

Sola Scriptura?:
Some Reflections from Baptist Perspectives¹

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I. Introduction

The wide range of ecclesial groups and independent congregations that fall under the umbrella term “Baptist” today might suggest that attempts to represent a Baptist perspective on any issue be deemed a Quixotic endeavor. Nevertheless, a thoroughgoing conception of and commitment to *sola scriptura* is arguably essential to the theological DNA of Baptists of all stripes in a way that differs, at least in degree, from other Protestant traditions. Indeed, the moniker “Baptist” itself names one of the distinctive practices that Baptists share—baptism of confessing believers. As early as the German and Swiss Anabaptist groups in the sixteenth century, this practice developed out of a certain reading of the New Testament that depended on a particularly rigorous implementation of the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. To wit, the early Anabaptists and Baptist movements that developed a bit later tended, at least in their rhetoric, to look to scripture alone as the norm for all church practice and belief. Since in their view the clear examples of baptisms in the New Testament depicted people

¹ The discussion of A.T. Robertson below includes material from my essay, “‘Still Pressing On’: A.T. Robertson as a ‘Traditional’ Baptist,” in *Tradition and the Baptist Academy* (ed. Roger A. Ward and Philip S. Thompson; *Studies in Baptist History and Thought* 31 [Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 2011], 160–82). This material is reproduced here with permission.

undergoing the rite after they believed the gospel message that they heard about Jesus, this was taken to be a norm for church practice. *Sola scriptura* functioned for these groups as a critical tool to be wielded against the broader Christian tradition when in their view traditional practices and beliefs were not directly derivable from the canonical books, and the 27 New Testament books in particular. While Luther used the principle of *sola scriptura* to press for reform within the tradition, the Anabaptists, and many Baptists after them, imagined that by way of appeal to scripture alone they could skirt tradition altogether and return to the pure teaching of Jesus and the apostolic church.

Already the preceding statements embroil one in a host of questions regarding authority, hermeneutics, the extent of the canon, etc. This brief study cannot hope to engage all of these issues. I offer below a selective and narrow survey of the Swiss Brethren and the Baptist New Testament scholar A. T. Robertson as a means of illustrating some of the ways that *sola scriptura* functioned and continues to function in shaping Baptist identities. I ultimately argue that the attempt to, as it were, vault over the tradition and reinstate the pure apostolic church represents a misappropriation of *sola scriptura* that fails to reckon 1) with the very influence of the tradition on the category of scripture itself, and 2) with the fundamental influence that traditional doctrines have tended to exercise on many Baptists. Nevertheless, the Baptist emphasis on *sola scriptura*, though at times excessive and philosophically untenable, continues to mark some important ways in which Christian tradition and practices are, at least in theory, always open to the critical voice of God's word. I turn first, then, to

discuss the early Anabaptist group known as the Swiss Brethren.

II. *Sola Scriptura* and the Early Swiss Brethren

I do not intend to weigh in on the thorny questions of the possible historical relationships between Anabaptist groups on the continent and the later rise of Baptists in Great Britain and beyond.² Nevertheless, given that the essays in this volume aim to reflect on *sola scriptura* from a number of angles 500 years after the start of the Reformation, it seems fitting to have some representation of Anabaptist thought. Moreover, whatever the actual historical relationships might have been between continental and British baptistic movements that later spread to America, their uses of *sola scriptura* show some remarkable parallels.

On January 21, 1525 a small band of friends in Zurich, disillusioned with the project of church reform, underwent rebaptism as one of their first definitive moves toward reinstating what they took to be the apostolic church. Once followers of Huldrych Zwingli, this group, which included Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, worked out and passed along much of the form and substance of what would become a movement markedly different from other Protestant churches. The movement's seven primary distinctives, spelled out in the *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527, concerned the practice of believer's baptism,

² For an excellent introduction to the question see William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism* (3d ed. rev. and enl.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 273–303. Estep concludes that significant cross-pollination between Continental Anabaptists and English Separatists and later Baptists is highly likely.

the use of the ban, their practice of the Lord's Supper, separation from the world, their understanding of the pastorate, their refusal to bear the sword, and their refusal to swear oaths.³ Underlying their convictions and practices was a particular approach to the issues of scripture and authority. At some point prior to 1543 those who agreed with these convictions became known as "Swiss Brethren."⁴

On many issues the Swiss Brethren remained committed to orthodox Christian beliefs.⁵ Gordon Kaufman notes that doctrines such as a "Trinitarian

³ Sean F. Winter notes, "The importance of the Confession for any understanding of early Swiss Anabaptism is clear. Schleithem is the first systematic attempt to codify those beliefs which the early Anabaptists saw as distinguishing them from the magisterial reformation; notably that taking place in Zurich under Zwingli" ("Michael Sattler and the Schleithem Articles: A Study in the Background to the First Anabaptist Confession of Faith," *Baptist Quarterly* 34 [1991]: 52). See also James M. Stayer's claim that, "Whatever their immediate occasion, the Articles [of Schleithem] did certainly serve the purpose of distinguishing Swiss Brethren practice from that of the Catholics, Protestants and other Anabaptists. In that sense, their appearance can very well be described as the 'crystallization point' of the Swiss Brethren sect" ("The Swiss Brethren: An Exercise in Historical Definition," *Church History* 47 [1978]: 174–95, here 190).

⁴ C. Arnold Snyder, "The Confession of the Swiss Brethren in Hesse, 1578," in *Anabaptism Revisited* (ed. Walter Klaassen; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 31. According to Snyder, the earliest known reference to the "Swiss Brethren" comes from the Hutterite Chronicle of 1543.

⁵ Shortly after Michael Sattler's execution in 1527, the Strasbourg reformer Wolfgang Capito wrote a letter to the city council of Horb am Neckar imploring them to deal gently with imprisoned followers of Sattler. Capito urges a merciful approach "sintemal in den Hauptstücken des Glaubens und der wesentlichen Punkte sie gar nicht irren" (Johann Wilhelm Baum, *Capito und Butzer: Strassburgs Reformatoren* [2d unver. Ausg.; Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1967], 375). Thus, he regarded the Brethren as mistaken but true children of God. Rather than being treated

conception of the Godhead, the divine-human character of the person of Christ, salvation and justification by faith, the sinfulness of man and original sin ... were all accepted by the Brethren.”⁶ Yet one of their distinctives was a particular outworking of a thoroughgoing commitment to the principle of *sola scriptura*.⁷ While Ulrich Zwingli would draw upon the normative authority of both the Old and New Testaments along with certain received and ancient practices to define and justify the kind of church reform for which he advocated, the Swiss Brethren developed distinctive beliefs and practices because while they held the Old Testament to be scripture, they saw *only* the New Testament as the appropriate authority for church practice.⁸ In short, the defining tenets of the Swiss Brethren

harshly, they should be viewed as broken reeds and smoldering wicks, and given time and instruction regarding their errors in secondary matters (Nebenpunkte).

⁶ Kaufman, “Some Theological Emphases of the Early Swiss Anabaptists,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 25 [1951]: 75–99, here 75–76. See also Stayer, “The Swiss Brethren,” who argues that the Brethren had more in common with the magisterial reformers than did many other Anabaptist groups.

⁷ The individuals to whom the Swiss Brethren movement owes its beginning (Conrad Grebel, Felix Mantz, *et al*) agreed with Zwingli on the principle of *sola scriptura*, perhaps even learning it from him. In fact, the first major break between the reformer and his young followers occurred in late October of 1523 when Zwingli agreed to defer to the Council of Zurich’s decision for gradual reformation by not abolishing the traditional form of the Mass immediately. To Conrad Grebel and a few others, this constituted a compromise that undermined and threatened the principle of scripture’s supreme authority. See the discussion in John Horsch, “The Faith of the Swiss Brethren: I,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 4 (1930): 254–66.

⁸ In 1524 Zwingli, who had been willing to entertain questions about infant baptism, again fully defended the practice in a letter written to some of the reformers in Strasbourg. His defense appeals to John’s baptism, the Old Testament and the principle of charity towards those who

movement developed largely from their conviction that scripture alone, and the New Testament in particular, held supreme authority for belief and practice in the church.

A brief examination of some of the writings of Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz illustrates the preceding point. Before the first “rebaptisms” occurred in Zurich, those destined to begin and lead the movement which became the Swiss Brethren addressed two letters to Thomas Müntzer outlining some of their growing convictions.⁹ The letters, both written by Conrad Grebel on September 5, 1524,¹⁰ touch on several of the issues which later became Brethren distinctives.¹¹ The Brethren’s radical attempt to work out the *sola* of *sola scriptura* emerges clearly from the pages of this letter. At several points they emphasize the commands of Christ and the supreme authority of the New

upheld the longstanding traditional practice of infant baptism (Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985], 303–10). The soon to be Anabaptists argued against Zwingli for believer’s baptism based on their understanding of the teaching of the New Testament texts alone. For more discussion see John Horsch, “The Faith of the Swiss Brethren: II,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 5 (1931): 7–27.

⁹ Müntzer never received the letters (George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* [3d ed.; Sixteenth Century Studies & Essays 15; Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001], 192).

¹⁰ While Grebel authored the letters, both were signed by six other key figures in the burgeoning movement including Felix Manz and Andreas Castleberger (Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 292, 294).

¹¹ For instance, the signers lay out their convictions on how to practice the Lord’s Supper, their view on the ban, their understanding of baptism, and their pacifism.

Testament alone for establishing matters of faith and practice in the church.

For example, they appeal to Christ's commands and the apostles' practices as related in the New Testament as providing the only authoritative rules for the church. "Christ," the first letter affirms, "commanded his messengers to preach *only the Word* according to the Old as well as the New Testament."¹² The Brethren were *initially* impressed by Müntzer and his critique of Luther, even dubbing themselves "seven new young Müntzers to Luther."¹³ They nevertheless exhort him to "act only in accord with the Word, and proclaim and establish the practices of the apostles with the Word."¹⁴ They urge Müntzer to "[m]arch forward with the Word and create a Christian church with the help of Christ and his rule such as we find instituted in Matthew 18 and practiced in the epistles."¹⁵ These statements express their assumption that the pattern set by Christ's commands and exemplified by apostolic practice in the New Testament function as norms for church practice. The Word alone, according to the Old and New Testaments, but especially according to the New Testament, is the authority for faith and practice.

In fact, their commitment to this principle even affirms its negative

¹² Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 287, emphasis added. One wonders how much to press Grebel here, but it may be significant that, as it stands, this statement appears to assume that Christ refers at some point to the Old and New Testaments. Is this a tell that reveals a conception of scripture that floats somewhat free from history and the role of the tradition in shaping these categories? I return to this question at the end of this section.

¹³ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 294.

¹⁴ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 288.

¹⁵ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 289.

form—anything not commanded by Christ and not found affirmed in the New Testament should not be practiced in the church.¹⁶ The first letter states,

[W]e ask and admonish you as a brother ... to seek earnestly to preach only God's Word unflinchingly, to establish and defend only divine practices, to esteem as good and right only what can be found in definite clear Scripture, *and to reject, hate and curse all the schemes, words, practices, and opinions of all men, even your own.*¹⁷

Grebel restates the negative principle more strongly later in the letter, "Whatever we are not taught in definite statements and examples, we are to consider forbidden, as if it were written, 'Do not do this ...'."¹⁸

Thus, they criticize Müntzer for allowing his congregation to chant the Mass in German as part of their worship: "This [chanting] cannot be good when we find in the New Testament no teaching on chanting, no example."¹⁹ They also fault Müntzer for putting up tablets in his church containing the Decalogue:

[W]e learned with sorrow that you have set up tablets, for which we can find neither text nor example in the New Testament. In the Old, [the law] was of course to be written outwardly, but now in the New it is to be written on the fleshly tablets of the heart, as a comparison of the two Testaments shows, as we are taught by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3, in Jeremiah 31, in Hebrews 8, and in Ezekiel 36.²⁰

¹⁶ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 287.

¹⁷ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 286, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 287.

¹⁹ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 286.

²⁰ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 289. Grebel's appeal to the supreme authority of the New Testament is particularly clear at this point since the Old Testament clearly does provide Müntzer with an "example" upon which he could base his practice. Yet Grebel does not allow the possibility that the Old Testament could be used to justify bringing a practice into the church without explicit New Testament authority.

Implicit in these comments is a radical commitment to *sola scriptura*.²¹ One, moreover, that shows a clear predisposition to set the New Testament in a particular position of privilege in relation to the Old when it comes to what may and may not be done in Christian worship.

Two more examples will suffice to show the extent to which the early Brethren applied their understanding of *sola scriptura* as a norm for practice in both positive and negative ways—the Brethren’s views on the Lord’s Supper and on baptism. When discussing the practice of the Lord’s Supper they say in the initial letter to Müntzer, “Christ instituted and planted the Supper of fellowship.”²² Therefore, “Only the words found in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, and 1 Corinthians 11 should be used, neither more nor less.... The minister from the congregation shall recite them from one of the Gospels or from Paul.”²³ Clearly they here view the New Testament and the words of Christ functioning as a normative paradigm for the practice of the Supper. Only what is in scripture should be stated and performed. Nothing was to be added or subtracted from that pattern. They therefore instruct Müntzer, “If you ever intend to administer, we would wish it would be without priestly robes and the vestments of the mass, without chanting, without addition.”²⁴

Felix Manz, a cosigner of Grebel’s letter, demonstrates the same

²¹ For further discussion see, Harold S. Bender, *Conrad Grebel, c. 1498–1526: The Founder of the Swiss Brethren* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950), 171, 206.

²² Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 287.

²³ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 287.

²⁴ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 288.

commitment to the authority of the New Testament in defining church practices. In his “Petition of Defense” composed sometime in December of 1524 he writes, “[I]t is no small matter to practice the only two ceremonies left to us by Christ [the Supper and Baptism] *otherwise than as Christ commanded.*”²⁵ He goes on to justify the practice of believer’s baptism by citing Matthew’s so-called “Great Commission.” Manz reads the order of Christ’s commands to the apostles as paradigmatic. He therefore highlights the fact that Christ says *first* to teach and *then* to baptize. That the apostles understood Jesus to be giving them a sequential pattern is shown by appeals to various New Testament texts that Manz understands to show the apostles following this pattern.²⁶ The Brethren therefore deduced that scripture authorized baptism only for those who first heard and accepted the teaching about Christ. In Manz’s words, “Christ commanded to baptize those who had been taught, ... the apostles baptized none except those who had been taught of Christ, and ... nobody was baptized without external evidence and certain testimony or desire.”²⁷

Manz relies on this sort of understanding of scripture alone to justify all the points he makes throughout his “Petition.” Ekkehard Krajewski comments, however, that just as was noted above in Grebel’s letters,

It is not quite sufficient to say that for Felix Manz the Bible was the authority. We must add: especially the New Testament. He draws all his Scripture quotations from the New Testament (in contrast to Zwingli, for example, in the question of baptism). Behind Manz’s use of the Scripture stands evidently

²⁵ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 312, emphasis added.

²⁶ Manz refers specifically to Acts 10:40–48; 22:14–16; and Rom 6:2–4.

²⁷ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 314.

a particular evaluation of it: The New Testament Church in it—that is the authoritative pattern for all questions of the church in the various ages.²⁸

This is not to say that the actual New Testament churches (e.g., the historical church of Corinth) were the norm. Rather, the commands of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament, as well as the practices of the early church as the Brethren understood these to be depicted in scripture are taken to be normative.

This approach is worth exploring in a bit more detail. For the Brethren, as for many other Christians, the Old Testament held the promise of Christ, the New Testament the fulfillment.²⁹ Yet their particular emphasis on the New Testament as the sole authority for church practice focused their attention to the point that the Old Testament offered little witness to or instruction for contemporary practices and beliefs unless these were shown to be explicitly affirmed by the New. “Christ,” some imprisoned Brethren wrote in December of 1527,

says, the law and prophets had prophesied until John, and from that time on the gospel had been proclaimed. Christ is the gospel, therefore the law prophesied until the coming of Christ, as Paul also says: Christ is the end of the law.... Notice in these words that Christ fulfilled the first testament, which ended in him, and established another, a new one, in which we are from now

²⁸ Ekkehard Krajewski, “The Theology of Felix Manz,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (1962): 76–87, here 78-79.

²⁹ Walter Klaassen remarks, “[The Brethren] viewed the drama of God’s redemption as a process, initiated by God in particular with Abraham, and moving forward to a climax in Jesus Christ, in whom God would conclude human history. The Old Testament with its Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants they viewed as preparatory, as paving the way, for the final and complete revelation of God in Jesus Christ” (“The Bern Debate of 1538: Christ as the Center of Scripture,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 40 [1966]: 148–56, here 152).

on to be in a new life and no longer in the old.³⁰

Walter Klaassen succinctly explains the Brethren's view of the authority of the New Testament in relation to the Old stating,

It was impossible ... for the swiss Brethren to regard the Bible as being equally authoritative in all its parts. The earlier stands under the judgment of the later; the first word, the Old Testament, under the judgment of the last word, the New Testament. [...] [They affirmed] that the Old Testament was also the Word of God, but with one qualification; it is valid "where Christ has not suspended it."³¹

Klaassen, whose article primarily examines the records of the Bern debate of 1538, could perhaps say more here about the tendency among the early Brethren not only to identify places where the Old is explicitly "suspended" by the New, but also to hold that what is not mentioned in the New Testament is not to be practiced in the church. His comments nevertheless highlight the primacy of the New Testament in relation to the Old and the positive, normative role it played for the Brethren.

This very brief and selective summary of some key distinctives of the Swiss Brethren's understanding and application of the principle of *sola scriptura* prompts some reflections. First, the preceding study shows that the Brethren's commitment to *sola scriptura* requires some qualification. They cannot rightly be called Marcionite given their clear affirmation and use of the Old Testament, as well as their belief that the God of the Old is the God of the New.³² Their views, however, plainly elevate elements of the New Testament to the point of

³⁰ Harder, *Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 517.

³¹ Klaassen, "Bern Debate," 153.

³² Klaassen, "Bern Debate," 153.

hermeneutical control. Notably, this control functions not only in respect to reading the Old Testament, but also in their negative application of the principle as a means of critically engaging tradition. If the New Testament did not affirm a practice, it was deemed an “addition of man” that should not be tolerated in worship.

Cornelius Krahn, speaking of Anabaptism in general, does not exaggerate when he states that among Reformation churches the Anabaptists were the most “radical in their break with the Catholic tradition and in their claim that Scriptures are the sole authority.... Calvinism approaches the Bible as a whole, a revealed unit, while Anabaptism views the whole from the New Testament.”³³ The Brethren’s view on *sola scriptura* is perhaps best characterized therefore as *sola scriptura sed primum Novum Testamentum*.³⁴

Second, however, to the extent that this scripture principle functions negatively to exclude traditions of human origin that go beyond the New Testament scripture itself, a real problem arises when one reflects on the origins of the canon and the definition or constitution of the very scriptures to which they appeal. The underlying logic of the thoroughgoing use of *sola scriptura* attested among the Brethren threatens to dissolve scripture itself. Not only does such an approach call into question the ongoing need for the Old Testament, but

³³ Cornelius Krahn, “Prolegomena to an Anabaptist Theology,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24 (1950): 5–11, here 9.

³⁴ Their commitment to *Solus Christus* should not be ignored here. Arguably, the literalism of the Brethren was tempered by a distinction between the written word of God and Christ, the living Word. See especially Kaufman, “Some Theological Emphases,” esp. 81–87.

the very constitution of the canon, including the books that make up the New Testament itself, loses its foundation when divorced from the larger Christian tradition that gave it shape and passed these texts down to later Christians as authoritative.³⁵

If, on the one hand, the Old Testament's authority for Christian faith and practice holds only in those aspects of it that are explicitly reaffirmed in the New, and if the true significance and meaning of the Old Testament is only explained in and by the New, then all reading of the Old Testament is mono-directional. One reads the Old only from the perspective of the New such that, if one is to be consistent, the Old has nothing to offer or teach about what is contained in the New. But if that's true, then the Old Testament can be largely discarded with little loss in the Christian church.

If, on the other hand, the canonical books of the New Testament are affirmed as the primary authority over tradition with no recognition of the role that early church played well beyond the apostolic age in collecting, preserving, validating and handing them down as scripture, the logic of the Brethren's

³⁵ Barry A. Harvey notes this as well commenting, "The Reformation banner *sola scriptura*, if understood apart from the worship, confession and teaching of the church down through the centuries, has no grounding. Storming out of the ecclesial house of tradition ... jeopardizes the canonical function of the Bible as the norming norm of our common life and language. Subsequent appeals to the authority of Scripture—regardless of whether they are based on rationalist proofs for its veracity or on some sort of claim to an unmediated inner awareness of transcendence—act as solvents that actually undermine the Bible's authority" ("Caught up in the Authorial Void: Tradition, Authority, and Dissent," in *Tradition and the Baptist Academy*, 22).

approach could pull the New Testament rug out from under them, so to speak.

These points raise the issue of the Brethren's understanding of history and the historical roots of Christianity. In a sense, the attempt to skirt the tradition and return to the unadulterated Word of the New Testament represents a desire to restore a historical form of Christianity, some pure church not yet sullied by the accretions of human tradition. There are, however, some problems with such an approach. I noted above Grebel's claim that Christ commanded his apostles to teach only the Word from the Old and New Testaments. The claim appears to betray a naïve and ahistorical conception of scripture, as if the Old and New Testaments already existed when Christ himself taught his apostles. Historically, such an approach seems to ignore the fact that early Christians could not have understood Christ apart from their scriptures/the Old Testament. Christology did not fall fully formed from the heavens, but was constructed as the testimony about Jesus was placed in dialogue with authoritative texts—the texts of Jewish scripture. Almost every page of the New Testament is itself an example of a kind of dialogical theology in which confession about Jesus and reading of Jewish scriptures go hand in hand. For the earliest Christians, at least, understanding Christ and reading their scriptures was a two-way street, not a monologue that ran in only one direction. The New Testament, which did not exist in the time of Jesus or the apostles, was created in part from this very dynamic as the apostles read Jesus and the Jewish scriptures together and wrote the texts that became the New Testament.

Additionally, however, the failure to recognize the constructive

contribution of the tradition to the very category of scripture itself creates another historical problem. The New Testament did not fall from the heavens fully formed, but consists of texts collected from and persevered through the early centuries of Christianity. Those texts accepted and given the imprimatur of scripture and those rejected as false or deemed not to be the work of the Spirit were determined by the labor of the tradition. The Brethren's radical outworking of the *sola in sola scriptura* potentially leaves one with little or no *scriptura* when one considers the historical realities of early Christianity.

Third, and closely connected with the point just made, the Brethren sought to reestablish the apostolic church by appealing only to the New Testament for their practice and belief. Yet much of what they affirmed was in line with the later, orthodox Christian tradition in spite of the fact that doctrines such as the Trinity are not derivable from scripture alone. This, together with the preceding point, suggests that, perhaps in spite of themselves and certainly in spite of their rhetoric, they were not as cut off from the tradition as they assumed. I say more about this issue in Section IV. Now, however, I leap forward in time and space to look at the thought of the Southern Baptist New Testament scholar A. T. Robertson.

III. *Sola Scriptura* and A. T. Robertson

A. T. Robertson exercised a major influence of Baptist thinking in America in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Robertson is, of course, a long way temporally and, in many respects, theologically from the Swiss Brethren.

Nevertheless, a comparison and contrast between some of Robertson's claims about the role of scripture and those noted above proves illuminating for the topic at hand. In good Baptist fashion, Robertson, like the Brethren, also imagines that *sola scriptura* enables one to circumvent the tradition and get back to the actual, pure teachings of Jesus, the apostles and the early church.

Robertson, as with many Baptists and Anabaptists before him, exudes deep suspicion of tradition and the authority accorded to it. In his view, the ceremonies and the decisions of the tradition act as a barrier between the individual and God's Word, obscuring the individual's access to truth by substituting external form for vital internal experience. Nevertheless, Robertson's exegesis exhibits an unquestioning commitment to the canonical books of the Bible, an unwavering conviction that God is triune, an unshakeable confidence in the fully human and fully divine natures of Jesus, and an affirmation that the interpretive task—far from being an objective, unbiased endeavor—must begin with the confession of crucial, traditional doctrines such as those just listed. All of this suggests that, in spite of his misgivings, Robertson remained beholden to the some of the key theological decisions made and mediated by the broader Christian tradition.

Like the Brethren, one of Robertson's main issues with tradition concerns the authority it gives to human decisions not directly related in scripture. For Robertson, the tradition vests its own institutions and decisions with too much authority. He asserts that for Baptists, authority is located only in God and, by direct implication, in the Bible (and especially the New Testament).

Scripture is the means by which God’s Word and voice come to humanity. Thus, with respect to scripture, he comments,

The unifying fact and force in both Testaments is God, with His redemptive purpose in it all The New Testament conception of prophecy is that the Spirit of God moved upon men to speak In this sense God is the Author of the message which is thus a revelation of the will of God to men The real authority in a message of this kind is that of God. If one is sure that he has a word from God upon any point, that settles it for him. ... So I must think of the authority of the Bible as being the authority of God if ... it is from God as I believe. *There is no ultimate authority in the spiritual realm outside of God.* We hear His voice in the Bible as nowhere else and can never get away from our need of it.³⁶

Though he does not here use the Reformation language of *sola scriptura*, the basic notion of scripture, as God’s Word, serving as the sole authority in spiritual matters is clearly evident. Moreover, as in the Reformation, Robertson’s implicit target—the authority against which he argues—is that of the tradition and its decisions on practice and belief.

To better grasp this last point it is important to recognize Robertson’s acceptance of the Reformation’s tendency to conflate a certain conception of Judaism, particularly a certain view of the Pharisees, and the tradition. One sees a hint of this when in the introduction of the article cited above Robertson claims,

It has not always been easy for people to get at the Bible. One of the sharpest indictments that Jesus made of the Pharisees and the scribes was that they put their oral tradition in the place of the Word of God The Talmud recites how the oral law was

³⁶ A. T. Robertson, “The Bible as Authority, *The Homiletic Review*, February 1892,” in T. George and D. George, eds., *The Best of A. T. Robertson* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 142–43; emphasis mine.

held to be superior to the written law. There is always this point and this difficulty. ... There is a difference between Christianity and churchianity as there is between the Bible and theology.³⁷

When he comments that the confusion of authority—the conflation of theology and tradition with scripture itself—is always a difficulty, he expresses his own conviction, hardly foreign to Protestantism, that a cycle of spiritual renewal and vitality followed by the rise of human traditions that eclipse the authority of God’s word punctuates religious history. Humanity inevitably crushes spiritual reality by piling oral laws/traditions on top of it.

He presents a particularly clear example of this cyclical understanding of religious history when assessing Paul’s ministry. In an address on the Baptist understanding of the ordinances given at the second meeting of the Baptist World Alliance in Philadelphia in 1911 he remarks,

The battle of Paul’s life was just this. He preserved spiritual Christianity against the demands of the ceremonialists. He met terrific opposition as did Jesus, as did Stephen, and for the same reason. The intolerance of those who mistake the symbol for the reality is always bitter. Paul won his fight with the help of the other apostles and [the] Judaizers were driven back before the onward march of apostolic Christianity. But the same narrow spirit reappeared in the second century. It dropped circumcision and seized on baptism as the *sine qua non* of salvation. This teaching was in reality Pharisaism *redevivus*. It was also in harmony with much pagan theology. It was easy to understand and it swept the field in the course of time. Out of the heresy of baptismal regeneration or remission has sprung a brood of errors that have turned the course of Christian history away from its primitive purity. ... The modern Baptist voice cried in [this] wilderness in the seventeenth century in England.³⁸

³⁷ Robertson, “The Bible as Authority,” 141–42.

³⁸ A. T. Robertson, “The Spiritual Interpretation of the Ordinances,” in *The Baptist World Alliance, Second Congress, Philadelphia, June 19-25, 1911, Record of Proceedings* (Philadelphia: Harper & Brothers, 1911), 121–22.

For Robertson, the very course of spiritual history consists of nothing less than a battle for the authority of God's pure word and the apostolic church against that of human traditions. Like the Pharisees and like the Judaizers, the rise of the Christian tradition/early Catholicism marks yet another attempt on the part of human authority to transform spiritual purity into "churchianity." Like Jesus, the cry of John the Baptist in the wilderness, and Paul, the Baptist movement represents for Robertson the call to churchianity to lay aside the authority of its traditions and return to the sole authority of Scripture. Only in this way can the church again recover the primitive purity of apostolic Christianity.³⁹

As with the Swiss Brethren discussed above, one practical implication of this recovery concerns the practice of baptizing professing believers. This, Robertson thinks, is the New Testament practice and, he claims, "the overwhelming bulk of modern scholarship is with the Baptist contention" that nothing but believer's baptism, and that by immersion, is taught in the New

³⁹ In his New Testament Interpretation course Robertson states that Jesus was involved in "the great controversy between ceremonialism and spirituality, the love of God and man and the love of self, *the great conflict of all the ages*. We have one-half billion nominal Christians. Do they take Jesus as their teacher on this point about the distinction between ceremonialism and spiritual life, as the Catholics, the Lutherans, the Campbellites, etc.? They take the side of the Pharisees against Jesus" (W. M. Fouts and A. M. Fouts, eds., *New Testament Interpretation [Matthew – Revelation]: Notes on Lectures of Dr. A. T. Robertson in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary [Taken Stenographically]* (rev. ed.; Louisville, KY: 1921), 33, emphasis mine).

Testament.⁴⁰ Robertson was convinced that the historical-critical investigation of the New Testament established the coherence of the Baptist understanding of baptism with the practice of the earliest Christians (i.e., the practice as attested in the New Testament). How then can other Christians countenance any other mode of the practice (e.g., sprinkling infants)? “The trouble” he writes, “is not so much [a recognition of what Scripture teaches], as in the conclusion [that some draw] from this fact. The Romanist will say: ‘Yes, but the church had the right to change the mode of the ordinance.’ He falls behind the doctrine of an infallible church. The appeal to Scripture does not reach him.”⁴¹ Robertson, that is, accuses Catholics of not granting the authority of the findings of historical-critical arguments even though such arguments make plain the meaning of scripture.

Thus, Robertson assumes a fundamental distinction between the source of Christianity—scripture—and later theological or interpretive decisions—the tradition. In this way, Robertson depends upon a near absolute appropriation of the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* akin to that of Brethren explored above. An important point of difference, however, is that for Robertson

⁴⁰ A. T. Robertson, “Baptism, *Baptist Argus* (Louisville, Kentucky), 1900,” in *The Best of A. T. Robertson*, 202.

⁴¹ Robertson, “Baptism,” 202.

historical investigation can help one delineate more easily between the scripture and later tradition. “The Baptists” he once said,

are not opposed to criticism, we invite it. [...] We believe in an open book and an open mind, and when you get the combination, if a man is honest he will be a Baptist. ... It has cost a great deal of struggle to get an open Bible, but it is still harder to get an open mind; there are always some nooks and crannies where the dust has not been brushed off.⁴²

The individual must be honest and brave in the face of the facts and allow the dust of tradition to be ‘brushed off’.

For Robertson, this delineation between scripture and tradition brings new freedom to the conscience since the knowledge gleaned from historical study enables the individual to recognize with greater clarity the truth of God’s word and thus also the extent to which he or she is beholden to the theology and authority of the tradition. In Robertson’s opinion, the individual is then better equipped to make a free choice—to continue to submit to the tradition, or bravely to throw off the theological shackles and obey the word of God. *Sola scriptura* sets the individual freed from enslavement to human teaching. Here Robertson embraces a modernist permutation of the principle with which the Brethren would likely disagree.

⁴² A. T. Robertson, “Response to Papers Presented on Modern Criticism, Morning Session, Friday July 14,” in *The Baptist World Congress, London, July 11–19, 1905: Authorized Record of Proceedings* (London: Baptist Union Publication Department, 1905), 141.

Be that as it may, one might ask whether or not Robertson is consistent in his application of this radical scripture principle. A glance at some of his exegesis suggests he is not, particularly when it comes to his view of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity, according to Robertson, “is clearly revealed in various parts of the Scriptures.”⁴³ In his opinion Jesus spoke openly of his own divine status and of the Holy Spirit’s deity. Yet, Jesus also spoke of only one God. Robertson concludes that this must mean the Godhead consists of three “persons” in a unity of “nature” or “essence.” He explains,

Jesus does not give a detailed discussion of the nature of the Trinity. But the essential fact revealed [in Jesus’ teaching] is that God is one. ... We may not be able to state in scientific formula the idea of the Trinity. Three Persons in one nature may seem intangible to us. Be it so. We must discriminate between the fact of the Trinity and theories about the Trinity. [...] [A]ll three Persons co-exist in the one essence and co-work in the salvation of men.⁴⁴

Such a statement implies that one can plainly see the fact of the Trinity (i.e., that God is one essence existing in three persons) in the pages of scripture. The nature of the Trinity is a simple fact attested in the text. Robertson still works here with the idea that scripture and tradition can be disentangled when he says that attempts to unpack the precise way in which this all works amount to little more than “theories about the Trinity.” The interpreter can recognize the distinction

⁴³ A. T. Robertson, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning God the Father* (New York: American Tract Society, 1904), 70.

⁴⁴ Robertson, *Teaching of Jesus*, 71–72.

between the obvious fact of God’s nature as three persons yet one essence, and “metaphysical speculations”⁴⁵ that reach beyond the pages of scripture and try to make the inscrutable more accessible. He writes, “Humility well becomes us all in applying to the infinite Godhead the metes and bounds of our finite reason. Christ himself is sufficient guarantee for the truth that he reveals even if it is incomprehensible to our mind. He is the truth and we can speak only the truth. We may rest in him.”⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he has relied upon traditional categories in this very argument.⁴⁷ A glance at his exegesis of John 1:18 makes this particularly clear.

In John 1:18 Jesus is identified as “the only begotten Son” who “is in the bosom of the Father” and who “hath declared him” to humanity (KJV). From this text Robertson concludes, “In measured phrase ... John asserts the eternal pre-existence of the Word, the existence of the Word with God, the identity of the Word with God, *an identity not in person, but in essence* and character for

⁴⁵ Robertson, *Teaching of Jesus*, 70.

⁴⁶ Robertson, *Teaching of Jesus*, 72.

⁴⁷ Paul Fiddes astutely comments, “In confessing a Trinitarian faith, ... Baptists are dependent on post-biblical development of doctrine, i.e. tradition, for their ‘certainty’ about the triune nature of God” (“Preface,” in *Tradition and the Baptist Academy*, xv). As I demonstrate below, the categories Robertson assumes, especially the ontological language of three persons but one essence, show the extent to which this is true of Robertson.

he is ‘in the bosom of the Father’ and ‘hath declared him’ when he ‘became flesh’.”⁴⁸

Several items of interest from these comments are worthy of note. First, Robertson’s approach here claims to use scripture to demonstrate Jesus’s deity. It is John who “asserts” in his Gospel the “eternal pre-existence of the Word” and “the identity of the Word with God.” Second, and more significantly, Robertson clearly employs later traditional Trinitarian language to illuminate this text. When he says that the nature of the identity between Jesus and the Father consists not in unity of “person,” but unity of “essence and character” he draws upon the “measured phrases” and “metaphysical speculations” worked out in the later Trinitarian theology of the tradition.

These initial observations lead to a third—Robertson’s exegesis attempts to strike a balance between two deeply held commitments. On the one hand, he wishes to allow scripture alone, apart from tradition, to be his authority and the sole source for his understanding of who God is. An open mind before this open text will perceive Jesus’s deity and unity with the Father. On the other hand, he obviously begins with some assumptions about God that he then uses to explain what John 1:18 means when it speaks of Jesus being in “the bosom of the Father.” Specifically, Robertson invokes the doctrine that God is three persons

⁴⁸ Robertson, *Teaching of Jesus*, 30, emphasis added.

whose unity is not one of personhood, but of essence and character. This assumption, though, is presented as what John “asserts” when he speaks of Jesus as the one who is “in the bosom of the Father” and who “hath declared” the Father to humanity. Yet it is not at all clear how these notions of personhood, unity of essence, and unity of character are “asserted” as mere facts in John 1:18. That there is a close relationship between the Father and the Son (following the Majority text) in John 1:18 is plain enough. That the two are distinct “persons” sharing one “essence” can only be understood as later Trinitarian theology being used as a lens to help understand this text. As Robertson interprets John 1:18 his exegesis is not actually showing that the verse simply asserts the fact of the Trinity. Rather, he draws upon the metaphysical categories provided by the tradition and uses them to help clarify how one *should* understand the nature of the relationship between Jesus and the Father presented in John 1:18.

One therefore observes here a tension present within Robertson’s exegesis. He tries to read the doctrine of the Trinity directly off the pages of scripture and thereby skirt the issue of the role and authority of the tradition, but in so doing he necessarily relies on some of the very “measured phrases” and metaphysical categories that the tradition itself provides him. That is to say, the conclusion that a verse like John 1:18 simply asserts as fact that Jesus and the Father share one “essence” while not being one “person” does not represent a

plain reading of John 1:18, one that emerges merely by having an open mind and open Bible. This is not an application of an absolute *sola scriptura*. Rather, the formulation of “three persons yet one essence” already depends upon the debates and decisions of the Christian tradition. Here at least, the tradition serves as a truly helpful lens for Robertson, not a layer of 4th century dust obscuring the truth.

The influence of tradition is clearly at work behind the scenes in Robertson’s exegesis. Not only are the decisions of the tradition helping to support the authority of this particular text by affirming and handing down its status as scripture—like the Brethren, Robertson takes the category of scripture to be a given, its presence also shapes the kinds of ontological categories and distinctions that Robertson employs to help clarify the meaning of John 1:18. In short, his carefully worded comments regarding personhood, essence, and character belie his sharp critique of the obfuscating role of tradition.

There is, then, a tension in Robertson’s thinking. This tension manifests itself in various ways. For example, he is committed to *sola scriptura*, yet, as with the Brethren discussed above, he remains reliant on the decisions and mediation of the tradition for the content of his *scriptura*. In addition, he strives to show how Trinitarian readings of Scripture arise naturally from the text. According to him, Jesus’s divinity and God’s triune nature are simple facts in

the text. Yet the texts he appeals to as demonstrative of these truths are explained by recourse to the very language and categories carefully thought out by the church in the fourth and fifth centuries. All of this implies that, in spite of his harsh rhetoric, Robertson does not really work outside of key elements of the larger tradition.

IV. *Sola Scriptura*? The Protestant Impulse in Baptist Identities

The discussions above demonstrate that the Swiss Brethren and later Baptists such as A. T. Robertson imagined that they could return to the pure, apostolic church. The principle of *sola scriptura* holds out for them the possibility of unmediated access to the original practices and beliefs of Jesus and his earliest followers. By means of taking scripture alone as the authoritative voice in belief and practice, one is able to chip away the calcified layers of tradition that obfuscate the clear teaching of Jesus and the apostles.⁴⁹ In both the Swiss Brethren and in A. T. Robertson, one sees a radical outworking of *sola scriptura*, which pushes the logic of the principle well beyond its original use as a tool of reform. But are these attempts to work only with scripture really at odds with

⁴⁹ As someone raised in a Baptist context, this chimes with what I have seen and experienced in a variety of Baptist churches.

the tradition in the ways the Brethren and Robertson, and numerous other Baptists, imagine? Three points can be made in conclusion.

First, there is a real tension evident in the Brethren and Robertson's claims about the sole authority of scripture and their interpretation of scripture. Insofar as they continue to hold to doctrines such as the Trinity and to the authority of the canonical books that constitute the scripture to which they appeal, their engagement with scripture remains beholden to the larger tradition. There is here a tension that many Baptists attempt (whether wittingly or not) to negotiate. To be sure, there are, have been, and will undoubtedly continue to be Baptists whose biblicism drives them to deny traditional doctrines like the Trinity.⁵⁰ The extreme logic of *sola scriptura* can lead to such conclusions. Yet such a radical outworking of *sola scriptura* must still face the question, "Why should one even accept these texts as scripture?" Some have asked this question pushing the logic out even further, but they have tended to recognize that this moves them beyond Baptist traditions.

⁵⁰ For a thoughtful analysis of Baptists and Trinitarian theology see C.W. Freeman, "God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33 (2006), 323-44. Freeman points out that, in addition to some Baptists who deny the Trinity, a good many Baptists are "Unitarians who simply have not gotten around to denying the Trinity. This criticism does not, however, apply to Robertson who appeals to the doctrine of the Trinity not only to explain the nature of Scripture, but also to fill out his hermeneutic.

The very tension in the Brethren's and Robertson's approaches, though, illustrates a different possibility. To accept the Christian canon and to approach scripture with certain key doctrinal categories such as the Trinity already in place suggests that the Brethren and later Baptists continue to stand within the tradition, even if they do not always realize the extent of their indebtedness to it. Neither the Brethren nor most Baptists are, that is, really as thoroughgoing in their commitment to *sola scriptura* as their rhetoric often implies. To affirm the canon, the very category of Christian scripture, is to locate oneself within the wider Christian tradition. To confess the Triune God, three persons who are one in essence, is to accept the decisions of those who have gone before.

This raises a second significant point. If the preceding analysis is correct and the Brethren and later Baptists continue to some degree to stand within the tradition, then a valuable theological exercise for adherents to these views might be to temper some of the rhetoric of rejection of tradition and reflect instead on the roles and ways that particularly baptistic commitments work within the larger tradition. Such an approach might enable more serious thought to be given to elements in the tradition that they may have rashly or mistakenly been excluded from their communities. The tradition contains rich resources and practices for grounding believers in the faith (i.e. creeds and catechisms) as well as tremendous resources for worship. Perhaps Baptists need not, as is too often

the case, exclude elements of the tradition from their churches on the misguided assumption that the only forms of practice allowable must be derived solely from scripture. Indeed, the questions of the content and limits of the canon, when taken seriously, already expose some the kinds of latent problems identified above in this assumption. The very scripture to which Baptists appeal dissolves when divorced from tradition. If Baptists confess scripture, they are already indebted to the wisdom of the tradition.

Having said that, a third point to consider is that at its best the tension one sees in the Brethren and in Robertson reflects an attempt to maintain a critical principle with respect to the tradition. As I have shown above, the *sola* in *sola scriptura* proves philosophically and hermeneutically untenable in some absolute sense. But Baptists, together with other Protestants, can nonetheless continue to point to the real value of *sola scriptura* as a heuristic principle. *Sola scriptura* represents an attempt continually to call the church's attention back to the supremacy of God and God's Word. This essential Protestant conviction continues to mark the commitment of Baptists to let God be God and to let the Spirit of God blow where the Spirit wills.