology is founded upon certain presuppositions. Historically, the hermeneutics of Protestant tradition are based on the following presuppositions: the full humanity of inspired writing, the organic nature of the Scripture and the consistency of God in all ages<sup>16</sup>. Since the divine inspiration is also fully human, we are bound to the grammatico-historical method to determine the intended meaning of the author. Assuming the organic nature and harmony of the Scripture, Scripture must interpret Scripture and the entire Scripture needs to be interpreted in total unity. Finally, as God is eternally unchanging, the principles derived from the Scripture transcend time and space, hence they are always relevant and needs to be translated into applications for the present generation.

The above-mentioned methodology of doing hermeneutics is very complex and undoubtedly no single individual can properly work from scratch and accomplish such a great hermeneutic task on his own. The individual is necessarily drawn to rely on church heritage to start with. The necessity to rely on the help of church heritage to arrive at a good exegetical result is well-expressed by A. A. Hodge:

“Men must interpret to the best of their ability each particular part of Scripture separately, and then combine all that the Scriptures teach upon every subject into a consistent whole, and then adjust their teachings upon different subjects in mutual consistency as parts of a harmonious system. Every student of the Bible must do this, and all make it obvious that they do it by the terms they use in their prayers and religious discourse, whether they admit or deny the propriety of human creeds

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<sup>16</sup> Packer

and confessions. If they refuse the assistance afforded by the statements of doctrine slowly elaborated and defined by the Church, they must make out their own creed by their own unaided wisdom. The real question is not, as often pretended, between the word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgment and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds.”<sup>17</sup>

It is not necessary to reinvent the theological wheel every time a soul is born again<sup>18</sup>. Rather, we build upon the foundation laid by our forefathers and continue where they left off to refine, improve and consolidate. This, in fact, has always been the practice in all other fields of knowledge. For instance, when learning Science or Mathematics, it is very natural to refer to and learn from tradition first, that is, the consolidation of various topics by past scientists and mathematicians, instead of starting research from scratch.

Finally, everyone appeals to tradition. Even when one decides to interpret Scripture on his own by plain reading of the Scripture without any external help, his method of interpretation is already determined by his doctrine or his view of the Scripture, which is influenced by various factors like his church, personal experience or other inputs he receives, which are in turn already influenced by some kind of tradition. Appeal to tradition is unavoidable whether one realizes it or not, hence becoming conscious of the kind of tradition one appeals to will help towards having a more informed and responsible hermeneutics.

### **3.3. Church Heritage and Scripture Hermeneutics**

The history of the church over the past two thousand years has accumulated a very rich heritage to summarize and expound the tenets of Christian faith. As divisions in

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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Archibald Hodge, *A Short History of Creeds and Confessions*. Accessed at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/confessions.html>.

<sup>18</sup> McMahan, *Illumination*.

Christianity have variations in what they adopt as church heritage, this section will focus on what is accepted in Protestant reformed tradition.

The first heritage consists in creeds of Christendom such as the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed and the Chalcedonian Creed. Historically, creeds were produced in attempt to guard against heresies of the time. For instance, the Nicene Creed was written in response to the Arian heresy which denied the divinity of Christ, while the Athanasian Creed was written to defend the doctrine of Trinity and the divinity of Christ. These creeds are generally accepted by the universal church, including the Roman Catholic Church.

After the creeds come the confessions of faith and catechisms. The confessions of faith are more lengthy summaries of the tenets of Christian faith and catechisms are a list of fundamental questions and answers which are often used as the study materials for church membership classes. The Protestant tradition takes the Scripture as the supreme authority, the creeds as secondary or derivative authority, universal and binding on all Christians, while the catechisms and confessions of faith are secondary authority that are local and binding to particular branches of Christianity.

The Protestant reformed tradition accepts a number of confessions of faith such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Second Helvetic Confession of Faith, the Canons of Dort, and the Belgic Confession of Faith. The catechisms accepted include the Westminster Larger Catechism, Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the Heidelberg Catechism among others, with the Westminster Confession of faith and Catechisms being the most widely used.

Further attempts have been made to consolidate the heritage of Christianity through the works of systematic theology. The most well-known and also one of the earliest works of systematic theology is the *Institute of Christian Religion* by John Calvin, the content arrangement of which adopts the Apostles' Creed closely. Just as the Apostles' Creed consists of four main parts, relating to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit

and the Church, so the Institute of Christian Religion contains those four parts corresponding to the Creed.<sup>19</sup> After Calvin's Institute, many theologians continue to consolidate and refine the summary of Christian doctrines. Typical systematic theology topics will include major doctrines such as the Bibliology, Theology Proper, Anthropology, Christology, Pneumatology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology.

With such a wealth of church heritage which has been gradually consolidated under particular historical contexts, through fierce trials and the test of time, students of the Scripture can find great aid in interpreting the Scripture. Without undermining the clarity of the Scripture on its major principles and the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the minds of the regenerate, tradition (or church heritage) is fundamental to the understanding of the Scripture because it reflects the guidance of the Holy Spirit throughout the history of the Church. And the Holy Spirit's guidance for an individual is always tightly connected to His guidance to the Church universally. As such, Michael Marlowe suggests confessional interpretation as a safer position to begin with compared to starting out on one's own. Confessional interpretation is the method of interpretation that takes a confession of faith as its starting point.<sup>20</sup> The first important issue in using this methodology is in determining the confession that one should use, and this is straightforward for the Protestant reformed tradition that already has its accepted list of confessions, some of which have been mentioned above.

The first part of this section has briefly surveyed church heritage in terms of the *content* of Scripture interpretation, particularly the summary of Christian doctrines formulated throughout church history. Another important part of church heritage is the *methodology* of Scripture interpretation, or hermeneutics, which concerns not only with 'what', but also with 'how'. Hermeneutics should deal first with the basic premises or presuppositions for Scripture interpretation, and then with the technicality of how one

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<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Eerdmans, 1989), p.24

<sup>20</sup> Michael Marlowe, *What is "Confessional" Interpretation of the Bible*. Accessed at <http://www.bible-researcher.com/confessional.html> .

should interpret the Scripture. One's doctrine of the Scripture, which consists of questions like "What is the Bible?" and "What does it mean by saying the Bible is the Word of God?" inevitably shape the way one does hermeneutics.

Traditionally, the church has followed the grammatico-historical method. As has been earlier discussed, the presupposition behind this method is the full-humanity of the inspired writing. Hence, whatever the author means, God means. God might mean more, but no less. The other principle is the principle of harmony, which rests upon the premise that there is one Divine Author of the Scripture, so Scripture interprets Scripture, Scripture cannot be set against Scripture. Finally, what is secondary or obscure must be interpreted in light of what is primary and obvious.<sup>21</sup>

Hermeneutics has developed considerably, however, such that scholars and theologians have increasingly found that while the historico-grammatical method is very important, it not the only method but should be used together with other methods. The literary element of the Scripture in particular has been much a subject of exploration recently. "The Foundations of Contemporary Interpretations" written by Moises Silva, the general editor of the book, together with a few other writers, deals with this subject more elaborately<sup>22</sup>.

#### **4. Limitation of Tradition**

Tradition has its significance. Notwithstanding it also has its limitation in guiding Christians in Scripture interpretation. First of all, the Scripture is the Word of God while tradition is human response towards God's Word in pursuing the right understanding. There will always be a gap between the Word of God and human interpretation of the Word.

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<sup>21</sup> Packer

<sup>22</sup> Moises Silva et al, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretations* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 1996)

Deeper reflection on the nature of the Word of God in the form of the Scripture handed down to the Church will make this point more obvious. The Scripture is the infinite Word of God contained in the finite medium of human language. It is the eternal Word of God embedded in certain cultural, geographical and historical context. From this angle, not only are the transmitted copies of Scripture manuscripts and Scripture translations a medium, the original inspired Scripture in its original languages is also a medium through which the infinite God reveals His infinite Word via the mediation of finite means. This leads to the complex question of how God's absolute revelation is expressed in the world of relativity, and how it can be understood by men who are inevitably bound by relativity, subjectivity and fallenness.

Appeal to the history, culture and language of the Scripture, as tradition has been doing, is necessary and important, however they are not exhaustive due to the inherent tension between the relative human medium through which the Word of God is written and the absolute nature of Word of God. At this juncture, the works of the Holy Spirit need to be emphasized. On one hand, based on the manner of God's revelation through mediation, students of the Scripture have to study to bridge the historical and cultural gap in order to reconstruct the original context in which the Scripture has been written. On the other hand, the immediacy of the Holy Spirit's works is absolutely necessary to open the believers' minds to the revelation of the eternal realm embedded in the temporal medium. In hermeneutics, both elements are equally important as the nature of the Scripture is both human and divine.

Tradition then has an important role in Scripture hermeneutics but it is insufficient. It is always limited because the gap between human understanding and the true meaning of Word of God will always remain. With the awareness of the importance of tradition and its limitation, students of the Scripture will be more conscious of the extent of the position or role of tradition and use it with more profit in Scripture hermeneutics.

## **Conclusion**

Whether conscious or otherwise, everyone is bound by tradition of some sort so it is impossible to escape the influence of tradition in interpreting the Scripture. A simple question such as how to interpret a verse in the Bible in reality involves complex integration of many factors even though one is hardly conscious of it. Even a simple reading of a passage involves interpretation which is influenced by the reader's personality, educational background, culture, environment, church or pastors' influence and other exposures.

Understanding the different concepts of tradition, the foundation behind those concepts and the kind and extent of influence that tradition has upon people will greatly aid students of the Scripture to do hermeneutics with greater responsibility. More fundamental than that is the understanding of the doctrine of the Scripture, i.e. the nature of God's revelation that comes to the church in finite form as the 66 books of the Bible with the implication of presuppositions which become the foundation and framework for doing hermeneutics.



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